

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume 19, Number 2

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you **Connections** —

Advent and Christmas: A Time to Stay Awake and Live with Intention

As another December dawns, so do new opportunities for living with intention. Part of living with intention is paying attention to the present moment, which in December, means paying attention to the Advent and Christmas seasons. Amid the noise and the haste, try to find some time for yourself and your community to reflect on what these seasons mean to you.



We've put together a few activities and reflection pieces to help you and your community focus your attention to the present moment. If you would like more activities, please visit the Current Volunteers section of our newly improved website: www.pallotticenter.org. We also welcome you to share your community's favorite activities with us; simply email sharedvisions@pallotticenter.org.

May you and your communities, your loved ones, and those you serve have a blessed Advent and Christmas!

Intentionally Living Christmas (Break!)

At this point in your volunteer year, you have most likely gotten into the routine of your placement. You have learned the quirks and qualities of your housemates. You have seen that you can make a small stipend go a long way.

And now it's time for a break! Or is it?

Some of you may be going 'home for the holidays'. Others may be staying on site and finding yourself celebrating this time of year with people you may have only known for a few months.

For those of you staying on site this holiday season, it is natural to find it a little difficult, especially if you have strong family or holiday traditions that you have

come to know and love. Those going home for part of the Christmas season also have a challenge. There may be a culture shock in going back to a more extravagant lifestyle or culture than what you have lived the past months.

The Pallotti Center wishes to offer you some ways to celebrate the season, whatever your holiday happenings may entail.

If you are staying at your placement site over the holidays:

- Talk about the traditions of your community members.
- Tell stories of your favorite Christmas memory

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Biblical Reflection: Voices Crying Out

Our Gospel readings this Advent season are full of voices crying out. Advent begins with Jesus' stark warning to his followers in the Gospel of Mark, "...you do not know when the master of the house will come... And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." (Mark 13:33-37) Over the next two weeks, both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John tell us the story of John the Baptist calling from the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." (Mark 1:1-8 and John 1:6-8 and 19-28) As we move closer to Christmas, the Gospel of Luke tells the story of the angel Gabriel's greeting of Mary (Luke 1:26-38), followed later by the angel's announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds and the shepherds "glorifying and praising God" after seeing the baby Jesus (Luke 2:1-20).

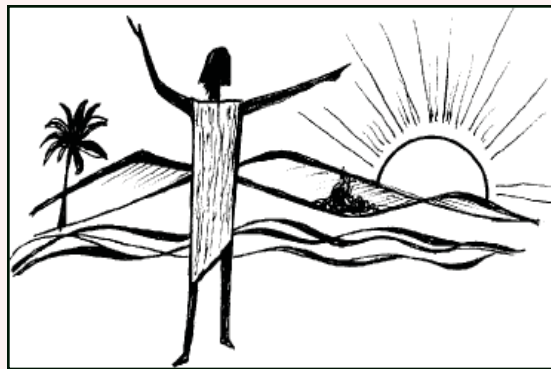
As a volunteer, you may relate to these voices in a variety of ways. Like Mary, you may have arrived at your current mission through a call which you did not quite understand but felt compelled to follow. Like those who went out into the wilderness to be baptized by John, you may have felt a need to break away from our dominant culture and adopt a radically different way of life. As you experience this Christmas season, you may feel a bit like John himself, wishing to stand outside the culture of consumption and call others to repentance. Or, perhaps you are like the shepherds, desiring nothing but to proclaim to others the joy and wonder of what you have experienced during your time as a volunteer.

While we all relate to these Gospel texts a bit differently, the overall tone of these readings makes it clear that God has urgent messages for each of us. As you move through the Advent season, spend some time in thought and prayer, trying to recognize the voices crying out to you. You may wish to use one or more of the following questions for your personal or community reflections:

- In Mark 13:33-37, Jesus admonishes his followers to "stay awake," because we never know when or how God will come to us. At the beginning of your time

as a volunteer, you probably felt wide awake as you met new people, encountered new ideas, and faced challenging new work. By now, however, you may have settled into a more comfortable routine. While this is not an inherently bad thing, you want to avoid becoming so comfortable that you close yourself off to new ideas, experiences, and challenges. As you look toward the next phase of your time as a volunteer, how can you stay awake to the ways God is speaking to you? If you live in a volunteer community, how can you help one another stay awake?

- In Mark 1:1-8, the Gospel writer describes John the Baptist living in "the wilderness," "clothed in camel's hair," eating "locusts and wild honey." From his position as an outsider, John preaches his radical



message, calling believers to "a baptism of repentance" in preparation for the coming of the Lord. As a volunteer, you too have chosen to adopt the lifestyle of a cultural outsider, joining an alternative community and adopting a simple lifestyle in order to do God's work. As you enter this Christmas season, you may feel great discomfort with the

commercialism and consumerism surrounding the holiday, or even with some formerly beloved holiday traditions. How can you and/or your community hold on to your new lifestyle while still celebrating and enjoying the holiday?

- In Luke 2:1-20, the shepherds who witness the birth of Jesus are amazed at what they have experienced and return to their homes "glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen." During the Christmas season, you may have opportunities to re-connect with family, friends and members of your church community from whom you have been separated during your service. How will you share all that you have "heard and seen" with them? How can you use your experience as a volunteer to witness to others about the work God is doing in your life and theirs? How will you use your own voice to cry out to others?

Alternative Gift Catalogs

Concerns about the commercialization of Christmas have been voiced by people of faith for a long time. It is certainly jarring to walk into a store on All Saints Day and see the candy and greeting cards being switched over from Halloween to Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. Television ads also start to mention the Christmas shopping season right around November 1.

One concrete way that some people are managing to keep the spirit of Christmas giving alive without becoming the pawns of retailers is through the use of alternative Christmas gift catalogs. These catalogs offer a menu of charitable goods and services that can be purchased in the name of a loved one. Your money goes to a good cause while your loved one receives a thank you card detailing just how far your gift will go to alleviate human suffering.

Heifer International (www.heifer.org) has one of the largest and most well-known programs. Shoppers are able to donate the gift of a work animal to a country in the developing world in one's own name or another's. Prices fit every budget, ranging from \$10 to \$10,000. If you cannot afford to purchase the animal in full, partial gifts are welcome.

Perhaps your volunteer community might introduce its own Alternative Christmas Gift Catalog this Advent. You might consider working with an established catalog like the one that

Heifer International provides, or you might create one of your own that responds to the particular needs of the community where you are currently serving.

- What items do you want to be sure to include in your catalog?
- What might be a reasonable amount of money to ask someone to contribute to meet some of the needs addressed by your catalog?
- Who would step up and meet these needs if you did not?

Build your catalog with the input of one or more of the social service agencies where your community members are working. Then share it with your family and friends back home as a way of alerting them to the real human needs you are confronting through your volunteer placement.

Other sources for alternative Christmas gift catalogs include:

- Catholic Charities, www.catholiccharitiesusa.org
- Catholic Campaign for Human Development, www.usccb.org/cchd/
- Catholic Relief Services, www.CRS.org
- Alternative Gifts International, www.alternativegifts.org/projects/
- Christian Appalachian Project, www.christianapp.org



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and what you love about the holidays.

- Try a simple gift exchange within your community. Create a survey sheet to give to each community member and have them write their favorite color, food, quote, author, song, etc. down. Then exchange the sheets secretly so everyone has to create something for another community member, incorporating his or her favorite things.
- Make a meal together in which everyone brings their favorite dish from their traditions to the table.

If you are going home for a holiday break: Think ahead of time of some stories you will share with your family and friends about your volunteer experience. There is no doubt that people will ask you about what

you have lived the past few months or so. Try to stay positive, whether about the program or what you like about being home. It is easy to become pessimistic about a more luxurious lifestyle after you have been living simply. It is also possible that your volunteer experience is at a stalemate and you have become frustrated with your community or placement. Try to share the positives about volunteering with your family, and likewise, look at the positives of being home- eating your favorite foods again, sleeping in your own bed, whatever situation in which you may find yourself.

The Pallotti Center hopes that, no matter how you find yourself spending the Christmas season this year, it may be a fruitful part of your volunteer experience.

Advent Prayer Reflection: Lectio Divina

This issue's Biblical reflection asks us to listen to the ways in which God is crying out to us this Advent season. Yet, for many of us this is the season when it is most difficult to be still and listen. Shopping, travel, visiting with family and friends, and preparing for holiday events leave precious little time to reflect on the true meaning of this holy season. During such a busy time, it can be helpful to adopt simple, structured prayer practices. In his book *Creating a Life With God: The Call of Ancient Prayer Practices*, pastor and spiritual director Daniel Wolpert guides readers through twelve prayer practices which are easily incorporated into our day-to-day lives. While all of these practices can help us discern how God is speaking to us, the practice of *lectio divina*, or "sacred reading," is specifically aimed at helping us hear God through the scriptures. Take a few minutes alone or with your volunteer community and apply the following steps to one of our Gospel readings this Advent.

As an individual:

1. Choose a passage of scripture and read it to yourself twice. Try to look past the literal meaning, instead focusing on whatever word or phrase most grabs your attention. Take a few moments to reflect on that word or phrase.
2. Ask God to speak to you through your chosen word or phrase, and listen for God's reply. Focus on the thoughts, feelings and images your word or phrase evokes. What is God telling you through this word or phrase?
3. When you are ready, respond to what God is saying to you through your word or phrase. Silently or out loud, speak your prayer of "desire, longing or action" to God.
4. After you respond, settle into a few moments of silence and rest. When you feel that your time of prayer has ended, express gratitude to God for your experience.



As a group:

1. Choose a passage of scripture and have a leader read it aloud twice. As the leader reads, group members listen to whatever word or phrase speaks to them. After a brief period of silence, the group leader invites members to speak only those words or phrases aloud. (In this and future steps, group members should listen without comment to what others say.)
2. The group leader reads the passage aloud a third time. As the leader reads, group members focus on whatever thoughts, phrases or images the passage evokes for them. After another brief silence, the group leader invites members to share those thoughts, images and phrases.
3. The group leader reads the passage aloud a final time. As the leader reads, group members listen for how God is speaking to them through the passage. After another brief silence, the group leader invites group members to share what God is saying to them.
4. At the conclusion of the time of sharing, the group closes with a time of prayer, including an expression of gratitude to God for the experience.

Check out our recently upgraded website for more activities and ideas for your volunteer community: www.pallotticenter.org.

Being Intentional at Your Placement Site

If you live in community during your volunteer or mission service, you probably give a fair amount of time to thinking about living intentionally; in many ways, you are forced into thinking that way. Limited resources, shared space, and the requirements of your program foster the kind of intentional thinking - how do we practice good stewardship, what meaning are we finding in our relationships, etc. - that many people associate with full-time, faith-based volunteer service. But what about at your placement site, where you spend a significant amount of your time during your term of service? Are you living with intention at work as well as at home?

Perhaps the type of work you are doing is very new to you; this may even be your first full-time job. Perhaps you have done this or other similar work before. No matter your background, your work at your placement site can be fairly intense. After a few months or more in the position, you've probably gotten into the swing of things. It's tempting to just continue on in a day-in, day-out fashion, but in doing so, we lose sight of how much intention we are putting into our work.

A quick response to the following questions may come easily, but try to take some time to answer these in a real, meaningful way. If you feel comfortable, consider sharing your answers among your community or workplace.



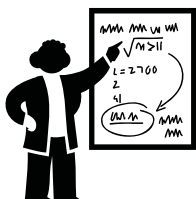
1. *What do you do at your placement?*

- List specifics, not just a general description or idea. If it helps, during the course of several days at work, list all the tasks that you do.
- Of the things you do, what do you like? Are you good at those things? Make an action plan for how you can incorporate more of what you enjoy doing.
- Of the things you do, what are new or different tasks than what you've done before? List something you've learned about yourself because of these new or different tasks.
- Are there any tasks or roles that you find interesting, but do not yet do? Make a plan for talking to your supervisor about incorporating these new and different things into your current role.



2. *Does the work you do feel simply like work?*

- Do you find that each day is the same, and that you aren't finding much growth or inspiration in your work? Name two things you can try in the next two weeks to make your work feel fresh.
- How much do you see your work as a ministry? Name a few reasons why you were initially motivated to do full-time volunteer service.
- When the work feels just like...well, work...to whom can you go for inspiration? Are there any Scripture passages that motivate or inspire you?



3. *What connections are you making between your spirituality and your work, if any?*

- In what ways do you see what you are doing at work as fitting in with God's plan?
- If you aren't finding connections between work and spirituality, what can you do about it? To whom can you discuss the connections you are making between your day-to-day tasks and the broader themes of spirituality? Of social justice? Of community? Of service?

During your volunteer year, you may find the pace of life to be frenetic. It is important, though, to take some time out during your time of service, and not just after, to reflect on the work that you do. Pause to consider what you've done so far in your placement, and to dream of what you would like to accomplish during your remaining time.

For Personal Reflection: Balance in the New Year

The time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day is often more hectic than we'd like it to be. During this year of living intentionally, it's important that you take time for yourself as well as your community, your clients or students, your friends, and your family.

After the rush of the holidays, consider how you've spent your time during the last few months,



and how balanced, or not, your time has been. Think of ways you can incorporate more time for reflection and self-care in 2009. If you typically enjoy making a New Year's Resolution, perhaps regularly checking the balance on your life can be your resolution.

What things do I do to contribute to the life of my

volunteer community?

What do I do for play?

For downtime, I:

What things do I do for my spiritual life?

Shared Visions

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The Mission of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center

The mission of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center is to inspire volunteer service through Catholic-based organizations. We support prospective volunteers during their exploration of service opportunities, strengthen the personal and spiritual development of volunteers while they serve, and assist former volunteers to stay connected to their ideals and their communities. The Center takes its inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to have a missionary heart.

The Pallotti Center is located in Washington, DC.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: intellectual growth, emotional and physical health, leadership and prayer.



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