



GOOD NEWS FROM A VOLUNTEER'S BACKPACK

ABSTRACT

With an even growing challenge of secularism to the Church, the paper explores volunteering as a venue where genuine dialogue between Christians and people of goodwill could happen. Using Charles Taylor perspective about secularism, the paper developed three images: map, compass and journal that would characterize a volunteer. These are things that are found in a volunteer's backpack, metaphor for life, which a Christian believer can resonate with when s/he identifies her/himself as a seeker, responder and storyteller. This paper not only provides a response to the invitation of Pope Francis to people of goodwill to create a culture of encounter, solidarity and peace but also develops a deeper appreciation and understanding of Christian witness in our post-modern context.

Keywords: volunteer, volunteering, secularism, social work, post-modernism, people of goodwill



INTRODUCTION

My immersion year was in the social work of the Redemptorists in Thailand.¹ For a month and a half I was assigned in Sarnelli House while taking my course in the Thai language. But it was in the Fr. Ray Foundation (FRF) in Pattaya where I stayed for almost 5 months. A number of foreign volunteers, mostly from developed countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, France, Spain, UK, the USA, Canada, China and Singapore, came to help in the operations of the Foundation. Working alongside with them invited me to reflect on my role in the FRF. In fact, I did their daily routine and even shared the same meal with them. This made me question my own identity as a missionary. How am I different from them who left home and ended up taking care of the kids in need?

The Backpack. To document my immersion experience on social media, I came up with the hashtag² #missiotravelathon because my idea of missionaries is like that of a traveler. Our travels, however, were not just about covering as much geography as possible in a given time but more about taking each travel at a pace that allowed actual real encounter with people and culture; hence, a marathon and not a running race. In this regard, the “backpack” became a metaphorical symbol of my immersion since travelers usually carry a bag.

The metaphor of a backpack is not novel. I encountered it when I took the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Our supervisor always used this metaphor of an invisible backpack filled with our past experiences and relationships as well as our issues, values and attitudes. According to him, every time we encounter people and life circumstances, we draw out something from our backpacks in response to them. Similarly, we gain something from each of those

¹Currently, the Redemptorist Province of Thailand runs three major social institutions: Mercy Center in Bangkok (www.mercycenter.org) founded by Fr. Joseph Maier; Sarnelli House for children with HIV in Nong Khai (www.sarnelliorphantage.org), founded by Fr. Mike Shea; and the Fr. Ray Foundation (FRF) that is located in Pattaya (www.fr-ray.org).

²Hashtags are short links preceded by the pound sign (#) they are integral to the way we communicate online.

encounters, which we in turn can load into our backpacks. Simply said, the imaginary backpack is a metaphor of our life.

The Fr. Ray Foundation. Fr. Raymond Allan Brennan was an Irish-American Redemptorist sent to Thailand in 1961. He was known to be a person with jovial character. Though initially very reluctant about his deployment to Thailand, Fr. Brennan ended up opening a huge Foundation which is now known in Thailand for its motto, “We don’t turn a needy child away.” This motto was said to be reflective of the story behind the Foundation’s beginning. Apparently, there are two versions of this story. One version detailed in the book about Fr. Brennan’s life, *In The Name of the Boss Upstairs* says that after one of his masses at the St. Nikolaus Parish in Pattaya, where he was the pastor for 7 years, a woman with a baby came to him telling him that her husband left her. Having found a new partner who refused to care for the baby, she did not know what to do with the child, and she thought that leaving the baby to the church was the best option.³ Another version circulating among volunteers says that Fr. Ray found the baby left at the doorsteps of the church. This story has become a good pitch to recruit new volunteers and benefactors. His open acceptance and his kindness to take care of the baby found a life of its own. Three years after that said incident, the number of babies had increased until sometime in 1974, someone made a donation for an orphanage – an orphanage which was not even in existence yet.

The first set of volunteers came to Fr. Ray’s rescue recognizing that his generosity was as great as his lack of skill in administration and financial management. The number of volunteers grew as the stories about the generosity of Fr. Ray spread, and these Volunteers help promote the good cause of the Foundation by sharing how their experience changed them.

³Jerry Hopkins, *In the Name of the Boss Upstairs: The Fr. Ray Brennan Story* (HI: The Thomas J. Vincent Foundation, Inc., 2004), 40.

This paper tries to shed light on how a volunteer's backpack can transform the Christian believer into better witnesses to the faith in helping build a "culture of encounter, solidarity and peace" among Christians and people of goodwill.

VOLUNTEERING.

The United Nations defines volunteering by highlighting three core elements: the activity should not be undertaken "primarily" for financial rewards; it should be done out of an individual's free will; and the activity should benefit other than the volunteer, while recognizing that they too might benefit from it.⁴ These three elements are integral to the development of an understanding of the person and of the activity, the volunteer and the act of volunteering.

This paper will be using the word *volunteering* as opposed to the commonly used term *volunteerism*. Volunteerism refers to a way on how things are done in a particular organization or community. Volunteering on the other hand describes, especially in the context of this paper, how the person interacts in the organization.⁵

Organized volunteering programs began in the West. In Britain, it can be traced in the medieval times, and was described to have strong association with religion and ministry to the poor and the sick. Later on, volunteering was said to be motivated by the common desire to achieve a vision of creating a more engaged nation, with more responsibility to self and neighbors.⁶ In America, its beginning can be traced in the first fire house built by Benjamin Franklin to respond to social issues with a philanthropic attitude and patriotism. Other volunteering efforts especially in the

⁴David Brindle, The Guardian, "A history of the volunteer: how active citizenship became the big society," June 1, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/voluntary-sector-network/2015/jun/01/a-history-of-the-volunteer-how-active-citizenship-became-the-big-society> (accessed July 10, 2017).

⁵English Language and Usage, <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/200584/volunteerism-vs-volunteering> (accessed July 10, 2017).

⁶Brindle, The Guardian, (Accessed July 10, 2017).

19th century to the present have been products of mature social awareness.⁷

The United Nations recognizes that there is a great social impact brought about by volunteering. The research of Points of Light in 2011 showed that volunteering affects the the individual person engaged in it and the society in the aspects of economic and social welfare. It says that volunteering contributes greatly to the global economy.⁸ Volunteering also impacts societal interaction by creating a more responsible citizenry and individual, resulting into a more cohesive, safer and stronger community.⁹ Volunteering helps develop a sense of awareness to community issues and problems. It also broadens the person's understanding of the importance of neighborhood participation.¹⁰ With the advent of social media, volunteering creates a far greater impact since the concept of neighborhood is not seen any more in the perspective of a place but of space.

WHAT'S INSIDE THE BACKPACK

The human finds realization only within society and selfhood is based on encounters.¹¹ The volunteers I encountered come from developed countries – secular, pluralistic and postmodern contexts. Although some of them are Christians, most of them do not adhere to a particular religious tradition and some do not really practice their faith. They are those whom Pope Francis has called people of goodwill.

⁷Tamara Warta, "History of Volunteerism in America", http://charity.lovetoknow.com/History_of_Volunteerism_in_America (accessed July 10, 2017).

⁸Huining Yu. Points of Light. "Social Impact of Volunteerism." http://www.pointsoflight.org/sites/default/files/site-content/files/social_impact_of_volunteerism_pdf.pdf (accessed July 11, 2017) 5.

⁹*Ibid.* 4.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p. 8.

¹¹Michael D. Moga, *What Makes Man Truly Human? A Philosophy of Man and Society* (St. Pauls: Makati City 1995), 111.

Life Maps

Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher who wrote about secularism, said that the human person is “constantly under potential revision, as we experience more and mature. So, the issue is not only where we are, but where we are going.”¹² This statement implies that a person is on a journey, and when on a journey, he/she as a traveler must have a map. This map not only leads him/her to his/her destination, but also fires his/her curiosity about uncharted territories. The ‘fire’ is the human person’s insatiable desire especially for the good. Taylor says that a lot of us are searching for an answer to what makes our life worth living or what makes it meaningful.

A person’s sense of self and of how that self may be related to other selves, to nature, and to God is fundamental to an understanding of what Taylor calls “hypergoods.” These are life-orienting moral goods that have captured one’s allegiance. The modern hypergoods of “justice for all” or “benevolent treatment of all” for many men and women in the twentieth century are unquestioned and unquestionable. It is with reference to these or other hypergoods that a person is able to construct a life narrative, the story that gives meaning to everyday moral choices in the context of larger human goods. Such stories differ from person to person, but all invoke what Taylor describes as “strong evaluation.”¹³

In a secularized society, the quest for meaning becomes more complex. Secularity for Taylor is not abandoning religious belief but an age in which religious belief is one of the options among the many. Secularism does not just arise because people get a lot more educated, and science progresses. Science and education maybe influential but not decisive. According to him, what matters is that masses of people can sense moral sources of a quite different kind, one that does not necessarily suppose a god.¹⁴

¹²Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 15.

¹³Sources of the Self Summary eNotes, <https://www.enotes.com/topics/sources-self>, (accessed July 8, 2017).

¹⁴Taylor, 313.

The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one among other, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.¹⁵

In postmodernity, metanarratives or frameworks, as Taylor calls them, are treated with much suspicion if not altogether dismissed. I would like to compare Taylor's concept of framework to our life map. Taylor stresses, however, that framework is essential for a person's identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which serve as a frame or horizon within which a person could anchor or reference his valuations, what is good or what ought to be done, what to oppose or to promote.¹⁶ In the absence of a clear framework, the human person is confronted with a poor sense of self or an identity crisis. In this secular age, some are not yet willing to yield to totally dismissing frameworks altogether. They tend to shop for what framework that works for them or mix and match them. The quest becomes instead, that of finding a believable framework.¹⁷ Volunteering thus becomes a map, albeit a temporary one to some, towards a person's quest for meaning or to what for them is good.

Moral Compass

Aside from the maps, the compass is also an important tool for a traveler. A compass is used for navigation and orientation – it shows direction. A moral compass thus is our motivation that orients us towards our desired goal, towards our charted destination.

Taylor said that the rising of humanist alternatives in this secular age has to do with the following factors: change in the condition of belief, “expressive” individualism and the great appreciation of the ordinary life.¹⁸ Expressivism, according to

¹⁵Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (MA: Bleknep Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁶*Ibid*, 27.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 17

¹⁸Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

Taylor, is that search for an authentic way of living or expression. This, coupled with the strong individuating revolution, where man is the producer, created the phenomenon of expressive individualism. The quest for an authentic life is something a person can create and fulfill. This quest has resulted into the phenomenon of self-orientation and a great appreciation of the ordinary life. There is now a steady spread of what Taylor calls a culture of authenticity where each one of us has our own way of realizing our humanity.¹⁹

These major shifts in coming to self-awareness have obviously shaped people's ways of responding to human experiences. Taylor outlined two significant axes of moral theology that are crucial to the response ability of the modern day seeker: 1. the sense of respect for and obligation to others; and 2. dignity.²⁰

First, the sense of respect for human life and integrity is universal, even instinctive, to all human beings. A further development of this principle of respect today is in the understanding of "rights".²¹ People today, Taylor observes, have in fact become more and more sensitive to suffering. He calls this, active respect which is more of the instinctual type.²² This may easily be translated into not wanting to hear about the sufferings of others rather than taking any concrete remedial action. The motivation to relieve suffering is detached from the broader notion of restoring a broader cosmic order.²³

Our bent towards the good (1) is thoroughly internalized in *sentiment* and (2) takes the form above all of universal *benevolence*. . . Action is best. . . which accomplishes the greatest Happiness for the greatest Numbers.²⁴

¹⁹*Ibid.* 475

²⁰Taylor, *Sources*, 15.

²¹*Ibid.*, 331.

²²*Ibid.*, 5.

²³*Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 264.

Second, dignity is the characteristic where we think of ourselves as commanding (or failing to command) the respect of those around us. This kind of respect is the sense of thinking well of someone or looking up to them. Attitudinal respect, as opposed to the active respect which we discussed in detail above, commands admiration of others which is so prevalent in our age now. Taylor explains what dignity consists of.

*It can be our power, our sense of dominating public space; or our vulnerability to power; or our self-sufficiency, our life having its own center; or our being liked and looked to by others, a center of attention.*²⁵

All these elements play a part in the modern person's response to encounters. Response is symbolized by the needle in the compass that points us to our respective north. A response is seen as good if it respects life and integrity which we commonly share with others. It is considered a dignified act and even fulfilling if it commands the respect and admiration of others.

Life Journal

Journals are our tangible access to our experiences. "Journaling" comes in various forms. Every articulation, be it in a form of word, image, symbol or story, brings us into a deeper appreciation of who we are, what we are and where we are. We are storytelling animals. To be a person is to have a story to tell.²⁶ Taylor says that human beings can only find identity in self-narration. A sense of life is found through articulating it.²⁷ Sr. Beatrice Eichten in her essay on the significance of telling our stories, quoted Christina Baldwin saying, "Story is both a great revealer and concealer... It takes courage to tell our stories. We need to believe that our

²⁵Taylor, *Sources*, 15.

²⁶Sam Keena and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey: Finding Meaning in Your Life through Writing and Storytelling*, (LA: Jeremy P. Tatcher, Inc., 1989), 1.

²⁷Taylor, *Sources*, 18.

stories will be received and held in respect.”²⁸ She continued: “Our stories about ourselves become the basis for our identity and the way we hold each other accountable for our individual actions.”²⁹ Psychologists believe that when we tell our stories to one another we find the meaning of our lives and are healed from our isolation and loneliness. Self-knowledge begins with self-revelation. We do not know who we are until we hear ourselves speaking the drama of our lives.³⁰

Taylor explains that the good that our lives are oriented toward exists through some articulation. It becomes available to us through an expression of some manner.

*The God of Abraham exists for us (that is, belief in him is a possibility) because he has been talked about [in the Scripture and liturgy[...]] Universal rights of mankind exist for us because they have been promulgated... philosophers theorized them [...] revolutions have been fought in their name, and so on. In neither case, of course, are these articulations a sufficient condition of belief... But articulation is necessary condition of adhesion; without it, these goods are not even options.*³¹

*Secularism has brought about a new form of storytelling. A new type of novel has emerged which highlights a greater appreciation to the ordinary life. Characters have become relatable, even familiar, for they can be people who we could possibly encounter in our daily dealings.*³²

This mode of self-narration... is what emerges in modern autobiography... and this is what determines the form of the modern novel. That is why the particular details of circumstances and happenings, and their order i

²⁸Beatrice M. Eichten, “Telling Our Story: Movements and Transformation,” *Review for Religious Quarterly* 70.2 (2011): 132.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 138.

³⁰Keena and Valley-Fox, xviii.

³¹*Id. Sources*, 91.

³²*Ibid.*, 286-287.

n time, become the stuff of the story... [it embodies that] the premise, or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience.³³

The story of Fr. Ray is a perfect, even ideal, story that could readily appeal to a lot of people of this age. It is not by sheer accident that there are two versions of the FRF beginnings with the more dramatic one as the preferred version that has circulated among the volunteers. It has created a heroic even legendary character out of Fr. Ray whose help center has become even more popular by its motto of not turning a needy child away. Taylor is right when he says that our manner of storytelling and access to human narrative affect our consciousness of things, bringing about new understanding of our reality.³⁴ Volunteering has provided an opportunity for an ordinary person to not only pursue a meaningful and purposeful life but also to create his own legacy of benevolence.

BACKPACK GOSPEL

I came up with three symbols or images of the volunteers which I, as a missionary and a Christian believer, can resonate with: the seeker, the responder and the storyteller. These images point to a particular item inside the volunteer's backpack. The map is for the seeker, the compass is for the responder and the journal is for the storyteller. Placing these symbols within the ambit of volunteering creates a venue for genuine encounter between people of goodwill and Christian believers.

The Seeker

Taylor describes a life of faith as a journey, of being led.³⁵ Nick O'Brien proposes an alternative understanding of faith, patterned from the description found in the Letter to the Hebrews. He quotes Herbert McCabe:

³³ *Ibid.*, 289.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

³⁵ Interview of Charles Taylor, "Professor Charles Taylor ~ Faith as a Journey", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2DmIXuK48g>.

For the author of Hebrews, the first image of faith is the journey of Abraham into the unknown, a journey simply based on a promise; not a planned journey, with all the arrangements made beforehand, but perhaps more like modern package tours, where you can't be sure the hotel has actually been built yet, where you are journeying toward Promised Hotel.”³⁶

But what drives a Christian believer to take on this faith journey? Where can we hear the voice of God who has spoken and has given the mandate to Abraham? James Martin, a Jesuit spiritual writer, says that God speaks to us through our deepest longings and desires. “In our deepest longings, we hear the echoes of God’s longing for us.”³⁷ Thus the evaluation of our desires warrants our faith.

Kevin Grove used the Heideggerian proposal – inspired by Augustine’s restlessness – to help further understand desires. While the object of Augustine’s search is Christ, it was done through three desires which Heidegger named as three goods, namely: goods for the world, goods of the flesh, and pride of life.³⁸ This typology is drawn from Genesis 3:6; the tree that drew Eve’s curiosity was described as good for food and it was delightful to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.³⁹ Interestingly, such a description captures the three desires of seekers:

“[...] desire for flesh [...] the tree was good for food... entails those human desires that relate to physical embodiment: food, drink, sex, etc... desire for the eyes, is for ownership of things of the world outside one’s body: anything that one might see with his eyes or her eyes and seek to have, control, or use... desire for what would make one wise... pride of life, or sometimes

³⁶Nick O’Brien, “Faith as ‘Journey’, *Spirituality*, Vol 22, No. 126 (2016): 155.

³⁷James Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth*, (NY: HarperOne, 2011), 122.

³⁸Kevin Grove, “Revisiting Desires for Seeker” *Doctrine and Life Religious Life Review*, Vol 67, No 1 (2017): 37.

³⁹NRSV

*worldly ambition, and the wisdom coming from the tree would augment that in a very important manner.*⁴⁰

Everything was created for good not until after the Fall. People have then wrestled with the tension between self-denial and self-indulgence up until Jesus showed that the reintegration of these three desires is possible. Prior to his ministry, he faced these three desires, not eliminating them but placing them on a different relationship with God.⁴¹

Today we still wrestle with the same desires in the ordinariness of our lives. However, Jesus has proposed a practical way to integrate them even in the daily circumstance of our ordinary lives through fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Not to be taken in a Lenten sense, to fast is to discipline one's consumption so that others might have their share. To give alms is to take what one has and share it with those in need. To pray, to say "Thy will be done," is to put the will of another before one's own. These approaches will help us move from self-isolation to reconnection with others.⁴² Jesus was indeed a seeker, too. Just like the volunteers, Jesus left home and submitted Himself to the uncertainties that lie beyond the horizon. His faith in the Father was borne as he encountered people on his journey. His desire to be with us has led Him to understand who He is and His purpose.

Volunteering thus helps a person articulate his or her desires and longings. Secularity places a person in a matrix of desires. Recognizing this need of the other person provides an opportunity for the volunteer to desire well through an experience of "fasting", "almsgiving" and "prayer" in volunteering. We may call this ability to "desire well," one's quest for a meaningful and purposeful life. Hence, regardless of one's belief or unbelief, one finds meaning, purpose or faith always in the context of others.

⁴⁰Grove, 37.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 39.

Responder

The advantage of sectoral ministry⁴³ in the church is that it is neutral and descriptive. Theologically, the emphasis is shifted from “what the church believes” to “what the Church does” – how it connects with other civic institutions.⁴⁴ This is attractive to a lot of people coming from a secularist background. They place higher regard on response-ability which is based on action and sentimentality. The Church today, however, becomes too institutionalized; rules are introduced and there are divided responsibilities.

*In this way, we keep the hungry fed, the homeless housed, the naked clothed; but we are now living caricatures of the network life. We lost some of the communion, the “conspiratio”, which is at the heart of the Eucharist. The spirit is strangled.*⁴⁵

Our responses have become that of adherence to a set of rules instead of genuinely responding to the person in need. Taylor, using the story of the Good Samaritan says that this is precisely the response of the priest and the Levite to the wounded man on the road side. The Samaritan, however, responded not to some “principle of oughts,” but to the needs of the wounded person himself.⁴⁶

In today’s sophisticated society, we tend to approach life’s questions with sophisticated answers. But it is not always true. Making definitive choices is sometimes simple. It is exposure to: personal conviction, human warmth, a confidence generating community, genuine goodness made evident in a context, good sense in an issue, visible enthusiasm in the faith or a powerful

⁴³Volunteering is part of the sectoral ministry of the Church. Sectoral ministries are those ministries where the clergy primarily works in or in close connection to some sector of the society rather than within the Church. The people within the particular sector have unique needs, tasks or jobs – their circumstances are a special concern to the church.

⁴⁴Kronemeijer, 19.

⁴⁵Taylor, *Sources*, 739.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 738.

spiritual message coming at the moment of special need or crisis.⁴⁷ Pope Francis appeals to many people because of his practical approach to faith. Indeed, these days, people are often adjudged to be ‘good’ based on their actions.

Goodness always tends to spread. Every authentic experience of truth and goodness seeks by its very nature to grow within us, and any person who has experienced a profound liberation becomes more sensitive to the needs of others. As it expands, goodness takes root and develops. If we wish to lead a dignified and fulfilling life, we have to reach out to others and seek their good.⁴⁸

If we go back to the story of the Samaritan, we can observe that he was called ‘good’ because of his act of kindness to the wounded man. The genuine neighbor is the one who shows mercy.

*Compassion demands that we get out of ourselves as we reach out to others in need. It makes us emerge from the comfortable cocoon of our self-enclosure and reach out in love and service to those who need our help.*⁴⁹

To be moved by the suffering of others as we see is not an exclusive Christian claim. The volunteers responded to this need of others by going out of their way to be in solidarity with them and to alleviate their suffering and pain. As Christians, we are moved in the same way, however, we see it more as a response to an invitation of Jesus himself. When we respond to the poor and suffering we respond to Jesus himself.

⁴⁷Meanparampil, 121.

⁴⁸Evangelii Gaudium 9.

⁴⁹Paul Cardinal Poupard, “A Man Went Down From Jerusalem to Jericho”, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/hlthwork/documents/rc_pc_hlthwork_doc_30061997_poupard_en.html (accessed July 21, 2017).

Storyteller

A priest once defined a missionary as someone who tells the love story of God. Our faith follows a long, living tradition of narratives. Jesus himself tells stories to reveal God. Paul wrote letters about his own exploits and discovery of God's mercy and love. To continue to tell the story of Christ is to tell the stories of the members of his body.⁵⁰ We are what we are now as Christians because of the stories of faith that have been shared across time and space.

Pope Francis spends a great deal of effort talking about reaching the hearts and minds of people. This of course touches our manner of telling God's love story. While our actions are a credible witness to our faith, we need to talk about our faith, too. Our individual stories lead us into a relationship where we come together as a community at a given time and place and for a reason.⁵¹ Living within the context of a community of volunteers, the sharing of stories becomes an instrument of transformation because:

Community challenges us to be open to the Spirit alive in and among us, leading into an adventure and risk of discovering more about ourselves and about others. It challenges us to be an authentic presence to one another... We need to keep telling our stories, bringing to consciousness what is happening so we can understand better what our stories mean.⁵²

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

Through this exchange with the volunteer's backpack, I am able to draw three conclusions and reflections as a Redeemer who is also called to be a missionary to a wounded world.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵¹ Beatrice, p.138.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 137.

Volunteering promotes a culture of encounter.

Social institutions, like that of FRF, is a place where encounter among people coming from different backgrounds happen. The diversity and differences are unified by the same desire to help each other live better and have dignified lives. Most volunteers attest that they leave the FRF a different person. Their encounter with vulnerable people – people who are physically challenged, abandoned and sick – led them to the realization that they too have handicaps. Their encounter with the vulnerable allowed them to be in touch with their own vulnerability. The encounter has become an opportunity to clarify their own quest for meaning and purpose, that their life can be so much more in giving.

A true encounter happens only when we have the attitude of openness and a posture of vulnerability. God in Jesus encountered our humanity in his utmost vulnerability. He identified himself with the last, the least and the lost of society. He was moved with genuine compassion for those in need because he knew how it was to be poor. Perhaps, the Samaritan was moved with compassion for the bleeding man by the road because he knew what it was like to be abandoned by society. We have seen that volunteers are moved to search because they are not only seeking for meaning but they also have needs. Some of them only get to realize this in the encounter or in an experience of vulnerability.

As a Redemptorist missionary, volunteering has become an opportunity for me to encounter people in various faces of poverty. Just like the volunteers, I was made aware of my own vulnerabilities. As the Congregation is geared to respond in mission to the reality of secularism, the volunteer has become my personal encounter of people coming from a secular context. The encounter can be an opportunity to give witness to our faith and in turn be evangelized by them.

Volunteering promotes a culture of solidarity.

Common desire for goodness is integral to our humanity which moves us to respond and be drawn to anyone in need. Genuine solidarity with others asks us to step out of our comfort zones. Volunteering also becomes an antithesis to the utilitarian attitude that pervades in our society now. Disabilities do not make a person less human; rather it shows us the indomitable human spirit to hope. There is strength in weakness. There is beauty in imperfection.

For us Christians, solidarity is perfected in Jesus Christ. St. Alphonsus used the images of the Crib, the Cross and the Eucharist as reminders for us why God is Emmanuel. The Crib reminds us how God went out of His way through His Incarnation to be with us and be like us. He made himself human so that through Him we are led to the divine. True solidarity not only draws us to be with others but also eventually makes us hope and dream with them. The Cross reminds us of Jesus' faithful commitment to his mission even if it means death looming over Him. In this age where success is placed as the ultimate goal and the goal must be met in an instant, it is easy to get frustrated and to give up. Failure can teach us patience and fidelity towards our commitments. The Eucharist not only reminds us of God's love but more importantly that His love can transform us through His in-dwelling Spirit. The Eucharist calls people to communion or solidarity. Solidarity allows us to encounter others with their respective backpacks. Unraveling what we carry with us can lead us towards a renewed perspective, which in turn develops in us a renewed attitude and then towards a renewed lifestyle. Transformation happens in communion.

Volunteering promotes a culture of peace.

Peace as we know is not just the absence of war, but is an experience of wholeness. The social center tries to provide not their material need of the disabled children, the orphans and

the sick, but warmth and affection which most of them seek. Volunteering provides an opportunity for people to experience sharing. Most discord and war spring from selfishness. If we create a culture that promotes sharing then the culture of selfishness can be addressed. In the Fr. Ray Foundation however, benefactors are always encouraged to spend time with the children. Encountering the kids becomes an opportunity to grow in solidarity with them. Fr. Ray wanted to create a 'family' in the Foundation where he was the father these kids never had. When we see ourselves as part of a family we will make sure that nothing comes close to harm any member of our family. Fraternal relationship, Pope Francis says, is the pathway towards peace. The Beatitudes say: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall become the children of God." Peace building makes us conscious of our universal brotherhood and sisterhood and we are all called to help build a community that promotes the well-being of each one. All it takes at first is an encounter. St. Alphonsus placed the value of community at the center of the Redemptorist life. A Redemptorist missionary needs to experience the unique dynamics of living in unity amidst differences; reconciliation in tensions and disagreements; support and acceptance in failure and insecurities.

The volunteers carry with them a map in their seeking. Volunteering has provided for me and others a space to encounter God. The volunteers carry a compass to direct their response. Volunteering provided an opportunity for me and others to be in solidarity with God in the poor. The volunteers carry a journal to tell their story. Volunteering has been an experience of peace and joy for me and others. This renewed joy urges me to live out my vocation to be a faithful missionary, one who tells God's love story as I continue my *missiotravelathon* in a wounded world.

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