

PARISH SOCIAL MINISTRY

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Working to Reduce Poverty in America.



CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: **Volunteering and Solidarity**

By Collen Mayer

When I think about the intersection of volunteering and Catholic Social Teaching, I'm reminded of one of my first experiences volunteering at a shelter for women experiencing homelessness. I signed up for "lunch duty," which essentially meant that I prepared plates behind a serving counter and distributed them to the shelter residents. My weekly volunteering routine was simple and efficient: I would show up five minutes before lunch was to be served, put on the apron they had waiting for me, scoop mashed potatoes and green beans on to plates (which had been prepared by the cooks prior to my arrival), and hand the plates to the women. About 30 minutes later, after all the meals had been served, I would leave, feeling like I had done my bit of "good" for the week.

But then one day, an interaction with one of the women challenged my rigid volunteering routine. After I had handed her a plate, she asked, "Hey, why don't you ever stay and eat with us?" I think the woman who posed that question intuitively knew that my interac-

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— USCCB, *7 Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*

tion with her and the other women guests had become somewhat “transactional” rather than relational: I saw my job as one of handing out plates of food rather than forming mutual relationships with the residents there.

With that simple question, she was challenging me to come out from behind the serving counter, and to embrace a key principle of Catholic Social Teaching: solidarity. Solidarity is the conviction that as sons and daughters of God, we are all “one human family” and that our identity as God’s children transcends “our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences” (*USCCB, 7 Principles of Catholic Social Teaching*). The Catholic Bishops insist that a bold shift in our Church and in our communities must take place in order for us all to truly embrace a culture of solidarity:

We have to move from our devotion to independence, through an understanding of interdependence, to a commitment to human solidarity. That challenge must find its realization in the kind of community we build among us. Love implies concern for all - especially the poor - and a continued search for those social and economic structures that permit everyone to share in a community that is a part of a redeemed creation (Rom 8:21-23). (*Economic Justice for All*, 365).

As we create volunteer opportunities in our parishes and communities, Catholic Social Teaching asks us to create opportunities for mutuality, for both volunteers and the poor and vulnerable among us to truly encounter each other, so all are transformed and healed by the interaction. Those we meet at shelters, house builds, nursing

homes, and soup kitchens are looking for much more from us as volunteers than just our ability to sort clothes, hammer nails, and scoop green beans. They are longing for genuine relationship and true encounter, which upholds their dignity as well as our own.

The principal of solidarity suggests we should avoid, as much as possible, crafting volunteer projects which put a barrier between the volunteer and those persons whom they have come to help, or experiences which create an artificial hierarchy between the “helper” and those “being helped.” Catholic Social Teaching reminds us that as brothers and sisters in Christ, as sons and daughters of God, we all have equal, infinite dignity, and at the same time, that we are *all* in need of healing and conversion, regardless of our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological background.

For me, coming out from behind the serving counter to have lunch with the women at the shelter felt risky and uncomfortable. I knew that I was opening myself up to stories of suffering and hurt, and to people who had lived very different lives than I had. But in a seeming “reversal of roles,” the women sensed my discomfort and, instead of pushing me away, they responded with hospitality. They invited me to eat *with* them. By warmly welcoming me to the table, they included me in their community. This experience, as most experiences of solidarity are, was transformative and healing to me, and no doubt prepared me to be more authentic and open in the work I do now at Catholic Charities. ■

Collen Mayer is Social Services Department Director for Catholic Charities of Tennessee.



Volunteer Management “How-To”

By Sr. Betsy Van Deusen, CSJ

Willing volunteers are everywhere, but how do you keep them and get them where you need them most? In many parishes there are long lists of liturgical ministers for weekend masses and great responses to stock the food pantry or help with the second collection. But how can we move people to engagement at a deeper level? How do we communicate that their canned goods impact real people and that their service of time and talent is needed too? And how might we communicate that their presence at weekend Mass is the nourishment they need to go forth to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world?

Because volunteers want to know what they're getting into, I've developed position descriptions to help answer some of the questions people ask, such as: "What is the task? How long is my 'term'?" How much time does it take? Does it matter when I do it?" While the answer to these questions will vary, I've learned that asking someone to commit for one year is often a good way to get a long term volunteer and facilitate change in a group. Many committees of volunteers don't turn over their membership because the status quo it is easy and comfortable. But change can be good.

Bulletin announcements are great, but Jesus didn't use a bulletin to have people join him. He used personal invitation – "Come and See." Personally inviting people to a meeting or to help with an event or a project will go much farther than any other method. Talking about why you yourself are involved (personal witness) is a very effective way to begin the process of engagement. Engagement may then begin a process of conversion so people understand more deeply the "why" of those canned goods. Once people are engaged, gratitude for what they do can be extended in many ways – a phone call, a note, an acknowledgment in the bulletin, a verbal thank you. It is hard to be "too grateful!"

Effectively utilizing volunteers can be hard work, but considering this an essential aspect of whatever your ministry is will keep you inviting, engaging, including, and thanking those who will step forward. ■

Sr. Betsy VanDeusen, CST, is Director of Community Partnerships with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany.

Volunteers and Catholic Charities

- Volunteers make up 80 percent of Catholic Charities' workforce
- Last year, at least 250,618 volunteers worked 9,673,074 hours for Catholic Charities
- Two-thirds of Catholic Charities agencies have a director or coordinator of volunteers
- Many Catholic Charities agencies use skilled volunteers, such as:
 - ✦ teachers volunteers as tutors
 - ✦ nurses volunteering at a free clinic
 - ✦ tax specialists helping low-income individuals review eligibility for the earned-income credit



FOCUS ON THE PARISH:

Mary Queen Catholic Church, Friendswood, TX

By **Shelia Herlihy**

At Mary Queen Catholic Church in Friendswood, Texas, there are a lot of opportunities to get involved. Parishioners can participate in the food pantry, ministry to the homeless, and Project Gabriel, not to mention the seasonal opportunities that come up throughout the year. To maintain all these ministries, the Social Minister, Chris Austgen, has to recruit, train, and maintain many volunteers.

For recruitment, storytelling has proven to be the best way to get people involved. Chris periodically speaks at Masses, and makes sure that members of ministries are aware of the impact they are having. There is a ministry fair every fall, but every time Chris shares in front of the parish, people email wanting to get involved. This enthusiasm requires some response, so she always replies to first-time volunteers with a phone call. Recruitment for one-time opportunities, like the state-wide Catholic Advocacy Day, is centered upon word-of-mouth communication and email, especially within the groups where volunteers have long been faithful. Standard advertising, like bulletin announcements and flyers are good, but more personal connection is usually required to get a new person into ministry.

Volunteer training varies widely based on the ministry, but there are some common threads. Most important is the way that volunteers treat those they serve. Chris often reminds her volunteers: "We are a ministry, so we must treat everyone with kindness and compassion... you need to remind yourself that it's a child of God in front of you." There is always a job description for new volunteers, which helps in both recruiting and training, but the essential truth of care for neighbor can never be forgotten. Whether one is packing food for a victim of human trafficking, or writing a card to someone who has recently lost a loved one, it's important to treat that individual with love.

The parish offers enrichment days at the diocesan level and through Catholic Charities, as well as parish wide pot-lucks for volunteers. This facilitates



Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) Volunteer Management Resources

- CCUSA's Volunteer Management Section has a newsletter, webinars and coffee talks. For more information, email vmn@CatholicCharitiesUSA.org
- The CCUSA Code of Ethics has a section devoted to the management, formation, and activities of volunteers
- The Parish Social Ministry toolbox, Section 2.3 is entitled "Volunteers: Recruitment, Leadership, Retention, and Formation"
- "Enticing and Farming Parish Volunteers-Strategies for success a May 2017 webinar is available as a recording or slide show"

The above resources are available to CCUSA members at www.CatholicCharitiesUSA.org in the "Resources" section under "Parish Social Ministry." Non-members may request them at psm@CatholicCharitiesUSA.org.

ongoing training and ensures that volunteers are paid back for their mercy in reaching out to others. According to Chris, it's incredible to watch connections form between different people both involved in the same ministry. The parish also shows appreciation by writing thank-you cards to long-term volunteers, and beginning to offer more spiritual opportunities so that parishioners can place their service in the context of their faith. Because of all this, Mary Queen parish has a vibrant social ministry, which is only possible because of their volunteers. ■

Shelia Herlihy is coordinator of Justice and Peace at Church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, VA