

DePaul University Ministry Service Immersion Program Philosophy

The University Ministry Community Service Immersion Program is committed to DePaul University's Vincentian, Catholic, and urban mission that emphasizes education and compassion through service to persons who are poor. Through the Vincentians in Action (VIA) model, the Service Immersion Program strives to help students understand their service experiences in terms of their diverse faith backgrounds and inner convictions to foster a life-long commitment to the dignity of each individual. VIA includes three Ways: The Way of Awareness and Appreciation, the Way of Dialogue, and the Way of Solidarity. Each Way provides a framework for students to better comprehend the service experience and reflect upon their own lives in regards to all members of the human community.

The Way of Awareness and Appreciation

"This experience leads to compassion, or at least can lead to compassion if we allow it to develop. We need avoid putting obstacles in the way of compassion, by seeing the poverty and suffering of the poor as the result of laziness or ignorance, by washing our hands of the problem, or by claiming helplessness in the face of it. We need to nourish the sense of compassion by feeling with the poor as deeply as we can."

The Way of Awareness and Appreciation is the beginning of the service experience. Through the Way of Awareness, one develops compassion and performs service on behalf of those we serve. Service is the cornerstone of the service immersion program at DePaul. In the spirit of St. Vincent DePaul, serving people on the margins is an essential act of solidarity. The goal is to nourish the inherent human dignity of all persons through the mutual sharing of time, talent, and resources. Service will be directly related to the theme of each trip. All immersions strive to embody a philosophy of service that celebrates the balance of "doing" the work of service and building relationships by "being" with the people we serve. Through direct service, one experiences the Way of Awareness and Appreciation and observing the lives and suffering of people who are poor.

"Compassion also leads us to simplicity in our way of living. We begin to sense the need to live more simply, to let go of many superfluous possessions, to examine the way we live in contrast to, and often at the expense of, the way of the rest of the world lives."

In addition, students will start to examine the way they use resources and strive to live more simply. Living with intentional simplicity is meant to help students heighten their awareness of the issues of access, availability and allocation of resources. It is also an opportunity to live in solidarity with the people of the host community. This process can begin to shape one's short- and long-term decisions about how to spend resources of time, talent and money. In community, the students define their common lifestyle by making consensus decisions about food purchases, recycling, technology usage, etc. The commitment is more than attempting to live within a budget; or to feel deprived of favorite things. It is a shift of focus. Spending an immersion centered less on money and the consumption promoted by our American culture can free students to experience the value of simple pleasures, conversations, and their own creativity.

"All of these characteristics of the Way of Appreciation- experience, compassion, Acts of Mercy, simplicity of lifestyle are important for spiritual growth toward solidarity with the poor. Indispensable as they are, however, they are only a beginning..."

The Way of Dialogue

"Persons at this stage enter into a new kind of relationship with the poor. In the Way of Appreciation, the poor were talked about and Acts of Mercy were performed for them. Now we begin to develop a more personal relationship with them."

The Way of Dialogue is the second Way along the journey of VIA. It involves a personal relationship with those we work with. One gains a greater understanding of the lives of the poor through more contact and time spent together. In the Way of Dialogue, it is no longer necessary for us to perform Acts of Mercy on behalf of the poor but rather, we start working together with the poor for change. Our work in

the Way of Dialogue focuses more on structural change and we begin to understand social justice more fully. Much of the disparity of resource allocation and marginalization results from systemic injustice. The purpose of this tenet is to increase one's awareness of the unjust political, economic and social structures which impinge upon the human dignity of people. Students are challenged to explore the causes and effects of injustice whereby they can begin to understand their role in creating a more just world. Intentional community becomes very important in the Way of Dialogue as we struggle for justice together with the poor. The purpose of building intentional community is to provide a unique opportunity for students to create a shared lifestyle, one that emphasizes human dignity and the common good. Central to this tenet is the Vincentian value that individuals come together in community to support one another in their work.

The Way of Dialogue allows us to enter more fully into the lives of the poor. The service most often associated with the Way of Dialogue is the service of being. We are touched by the lives of the poor and the poor are touched by our lives. Through this deepened relationship with the poor, we realize that the change needed must come from the poor themselves and that they are fully capable of creating change. We may not be needed in the way we thought. Instead, we must learn from the poor and gain wisdom from their strength and character.

"We enter more intensely into the life of the poor. We do not necessarily think in the same way or have the same opinions and views as they do, but our actions on behalf of justice are united with the action of the poor."

The Way of Solidarity

"We enter into solidarity with the poor when the distinction between we and they no longer applies. The distinction breaks down and we are the poor, one among them. We have, it is true, differing talents, life experiences, but the fundamental point is that we stand together as one, of one mind and heart in the midst of political, economic, and social structures that oppress. We approach the world with the same outlook. We approach it aware of our different backgrounds and roles, aware of our sinfulness, limitations and weaknesses, but with mutual love and respect."

Our experience in the Way of Solidarity is the experience of the justice of God. We live in solidarity with God and the poor. The differential of "us" and "them" no longer exists. We no longer see the poor as perfect but rather as human beings. The acts of service and justice remain a part of our lives. Our relationship with the poor and with God is one of unity and peace.

"It is what directs our lives and actions, gives us energy, and expresses itself in an inner peace that is the consequence of reconciliation within ourselves with the poor and with the God of the poor."

Reflection on our service work is a part of our prayer and now we pray to God from the point of view of the poor. Service without reflection is just work. Reflection is necessary in order to better understand the complexity of the issues that people on the margins face in their daily lives. Therefore, each night the DePaul community will gather to reflect on the day. These discussions provide opportunities for participants to process their experience and learn from one another. What motivates you? The service immersion program upholds the sacred-ness of all life. In each experience, students are challenged to look deeply at their own lives and source for living. For Vincent DePaul and Louise de Marillac, their service with the poor was rooted in the person of Jesus Christ. Whether or not you come from a religious background or specific faith tradition, the service immersion experience will challenge each participant to look more deeply at his/her motivating source and life values.

"Solidarity becomes the motive force of how we view the world and live within it, and of how we experience God."

¹ Excerpts taken from the Jesuit Volunteer Corps website.

*All quotes taken from Theodore Wiesner's "Experiencing God in the Poor"