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Marquette University Global Brigades: Using the Spiritual Exercises as an Orientation for a Short-Term International Engagement Project

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Abstract

In 2003, a group of students from Marquette University chose to travel to Central America to work within poor, rural communities. The goal: to improve quality of life for the members of those communities. It served as a catalyst in creating Global Brigades, which is currently the largest, student-led service organization in the world. This tradition of global service immersion continues at Marquette, and while students embrace the life-changing opportunity, many struggle upon their return with feelings of guilt and dissonance associated with the amenities and conveniences in their own lives. This led to the creation of an orientation program, designed to prepare students for their re-entry into the United States prior to their departure from Central America. Using themes from St. Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises, students assumed the lead in developing a program that helps Global Brigades’ participants prepare themselves—prior to, during, and after their immersion. This article outlines the background and evolution of the orientation program at Marquette University.

Inspired to Serve

- Beginning in 2003, Marquette University students traveled to Honduras to assist in creating mobile medical clinics and promoting public health education in rural villages near Tegucigalpa. Since then, more than 340 students have participated in 17 trips to date.
- In the spring of 2012 and 2013, a Marquette group traveled to Panama to help a community establish programs in sustainable agriculture and public health.
- Also in 2013, Nicaragua was the destination for a combined medical and public health brigade.

At Marquette, global service immersion includes many different engagement initiatives; all were inevitably life changing experiences, for the villagers as well as the volunteers.

These global forays to work with these communities are driven by Marquette University students, who carry forward a tradition that began a decade ago. The seed was then planted for what today has grown into the Global Brigades program, thanks largely to the inspirational and selfless work of Sister Maria Rosa Leggoll, OSF.

Sister Maria is the humble founder of SAN—the Sociedad Amigos de los Niños (Friends of the Children). Through SAN, Sister Maria established

orphanages responsible for raising more than 40,000 children thus far; SAN also developed a mobile clinic program, utilizing the volunteer services of medical professionals from Honduras, the United States, and Canada.¹ Marquette student Jeff Bodle had previously traveled with a group of medical professionals from Indianapolis, Indiana to Honduras as part of sister's program. The journey was sponsored by the Timmy Foundation.

In fall 2002, Jeff, who was a junior, and his friends Shital Chauhan and Stephanie Merlo drove efforts to recruit fellow Marquette students who would travel to Honduras to assist these physicians as they set up mobile medical clinics in rural villages. The following spring, the first Marquette group of volunteers arrived in Tegucigalpa to spend their spring breaks working with medical professionals in these communities. So inspired by their Honduran experience, Shital, Honduran Quique Rodríguez, and fellow Americans Steve Atamian and Duffy Casey laid the groundwork for Global Brigades—the world's largest student-managed international service organization. With over 6000 volunteers from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Ghana, Global Brigades has directly assisted more than 400,000 people in Honduras, Ghana, Panama, and Nicaragua.²

Dealing with Dissonance: The Dilemma for Students Who Serve

The Global Brigades experience profoundly affects all participants. Its impact, however, creates its own challenge for volunteers. Students returning home often have feelings of guilt and conflict. Sixty percent of Hondurans live in poverty; it is apparent within minutes of the airport as one travels through Tegucigalpa and witnesses the shanties built on the hills in the city. Students find it difficult to reconcile their own comforts and conveniences with the poverty encountered in the city and villages in which they serve.

Ensuring a Transformative Experience: The Need for an Orientation Program

Dr. William Cullinan, Dean of the College of Health Sciences at Marquette, suggested the need to assist these students, to help them reconcile

their feelings after returning from their service immersion and ensure the experience was transformative rather than depressing. Dr. Cullinan initiated a call to action as a Cohort #1 participant in the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities' Ignatian Colleagues Program (ICP). ICP is a national program designed to educate and form administrators and faculty more deeply in the Jesuit tradition of higher education; the goal is to enhance their ability to articulate, adapt, and advance Ignatian mission on their campuses.³

As a Cohort #3 participant and co-advisor for Marquette's Global Brigades group, the author discussed this with his colleague and also co-advisor Michelle Schuh, Assistant Dean of the College of Health Sciences. We contemplated an approach for helping students cope with their feelings. We concluded that the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises presented an opportunity for creating a program that would enable all student participants in the brigades to embrace their experience and return with an understanding as to how they can proactively use their new-found or reinforced passion to serve others.

The Spirit of the Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises evolved from St. Ignatius' experiences, through which he sought how to embrace God, discern His will, and find personal and spiritual awareness.⁴ Ignatius maintained a journal of his spiritual insights, including prayers, meditations, and reflections, and guidelines that served as a framework for a retreat he referred to as "Spiritual Exercises." Ignatius wrote that the Exercises "have as their purpose the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment."⁵

Marquette's Faber Center for Ignatian Spirituality builds upon this precept, describing how:

"Ignatius uses our human bodies as sources of wisdom, discernment and revelation, and he views the world as our space to serve with grace, respect and inquiry. Ignatius invites us to view what is possible in all things of the world, and he invites us to imagine the

possibilities of our own vocations as true contemporary disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁶

Themes from the Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius developed the Spiritual Exercises in the 1500s. He compiled his reflections from his own spiritual experiences and of those close to him. The “full” Exercises were designed to last four weeks with a focus for each week beginning with a self-awareness of one’s own strengths and shortcomings, followed by understanding how it is to love as Jesus did, progressing to acknowledging the suffering Christ endured for our sins and then culminating with the joy and celebration of the Resurrection.

The Spiritual Exercises are nothing less than complex and complicated. The late Dean Brackley, S.J., once said, “If you are not confused by the Spiritual Exercises, then you are not paying attention.”⁷ Being very attentive, Michelle Schuh and the author recognized that this undertaking would be difficult: we were determined to create a program that would provide Global Brigade student leaders with an understanding of the Spiritual Exercises so that they could comprehend, interpret, embrace, and subsequently share it with the student volunteers, enabling them to be positively transformed by their service immersion. But how to begin?

We decided that the program should reflect the spirit captured by Warren Sazama, S.J., who describes:

Discernment of spirits takes us on an exciting adventure. When we give up control and take risks to follow God’s lead not knowing where we will end up, with the attitudes of openness, generosity, and inner freedom recommended by Ignatius, life is a lot more fun and exciting than when we try to control everything ourselves.”⁸

We were also cognizant of former Superior General Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., who explained that:

“Jesuit education strives to give learners ongoing development of their imagination, feelings, conscience and intellect, and to

encourage and help them recognize new experiences as opportunities to further growth. Learners see service to others as more self-fulfilling than personal success or prosperity.”⁹

We used that context as the foundation for creating a program that would be transformational for brigade participants.

Structure of the Program

To be comprehensive, the program must allow students to contemplate their service before, during and after the immersion experience. We, therefore, developed three program components: (1) Pre-trip orientation, (2) Reflecting during the experience, and (3) Reflecting after the trip. To develop a thematic tool valuable throughout the three program components, student leaders worked within the four-week framework of the Spiritual Exercises; consequently, they developed a theme as the focus for each of four pre-trip orientation sessions: Acknowledgment, Love, Suffering, and Joy and Celebration.

The Program in Action

Pre-trip orientation

Student leaders conducted the four sessions for all students who would travel with them on the upcoming brigade. They took place in the fall semester for the winter and spring break trips. Each session was about two or three weeks apart. These gatherings enabled the group to discuss and understand the designated theme.

Acknowledgement

The first week of the Spiritual Exercises is a time for personal self-reflection: Who am I? How have I lived my life up until now? This week is about awareness and acknowledgment of the good and the bad within the individual. Chris Lowney quotes Ignatius while describing this important step within the Exercises: “While our weaknesses remain unacknowledged or closeted away, we are powerless over them.”¹⁰ Ignatius contends that until we acknowledge our strengths and weaknesses, we are not fully free to love God. God wishes to free us of these hindrances. Lowney thus suggests that the first week of the Spiritual Exercises is about taking stock of who

you are, where you want to go, and what is holding you back.¹¹

Likewise, the first session of the pre-trip orientation invites students to reflect on two questions: Who am I (including personal strengths and weaknesses)? Who are we as Global Brigade volunteers? Students who have previously participated in a trip are paired with students who are planning to attend for the first time. These “veterans” pose the questions to the “rookies,” asking each to explain what it is about them as an individual that makes them a good fit for the Global Brigades initiative. How can they contribute to the group? Additionally, the rookies are asked to share anxieties or fears they have about participating in the program. The veterans encourage the rookies to open up and speak honestly about their first Global Brigades experience. This is consistent with the *Acknowledgment* theme of the Spiritual Exercises. Paralleling how God wishes to free us from our weaknesses so we can love unconditionally, student leaders try to allay the fears and anxieties of the rookies so that they may experience fully the abundant love for and from the people served through Global Brigades.

Love

The second week of the Spiritual Exercises challenges all of us as individuals to live as Christ did and to love others. We should function as a disciple, called to serve and love others; “we are brought to decisions to change our lives to do Christ’s work in the world and to love him more intimately.”¹²

In this context, student leaders begin the second pre-trip orientation session by simply asking the question: What is *Love*? Exploring the question, student leaders facilitate a conversation around *Love*’s essence. Specifically, the compassion within *Love* helps carry us through *Suffering* (the third theme to be described in the following section). *Love* compels us to stay in the present. It is because of *Love* that we serve, and do so not out of duty, obligation, shame, guilt, or even reward. We love and serve because it is what we wish to do. We aspire to love as Jesus loved. It is our understanding of *Love* that allows us to have a much richer experience during the Global

Brigades trip as well as upon our return to the United States.

Plugging into the first week’s theme of *Acknowledgment* through which students realize that they all have special gifts and talents to share through Global Brigades, *Love* is the catalyst that brings those gifts to bear. During a previous brigade trip to Honduras, Sister Maria Rosa explained to the student participants that they were chosen by God to serve her people. This reinforced the students’ call to serve, reminding them of the gifts they have to offer in meeting the needs of others. Sharing these gifts out of *Love* is immeasurably appreciated by those served, who in turn express *Love* for the volunteers.

The preceding illustrates the goal to make students cognizant that they have made a choice to serve through Global Brigades and that service is not an obligation or done for self-fulfillment or reward; it is simply done to serve and love others. Since the student leaders facilitating these points in the pre-trip orientation can speak to how they have themselves been changed by their experience in relation to the theme of *Love*, they spend time during the second session describing how being open to the love of others and expressing respect and kindness towards people in need has a positive effect on all parties involved. With *Love* at the core of the daily interactions between the service volunteers and the people served, giving is a two-way street.

Suffering

This third theme of the Spiritual Exercises relates the Passion and death of Jesus. We are drawn in to “identify with his *Suffering* and to deepen our commitment to him.”¹³ We ask the students to open up to others. Allowing themselves to be vulnerable enables relationships and trust to build. This vulnerability provides a greater ability to love, be loved, and recognize the suffering around them.

Just as the Spiritual Exercises draw us into imagining the *Suffering* of Christ, students who participate in Global Brigades are encouraged to absorb the poverty and *Suffering* they see. The third pre-trip orientation session is an opportunity for student leaders as brigade veterans and the rookies to define “*Suffering*” as they know it. Recognizing that there is overwhelming poverty in the world,

the veterans discuss how they reconcile this with their own lives upon their return home.

The goal is for students to be cognizant of the comforts and conveniences that they enjoy in their lives, understanding that in contrast, the desire for material things is not a cultural norm in the villages served through Global Brigades. The people served are simply grateful that the volunteers are with them. That said, *Love*—not reward and adulation for serving—is what students need to see as the end result. It is about serving others simply for the *Love* and *Joy* in doing so.

Joy and Celebration

The fourth week of the Spiritual Exercises ties the four themes together. Ignatius intended that the first week be an occasion for *Acknowledgement*, to realizing that we sin and that our sins can lead to *Suffering* in different ways. *Love* and awareness of *Suffering* allow us to be moved to act for others in our daily life, even in small ways. The connection between *Acknowledgement*, *Love*, and *Suffering* prepares us for *Joy and Celebration*.

In the fourth pre-trip orientation session, the focus is around the nature of *Joy*. It does not occur without suffering; in most cases, most *Joy and Celebration* occur after conflict or struggle. *Joy* comes from understanding; good can come from what seems only bad. For example, during brigades to Honduras or Panama, student volunteers are aware of the guilt they have vis-à-vis the disconnect between these poor countries and the comforts of living in the U.S. By being aware, by being able to walk in the shoes of so many who have little, by being their voice upon returning home, students can look forward to the upcoming brigade as an opportunity to change the world, day by day.

Students are asked to see how they can make a difference if they have the power to choose to move through pain—to see more than what appears on the surface by being able to articulate their pain and *Suffering*. They will be able to feel the *Joy and Celebration* of the understanding they have of the challenges encountered. This capacity remains present within us and, as such, affects the way we conduct ourselves on a daily basis. In the same way that Christ died on the cross, *Suffering*

and death are not the end of the story. He rose again three days later, giving us a greater understanding of compassion, empathy and freedom. “We walk with the risen Christ and set out to love and serve him in concrete ways in our lives in the world.”¹⁴

Reflecting during the Experience

The second component of the program truly builds upon and allows students to take strength from the discussions around the four themes introduced during the pre-trip orientation sessions. On the first night of the brigade experience, the students are given time to self-reflect, journal, or meditate on what they think the trip will be like and if they feel they are ready. For the next four evenings, the group focuses on one of the four themes. The orientation program prior to leaving appeared to be effective for the group was well prepared and the discussion was very engaging. The first theme, *Self-Acknowledgement* was introduced on the first night as the next day’s focus. They were told to be conscious of this theme throughout the day. Each day focused on one central question that corresponded with that theme. We wanted all to truly think and reflect on what they were seeing and feeling.

The second evening of reflection focused on *Self-Acknowledgement*. What did the students realize/learn about themselves that day? For the third evening the group was asked to share the greatest act of *Love* they saw that day? For the fourth night the group was asked to reflect and share their observations regarding the *Suffering* they witnessed that day. The fifth night was a culmination of the themes. Did they realize the *Joy and Celebrate* the ability to be able to understand the challenges faced by those whom we served? Were they aware that they can make a difference if they choose to move through pain, see more than what appears on the surface, by walking in the shoes of those whom they serve, and by being able to articulate their pain and *Suffering*?

The last night of the trip was an opportunity to share high points and the most challenging occasions of the trip. The group was encouraged to draw on those emotions and use what they experienced upon their return home.

Reflection upon Return

The goal of the orientation was to educate, engage, and empower the students to embrace the Spiritual Exercises as a means to make sense of their experience before, during, and after the brigade. Upon completion of the trip the group gathered and reflected on their experience. The students were asked if their orientation enabled them to return reconciled and prepared to proactively share their newfound passion in their world.

The groups were separated by rookies and veterans. Rookies were asked: How were you affected by the trip? What did you think about the pre-trip reflections? How were in-country reflections different? How did you feel about the veterans sharing? Were you ready for your return?

The veterans met separately and were asked: Since you have been through the reflection experience twice, what do you think? How were the themes? How were the reflections in-country?

Indications of Success

Success is perhaps best captured by quotes from the students upon their return. *"Honduras does not have to end there"* and *"Made me realize that the feeling of suffering and guilt was natural."* Other words of description provided included *"Prepared"* and *"Empowered."* The student leaders' assessment of the success of the Exercises as an orientation and how it impacted them and their peers is best described in their words.

When I was first asked to help create an Ignatian program that relates to my peers I thought, this is going to be a tough one. Trying to find a way where everyone would understand spirituality and its role in our service work, no matter their personal level of faith and spirituality, proved to be a challenging yet rewarding experience.

Spirituality is not something that can be learned or used only by those who consider themselves to be "extra" spiritual. It can be applied at all levels of the spectrum. The themes of *Acknowledgment, Suffering, Love, and Joy and Celebration* became something of a second

nature to all of us. They provided an understanding of not only what our service work means but our role as individuals and a community of people. By far, the most important thing to take from the spiritual exercises is the realization that this is not just service work, but a way of life. A life that has been transformed through our work with our brothers and sisters and an understanding that we are all in this together. No matter one's economic background, race, religion, political ties, etc. Our goal has become one.

This is what the spiritual exercises have done; created a framework for us to express our thoughts and not be afraid to turn them into positive social change. We are not just a stagnant group of individuals waiting for something to happen, we have become the change.

Angie Macias, alumna

The Global Brigades family is an unconditional love, bond, and understanding between the members working with those in need. In creating and experiencing the Marquette trips to Honduras and Panama, there has been growth amongst the group members in the realizations of *Self acknowledgement, Love, Suffering, and Joy and Celebration*.

We celebrate together, through a series of emotions that may feel uncomfortable at times, in order to fulfill our mission and seek to promote respect through service. By making use of our time before each trip, the Spiritual Exercises promote four themes that help us realize who we are and why we feel so drawn to this cause; only once we understand ourselves can we understand others. Though differences have divided many, they are what bring us together with these wonderful people and guide us during our journey.

The Spiritual Exercises themselves orient the students by making them experience conflict. Although the true emotion of this conflict is felt once with a struggling community such as in Honduras, orientation helps us realize how normal our feelings may be once we come home. By focusing on our return to the United States even before the trip begins, we start to

examine ourselves and our duties while breaking down barriers that come with unfamiliar experiences. By preparing ourselves in this way, we feel that we have created a successful experience for the Marquette Global Brigades family, and have promoted further exploration into continued service opportunities that may make us feel similar conflict.

Kristen Ward, alumna

The Spiritual Exercises helped me immensely in allowing myself to be open to all of the possibilities around me. While I was uncertain of where my experiences in Honduras would lead me as a person, taking part in the spiritual exercises helped to guide me along the way. I knew the emotions I was feeling were normal and when I didn't know how to cope with them, I could turn to the exercises. As a student leader for these exercises I was able to hear the other students' reflections on the same experiences I was going through and by making the exercises a group activity, we were able to build off of each other and help each other grow.

While self-acknowledgement should be for yourself, to better understand your strength and weaknesses, and to figure out who you are, it also serves a vital role for groups as well. We were able to share what each of us can bring to Global Brigades and determined what makes us who we are as an organization.

Through the process of *Self-acknowledgement*, and figuring out how I cope with experiences that change me on the inside, I was able to feel the *Love* of the Honduran people, see the *Joy*, and experience the *Celebration* in Honduras and everyday life, despite the *Suffering* I see in the world. Through my trips to Honduras, and by participating in the spiritual exercises simultaneously, I was reassured that service is a true passion of mine. It is not something that is a requirement or a chore. The exercises have opened my eyes to other possibilities to serve not only internationally, but nationally and locally as well."

Samantha Dodd, senior

Conclusion

For the Spiritual Exercises to be effective, the students first needed to understand and embrace them. This is why we asked the student leaders, after coaching them on the Exercises, to identify the themes in words that would resonate with their peers. The students also had to understand what they were going to encounter so they would not be shocked with the poverty they would experience. Finally, and our ultimate goal, was to enable and empower them to return not with guilt but inspired to change their lives to love, respect, and serve others. Based upon the feedback we have received after applying this to four of our trips, it appears to make a difference. The students indicate that they return better prepared to love as Christ loved us, respect all, serve as a voice and advocate for those marginalized and underserved in our neighborhood, community, country, and world. HJE

Notes

¹ Maria Leggoll, O.S.F. in conversation with Toby Peters, August 2013.

² Global Brigades, "Vision and Mission," accessed November 30, 2013. <http://www.globalbrigades.org/vision-mission>.

³ Ignatian Colleagues Program, "About the ICP," video excerpt of Dean Brackley, S.J., accessed November 30, 2013. <http://ignatiancolleagues.org/>.

⁴ Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003), 114.

⁵ Ignatian Spirituality.com, "What Are the Spiritual Exercises?" accessed November 30, 2013. <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises/>.

⁶ Faber Center for Ignatian Spirituality, "Ignatian Spirituality," accessed November 30, 2013. <http://www.marquette.edu/faber/IgnatianSpirituality.shtml>.

⁷ Dean Brackley, S.J. in conversation with Toby Peters, February 2011.

⁸ Warren Sazama, S.J., "Some Ignatian Principles for Making Prayerful Decisions," accessed November 30, 2013. <http://www.marquette.edu/faith/ignatian-principles-for-making-decisions.php>.

⁹ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J. "Jesuit Education and Ignatian Pedagogy," accessed November 30, 2013.
http://business.fordham.edu/faculty_resources/documents/Jesuit-Education-and-Ignatian-Pedagogy.pdf.

¹⁰ Lowney, *Heroic Leadership*, 117-18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹² IgnatianSpirituality.com, "What are the Spiritual Exercises?"

¹³ Joe Paprocki, "What Are the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius?" accessed November 30, 2013.
<http://www.loyolapress.com/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises-of-saint-ignatius.htm>

¹⁴ IgnatianSpirituality.com, "What are the Spiritual Exercises?"

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