

Students in Service—In Redwood City, California

Aquinas College Magazine, Spring 2004

“The charity of truth seeks holy leisure; the necessity of charity accepts just work.”

Upon reading this poignant line by St. Augustine in the Catechism recently, I thought, “My life exactly!” It expresses how I felt this summer as a recent college graduate and a CYO camp counselor, suspended between a state of leisure and work.

My freshman year at Aquinas, I decided that I wanted to commit at least one year of my life to serving others, solely for the sake of charity. A week-long service learning trip to Nazareth Farm in West Virginia showed me that volunteer service is not only a viable option in our competitive culture, but also a calling. The four cornerstones of Nazareth Farm are core to anyone who seeks to live a more just life: community, simplicity, prayer and service. They are so tightly woven together that service is empty without the first three tenants.

Much more important than a degree in psychology and communication, my four years at Aquinas gave me the cornerstone of community. My memories of living in Meijer Hall, of visiting professors in Holmdene, and of participating in Mass at Bukowski Chapel are all coated with the nostalgia of camaraderie and a caring community. The Aquinas community supported my whole person and accompanied me on my journey to Catholicism.

I miss the energy and depth of theology discussions with friends into the early hours of the morning. Since beginning my year of volunteer service in September, I have a new understanding of early morning. I am now among those who begrudgingly wake up while it is still dark outside and return from work with the setting of the sun; yet, the light of my ministry site community, St. Francis Center, fills my day. Not to mention that my itinerant residence of Redwood City, California boasts “Climate best by government tests.” (Any degree of nostalgia will not make me miss the countless cloudy days of Grand Rapids!)

As a Dominican Volunteer, I work full time in exchange for housing, food, insurance, a small stipend, and invaluable life experience. The climate of my work environment is stimulating, to say the least. I interact with dozens of colorful personalities each day and perform a variety of tasks requiring flexibility and, as our motto at St. Francis Center says, “compassion, not judgment.” Compassion takes on the form of food and clothing at the Center. At least 400 families come through our small, non-profit agency’s home each month. We are located in a primarily Hispanic neighborhood, right where many of our clients live. We provide them with a clean and inviting facility where they can shop for lightly-used clothing while volunteers prepare two or three bags of groceries for them to take home. Our services are free of charge and full of dignity.

As more clients use our services around Thanksgiving and Christmas and the pace of my work increases, I am grateful that living in the Aquinas community gifted me with a theological

perspective. Last fall, as friends and I laughed and crunched fallen leaves while walking on the path from Bukowski Chapel, God spoke to me about living in a state of prayer and celebration. As I sat on a fallen tree by Coldbrook Creek following last year's gorgeous ice storm, God spoke to me about accepting death and embracing new life. As I stood in the Holmdene Garden breathing the completely still night air and surrounded by the undefiled snow, God spoke to me about savoring the gift of the moment.

God's voice, so clear and warm in nature and community, still reverberates in my being even on days I am too busy to reflect on my experiences. These daily activities include teaching second graders and their mothers, helping volunteers sort clothing donations, picking up a van full of food at the Food Bank, writing thank you notes and running errands. God reveals himself in everyday events and people, and it is clear to me that St. Francis Center, with its disparate members, is the body of Christ. Nearly 100 volunteers and many more donors work together to create miracles.

Twelve of our miracles give me hugs and bless me with holy water after I teach them music. These second graders did not speak English when they came to Holy Family School two and a half years ago. Now, they love to sing in Spanish and English! In an effort to educate the whole family, the children's mothers are committed to coming to St. Francis Center one day a week to learn English.

In addition, I am teaching them computers and catechism. Talking about faith with the mothers is an incredible blessing. Having joined the Catholic Church when I was a sophomore at Aquinas, I love to share the rich traditions of our faith that I first came to know while singing in the choir and lecturing for Mass at Bukowski Chapel. In turn, the ladies share the stories of their lives with me and tell me about some of their rich Mexican or Salvadorian traditions. We teach one another. The women are gentle reminders of what I learned while I was a member of Casa Hogar at Aquinas.

Three missions to the Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II Orphanage in Peru began preparing me for the gracious hospitality I have received since arriving in California. The celebrations in which I took part while in Peru and the spirit of generosity in the children and their family teachers challenged me to believe that how we receive is just as important as how we give. Coincidentally, giving and receiving are different expressions of charity, precisely as holy leisure and just work both spring from charity. Presently, the beautiful beaches and fabulous food of the Bay area ensure my leisure, while the poor economy and immigration laws provide me with plenty of work.

The two Dominican sisters with whom I live and work encourage me to seek balance as I adjust to a new lifestyle. The sisters are incredible examples of the Dominican charisms with which I became enamored while attending Aquinas: reaching, blessing and praising. Dominican Volunteers USA is giving me the opportunity to preach the Gospel, bless others, and praise God "for a living!" My housemates live out this calling with such faithfulness and charity. Even though my term of volunteer service will be over in June, I will continue to preach the Good News both in my leisure and my work, in whatever community I am blessed to be a part.

Carla Johnson '03