



The Embodiment of Divine Compassion

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I have been blessed with the amazing opportunity to participate in two African mission awareness trips hosted by Christian Foundation for Children and Aging (CFCA). Witnessing Catholic Social Teaching in action has been edifying. This rich tradition—often referred to as the Church’s “best kept secret”—expresses the epitome of God’s love, compassion, and justice for all his children without exception.

As a student of Social Justice, the term “solidarity” was academically implanted in my mind—but remained outside my realm of experience until my first mission awareness trip. The Kenyan people enthusiastically greeted us with lively song and spirited dance, holding absolutely nothing back. They showered us with handmade gifts, sacrificing the little they had to lift us up. Amid this gracious reception, the word, “solidarity” flashed in my mind: “Aha, I get it! I now know what they are talking about. This is it.” Experiencing this outpouring of affection clarified the power that compelled me to travel half way around the world. It was undoubtedly a divine call to share in God’s love with people two worlds away—a love

that embraces the other’s joy and pain, does not tolerate oppression, and calls for action. In that moment, “solidarity” moved from being just a fancy word to being a gripping force evoking thirst for communion with God’s people. Sharing precious moments with those so different from myself allowed me to experience a deep sense that we are all one human family united by the love of our heavenly Father. This epiphany was a mere introduction to the many experiences of solidarity our trip had in store for us.

In my 2007 trip, my daughter Kristina and I met my sponsored son Leonard, who lives in Uganda. We had been writing one another since he was orphaned at age six. Both Kristina and Leonard were 21 years old—young adults. A mystifying force quickly bonded us together as we spent the next few days cherishing one another’s company. Undoubtedly, Kristina and I from the golden land of opportunity are far removed from Leonard’s existence of struggle in a developing country, but in that short period of time, we became kindred spirits. We became family. Even though geography separates us, we carry

one another in a very special place in our hearts—the driving force to our reunion in 2011.

Solidarity is key in Catholic Social Teaching. CFCA mission awareness trips have allowed me to embrace solidarity as a precious treasure. The Eucharist draws us into union with God and humankind. As we consume the body and blood of Jesus, we commit ourselves to be bread for the world, striving to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and living in communion with all of creation. The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* invites us to enlarge the scope of our Christian concern, opening our hearts to the expanding world. The document begins, “The joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” In the words of Pope John Paul II:

Solidarity helps us to see the “other”—whether a person, people, or nation—not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our neighbor, a “helper,” to be a sharer, on par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.

There was something very different in the air on my second visit to Kenya in 2011. CFCA Kenya had called a meeting with the goal of creating a plan to empower families to lift themselves out of impoverished lifestyles. It was the women who showed up expressing their willingness to walk with CFCA as they endeavor to become self-sufficient. Most of the fathers lacked an interest in participating. Recognizing that the immediate hope for survival of the Kenyan family rested in the mother, the typical head of the household, CFCA formed Mother’s Groups. There are also a handful of men who are active in the Mothers’ Groups, who share the dream of breaking the chain of poverty for their families. CFCA is taking other steps to reach out to the fathers who for the most part are not stepping up to the plate to battle poverty in a community where despair has been so prevalent. The long-term goal is to change the mindset of the men to one of hope, so they too can be a positive force in the family.

The joy of the women was palpable as we gathered to learn about life in Kenya for families who have intimately known hunger and despair. Their newfound confidence shone like a bright star contrasting the black sky of days gone by, in a culture where women have traditionally not been valued. With pride, the children observed their

mothers displaying professionalism and charm as they addressed CFCA, the organization that had offered them the gift of empowerment.

Each mother is encouraged to contribute a small amount of money to a pool monthly. CFCA matches their funds. The ladies can then take out a loan to start or expand a business. The possibilities are endless. Some utilize their talents by making soaps, candles, jewelry, or baked goods. Others raise crops or livestock on a limited scale. One woman was able to open a modest restaurant, while another buys old clothes and sells them for a profit. They learn from one another as they share their successes and hurdles within their supportive community. Their ventures have allowed them to clothe their once barefooted children, send them to school, and put basic nourishment on their humble tables.

The mothers are transforming Kenya with the support of CFCA. Tears and anguish are turning into smiles and hope for a brighter future for themselves and their children. CFCA is working to liberate victims of poverty from their existence of oppression. Hope now has profound meaning. For these mothers, providing for their families is no longer a lofty unattainable hoax. It is now their reality, motivating them to forge ahead despite challenges and obstacles, confident that God has a special plan for each person.

The women advised that owning their own business no longer subjects them to the mistreatment they previously encountered at the hands of employers. Because their dignity is uplifted, they are motivated to put more of themselves into their undertakings. Dignity of the human person as created in the divine image stands at the heart of the social teaching of the Church. The Second Vatican Council could not have been clearer on this subject as is evidenced by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,

...all offenses against human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children, degrading working conditions...all of these and the like are criminal: they poison civilization...and militate against the honor of the creator.

The women explained that they are also able to make more money self-employed, improving their ability to provide for their families and contribute to society. One woman elaborated that she originally saw CFCA as an organization that was willing to carry her burden. She now sees it as the source of her empowerment that has allowed her to break the chains of poverty. In

their pastoral, *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops emphasize that economic justice is a moral obligation of society, assuring that rights of all people are upheld, including the right to the necessities of life, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, and to decent working conditions.

CFCA Kenya employs the concept of subsidiarity as they empower families. The social teachings of the church dictate that parents are obligated to provide basic necessities for their children; however, they may not be able to lift their families out of poverty on their own. The family may need assistance from another layer of society such as a community organization, a faith community, the business sector, or government intervention. The principle of subsidiarity involves providing assistance at the closest level possible, which in this instance would be CFCA Kenya. That does not mean that larger institutions or government should not play a role in instances where the need is not met and human dignity is being violated. CFCA is actually walking with the people and listening to the families, not making decisions for them—a concept encouraged by Catholic Social Teaching.

CFCA is the brilliant light shining in what used to be a sea of hopelessness, as they reach out to youth. Members of the CFCA staff are wonderful role models for young people. Many of them are giving back after being lifted up as a child sponsored by CFCA. The youth group provides mentorship, helping teens make good choices and setting a good example for their peers. The encouragement received in youth groups goes a long way in helping these young men and women attain a high degree of



self-respect, allowing them to be a source of inspiration to other young people. Teens are now reaching out to lift up their communities. CFCA is hopeful that their efforts at this level will also cultivate a sense of responsibility, giving young men the tools needed to be responsible fathers in the future.

On my mission awareness trips, I have had the privilege to hear many heroic stories of young people growing up in horrendous circumstances who have overcome extreme obstacles to become responsible members of society. One young man, Samuel, spent part of his childhood as a street kid begging for food with his siblings. He was discovered by CFCA. Sponsorship totally changed his life, giving him opportunities and an education that would not otherwise have been available. He is now an accomplished motivational speaker hosting conferences for young people, a composer, a musician, and a councilor with the Kenyan government. He eloquently stated, “You raised me up. There is so much potential in me. CFCA showed me that there is value in me. They have allowed me to be a miracle to others as CFCA was a miracle to me. A CFCA sponsor is making an investment into a life of someone who is desperate. This goes a long way to transform Kenya.”

Catholic Social Teaching speaks of the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Pope John Paul II described our commitment to the poor as a “call to have a special openness with the small and the weak, those who suffer and weep, those that are humiliated and left on the margin of society, so as to help them with their dignity as human persons and children of God.” Jesus’ love of the poor permeates Scripture. “Whatever you do for the least of your brother or sister, you do for me” (Mt 25:40). “When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the



crippled, the lame, the blind...you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Lk 14:13-14). “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Lk4:18).

The weight of our responsibility as presented in our social doctrine is expressed beautifully by the late Fr. Henri Nouwen, “The Church as the people of God can truly embody the living Christ among us only when the poor remain its most treasured part. Care for the poor, therefore, is much more than Christian charity. It is the essence of being the body of Christ.”

CFCA stands as a wonderful testament to Catholic Social Teaching. Everyday they go way beyond putting a band-aid on the nightmare called poverty. Guided by their faith, CFCA is a movement that empowers the poor to lift themselves up, creating responsible families in wholesome communities, where the sanctity of the human person is guarded and every member is able to contribute to the common good. By sponsoring a child, you can become a part of this miracle of transformation.

Editor’s Note: The CFCA website is www.cfcausa.org or www.hopeforafamily.org.

Their mission as described there is as follows:

We provide personal attention and direct benefits to children, youth, aging and their families so they may live with dignity, achieve their desired potential and participate fully in society.

We invite people of good will to live in daily solidarity with the world’s poor through one-to-one sponsorship.

We build community by fostering relationships of mutual respect, understanding and support that are culturally diverse, empowering and without religious or other prejudice.

Grounded in the Gospel call to serve the poor, CFCA is a lay Catholic organization working with persons of all faith traditions to create a worldwide community of compassion and service.

