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I. Introduction

Christianity, to me, has always been just as much about family as it has been about faith. My religious upbringing consisted of two parts dinner table conversation for each part doctrine, and I don't have any memories of going to church on Christmas with my family because our Uncle Bud (a.k.a Father McCloskey), a Jesuit priest, would just do mass in the living room for us on holidays. Saints were people that my mom and grandma called up for favors and the Pope was a man kind of like the president: I knew I liked the greater organization that he governed but that didn't mean that I felt obliged to agree with his every proclamation.

Though certain currents of Catholicism were lost on me growing up, others held me rapt. From a young age, I was captivated by the distinction that Catholics make between social service and social justice: that the former responds to the effects of a problem while the latter responds to the cause of a problem. The idea that you could heal broken people by healing broken systems seemed to me like one of the most true ways to love a person; that when Catholics asked how they could do the most good in someone's life, they were really asking how they could do the longest (or most sustainable) good.

Studying public health has been in many ways a commitment to asking how I can do the longest good for people in need. This summer I traveled to Limpopo, South Africa with a team of graduates and undergraduates from U.Va. and spent five weeks piloting a child development training program for nurses from the Ministry of Health in Limpopo.

Though the public health student in me wanted this summer to be about collecting good data so we could conduct a good needs assessment when this is all over, I had to make a continual effort to be open-minded to the cornucopia of people and perspectives that are coming together to work on this project. And that is where this blog comes in.

The Catholic Church highlights seven main themes of their teaching on social justice: life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God's creation. Throughout the course of my time in Limpopo, I studied these themes and reflected upon how their meaning came to life in the context of the people I met and the places I traveled.The following paper is divided into the three areas of social justice that I learned the most about this summer: the call to community, the dignity of the human person and solidarity. My hope was to gain a refreshed understanding of Catholic social justice theology and consider whether the main tenants of these teaching have become antiquated or whether their main messages have stood the test of time.

In this paper, I will explore in more detail the lessons I learned about the call to community, the dignity of the human person and solidarity.

II. The Call To Community

Early in the summer, in between meetings with faculty and students from the University of Venda (our primary research partner), writing our child development curriculum and learning to navigate a foreign grocery store, I read *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*.

Dorothy was arguably one of the most radical Catholics in history. She was a co-founder of the newspaper *The Catholic Worker*, a publication that espoused Catholic social teaching and was the catalyst for the Catholic Worker Movement, a group of catholic communities that believes "the Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor." The Catholic workers were famous for their houses of hospitality and Dorothy spent much of her adult life serving the poor and homeless in these houses demanding that"we must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it."

As someone with a keen interest in community health, I am struck by what a clear message Dorothy teaches about the necessity of community engagement. "It's the people who are important, not the masses," she insists. That, despite what modern individualism may lead us to believe, "[w]e are our brother's keeper. Whatever we have beyond our own needs belongs to the poor… we must give far more than bread, than shelter." Instead, she invites, we must give ourselves.

But how to give ourselves? asked the well-meaning but seriously impatient college student, flipping tiredly through Dorothy's diaries on her bedroom floor.

As it turns out, Dorothy Day was a big fan of the sacrament of the present moment. Discussed extensively in"Abandonment to Divine Providence" by Jean-Pierre de Caussade, the sacrament

of the present moment is championed as the entry point to God's will and the necessary nourishment for a fulfilling life. In the words of de Caussade,

> *The present moment, then, is like a desert in which the soul sees only God whom it enjoys; and is only occupied about those things which He requires of it, leaving and forgetting all else, and abandoning it to Providence.*

Last weekend when my teammates and I were receiving our cultural orientation from the faculty in the Community Engagement Office at the University of Venda, we were told that we must conduct all our work using *ubuntu* as our research framework. *Ubuntu*, Zulu for *I am because you are*, is the premise that guides all community engagement efforts here in Vhembe district of Limpopo. *Ubuntu*, like the sacrament of the present moment, requires respect for humanity and celebrates the inherent goodness of people. They both offer us a more expansive definition of hospitality by saying, "what I have is not mine alone but to be shared with whoever is present."

Furthermore, both of these ways of living emphasize the idea that our individual choices affect greater forces of change. Dorothy Day believed that, "each act of love, each work of mercy might increase the balance of love in the world. And she extended this principle to the social sphere. Each act of protest or witness for peace— though apparently foolish and ineffective, no more than a pebble in a pond— might send forth ripples that could transform the world."

Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden also was famous for teaching his players about the importance of attention to detail. On the first day of practice, when his

freshman recruits were raring to get on out the court and show their new coach what they could do, Coach Wooden spent time teaching them how to put their socks and shoes on correctly. After a half hour of showing them how to align the heel of their foot firmly into the heel of their socks, how to keep their socks from crinkling inside their shoes and how to tie their shoes so the sock wouldn't bunch up, he would face his team and say:

> *You see, if there are wrinkles in your socks or your shoes aren't tied properly, you will develop blisters. With blisters, you'll miss practice. If you miss practice, you don't play. And if you don't play, we cannot win. If you want to win championships, you must take care of the smallest details.*

What Coach Wooden understood was the importance of working on the little things to prepare for something bigger. And that doing so requires a focused mind and an open spirit.

Public health derives its strength from doing little things for the long term. In fact, our entire project this summer is ultimately just a pilot study and thus is only the very beginning of a potential avenue for change in these people's lives. To be able to engage communities meaningfully, public health students must remember what Dorothy day called "the sense of the small effort."

> "People say, 'What is the sense of our small effort?' They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time."

I am deeply grateful for this single-brick of a project. If nothing else, it will have taught me to take more care when putting my socks and shoes on in the morning

III. The Dignity of the Human Person

Viktor Frankl (26 March 1905 – 2 September 1997) was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. On the night he thought was his last, Frankl turned to his friend Otto and said,

> *Listen, Otto, if I don't get back home to my wife, and if you should see her again, then tell her that I told of her daily, hourly. You remember. Secondly, I have loved her more than anyone. Thirdly, the short time I have been married to her outweighs everything, even all we have gone through here.*

Frankl believed that "love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire" (Frankl 38). But what allowed him to hold onto this believe so fervently amidst the moral deformity of the Holocaust? In *Man's Search for Meaning,*Frankl's autobiographical testament of his time in Auschwitz, he offers this explanation: "Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man-, -his courage and hope, or lack of them- -and the state of immunity of his body will understand that sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect" (75). To illustrate his point Frankl details for us his theory on the record high death rate in Auschwitz during Christmas 1944 to New Years 1945: that prisoners died because they had expected to be home before Christmas. When they realized this was not to be they completely lost hope in life beyond the concentration camp.

Last week, when reflecting on community engagement, I discussed how the sacrament of the present moment allows us to be stronger community members by enhancing our awareness of

our connectedness to others. However, in his psychoanalysis of Holocaust prisoners, Frankl offers a different perspective: “It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future…And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task” (73).

The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. As far as threats to human dignity go, the Church includes abortion, euthanasia, cloning, the death penalty and war. I feel that it might be necessary to also add time poverty.

Time poverty, according to Maria Konnikova, is “what happens when we find ourselves working against the clock to finish something.” For someone who is financially comfortable, poverty of time is merely an unpleasant inconvenience. For someone whom lack of time is just one of their many burdens, time poverty becomes much more serious. Especially when you take into account that time poverty tends to bring about what Konnikova calls bandwidth poverty or, “the type of attention shortage that is fed by [financial poverty and time poverty].” She offers us the following example:

> *If I’m focused on the immediate deadline, I don’t have the cognitive resources to spend on mundane tasks or later deadlines. If I’m short on money, I can’t stop thinking about today’s expenses — never mind those in the future. In both cases, I end up making decisions that leave me worse off because I lack the ability to focus properly on anything other than what’s staring me in the face right now, at this exact moment.*

And so we begin to see how our need to look to the future for hope and our need to be present in the moment for peace come into conflict. It is clear that we need space in our lives to develop healthy relationships with both "now" and "later" and that a lack of space to do so is detrimental to our overall well being. That poverty, in whatever sense we are discussing it, is not a static issue.

In the past week, my research team has visited Tiyani twice to conduct focus groups with nurses and community health workers (CHWs) from the surrounding area. Though I am not directly a part of the CHW study, my project partners and I got to help our other teammates out with implementing their focus groups. At the beginning of each session, we would go around the circle and ask each woman their name and how long they had been working. Most them had been CHWs for at least five years, some as many as fifteen. It was not until later in the day that I found out that none of these women are paid for rounds they do in their communities each week. They just do it because they believe it's important.

The Catholic church teaches that our human dignity comes from the fact that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Or, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, dignity is the idea that:

> *We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.*

Maria Konnikova's research on time poverty seems to make it pretty clear that having a deficit of time in one's life makes it very hard to cultivate a sense of dignity or to honor that of others. However, throughout *Man's Search for Meaning,* Frankl insists that "he who has a *why* can *bear* almost any how" (Nietzsche).

> *The experience of camp life shows that man does have a choice of action. There were enough examples, often of a heroic nature, which proved that apathy could be overcome, irritability suppressed. Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions as psychic and physical stress…everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of human freedoms–to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way* (Frankl 65-66)

How can one begin to argue with such unfettered faith? Frankl offers us a no-holds-barred answer to the question of how to find dignity in suffering. Or (much) more simply, how to rationalize giving time to that which we might not logically have time for.

However, though I am deeply moved by Frankl's words, I must return to the "almost" in the Nietzsche quote of which he is so fond. He who has a why can bear *almost* any how. Though I am humbled beyond belief by the grittiness of Frankl's faith, I fear the depth of responsibility that he takes for his own well-being can almost makes us forget the severity of his aggressors' actions. Ultimately, I still believe that the choices that we make are determined by the choices that we have. That spiritual freedom is only a possibility for those who have a concept of the spirit. That even though people like the community health workers that we met in Tiyani this

week will always give me hope that people will do good and be good whether or not they have the time to do it, it is our responsibility to not make that choice a burdensome one when we can.

V. Conclusion

Graduation ceremonies in the States are like saltine crackers in comparison to the graduation ceremonies in Limpopo. For every bit our graduations are dry, predictable and a little bit square, ceremonies in Limpopo are bursting with color and ceremonial flavor.

It was our last day at Tiyani Clinic. When we arrived, all the community health workers we had trained last week were already in the center of the clinic courtyard dancing with summer-storm fervor. In contrast to the starch, navy blue uniforms they had sported during their training session the day before, today they were each decked out in their finest traditional wardrobes. Brightly colored striped dresses and long beaded necklaces swung around and around their bodies as they bounced and spun. On their hips, the women wore large tasseled belts that moved with maraca-like speed as they shook around the circle.

A few of us jumped right into the spiral of dancing. We all marched around the circle together, shaking our hips as fast as we could, until the head nurse called for us all to sit down.

The day continued in a stream of dance. When each woman was called up to receive her certificate for completing our training workshop, the music was turned back on, and she sashayed her way down the aisle. There was a sense throughout the courtyard of dance being the only adequate way to greet good news.

* * *

Throughout this summer, whenever we have gathered together with our community partners in Tiyani or for an appointment at the University of Venda, each meeting has been structured around three main things: an agenda, tea time, and a vote of thanks.

Though I can't speak for all of South Africa, or even all of Limpopo, people in Thohoyandou, it seems, love agendas. Whenever we arrived at a group gathering, within the first five minutes someone would hand us an agenda detailing the proceedings for the next couple of hours. Without fail, each of these agendas included "tea time" about halfway through the proceedings and concluded with a "vote of thanks."

The first time we ever heard about votes of thanks was back at the beginning of the summer, during our orientation day at UNIVEN. During lunchtime, our main faculty administrator from U.Va., Dr. Dillingham, addressed the group of us and said that it was customary for guests to end a gathering by taking a few minutes to thank their hosts for having them and to extol the virtues of the meeting. "It might seem a bit formal to us Americans, but here in Limpopo people are just very explicit about expressing gratitude," she explained. "Would anyone like to volunteer?" I couldn't help but smile. What an exquisite thing to value. My hand shot up in the air.

For the rest of the summer, whenever we had to give a vote of thanks, it became my job. On a couple of occasions people just wrote my name into the schedule and I wouldn't find out until I arrived at the meeting myself that I would be giving the vote of thanks for the day. I loved it though. The whole summer I was plagued by a continual feeling that our team of students

could never, through our research, give quite as much to the people we met in Limpopo as they had given to us. So I relished these opportunities to thank them. At times it felt like the only truly worthwhile thing I had to offer.

* * *

The ceremony was winding down and all that was left on the agenda was "Message from a Graduate" and "The Vote of Thanks." As the young community health worker took the microphone and began to speak she said:

"Greetings to you all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, hallelujah, amen!"

"Hallelujah, amen!" chorused the audience of community health workers in reply. The rest of the young woman's speech was in Tsonga, but every couple of sentences she would shout, "Hallelujah!" and the women in the audience would respond, "Amen!"

As I went up to the main stage to give the vote of thanks, I turned to the audience and observed the looks of polite attentiveness on each of the women's faces. I thought about how funny I must look to them, dressed in the style of the elderly women in their communities (we found out very belatedly that only the grandmothers in their village wear floor-length skirts) and lacking the festive accessories that one ought to wear at celebrations like this. I thought about how little they had asked of us during our stay, and how relatively little we had to offer them in return.

And so I began, “Greetings to you all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, hallelujah, amen!”

Each one of the woman’s face lit up in surprise. “Hallelujah, amen!” they cheered.

I told them how much I admired them. In the meager bit of “Church English” that we all shared, I told them that I thanked God for having met them and for having been able to spend the summer learning about how they care for their communities. I told them that the greatest blessing of my summer had been to learn that women like them existed, that they had renewed my faith in community health work and had given me hope for the future. After I finished each thought I would say, “Hallelujah!” and the women would respond with a hearty “amen!”

When I sat down again, I was shaking. After a summer of holding focus groups, teaching lessons, blogging and giving presentations, I suddenly had nothing left to say. After a summer of looking for the right words, I had found them in the most familiar of places: hidden quietly in plain view of a shared faith.

Hallelujah, amen.