

Good News from a Volunteer's Backpack

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Abstract

With an even growing challenge of secularism to the Church, the paper explores volunteering as a venue where genuine dialogue between Christians and people of goodwill could happen. Using Charles Taylor perspective about secularism, the paper developed three images: map, compass and journal that would characterize a volunteer. These are things that are found in a volunteer's backpack, metaphor for life, which a Christian believer can resonate with when s/he identifies her/himself as a seeker, responder and storyteller. This paper not only provides a response to the invitation of Pope Francis to people of goodwill to create a culture of encounter, solidarity and peace but also develops a deeper appreciation and understanding of Christian witness in our post-modern context.

Introduction

My immersion year was in the social work of the Redemptorists in Thailand.¹ For a month and a half I was assigned in Sarnelli House while taking my course in the Thai language. But it was in the Fr. Ray Foundation (FRF) in Pattaya where I stayed for almost 5 months. A number of foreign volunteers, mostly from developed countries like Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, France, Spain, UK, the USA, Canada, China and Singapore, came to help in the operations of the Foundation. Working alongside with them invited me to reflect on my role in the FRF. In fact, I did their daily routine and even shared the same meal with them. This made me question my own identity as a missionary. How am I different from them who left home and ended up taking care of the kids in need?

The Backpack. To document my immersion experience on social media, I came up with the hashtag² #*missiotravelathon* because my idea of missionaries is like that of a traveler. Our travels, however, were not just about covering as much geography as possible in a given time but more about taking each travel at a pace that allowed actual real encounter with people and

¹Currently, the Redemptorist Province of Thailand runs three major social institutions: Mercy Center in Bangkok (www.mercycenter.org) founded by Fr. Joseph Maier; Sarnelli House for children with HIV in NongKhai (www.sarnelliorphantage.org), founded by Fr. Mike Shea; and the Fr. Ray Foundation (FRF) that is located in Pattaya (www.fr-ray.org).

²Hashtags are short links preceded by the pound sign (#) they are integral to the way we communicate online.

culture; hence, a marathon and not a running race. In this regard, the “backpack” became a metaphorical symbol of my immersion since travelers usually carry a bag.

The metaphor of a backpack is not novel. I encountered it when I took the Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Our supervisor always used this metaphor of an invisible backpack filled with our past experiences and relationships as well as our issues, values and attitudes. According to him, every time we encounter people and life circumstances, we draw out something from our backpacks in response to them. Similarly, we gain something from each of those encounters, which we in turn can load into our backpacks. Simply said, the imaginary backpack is a metaphor of our life.

The Fr. Ray Foundation. Fr. Raymond Allan Brennan was an Irish-American Redemptorist sent to Thailand in 1961. He was known to be a person with jovial character. Though initially very reluctant about his deployment to Thailand, Fr. Brennan ended up opening a huge Foundation which is now known in Thailand for its motto, “We don’t turn a needy child away.” This motto was said to be reflective of the story behind the Foundation’s beginning. Apparently, there are two versions of this story. One version detailed in the book about Fr. Brennan’s life, *In The Name of the Boss Upstairs* says that after one of his masses at the St. Nikolaus Parish in Pattaya, where he was the pastor for 7 years, a woman with a baby came to him telling him that her husband left her. Having found a new partner who refused to care for the baby, she did not know what to do with the child, and she thought that leaving the baby to the church was the best option.³ Another version circulating among volunteers says that Fr. Ray found the baby left at the doorsteps of the church. This story has become a good pitch to recruit new volunteers and benefactors. His open acceptance and his kindness to take care of the baby found a life of its own. Three years after that said incident, the number of babies had increased until sometime in 1974, someone made a donation for an orphanage – an orphanage which was not even in existence yet.

The first set of volunteers came to Fr. Ray’s rescue recognizing that his generosity was as great as his lack of skill in administration and financial management. The number of volunteers grew as the stories about the generosity of Fr. Ray spread, and these Volunteers help promote the good cause of the Foundation by sharing how their experience changed them.

³Jerry Hopkins, *In the Name of the Boss Upstairs: The Fr. Ray Brennan Story* (HI: The Thomas J. Vincent Foundation, Inc., 2004), 40.

This paper tries to shed light on how a volunteer's backpack can transform the Christian believer into better witnesses to the faith in helping build a "culture of encounter, solidarity and peace" among Christians and people of goodwill.