MISSION TRIPS: AN EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTER

Erika Scheelje

The ruptures of the human person have a direct impact on the environment, and this environment affects the human person. In recent documents, the last three pontiffs have brought attention to the topic of human ecology, which considers the different relationships of people with the environment, having the human person as the center. As Pope emeritus Benedict XVI said, “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa. This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences (c.f. John Paul II, Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace, n.13).”

There are many paths of reconciliation between the human person and the environment. This relationship always has to be considered in the wider framework of the four relationships that Pope Francis mentions in Laudato Si: God, the self, others and creation. In this text I want to propose mission trips as one of the paths of reconciliation and encounter between the human person - particularly the youth - and the four levels of relationship.

I’ve been leading mission trips for the past 17 years and I have found that for young people this experience contributes greatly to swift changes in the way they conduct their lives. Young people are seekers, and they are not satisfied with what they are being offered. The young missionaries that participate in these mission trips, like many other young people, are influenced by a culture of consumerism, relativism, individualism and the pursuit of self interests as the ultimate goal in life. They usually come from well-off families, are well educated and live comfortably. Many of them are on a quest for meaning and these cultural influences leave them empty and unfulfilled. “That yearning –for meaning, for belonging, for something or Someone else– can take many forms, and the search it triggers can take many routes... the search often starts with a deep discontent with the values thrust on them by their popular culture, schools, churches – sometimes even by their own families. That dissatisfaction manifests itself differently in each seeker.” As a consequence of this, the youth today live in a very subjective world, closed within itself, that lacks the fresh air of the encounter with the objective truth. But in their hearts there is also a desire to help others who are in need and they are very prone to embark on adventures. This goes back in history. Collazos states in her dissertation that:

The practice of young people traveling with the aim of providing some service to other communities is as old as the human being, since service and giving of oneself is a constitutive feature of his nature (Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC), Nicomachean Ethics, Book IX, 2.) [...] Among the variety of possibilities young people have to travel abroad on voluntary service, a particular one is known as “mission trips”. These types of trips are run by Christian organisations who offer young people (“missionaries”) humanitarian work abroad inspired on Christian values.

The objective of a mission trip varies according to the vision of the missionaries, but every mission aims at transformation of some sort. These trips, when planned according to the culture they visit, first and foremost serve the people in need. They can bring great good to them and also to the missionaries themselves. This is something we know by experience, but we usually don’t take the time to categorize how mission trips impact the culture they serve and the missionaries beyond the immediate help that it brings.

In this reflection we want to deepen the experiences of young missionaries who have traveled to developing countries, and evaluate the long-term impact that a mission trip could bring to the people they serve and to the missionaries themselves. We want to show in which way these experiences could transform society and open paths towards reconciliation in all levels of human relations. In short, how the experience of encounter leads to transformation of the world.

*Encounter with creation*

One of the first experiences to take in when going on a mission trip is living in a totally different environment than what missionaries are used to. Whether it is the city or the countryside, the poverty and misery that the missionaries face most of the time is unlike anything they have seen before, at least in person. A missionary describes her experience with the following words:

> We were prepared with pictures and stories from the sisters of what the poverty would look like. They warned us that this would be unlike anything we had ever seen, but honestly no stories or pictures could have prepared us. Imagine a constant grey sky, and endless dirt hills, littered with shacks that many call home. It is rare to find running water and people own nothing and very often do not get more than a meal per day. The smell, the air, the scarcity of anything and everything that we take for granted was unreal. We visited houses, or tiny rooms of scrap materials, where families of six shared one bed and had a single light bulb for the room.5

Seeing the conditions in which poor people live is one of the most shocking experiences for young missionaries. Never could they have imagined that someone could live in such conditions. Poverty tastes very different when you see it firsthand.

Other times the places we visit are not so harsh. It is hard to witness that people live in such poverty despite the many resources and beauty that surrounds them. “In some places, rural and urban alike, the privatization of certain spaces has restricted people’s access to places of particular beauty. [...] Frequently, we find beautiful and carefully manicured green spaces in so-called ‘safer’ areas of cities, but not in the more hidden areas where the disposable of society live.”6

Regardless of the motives that bring a young person on a mission trip, this is usually a transformative moment, when the injustice of it all cries out to them and they realize something has to be done to change the situation - and young people feel empowered to do so. The encounter with such poverty drives them to question their own lifestyle, the many goods they have, even the way they use water and waste food. For many this is a new realization of the way we are using and misusing the resources that has been given to us, and that we are all accountable for these resources.


6 *Laudato Si 45*
**Encounter with others**

The next experience we want to deepen in is the *encounter* with poor people. We use the word *encounter* with its Spanish meaning, the way Pope Francis uses it, which is “meeting someone in a way that something of your humanity is being shared, it’s a deep thing, it’s relational. It doesn’t have to be long...it’s a sincere meeting.” These encounters are made possible by the type of work they do, as Collazos describes it: “The missionaries spend a great amount of time working hands-on with members of the local community. This work could range from assisting in the refurbishment of a school, nursery or Church (for example, painting walls), working at soup-kitchens and engaging in the daily routine of the locals (for example, helping people in their house chores or in the fields), or delivering different types of workshops (for example, teaching children basic habits of hygiene, instructional games and sports).”

During these activities, missionaries get to know the locals and they are also known by them. They share in their sufferings, in their daily lives and they even share meals with them. The encounter with the poor can increase one’s capacity to sacrifice oneself for others. We can learn from them how in their needs they care for each other even to the point of renouncing themselves:

> An admirable creativity and generosity is shown by persons and groups who respond to environmental limitations by alleviating the adverse effects of their surroundings and learning to live their lives amid disorder and uncertainty...At times a commendable human ecology is practised by the poor despite numerous hardships. The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging. In this way, any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life.  

This experience of poverty places one in extreme circumstances. It helps us to be in contact with the essential things in life and with one’s true self. It doesn’t make sense to pretend to be someone else in the face of poverty. The people we visit usually open their hearts widely and welcome us in their homes, without being ashamed of their own vulnerability. Many times they will offer us a meal that would have cost them a week’s worth of meals. Missionaries experience the love of the poor, and it is overwhelming to see how much they can love having so little to live with.

Thibault says that “The poverty makes everything so raw. There is nothing material that people can hide behind. In our society here, we have all experienced the different masks that we put on to hide our struggles and imperfections. The poverty stripped any masks that we were trying to put up when we arrived. We were able to open our hearts to these people and when we talked to them we really saw each other for who we were.”

This poverty doesn’t only refer to housing or salaries, but also to nature itself. Sometimes the destination of a mission trip will be beautiful, rich in nature and beautiful scenery. Other times we visit very dry lands with no resources. Everything is seen as a gift, because even in the barrenness of certain areas, God’s love and the self giving of the missionaries and the people they serve can make a difference, and help to make it a place that serves human dignity.

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8 *Laudato Si* 148  

That’s why even when traveling to a beautiful destination the experience is very different than tourism, which promotes a consumerist view of life: “International tourism often follows a consumerist and hedonistic pattern, as a form of escapism planned in a manner typical of the countries of origin, and therefore not conducive to authentic encounter between persons and cultures.”

Austerity is also part of the missionary lifestyle. Missionaries travel light, with basic goods. They often sleep on the floor. Their diet consists mostly of carbohydrates, like the poor people’s diet. This helps us to be closer to those we serve. It also teaches us that we can live happily with much less than what we have back home. Austerity is not a popular virtue in our culture. Living like the poor teaches us a great lesson: to discern if we really need to have the things that we desire. It also draws one’s attention to what is really important in life, to the essential questions about our existence.

**Encounter with self**

An important part of the experience is the “technology fast”: the missionaries won’t have access to their phone, to social media, or have music plugged in. This results in several moments that young people are not used to - silence and quality time to be with yourself. The missionaries are usually “young ‘seekers.’ This silence is an opportunity to encounter their deeper yearnings. They come to a mission trip searching for a meaning in life. For many of the mission trip leaders this search is above all a search for God, hidden in the sense of adventure and openness to new things. It can be expressed as a desire of having a ‘life-changing’ experience or looking for ‘something different’ ” (Collazos).

In extreme circumstances, two things can happen. The first possibility is that the missionary realizes he or she can go beyond his or her own limits, giving of themselves to a new extreme. On the other hand, one faces vulnerability and fragility in a way they never experienced before. For missionaries, it’s usually both experiences together. Where they come from, they are very much influenced by a culture of individualism. To ask for help and to be vulnerable are seen as bad things. So this is a time for them to learn that being vulnerable is not bad. To show yourself for who you really are is a freeing experience, and the beginning of a new level of giving of yourself.

Being in contact with themselves, missionaries learn how to live in community. Being authentic, with the good and the bad, helps to build relationships with others. Each day is so full of experiences of encounters, challenges, joys and sufferings that there is a need to share what they are experiencing everyday. Finding they are not alone but actually sharing the mission opens the door to a different way of living. As opposed to thinking they are alone and that asking for help is a burden to others, missionaries experience true community. They help and encourage each other by example, building real friendships and bringing them to a deeper understanding and acceptance of themselves. In just a few days missionaries build friendships that could last a lifetime. It is easier to build friendships when you are vulnerable, when there are no masks to hide, when you need each other to continue giving of yourselves to those who are most in need. They learn to give and to forgive, to give lovingly, sharing what is theirs, material and spiritual alike. These friendships come with a great joy of knowing you are sharing your humanity, who you really are. This is one of the strongest experiences that help us realize that we are made for being in relationship with others, to encounter them, giving of oneself, and that fulfills our hearts.

**Encounter with God**

All of these experiences are accompanied by a deeper one. In many ways, missionaries experience God encountering them throughout different activities. We plan moments of prayer every day, but this encounter goes beyond those moments. The missionaries speak for themselves:

**Caritas in Veritate 61**
“I have never seen so much joy from children, even though they are living in extremely difficult situations. They are perfect examples of how money cannot buy happiness and how all you need in life is a strong relationship with Christ and faith that He will always provide. Sarah, the blind woman was a perfect example of this. She helped me to see that no matter how hard things may get in life, God will always be there by your side. He has a plan for you in life and abandoning you will never happen.”

**Conclusion**

I do believe that mission trips are a great help for the people they serve and also for the missionaries to make a change in their lives. They help to make a shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of new lifestyles, in which, as Pope emeritus Benedict XVI said, “the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth” are the factors which determine the way society conducts itself. These experiences open a path towards reconciliation with nature, others, self and with God.

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11 Jacqueline Maher. Text message. September 13, 2015

12 *Caritas in Veritate* 51