

RETREAT: REFLECTING ON VOLUNTEER SERVICE

GETTING STARTED

After a service project or day of volunteering, find a comfortable place where you can reflect on your experience without distraction. If you volunteered with others, invite them to join you for this retreat.

Now settle into the moment:

- Find a silent or peaceful place.
- Close your eyes and breathe deeply.

REFLECTION

Slowly walk through your day, paying attention to your thoughts and emotions. How did you feel before you started the service experience? What were you excited about? Was there anything that made you nervous or uncomfortable? Where and with whom did you experience joy or gratitude? Recall each encounter of the day and how you reacted to it.

READING

“In many places, generally speaking, due to the economic humanism that has been imposed in the world, the culture of exclusion, of rejection, is spreading. There is no place for the elderly or for the unwanted child; there is no time for that poor person in the street. At times, it seems that for some people, human relations are regulated by two modern “dogmas”: efficiency and pragmatism... Have the courage to go against the tide of this culture of efficiency, this culture of waste. Encountering and welcoming everyone, solidarity – a word that is being hidden by this culture, as if it were a bad word – solidarity and fraternity: these are what make our society truly human. Be servants of communion and of the culture of encounter!” ([Pope Francis, speaking at World Youth Day, July 27, 2013](#))

THOUGHTS ON THE READING

In a “culture of waste,” we reject what we don’t have time for. We discard the food we don’t finish. We spend money on things that we want when we want them. We even see people as disposable. We would rather not interact with or care for people who we consider inconvenient or who take up resources that could be given to someone who seems more deserving.

During your service experience, you likely crossed paths with someone who has felt rejected, discarded, undeserving, or treated as an inconvenience within a “culture of waste.” By being in relationship with someone who has been pushed to the margins, you show the “courage to go against the tide of ... this culture of waste” and begin to create a “culture of encounter.” In a “culture of encounter,” we no longer see the “elderly,” an “unwanted child,” or a “poor person” – we see a friend, a brother, a sister, who we need and who needs us. This is solidarity: encountering and welcoming everybody because we believe we are a part of one human family where everyone is needed.

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REFLECT ON THE READING

Take a few minutes to think about or jot down your responses to the following questions. If you are reflecting with a group, share your thoughts with one another.

- *What are your thoughts and feelings about Pope Francis' description of a "culture of waste"? How did you see the "culture of waste" reflected in the individuals where you volunteered? How might you be contributing to a "culture of waste" in your own life – at home, work, school, in the community?*
- *Consider a conversation or interaction you had with someone you met today. How did he/she make you feel initially? What surprised you? What did you take away from the encounter? What do you think (or hope) the other person took away from the encounter? If this encounter happened again, what would you do differently? What would you do the same again?*
- *In what ways in your life do you already help build a "culture of encounter"?*
- *How can you more courageously welcome and encounter those who are on the margins of society?*
- *What do you think would be some personal benefits of counteracting a culture of waste with a culture of encounter?*
- *What personal and social challenges might you need to face or own up to in order to create more encounters?*
- *What resources might you need to help you in your endeavors? List the people, books, organizations, music, prayers, and more, that might help you.*

PRAYER FOR THE COMMUNITY

Close your eyes and slowly call to mind the image of each person you encountered today. Offer a few words of gratitude and a prayer for each person.

MAKE A COMMITMENT TO BUILD A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER

Write down or use a note app to write one way you will build the culture of encounter this week. Maybe it's by making eye contact or starting a conversation with someone who you might otherwise try to avoid. Or, consider breaking your daily routine and going out of your way to participate in service that is an encounter with those on the margins. Whatever it is, make sure it's doable. Write it down and stick to it.

CLOSING

May I remember that the elderly, the unwanted child, the poor person on the street, the immigrant, the homeless – are all people with names, stories, and families who are a needed part of the world. May my experience of volunteer service remain with me and inspire me to work to build a culture of encounter in my daily life.