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Is there a problem with mission trips?



If "heroism" is driving your mission trip, stay home!

By Dr. Mike Gable, mission office director for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati

[Sounding Boards are one person's take on a many-sided subject and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of *U.S. Catholic*, its editors, or the Claretians.]

"All those who want to go to Ecuador to mainly build houses, please raise your hands. OK! All those who have raised their hands, please stay home! Now, those of you who want mainly to listen and learn from the faith and culture of Ecuadorans, join my immersion trip." This is how veteran Comboni missionary Father Joe Bragotti typically began his first information night for a mission trip.

Not long into my job as the director of the mission office of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, I received a phone call from a reporter at our Catholic newspaper. "Mike," she said. "I'm not going to write any more mission trip stories." When I asked her why not, she told me, "I'm tired of these groups who call me nearly every year when they return from the Caribbean and Central

America. They always want their photo in the paper explaining how wonderful they are. Their attitude seems to be, 'If it weren't for us generous white American mission groups, these 'poor backward people' would be in worse shape.'" She added, "Mike, I've had it. No more of these stories."

I vowed that day to do my best to change that. I am convinced that mission offices, parishes, and schools across the U.S. need to stop funding and sending harmful, arrogant, and poorly trained short-term mission groups. I don't believe mission trip leaders are "bad intentioned," and I know that many of them sincerely want to help, but we need to eliminate this colonialist style of expeditions, which is based on a pre-Vatican II "heroic" model of mission. This approach came out of a time when many, but not all, European and North Americans believed that they had a sacrificial duty to "bring civilization and God" to the so-called "pagans" who supposedly needed our Western culture to be fulfilled human beings.

This heroic mentality hangs on today as many of us Christians in the West are either unaware of, or wish to ignore, the racism and "white privilege" that unconsciously determines how we approach other cultures with *our* hopes and goals for "those poor people down there." Frequently we don't even realize our "we know better" attitudes and asymmetric relationships.

According to Robert Priest, who has studied short-term mission, every year about 2 million North American Christians are involved in these trips at a price tag of roughly 1 to 2 billion dollars annually. That's a lot of money and resources, and we need to ask if these trips are really the most responsible way to spend precious mission donations.

Also, sadly, his research shows that after a year or two of returning from a mission trip, most participants admitted that it didn't have lasting effects on them and that many of their well-intentioned projects failed. If companies were run the same way, they would long be out of business. Something has to change.

Heroic mentalities do not allow us to do even simple social analysis of our own culture, economic and political realities, or of the communities hosting us. Mike Haasl, a friend and fellow former Maryknoll lay missionary, notes that, in order not to offend the incoming volunteers, people in some cultures want to be kind and will say "yes" to the outsider's projects and plans. But in reality they don't buy into it. "Yes" really means "no."

Haasl recounts that one of his parish members visited a Nicaraguan village and decided to purchase cows for the community believing the Nicaraguans agreed. Later they learned that only one person there knew how to raise dairy cows, and he lived outside of town. The cows all went to him, and the community project died.

What about the waste of donations for projects that are simply "make-work" for mission groups? Foreign volunteers built a church in Ecuador that was never used because the local community had no need for it. And a group of American high school students who had travelled to an orphanage in Tanzania to help build a library was so inept at laying bricks that each night the men in the village had to take down the structurally unsound bricks and re-lay them so that in the morning the group would be unaware of their failure.

In his book *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help*, Robert B. Lupton cites many other sad examples of the "make-work" nature of short-term mission trips. Among

them are a church in Mexico that was painted six times during one summer by six different mission groups and a wall built on an orphanage field in Brazil that had to be torn down after the visitors left.

A recent study found that it cost \$30,000 for U.S. mission trip volunteers to build a house in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch, while local Christian organizations built nearly the same for only \$2,000.

Lupton concludes that many mission service projects *do not* empower those being served, do not engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, do not improve local quality of life, do not relieve poverty, do not change the lives of the participants and do not increase support for long-term mission. But they do weaken those being served, foster dishonest relationships, erode recipients' work ethic, and deepen dependency.

Fifty years ago, during the Second Vatican Council, bishops from Africa, Asia, and Latin America began to speak up, urging that their cultures and histories be respected. They emphasized St. Paul's understanding of the church where *all* are members of the one body of Christ with many parts and gifts to share with one another for the good of all.

Today we are called to turn toward a "humble" model of mission based on principles of reciprocity and mutual respect of each other's God-given gifts, beliefs, and talents. We participate in trips now as pilgrims, willing to learn from and stand with our hosts as equal partners, planning trips and projects *together*.

A recent study shows that most U.S. mission groups prefer construction projects, while most hosting communities prefer building long-term relationships humbly walking together in Christ. Only after partnerships of trust and respect have matured should it be appropriate to discuss possible service and social justice projects together—projects that are self-sustaining and do not promote dependency on outsiders. Such friendships can turn into parish twinning relationships where all members of both churches can be in mission to each other and grow together in one body of Christ.

Before he set off for his own "mission trip" to build God's reign, Jesus spent 30 years learning how to humbly listen and befriend widows, lepers, and Samaritans. He reflected long and hard on his own cultural experience in prayer with God and his friends before acting.

Similarly, today the world admires Pope Francis for listening and meekly reaching out to understand others and for embracing what he has called a "culture of encounter." He spends time with the forgotten homeless in the slums of Rome, with the sick in Brazil, with the oppressed in the Holy Land, and with the sexually abused.

This spirituality of humility contains an attitude of willingness to be evangelized by members of other cultures that may take us to a newer and deeper understanding of our faith and what it entails. When it comes to mission trips, participants should work ahead of time to improve their skills of listening and accompaniment, formulating intelligent questions, and prayerful dialogue.

Developing the Catholic social principle of solidarity, as championed by Pope John Paul II, is another key component for mission trips today. Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador challenged North Americans to transform the purposes of their mission trips into efforts of

solidarity: to meet with and pay deeper attention to the plight of women and labor/peasant organizations, to struggling local parish/school members, to religious orders committed to the poor, and to local civic leaders.

The archbishop wanted U.S. citizens to come, understand, and help eliminate the causes of poverty, oppression and war that came from the North. Romero didn't ask for building projects as much as he wanted outsiders to LISTEN to and build long-lasting parish relationships, covenants with his tortured people. He called on North American Christians to share what they learned with their home churches and politicians back in the U.S. to end the bloodbath and fix cruel immigration laws of the U.S.

And so this principle of long-term solidarity also implies better preparation *before* our trips. Consider inviting leaders of your diocesan mission and/or social action offices, an immigrant from the country you will be going to, returned missionaries or Peace Corps members, or other experts to educate your group beforehand about the key local issues and culture you will visit. You will want to develop respectful questions for your hosts about the negative and positive influences our government and companies have on their community and nation.

This principle of solidarity has now led many U.S. twinning parishes to become advocates for their partners as they work with Catholic social justice organizations and local congresspersons to reform unjust immigration and economic policies.

In conclusion, my advice is simply this: Why not follow the example of our Lord Jesus and that of Pope Francis who both rejected heroic, paternalist, arrogant models of mission? Instead, like them, invite the Spirit of God to transform our hearts, minds and souls to be open to the faith, gifts, talents, joy and yes, challenges of people of other cultures. Maybe we'll become even more effective instruments of God's love locally and globally, as we then work together in the body of Christ.