

**ST. JOHN VIANNEY
2017 KOLKATA MISSION TRIP
BLOG ARCHIVE**

Sunday, January 1, 2017—Preparations

I'm the kinda guy who skims over the terms and agreements. I like to know what I'm getting into and how I can prepare for it. I read the directions and warnings, the instructions, etc. So, when God asks to take over preparations I'm a bit hesitant. Not because I don't trust Him, but because I like to know as a fact that I will be prepared and that every problem I encounter can be solved through the tools I have on hand. This is a problem. Especially when God's mercy is essential to growth in the spiritual life, and in the moment that I'm caught realizing how unprepared I am for life with Christ. And I don't like that.

And so I prepared for a trip to Kolkata. I obtained a Visa, scheduled a doctor's appointment, obtained the necessary bug repellants and vaccinations, and read the given information. We read books on Mother Teresa, watched films, heard stories, met Missionaries of



Charity. Preparation mentally? Half-check. I was reminded over and over how we could not be fully mentally prepared. Fine. I'll go half-way. Preparation physically? Check. Medications flowing through my body, I'm ready to travel to foreign lands. Preparation spiritually? And I thought I was prepared already. The Father knew better and did something about it. And I thank Him for it, though it was hard to see at the time.

I sent my passport to Chicago to obtain an Italian Visa for studying in Rome next semester. Perhaps you see where this is going. I was going to leave for Chicago the 29th to get to St. Paul with enough time to rest before leaving for India (and ensuring preparedness). Christmas comes and goes. Still no passport. We're supposed to leave the 31st. The short Christmas break with my family turns into a blur of anxious anticipation. Long story short, it was sent to Grand Rapids (the morning of the 28th, arrives in Grand Rapids the morning of the 30th), my saintly father and brother drove it to Peter Ludwig. Peter also received his Italian visa and passport that morning after many urgent Memorares from his seminary brothers. He had to leave his house to catch a flight by 11:00. My passport reached his house at about 10:30. The alternative would have involved flying Peter to New York to rendezvous with the rest of the group. Instead, he safely tucked his passport and mine into his luggage and caught his flight to St. Paul. The providential Hand of God was clearly present in the midst of this apparent chaos.



Nothing I did helped to solve this problem. I called post offices, put in a package intercept, emailed the Italian Consulate, and none of these things seemed to have an effect on the travels of the package. My father had to talk to the post office to get them to hold onto it, the package intercept wouldn't have happened until it arrived in Grand Rapids, and calling post offices ended in them suggesting I go online. I felt hopelessly unable to prepare. And the Father began to speak to my heart. I didn't look to God to help me because I thought it was up to me to do it all. This was His reminder that it isn't up to me. It's up to Him. And He delights in this His ability to provide as a Father and my inability to do all things - making me the perfect candidate for his son.

And so, before the trip even began, I was prepared spiritually. How? With the reminder of my poverty. How appropriate. As we begin to serve the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, I am reminded that, in the Father's eyes, we are both on the same level. Unprepared and living in great poverty.

David Sacha-Diocese of Grand Rapids

Tuesday, January 3, 2017—First Day with the Missionaries of Charity

Day One of the Saint John Vianney Mission Trip...Complete. So far, no debilitating illnesses or injuries, which is always a plus. Today was our first full day on site working with the Missionaries of Charity. The night before was the first time in 40+ hours that we laid horizontal in a comfortable spot that wasn't an airport bench. So, needless to say...we slept like rocks our first night--despite the perpetual car horns and barking of dogs. Morning came very early as we jumped right into things, waking up at 4:50am for a light breakfast provided by our hosts at the



Fairlawn. A few swigs of "chai" (tea) and it was off to the Missionaries' for 6:00am Mass. It wasn't our first time at the Motherhouse though, as we made a short visit on Monday (the day we arrived in Kolkata) to pray at the tomb and have Mass literally beside the tomb of Saint Mother Teresa.

After Mass, we gathered in a community room to meet other volunteers and to have a quick banana with a slice of bread and chai. Some of the other volunteers came all the way from Chile, the Philippines, France, and the U.S. It wasn't long before we split up into our groups that we would be serving with for the duration of our visit. Each of us were assigned two locations--one to visit in the morning from 7:30-11:45am, the other in the afternoon from 3:00-5:15pm. Our means of transportation are two

17-passenger buses. Once we arrived at our volunteer sites, the Sisters had us busy with much good work. The names of some of the sites include Prem Dan (mentally handicapped/sick), Nirmal Hraday or Kali Dad (dying/destitute), and Daya Dan (children in need). At lunch time, we were picked up and brought back to our accommodations to eat before resting for awhile. One group had to walk back since they were taking extra time to assist at the volunteer site. Around 3:00pm, the buses delivered us to different locations where we helped serve dinner and prepare the sleeping quarters for the night. By 5:15, the day of volunteering was over. Most of us spent our mornings helping with laundry (either scrubbing or repeatedly rinsing soiled linens and clothes) while the afternoons allowed for more personal interaction.

For dinner, our group was able to venture out on the town to a restaurant serving yummy local fare, complete with its own soap-tasting, green popsicle for dessert. The food was delicious and did well to introduce us to all kinds of native cuisine, especially with all the different spices (cumin, cardamon, coriander, curry, masala, chile, etc.)

One prominent grace from the day was being able to live out the joy that the Missionaries of Charity always carry with them to the Poor. For instance, before we set out from the Motherhouse in the morning, everyone sings a song. The song, which repeats "...We find our hope in Jesus, ... Jesus is our joy" is one that you actually want to have stuck in your head. This little "hymn to Joy" along with reception of Our Eucharistic Lord animates the entire rest of the day. That is the perfect meditation for serving Christ in His Poor. One of us met an 85-year-old man named "Arun" who reminded us of our 91-year-old grandfather. Moments like this of genuine conversation with someone who speaks just enough English is a special occasion to live out the Joy of Christ. But what we have found for certain from our experience so far is that everyone speaks a common language that surpasses all others. Love.

Kyle Loecker-Archdiocese of Omaha

Friday, January 6, 2017—A World that Doesn't Make Sense

Walking through the streets of Kolkata has been one of my favorite parts of this trip so far. On Tuesday and Wednesday my group of volunteers walks to our volunteer site. It's about a 30-minute walk and it takes us through the heart of the Kolkata neighborhoods – the very streets that Mother Teresa herself used to walk. The best way to describe the walk is that the city assaults your senses. I've never encountered anything like this before. It truly is a whole new world. The sounds of the incessant honking, the street chatter, the barking dogs, and the roadside bargaining create a harmonious cacophony. The sights of the beautiful saris, people taking baths in the street, smiling faces, and the sun setting over the Hooghly (Ganges) River creates quite the collage. The smells of raw meat, curry, and garbage work together to sting the nostrils. Constantly bumping into people, and shaking hands with the



men we are serving, adds a touch of humanity to the commotion. And the new foods are challenging the boundaries of what I thought my palate could handle. As I reflect on this “new world” that I’m encountering, I see that this is another expression of God’s heart. These people of Kolkata that He loves are not that much different than us, but the differences that do exist are simply a different part of God’s heart being expressed in this vast universe that He has created.

In soaking in this new-found beauty of God I am filled with love and wish to do “something beautiful for Him.” Luckily, I can follow in the footsteps of the person who voiced these very words. Mother Teresa encountered God’s heart and this led her to minister to His forgotten children, those marginalized by society and she showed His love. She realized that God thirsted with love for her, but not just for her, but for every soul that He had created. In return she wished to satiate this thirst by showing His love to the poorest of the poor. This type of spirit is exactly what I wish to channel on this trip, and as I pray every day in front of Mother’s tomb I ask that I may be a worthy vessel of God’s love.

Yet, like any good thing, this is not as easy as it seems. I have found it difficult to interact with the men that I am serving. I have served at Prem Dan (a home for men) and Kalighat (a home for the dying destitute). There is a language barrier and I feel awkward when trying to interact. I have this love built up inside my heart and wish to show God’s love to each and every soul I come in contact with, but I have no idea how. I’ve found it is easier to busy myself washing dishes, or ringing out laundry, rather than simply sitting in awkward silence with the men. Yet, I continuously feel the Holy Spirit pushing me out of my comfort zone and insisting that I simply be with the men.

In talking to some of my brothers about this experience I’ve learned that some feel the same. In processing how we are feeling we’ve come to understand that many of us want to feel useful. As American males we want to know that we are doing something and fixing the problems. We see the streets of Kolkata and the people we are ministering to and some of us wonder if simply sitting with them in silence is doing any good at all. However, we did not come

to Kolkata to fix problems. We did not come to Kolkata to be useful. We came to Kolkata because we have encountered God's incredible and unconditional love and felt compelled to share that. We felt compelled to serve Him, to serve Him hidden in the poor. For truly God resides in each soul. And sometimes God may not want us to say beautiful things, or do great acts of service. Sometimes God just wants us to sit with Him in silence.

With this in mind the other day I was at Prem Dan. We had finished laundry for the day and were waiting for the food to arrive so we could serve lunch. I felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to go interact with a specific man. Reluctantly I went over and said hello. His face lit up and he eagerly shook my hand. He traded some words in broken English. After a long pause in the conversation he patted the spot on the cement that he was sitting on and invited me to sit down. We traded some more broken English. After a while of sitting in silence I was beginning to think I should go do something useful or at least go spend time with another resident. But just as I was about to get up I felt compelled to remain seated and as if reading my mind, the man motioned to me to stay put. Another few minutes of silence followed and all of a sudden the man began lovingly rubbing my back. I couldn't believe it. Here is a man in destitute poverty that I should be serving. I want to show him the love of God, but here he is showing me the Father's indescribable love. A love so indescribable that only a gentle rub on the back can truly begin to express this love. Sometimes God just wants to sit in silence with us and sometimes He thanks us by rubbing our back. Praised be Jesus Christ.

Ben Baker-Diocese of Des Moines

Friday, January 6, 2017—Visiting Pathways Jan Seva

Today we had the opportunity to visit the Pathways Jan Seva that is located here in Kolkata. This school was started to help young mothers who cannot afford proper education for their children a chance for their children to receive a well-rounded education with free tuition. The school has over 200 students ranging between 2 and 6 years old. We were given the opportunity to see the daily school and classroom activities of the children, while also getting to interact with them. Some of us were able to go around to different classrooms, doing things such as playing guitar and drums for the children, while the rest of us were able to play with all of them outside.

After two days of working with the Missionaries of Charity that were rewarding and tiring, this day was a welcomed break for all of us. Working in homes for the sick and the dying requires a volunteer to give every ounce of their being in order to bring joy to those who are suffering and in so much pain. While there is joy present in all people, even those who suffer the



most, it can be very difficult to witness the great pain and depravity; it can even boarder onto feelings of hopelessness and despair. However, today at Pathways, we were able to receive joy in its most pure form. At Pathways, it is hard not to constantly smile, to constantly be filled with joy, seeing these children, the opportunity they are being given, and the carefree attitude and happiness they exude, even amidst some of the most depressing sights.

In our short time at Pathways, we were able to see just how much the organization does for these children. Pathways is able to take children from some of the poorest families, put them in an environment of stability, education, and love, and prepare them for, hopefully, a better life. Pathways, however, does not stop with helping just the child. The organization goes out of its way to look after mothers of children, some of whom have been abandoned by their husbands and left to fend for themselves and their children. Pathways seeks to give a better life for the whole family, educating mothers in order to better care for and support their children. Ultimately, it was amazing to see how Pathways is able to change the lives of these individuals, children and adults, in this section of Kolkata. Sometimes, the only way to change a situation or environment is through individuals and through relationships. This is what Pathways is doing in looking



after the whole family, instilling love and a value for education, in order to slowly change the city.

The great care that Pathways has for the families can be reciprocated and seen the other way, with families being so grateful for all Pathways has done for them. Three of us had the opportunity to walk the streets of Kolkata to two small homes to visit two alumni of the school. Even after

being exposed to this city for three days already, it was still shocking to see these houses. The size of these houses is comparable to a small walk-in closet and families with up to five or six children all lived there together. It was most certainly the poorest living conditions I have seen. However, even with all of these facts, it was amazing to see how generous and grateful all of the families were. We had the opportunity to visit two houses, and in both instances, the mothers were very hospitable, offering tea and a place to sit. They completely gave of themselves, even when they had barely anything to give. It brought so much joy to each of us to see the love and hospitality the mothers had for us after having just met us. These mothers' love for Pathways was just as visible. The children we visited who were alumni of the school remembered many things they learned from Pathways and were so excited to see former members of the school. One girl even went so far as to call the founder of the school a "second mom" to her.



All of these experiences opened my mind even more to the culture of extreme poverty we have been surrounded by for many days. Having these experiences with the children and with the families of the children allowed my brother seminarians and myself to recharge, to encounter the love of the Lord in the simple smile of a child, and to see that generosity and hospitality are not dependent on wealth or financial security, but simply on gratitude and love.

-Michael Gehrig Diocese of Rockford

-Matthew Jakupco Diocese of Lafayette in Indiana

-Ryan Anderson Diocese of Duluth



Wednesday, January 11, 2017—Learning New Languages

Two days ago I had the privilege of visiting Nirmal Hriday, the Missionaries of Charity home for the dying in Kolkata. I had previously served for three mornings at the home, and had



gotten to know several of the residents. So, I was looking forward to visiting. On arriving, I greeted one of the men who knows English well. In the meantime, a few of my brother seminarians broke out instruments and began singing. After a short conversation with the man who knows English, I moved over to one of the other residents I know. This man is sunken with starvation. He is so malnourished that he cannot walk, he can barely move his arms, and one of his hands is completely crippled. The first day I spent at the home, I massaged the man for almost an hour, working his arms and hands in an attempt to restore their motion. Since he speaks no English, I spent that entire time with him simply trying to interpret his head nods and eye movements. While he could not communicate what he wanted, I picked up on something much deeper that I have yet to

fully understand—suffering. This man, left for dead on the streets of Kolkata, was suffering immensely. At first, I was frustrated, because I could not understand his suffering. I took my frustration to prayer, but my understanding would only come slowly. As I worked with this man over the next few days, I gradually came to communicate with him a little through eye contact and head nods. But, more importantly, I began to love this suffering man. If I have learned one thing from the Missionaries of Charity, I have learned that they love people as they are—broken, suffering, with all the strings attached. Their mission is to fulfill the deepest thirst of all—the thirst for love. Without even realizing how, I began to see this man as my brother. As I came to see him this way, I desired to alleviate his thirst for love. Every time I served this man, I tried to convey the Father’s love for him. Now, while just stopping in for a visit, I had the chance to sit by him and listen to the music.

While I was sitting there, the man asked me for some things, which I actually understood and did for him. But then, he did something I had not seen him do yet—he smiled at me. At long last, this man knew that I loved him, received this love, and returned it with a smile. This simple gesture meant the world to me as I just looked into his eyes with love and gratitude. That moment will never leave me. The look of gratitude on that man’s face for the meager service and love I gave him could have warmed the coldest heart.

Tomorrow, I go back to the home for the dying. I hope to see him there, in his usual place. I just learned the Bengali phrase for “I love you.” What better words to leave with a dying man.

Peter Ludwig- Diocese of Lansing Michigan



Wednesday, January 11, 2017—Making New Friends

After a boat ride on the boarder of Bangladesh and running through the rice paddy of rural India, the brothers and I boarded the bus to Morning Star Seminary. We arrived at 8pm, amid the darkness of night and weariness of the journey to the sounds of native drums and singing. The welcome by the 205 seminarians was beautiful and unexpected the dawned us with



leis of flowers around our neck as a sign of their gratitude for our being their – the foreigners to visit this house of formation. Dinner was fantastic and then it was off bed – sweet sweet bed – in order to get a full nights rest before we joined the seminarians in the their daily routine of 6am Morning Prayer followed by Holy Mass. In praying the prayer of the Church with our brothers on the other end of the world, we had a concrete and beautiful experience of the Catholic – which means universal – Church.

The brothers at Morning Star continued the remarkable Indian hospitality we have all experience through this voyage with breakfast and what I will call a “program of gratitude.” This “Program of gratitude” included welcoming us again, teaching us about their Seminary and Country. The dances and way the brothers welcomed us into their community allowed me to see again some of the beautiful qualities of the Church in India – gratitude and a spirit of community. In the USA we have so much and it is easy for me to become accustomed to all that we have, but the brothers give thanks to God for all the good in their lives because the see the immediate world around them and understand that the could have things worse. The appreciation for our visit, had less to do with us, and more to do with the thankful disposition of the seminarians – such a disposition lends them to say things like “a visit from someone is like a visit from God Himself.”

After this program, we had some time to meet in small groups with the seminarians studying philosophy. I was in a group with Micheal and David S., We shared our vocation story’s ane the struggles and joys that come with the life of a seminarian. The brothers from Kolkata shared their struggles and joys that come with living a radically Christian life, one brother shared a story from when he was fourteen, His teacher was killed by a radical Hindu group. This attack was a response to their leader being killed, the Hindus thought that the Christians had killed the leader, but the killers were in fact non-Christian terrorists. The attack left him to literally run for his life into a thick wooded area, He walked for many kilometers from village to village to see where he could find some food. He and the other children his was with witnessed many villages with the churches burned, no food to be found, and priests and religious killed. The experience laid out before me made me keenly aware of the blessings that we have in the USA. We are certainly not with out problems but this story and this trip have made me grateful for that Country and my Faith.



Small groups concluded with lunch. After Lunch we had some time to rest and pray, and 3pm initiated an international game of Basketball. It was a hard fought game, a close game, an

injury-free game, and we came out on top USA 39- India 37, we could not have asked for a better game.

I was taken aback by the simplicity of the brothers, the unity of all of them despite cultural differences, and their singleness of purpose. As a result of visiting the brothers, I desire to remain in the presence of our Lord.

Joe Domina-Diocese of Lafayette in Indiana

Wednesday, January 11, 2017—Our Visit to the Leper Colony

We turned off the paved road onto a winding alley way, so we know that we were close to the leper colony. The walls seemingly touching the bus brought much comfort as it meant the two hour bus ride of stop and go traffic was behind us. The alley opened into a small parcel of land boadered by houses on three sides and rail road tracks on the other side. We walked into



the building that was to the left of the rail road tracks. A brother from the MC's was guiding us to a room where 18 of us took seats sitting around the perimeter facing a worn wooden desk. A young man in the youth of his twenties entered and stood in front of the desk. The brother introduced "Dr." Pat and then left. Pat quickly explained that he was not a doctor, and told us that he was just out of medical school, he had chosen to spend year volunteering with the

brothers. The youthful Pat took our group outside, from there we were guided under the watch of three men to cross the rail road tracks. The tracks, there being four sets of them, were in full operation so we needed the three sets of eyes to safely cross the tracks.

Safely across, we entered through a gateway into the center of a sprawling complex. It was three football fields longs both to the left and to the right, with one field for its depth. Pat filled us in to some of the particulars of the colony. Promising to tell us more, he later guided us into the school. The 20 children welcomed us in with singing voices. My heart was moved by their smiles and beautiful voices. My brothers broke out their instruments and we started to sing for the kids. When we finished our tunes we handed them the gifts from America. Then to our surprise they had a song and dance for us before we left.

Pat then guided us on to the loom shop. The loom room was a building 20 feet wide that stretched beyond sight. we entered the first room containing a few people spinning thread on bobbins and two people running looms. We greeted each person as we passed single fill between the spinners on our left and the weavers on our right. Passing through a door this first room opened up into the long room, and we gasped as we began to understand the vast scale of this operation. In this room was filled with the constant clack, clack, clack of the shuttle weaving its thread to make the cloths. As we passed through the building we saw the many clothes and fabrics that we used in our work sites being made. We saw the creation of bed sheet, bandages, and the sisters sarees. The speed and coordination of the workers impressed me greatly, as I stopped and marveled at how the looms wove the threads in fabric. At the end of the building we saw men preparing the looms, and the bobbins being spun onto the drums.



We left walking the length of the building again outside, as we headed for the room of the leper patients. The men were in several rooms with beds against the walls and an aisle down the middle. I looked each person in the eyes and greeted them with a smile. Some smiled backed and greeted me in return with a namaste. The



women building was bigger with beds along the walls and a row of beds down the middle. It was harder for me to greet the women, because it had sunk in that there was nothing that I could do for these people with Hansen's disease. After the last building we quietly walked back to the room across the tracks where we started. Pat then told us more about the practical facts of Hansen's disease, and his words sunk in after seeing the patients. Pat then took the time to field our many questions. We left a little more serious, with a lot to think about on our two hour bus ride back into the heart of the city.

Nathan Hansen-Diocese of New Ulm

Thursday, January 19, 2017—A "Hearty Welcome" from a rural Indian parish

As part of the trip to Morning Star Seminary, we visited a rural parish in the region. After a short breakfast, we drove a distance out of the city and picked up the rector of Morning Star and one of the priests on staff and then began the mad scurry which is driving through the narrow and congested streets of rural India, weaving in and out of oncoming traffic, pedestrians, sundry animals (domesticated and otherwise), and the endless stream of rickshaws and Vespas which weave and dart among the larger vehicles like rabbits attempting to evade a predator. We recommended ourselves to the Lord and his Mother (I half-expecting to meet them more directly quite shortly as three-ton Tonka-trucks whiz by a foot away from my face :P), and were deeply grateful as we tumbled out of our bus several hours later onto the good, solid earth.

When we arrived at the village which the parish church is located in, we were told that everybody was waiting at the church for us to arrive before starting the Sunday mass (Epiphany). However, instead of rushing us to the church we were taken to the local Catholic boarding school, where some very joyful sisters served us a second breakfast of fresh boiled eggs, bananas, toast, chai tea (a fixture in Indian daily life), biscuits, and marmalade. You might be a little surprised to hear this, as I was, since we were about to go to mass, but we were reassured that the mass in Bengali would take more than two hours, and so we had nothing to worry about. You also might be surprised that, since there was a full church waiting for us to arrive, that they would prioritize breakfast over getting over to the church, again, I was. This was where we first began to experience a crowning virtue of the (at least Catholic) Bengali people – hospitality. What I did not realize until I reflected on it later was that, for all of these people, the most important thing (besides the Lord himself) was that we, their guests, would be well cared for. Even if that meant that the whole parish wait an extra half hour for mass to start while their guests enjoy a pleasant breakfast two doors down the street. Wow.

Mass itself was an incredible cultural and human experience in itself, as well as a deeply prayerful one. We were asked to take part in the procession into the small church (which took 10 minutes itself), immediately preceded by 10, 14-16 year-old girls in beautiful traditional dress, with flowers woven in their hair and silver bracelets jingling on their wrists, as they gracefully danced into the church. At the front of the church, a woman placed a dot of some paint-like substance in between our eyebrows, in traditional Bengali fashion, except that instead of having the standard brown coloring it was a lustrous golden hue. I realize only part way through the mass that only we seminarians and the priests had this seeming “golden star” placed on our foreheads, and I was reminded of the scriptures in Revelation and other places where it talks about the sign of the Lamb, placed on the foreheads of God’s people. After mass, we were asked to sit in front of the congregation while the children sang a song of welcome in Bengali and older men and women processed fresh bouquets of flowers for each of us to the front of the church to the beat of a drum.

From there, after some mingling and socializing and after being fed a third breakfast (oof!), we were brought over to a little auditorium, with a stage decorated specifically for our visit, filled with hundreds of young girls and boys who attend the local Catholic boarding school or are members of the parish. These children, with ages ranging from roughly 6-18, had prepared a so-called “Cultural Program” for us consisting of numerous dances which the different age-groups had prepared for us and interspersed with many “hearty welcomes” and several speeches.

I've taken time to describe this experience in so much detail because I thought many of you might be curious what the experience of being in India has been like for us. It really is a sensual inundation, in that there is a wild chaos of sights, smells, sounds (!), tastes, and smells (!!), both good and bad. But in spite of this, these experiences have seemed periphery to the struggles, joys, and sufferings we have encountered while here. This day was no exception, and an overwhelming joy and delight surrounded us the whole day long. The children of the parish and school were constantly smiling and waving at us, always eager to practice the little English they know on us. We visited a half-dozen houses of Catholic families within walking distance with the sisters and priests, and were instantly and enthusiastically welcomed by those families into their homes. Many of these families had no more than two bedrooms and a common room for the parents and children, yet there was only delight when we arrived. I find it difficult to describe the contagious joy and hilarity that the surrounded us. Especially impressed on my mind is the moment when we arrived at one house in which they started music playing and we (children, sisters, priests, and seminarians) started dancing and laughing our hearts out. The love of Mother Superior, who immediately accepted us as her sons and took care of us, the swarm of children smiling and laughing, and the young sisters who seemed unable to stop giggling and laughing made us feel instantly in this parish that we only spent a couple of hours at and the Lord blessed us with some much needed rest and joy in them.

David Kirsch- Archdiocese of St. Paul Minneapolis

Thursday, January 19, 2017—Spiritual Wisdom from a Missionary of Charity

Being a senior at St. John Vianney means I've had many opportunities to hear many very wise, intelligent, and saintly people speak to me about how to be a priest. However, one of the most memorable talks during my four years in college seminary occurred not in SJV itself, not even in America, but on the other side of the world. After Mass on our last day with the sisters, we were told that one of the missionaries named Sister Mercy Maria, an American sister from Huston, would like to speak with us before we left for our final day of service. We thought it was going to be a somewhat brief talk with sister, but 45 minutes later, I was really glad it wasn't brief. In fact, I was regretting that I didn't bring a notebook! That holy humble sister was able to summarize so many things that I've learned over three years at SJV, one semester abroad in Rome, and three years of teaching Totus Tuus. It was like having a real talk with Mom in an incredibly beautiful way. I remember leaning over to a couple different brothers after she spoke and saying, "what i wouldn't give to be able to make a Holy Hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament to pray through everything that sister just told us." There were so many gems but I'll share just a few. First, she told us we must know ourselves and our weaknesses in our hearts to guard ourselves against temptations. She asked us if Jesus said "Follow me" or "I will follow you"? She talked to us for a while about healing, forgiveness, pain, and the reality of God's love for us that even as seminarians, we can struggle to believe. It really hit home for me. I think I should also mention that one of the things that makes it so convicting when sisters and priests speak very simple messages of truth and of the gospel, it usually isn't anything that I haven't heard before, but the fact that they know Jesus in such a deep and intimate way is what drives it home in our hears. Sister Mercy Maria knows our Lord dearly and I'll remember the impact that short 45 minutes had on me for a long time.

John McFadden-Diocese of Rockford

Tuesday, January 31, 2017—Experiencing the "I Thirst" of Kolkata

Sitting here on our last night in Kolkata I can honestly say that I am not ready to leave quite yet. I have learned so many things, and my outlook on life has been deeply affected. Already in my ten days here the city that once “assaulted my senses” now feels familiar. I’m not claiming to know Kolkata well but I confidently walk the streets and have gotten somewhat used to cars, motorcycles, and rickshaws flying by and barely missing me by inches. Being familiar with this city is nice but I think the real reason that I’m not quite ready to depart is because I have encountered the love of Christ in a new way and I long for more. I have come to know Christ’s “thirst” more deeply and my own “thirst” for him (despite my own great imperfection) has yet to be satiated.

More on that later. Before diving into that I’d like to discuss some of the lessons that I’ve learned so far in my ten days here in “the city of joy”. Even in becoming familiar with the city, the missionaries of charity, and this life of service, I have been sufficiently uncomfortable. Yet, I’ve seen a beauty in learning to be comfortable in being uncomfortable. I look at the life of Mother Teresa and the way that her sisters imitate her rule of life and spirituality, and I see women who are fighting courageously against comfort. This makes me think of Benedict XVI’s often quoted line, “We are not made for comfort, we are made for greatness.” The sisters are not perfect but they truly are striving for greatness. In their humility they pray every day to let Christ shine through them. They pray that in receiving the Eucharist that Christ may increase and they may decrease (John 3:30). They pray that Christ’s love may radiate through them and be the “catching force” for souls. To pray and live in this way is not comfortable. To truly live as the sisters do is to reject everything that the world tells us that we need. The sisters have zero possessions, they do not have a family of their own, they are obedient in all things, they strive to serve the poorest of the poor, and they rely, in a radical way, on God’s love alone. In so many ways they are uncomfortable but this is exactly what opens them up to God’s grace so that they may become saints. Their rejection of comfort is the cause for their joy. In being uncomfortable they rely solely on Christ and there is no greater joy. I long to be distrustful of comfort in my life going forward. I long to taste this great love of knowing and being only Christ’s love. Another lesson I’ve learned is the beauty of simplicity. One major vice of mine that I’ve discovered, besides my love for comfort, is my love for technology. I never realized how much I turned to technology to fill my boredom. Going forward I’m going to reflect on why I feel the need to fill my time with meaningless internet surfing or T.V. vegging, and in doing so I hope to cut back and find a greater sense of simplicity and detachment.

I know it sounds cliché but one’s example and presence can never be underestimated. In my first blog I mentioned how I found that simply being around a person can show them the love of God. But as well our example, most times unspoken, speaks volumes and can inspire another person without even knowing it. I’ve found that simply being a young man from the United States, who has everything I could want, but has decided to serve in Kolkata and pursue the priesthood, touches a lot of people’s hearts. I don’t need to preach to them, but simply show them that in wanting to give my life for Christ (no matter how many times I fail to do just that) I can find that deep fulfilling joy that every human soul desires. In simply living my vocation joyfully I can bring others more fully into God’s embrace.

Lastly, and probably most importantly, I’ve learned that, to quote *Les Misérables*, “to love another person is to see the face of God.” In our travels to the rural parish and the seminary we were treated like kings. I’ve never been so honored in my life and I did absolutely nothing to

deserve it. I asked one of the seminarians why they are so hospitable. He responded, "It's because when a guest enters our home it is like God enters our home." This puts American and even Midwestern hospitality to shame. It convicts me that so many times I am "too busy" to acknowledge or show my appreciation to people in my life. As a Catholic I believe each person I encounter has a divine spark. Within each person I can find Christ. Due to this, I should treat each as if they are Christ, because in a sense they are. This is something Mother Teresa did so well and something her sisters continue to do. Her legacy has left an imprint on this city and it is clear to see that human dignity is more than a buzzword but a way of life. I long to be able to say that each person I encounter brings me into deeper unity with my God. I long to have the kind of solidarity that Mother Teresa had. To truly enter into the sufferings of my fellow brothers and sisters. Not to simply throw money or food at them (this does help) but to show them that they are not alone and that they are loved.

I have discovered more intensely God's thirst for me and my fellow brothers and sisters. We truly are His beloved children. We are not an accident, or some random being with a meaningless existence. We have an eternal destiny and a mission to complete. We are called to be God's love in the world and to help satiate the thirst that God and others have. My own thirst is not quite satiated yet. However, it's time to move on and see what more God has in store. This thirst probably won't be fulfilled until Heaven but until then I will work (though failing often) to love God in everything I do and keep a special love for my brothers and sisters in poverty. For what I do to them I do to God Himself.

Ben Baker- Diocese of Des Moines

Tuesday, January 31, 2017—Taking Stock on a Flight Home

The Lord speaks to us in many different ways, but in the thick of everyday life and the chaotic movements it can bring, it is hard to see exactly what He is trying to tell us or invite us to do. This is why it is so important to retreat every so often to a place that is outside the daily routine in order to take stock of where the Lord is speaking to us in our experiences.

With this in mind, after approximately 12 days in and around the city of Kolkata, we took a three day side journey to Darjeeling, a town situated in the northern-most part of India in the foothills of the Himalayas, known for its beautiful landscapes and prestigious tea estates. Going there allowed our group to escape the hustle and bustle of the city of Kolkata and our daily schedule with the Missionaries of Charity and other activities. In our service with the sisters and our general interaction with the city of Kolkata, the Lord had given us so many gifts, but there was hardly time to process and unpack them in the midst of all of the noise of the 15 million person metropolis. Going to Darjeeling allowed us to slow down from the daily assault on our senses and to pay particular attention to how our hearts had been moved.

As we wrap up our journey, there are innumerable graces to speak of over the past two weeks. I wish to describe two in particular here that I have received. The first is a sense of joy in forgetting self in service of others. After Mass each day, one of the prayers the Missionaries of Charity recite goes in part “for it is by forgetting self that one finds...” This rang true for me in my service at the Daya Dan center for handicapped children. Each day, I was able to enter into my work such that my focus was only on the task ahead of me or the child in my care. The sisters foster an environment of utter joy and simplicity in their care of these young children—they wish to make their lives better in any way, despite the fact that many of these children may never grow to function normally in society. They are not focused on worldly success; rather, they’re concern is service of the Lord and the people He has put in front of them. In this sense, forgetting self does not become some austere, rigid practice. It is actually how one finds the Lord working in one’s own heart. I found that the more I entered into my work at the center, the more joyful I became. When I let go of my own apprehensions and anxieties for those few hours I was at Daya Dan, I was so happy to be there. The Lord showed me that there is joy to be had in resting in the work He does through me rather than trying to work by myself without his guidance.

The second grace relates more to our group as a whole. While in Kolkata, our only time spent all together was meal times, and even then, many times not all of us would be together due to illness or fatigue. In Darjeeling, the time to slow down and spend time together helped us to grow in our fraternal bond as we ate our meals together, watched the sunrise over the Himalayas, and sampled some of the finest teas Darjeeling has to offer. We shared Mass and prayer together, and we took an extended time on our last day to share the graces we had received during our time in India. Our time in Darjeeling allowed us all to be edified by how much the Lord was at work in each of our brothers as well as in ourselves.

Like with most eye-opening experiences, there are still many internal questions. Our time in Darjeeling allowed us to process many of our questions and ask the Lord to help us understand our experience of Kolkata. We were also able to experience the Lord speaking to us in different ways, including through his beautiful creation in the majestic Himalayan mountains which were never out of view for us. We experienced the gift of silence, which is always something to which we want to return. Finally, we experienced the gift of brotherhood through time spent with each other, both in sharing of graces and casually conversing.

In addition to entering semi-retreat mode, we had many unique experiences in Darjeeling. Unlike Minnesota, the people of Darjeeling do not combat the cold with indoor heating systems. Thus, we spent most of our time, including eating and sleeping, in layers and layers of clothing. This minor setback was offset by viewing a beautiful sunrise from the famous 'Tiger Hill,' where the light of the sun hits the peaks of some of the tallest mountains in the world, including Mt. Everest. We were also able to experience the toy train, named for its smaller size and traditional steam engine structure. This train route through the mountains was the same one Mother Teresa used in her time as a Loreto sister and on which she had her mystic experience that led her to found the Missionaries of Charity.

Currently, we are on an airplane between Kolkata and Dubai in the midst of our travel back the United States. After two wonderful weeks abroad, we are ready to embrace home again. Thank you for all of your prayers for us. We continue to remember all of our spiritual and material benefactors in a special way as we travel home.

-Nick Smith