

Encounter Through Service

Praying and reflecting about the human dignity of those we serve

Pope Francis speaks constantly on the theme of “encounter.” He uses it to urge Catholics to go to the margins of society, especially to the poor and those who suffer. Service should involve engaging in authentic encounter. With the understanding that all humans are created in God’s image, we reinforce that all people have a dignity that is God-given and graced. This dignity may be denied them, or they may deny it themselves.

Pope Francis addressed his fellow Argentinians on the occasion of the Feast of San Cayetano. St. Cajetan, patron saint of Argentina, was a 16th Century Italian priest known for his outreach to and solidarity with the poor and sick.

Pope Francis concluded with these words, which give an example of what encounter can be:

“Thank you for listening, thank you for coming here today, thank you for everything you carry in your hearts. Jesus loves you very much! San Cayetano loves you very much! We ask only one thing: that you reach out! And that you go and seek out and encounter the most needy!

But not alone, no. With Jesus and San Cayetano! Does this mean going to convince someone to become Catholic? No! You are just reaching out to meet him, he is your brother! That is enough.

You reach out to help them, the rest is done by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. Remember well: with San Cayetano, we need we encounter the neediest. With Jesus, we who are in need, we reach out to those who are even more in need. And maybe Jesus will show us the path to meet with those who need it most.

When you meet those most in need, your heart will begin to grow bigger, bigger and bigger! Because reaching out multiplies our capacity to love. An encounter with others makes our heart bigger.

Take courage! “I don’t know what to do on my own.” No, no, no! With Jesus and San Cayetano! May God bless you. And please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.”¹

It is in this spirit that we do service. To deepen the experience, we need to serve prayerfully, aware that we are responding to the call to reach out with respect and the Caritas that allows us to love in a freeing way. Praying directly before and after service is an important part of the experience, and an opportunity to reflect on human dignity and on our roles as disciples, creating the space for a graced and sacramental encounter with children of God.

The following page offers prayers to be prayed before and after service activities. These can be said together with a group, or individually. Read the prayers ahead of time, and spend time discussing the reflection questions after service.

You may want to write about the people you served: why those people needed help and why we are called to encounter them in their dignity as well as their need. You can also write about your experiences with the prayers. Encourage service participants to see that a spirituality of solidarity can develop when we approach any service with a recognition that it can be a deeply reflective, prayerful meditation on human dignity and solidarity.



PRAYER BEFORE SERVICE

God, help me to recognize your image in all the people I will serve today. Help me to respect them, to give my full attention to them, to learn their names, to be open to them and to desire to empathize with them. Help me to see them as people who, like me, have potential and emotions.

Christ, guide me to recognize all these people as my brothers and sisters. Quiet my fears, so I can move beyond them and be fully present to everyone in your beloved family. Help me remember that some of them may be broken and wounded individuals who need healing. Let my heart be moved by their brokenness and their need. Let my heart rejoice with any good I may see and do. Amen.

—Jane Deren, Ph.D.

PRAYER AFTER SERVICE

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to serve others in your name. Throughout my experiences I have worked to overcome my indifference and biases: to be respectful, attentive, open and present to all those I have worked with today. Bless this struggle and bring some good from it. Renew my commitment to understanding those less fortunate than myself and help me to grow as I continue to conquer my disregard, and work to see you in the faces of those who suffer.

Guide me to reflect on the reasons these people need help. Guide me to learn more about the structures and systems that allow poverty to continue. Guide me to learn what we all must do to transform these into graced structures, so that every person can flourish and reach their full potential as human beings created in your image. May I continue to do my part, no matter how small, in your great work of charity and justice. May I recognize my great dignity as a co-creator with you of a better world. Amen.

—Jane Deren, Ph.D.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How do these prayers call you to fully see the people you are serving?
- What perspectives do the prayers challenge us to assume before, during and after service?
- How can prayer deepen your service experience?
- What can we learn about others through prayerful reflection?
- What can we learn about ourselves through prayerful reflection?

Education for Justice has an eight-part series of resources to enhance service learning:

- Part 1: Rooted and Grounded in Love (www.educationforjustice.org/node/1498)
- Part 2: Surrounded by the Faces of God (www.educationforjustice.org/node/1532)
- Part 3: Our Lives as Service (www.educationforjustice.org/node/1586)
- Part 4: Struggling against Structural Sin (www.educationforjustice.org/node/1623)
- Part 5: Accepting Responsibility for Each Other (www.educationforjustice.org/node/2245)
- Part 6: Called to Faith, Committed to Justice (www.educationforjustice.org/node/2381)
- Part 7: Understanding Justice (www.educationforjustice.org/node/2442)
- Part 8: Faith in Action (www.educationforjustice.org/node/2477)

Endnotes

¹ Michael Sean Winters, “Pope Francis and Encounter.” *National Catholic Reporter*. August 19, 2013. Accessed August 8, 2018. <http://bit.ly/2vO6IPI>.