



ENCOUNTER

Catholic laity on mission – everywhere

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Suffering. How do we hold all the suffering around us? We each have our personal struggles. Then the suffering of family and friends. Neighbors? People in other parts of the country? The world? In a word, hope.

Fueled by our deepest desire for God who embraced suffering through the cross, hope is the way forward if we keep our eyes – like St. John at the foot of the cross with Mary, our Mother – on Jesus who suffers with us, and for us, and, frankly, because of us. Hannah, and her mission, is a sign of hope. Rhonda Miska – reflecting on Pope Francis and his advocacy for people on the move – points to the mutual hope that immigration offers to us.

My Life is a Mission

“It’s a tiny little school on a tiny little island that is doing so much good.”

Hannah Klein spent only seven months of the two years she signed up for with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC) living in Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, and teaching in-person at the Akoyikoyi School—that “tiny little school”—but it made an enormous impression on her. So great, in fact, that after being recalled with only about 72 hours’ notice at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Hannah continued independently as a volunteer teacher for the rest of the 2020 school year.

The 2019 University of Dayton graduate is still leading 8th grade classes from her family’s home in Centennial, Colorado, although she’s been drawing a small salary since August 2020.

“Technically, I’m a paid teacher now,” she says with a laugh, before adding, “I just wanted to continue teaching.”

JVC had not resumed the program yet at the time of this interview.

It was during her final semester at U Dayton, when Hannah was studying in Ecuador, volunteering as a teacher and improving her Spanish, that someone mentioned JVC. She’d applied to two other programs that



would have kept her in Ecuador when JVC came through with an offer—for Micronesia.

“It was quite a whirlwind—a lot of discernment and figuring out where I was supposed to be. Was it my own seeking to come back to Ecuador?” she asks. “JVC just fell into place.”

She was one of two Jesuit volunteers at Akoyikoyi, while four others were at Xavier High School. Some were returning volunteers, and there were local teachers at Akoyikoyi, as well. During her seven months, Hannah threw herself into learning the Chuukese language and embracing a culture vastly different from the one back home. The pace of living and sense of time is slower in Micronesia, she says—“Island time is very real!”—and people speak more softly. “We sometimes talk very loudly,” she says of Americans, in a diplomatic bit of



understatement.

While on the island, Hannah tried not just to live in the culture, she says, but “to *be* in the culture.” That included her commitment to the JVC value of living simply—for her, not solely merely in the material sense.

“It was more the mindset of, how do I live simply in my job, mentally? How do I make that less complicated, less filled with unnecessary things? Taking away the distraction of things,” she says. “A lot of that growth happened very subconsciously. I would realize, wait, I’m doing this differently than I would have in the United States.”

And then, the pandemic, and a return to home on such short notice, she hardly had time to say goodbye to her students. It was devastating.

“Not just in my mind, but in my heart and my soul, I had dedicated these two years to the place, to the people, to my teaching and to my students,” Hannah recalls. “And having to drop all that, I don’t even know how to describe all that in words. I had put all my being into this trajectory of two years.”

Given that her heart was back on the island with her students, it didn’t take too long to decide that while the pandemic might keep her physically out of Akoyikoyi, through the wonders of the internet—and the purchase of 20 Chromebooks, engineered by the school’s director and principal—Hannah could, and would, continue

teaching. In 2020, she saw her class through the final months of the academic year to become the second graduating class that had started the school as kindergarteners.

“Hannah has been an example of what it means to be a servant leader. She is dedicated to her students and the school community,” says her friend and mentor Therese “Tess” Hart, program manager for Catholic Relief Services, Chuuk. “Through her positive energy, creativity, and concern for others, Hannah contributes not only to her students’ educational progress, but models the idea of being a source of light for others.”

Asked about what she sees for herself in the future, Hannah will only say that she’s committed through the end of this school year, probably virtually, unless it’s possible to safely return to in-person teaching. After that, she’s not sure, but she does believe that God will show her the path.

“I think God guides us in different ways, to highlight our strengths, challenge us, point out things we can work on to be better,” she says. “And I believe that my whole life is a mission, filled with various adventure and various journeys.”

Article by Julie Bourbon, ENCOUNTER Editor



A Stranger and You Welcomed Me

Rhonda Miska

As I type these words, we are in the final days of a summer that has brought us unusually high temperatures in the U.S. and globally, droughts and wildfires, and catastrophic flooding. On the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Ida dumps rain along the gulf coast, and many New Orleanians with the means to evacuate have done so. Severe weather events like these—made more extreme by climate change—forces some to leave their homes, whether temporarily or permanently. After 20 years of conflict, the Taliban has taken control of Afghanistan, causing both Afghans and those of other nationalities to flee that country. By the time you read these words, there may well be new events—incidents of severe weather, political upheaval, war, or other catastrophes—causing people to leave home and seek safe harbor elsewhere.

In the face of this reality, those of us living with relative safety and stability must choose if we will respond to people on the move with suspicion or compassion, indifference or empathy, defensiveness or generosity. Those of us living with relative safety and stability who identify as followers of Jesus face an even larger question: Will we regard them as outside the circle of community, or as brothers and sisters made in God's image, part of the "us" of the human family?

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis—himself the son of Italian immigrants to Argentina—has resolutely and continually called for mercy, encounter, and solidarity for people on the move. Since his first trip as pope to the Italian island of Lampedusa to commemorate the refugee lives lost and repent of the collective sin of indifference, his challenge to us to see immigrants and ref-

ugees as men, women, and children with dignity rather than as "pawns on the chessboard of humanity" has been repeated over and over.

A Stranger and You Welcomed Me: A Call to Mercy and Solidarity with Migrants and Refugees is a collection of Pope Francis' addresses, homilies, and prayers from 2013 to 2018. Reading the book is like listening to many variations of

a core theme: People on the move have dignity and worth and are to be encountered as subjects rather than objects. They bring with them giftedness and hope, and they reveal to us the face of Christ. We are called to resist throwaway culture and embrace our fellow human beings to create paths of liberation and fraternity together.

Pope Francis explicitly states that "whether their status is regular or irregular," those who are fleeing home and seeking to establish a new life are worthy of welcome and integration. It is not only immigrants who "waited in line" and successfully navigated long and expensive processes to gain legal status, but all those forced leave home and establish themselves anew who are to be received with openness.

Through welcoming people on the move, those of us who are more rooted and comfortable will be called to deeper conversion. This has been my experience repeatedly in ministry for and with and among people on the



move. From serving as a legal assistant to Central American migrant children to building relationships in Spanish-language parish faith-sharing groups with undocumented immigrants to joyfully celebrating the breaking of the Ramadan fast with immigrants and refugees, the smallness of my heart and the fearfulness embedded in my faith have been challenged by people on the move. Their witness of courage, resilience, and hope have called me to spiritual growth. In the loss of their home countries and struggle to establish themselves anew, I see the paschal mystery lived out. Far from being objects that receive charity, they are my friends, my family, my community mates, my teachers, my co-disciples and co-ministers.

Though Pope Francis' message of has been consistent throughout his papacy, his call to solidarity and encounter with people on the move takes on a new urgency as the Covid-19 pandemic continues. We are weary, and in our weariness, our capacities for compassion may be diminished. The financial, emotional, and relational stresses brought on by pandemic can cause those of us

living with relative comfort to turn inward, to focus our efforts on those whom we perceive to be like us. As we live through collective trauma, our fight or flight response can be triggered, lessening our ability to act out of our Christian convictions. There can be the impulse to "take care of our own" and see those labeled as "outsiders" as a threat or a burden, especially in a time when physical proximity brings fear of viral contagion.

Given this, Pope Francis' exhortations are timelier than ever. The realities that cause people to leave home—regime change, violence, climate change—are unlikely to lessen in the coming years. For those of us who seek to live as missionary disciples in a globalized world, there is the work of individual and collective discernment. How we are invited to see, judge, and act with open and merciful hearts prepared to encounter Christ in our brothers and sisters on the move?

Rhonda Miska is a lay minister, writer, spiritual director, and preacher currently serving at the Church of St. Timothy in Blaine, Minnesota. Many of her years in ministry have been with immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and other people on the move.

USCMA Happenings

- **9.19.2021 Catechetical Sunday.** Pray for all catechists as they cultivate missionary-discipleship in young and old alike. They are called by the community to serve the initial, and ongoing, faith formation of the members of the community. As missionaries, we are called by the same community to go beyond the community to proclaim, serve, and witness to the mercy of Jesus Christ.
- **09.21.2021 USCMA Membership Meeting | 2 pm ET.** A celebration of USCMA's 40th Anniversary with Sr. Madge Karecki as our keynote speaker. [Registration via Zoom](#) is required. More details at www.uscatholicmission.org/2021
- **10.25.2021 Save the date!** *Angels Unaware – Mission with People on the Move* will meet from October 25 – 29. The USCMA conference for 2021 will be a virtual gathering, using the pastoral circle (see, judge, act) to foster a dialogue in the missionary community and the U.S. Church about its mission to the immigrant, the migrant, the refugee, the asylum seeker. USCMA welcomes sponsors for the gathering. Details & registration at www.uscatholicmission.org/dialogue
- **Books for Review** | USCMA receives complimentary books about missiology, theology, and spirituality for review. Our current feature book is *Mindfulness – Walking with Jesus and Buddha* by Sister Annabel Laity, published by Orbis Books (2021). For this book or a current listing, email [Ms. Nichole Petty](mailto:Ms.NicholePetty@uscatholicmission.org), USCMA Office Manager



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