

## **Mission Trips - Why Do We Go? Seeking Solidarity with the People of Other Lands**

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During the past ten years as director of the Maryknoll Mission Education Office in New Orleans, I have been privileged to work with a number of youth and adult mission education programs that have included mission trips to Guatemala, Nicaragua, Mexico and the Texas/Mexico border from El Paso/Juarez to McAllen/Reynosa. The US Bishops' document "*Called to Global Solidarity*," along with heart wrenching stories and pictures and news of victims of natural disasters (Hurricane Mitch, flooding in Mexico or Bangladesh, earthquakes in Central America, etc.) have strongly contributed to this phenomenal growth in the number of groups going on short-term mission trips. Some people call these "Mission Exposure" trips, others refer to them as "Immersion Experiences," and some organizations bill them simply as "Third World Delegations." Most generically, they are referred to as "Mission-Trips." Invariably, the first question that is asked by

an interested participant is "*What are we going to do?*" Perhaps we should be asking instead, "*Why do we go?*"

Even those of us working in the promotion department of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers see such trips as an important strategy for mission education. But we must ask ourselves and enable others to ask themselves what is the context for going into mission for such a short moment—whether it be for the eight-day, the three week or the one year experience?



IN THESE MOMENTS, MANY OF US HAVE  
GREAT HOPE:

**We want to cultivate the earth.**

**We are trying to help ourselves.**

STANDING SHOULD TO SHOULDER,  
THEREFORE, ALSO SISTERS AND  
BROTHERS, WE HOPE THAT YOU WILL  
BE IN SOLIDARITY WITH US.

INDIAN PEASANT  
QUETZALTENANGO  
GUATEMALA

That we are first concerned with "*doing*" when presented with the possibility of going on a mission trip is quite understandable. Our culture and spirituality has formed us from our earliest days to see our significance in terms of what we do; and our original theology of mission has taught us well that, mission and ministry is about giving to and doing for the poor. Missioners have so often spoken of their "success" in terms of how much they have done either spiritually or materially whether it be the number of converts made, schools built, clinics established, teeth pulled or operations performed, houses repaired, bible classes taught, etc. It is only in recent years

that we have begun to understand that our significance as persons comes not from what we do but from who we are. Our understanding of mission has begun to change from "doing for" to "being with." Donal Dorr says so poignantly in "*Mission in Today's World*" that, as we have begun to focus on the recipients of missionary activity and not on the great work and great gift of the missionaries, we have come to understand that "*mission is not just a matter of **doing things for people**. It is first of all a matter of **being with people**, of listening to and sharing with them.*"

And so it is that, in the first instance, going into mission is not to help others or to teach others. Rather, it is for nothing less than for the sake of conversion—but not the conversion of those to whom we go; it's for our own conversion! And this conversion has to do with a fundamental change in the way that I view my own life—what I do, what I have, what I count as friends, what questions I ask myself, what issues I pay attention to, who and what I give my allegiance to. Some-



how, going into mission helps that conversion. Recently a nun-friend of mine who has been in Haiti as a missionary said, *"our viewpoint depends on our standpoint."* Richard Rohr in his book, *"Simplicity,"* says that, like the blind man in the Gospel, we need to yearn to see anew. And for this new sight, he says *"You have to run with your own feet to some place you haven't been before - to a new place. You have to leave the world where you have everything under control. You have to leave the world where everybody likes you. You have to head into a world where you are poor and powerless. And there you will be converted, despite yourself."* I often hear myself saying that mission trips are about creating an opening for seeing and listening and hearing in ways that we are not easily able to do at home.

On the other side of this need for conversion in our way of thinking, is the need for conversion to the poor and often oppressed peoples of the 3rd world, who are deeply in need of 1st world friends and advocates. Here again we need to be careful in understanding that this is a new call—we are not being called to old-style paternalism or neo-colonialism. The best in liberation theology has made it quite clear that the poor must be free to be the subjects of their lives and not simply the objects of our sympathy. Isn't it quite significant that the US Bishops used the word *"solidarity"* to call us to new global discipleship? As if to say that we are not simply called to offer our neighbor charity but to engage in deep solidarity. Bishop Casadáliga in *"Political Holiness"* speaks of solidarity as political charity—*"only those who make the rights of brother and sister their duty, co-working liberation with them, can be said to act in solidarity"* Solidarity thus understood, is not for a week or a month while we are with them, but for after we return to our lives in our home country. On mission trips we enter into friendships with the 3rd world poor which can move us to live differently; to act on their behalf with a certain passion for justice issues. Dorr explains that *"by entering the world of deprived people one extends, and deepens the experience of 'suffering with' those on the margins. And, by doing so, one comes to share not only their pain and struggle but also their hopes..."*

Many today believe that we live in an era that challenges us to develop a global spirituality—a spirituality that has at least four basic characteristics: First, a growing awareness of human rights and some initial understandings about human responsibilities to others. Second, a recognition of the call to enter into solidarity and realize our interdependence with the poor, especially the poor of the 3rd world who are often poor because of oppression. Third, a deeper relation to God's creation itself, the Earth. And, fourth, a greater bonding with peoples of other cultures and faiths as we see the commonalities of faith and belief.

And so, it is out of these frames of reference that the Maryknoll Mission Education office understands the importance of sponsoring and accompanying youth and adults on 3rd world mission trips. It is why we go.

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*Matt Rousso is Maryknoll Mission Educator in New Orleans, Louisiana. The Mission Education ministry is dedicated to two interrelated tasks: first, we want to build a knowledge of the people of other lands—their problems and aspirations for truth, freedom, justice and peace: and secondly, we strive to evoke the Christian solidarity and cooperation with these people as cherished brothers and sisters.*