Blog
Ministry
Spirituality



Retreat participants of the St. Joseph Worker Program of Orange, California, received shells representing the Camino de Santiago as a sign that we are pilgrims on our faith journey. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)



by Jaesen Evangelista

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

December 15, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Editor's note: *Notes from the Field features reports from young people volunteering in ministries of Catholic sisters. Meet this new round of bloggers: Jaesen Evangelista is with the St. Joseph Worker Program at the Mission Hospital Family Resource Center with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, California; Julia Gerwe serves as the ecological sustainability educational program manager with the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, in Nazareth, Kentucky; Caileigh Pattisall is a Good Shepherd Volunteer serving at the Rose & Blum Close to Home Residences in New York City. This is Jaesen's first blog post. Read more about her.*

"Unworthy" is a word I always associated with when it came to my Catholic faith. I remember turning away from God because I believed I did not fit the mold of a good Christian. I never prayed daily, I rarely went to Mass, and I never felt included in youth groups.

I turned my worthlessness into rebellion. I thought to myself, "Well, if I am not good enough for God, then I'll just live my life without him. God and I are strangers."

I was wrong.

At the end of my senior year of college, I was faced with the overarching question: What are you doing after graduation?

I looked at everything I did in the past four years as I was preparing for medical school. I did all the research internships, the hard science classes, the leadership positions, but I had no purpose. I had no connection to the work I was doing. That's when I started to look more into a year of service.



St. Joseph Sr. Mary Beth Ingham and the 2021-22 St. Joseph Workers celebrate the newly installed leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange. From left: Emily Michaelis, Nina Dorsett, Cindy Emenalo, Emma Shay, Ingham and Jaesen Evangelista. (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)

Though I knew we were most likely to remain strangers, I wanted to try one more time to know God through a year of serving his people. Perhaps if I do this, I can find my purpose. I felt a call say to me, "Just try this one time."

Fast-forward through my time studying different service programs and I am at the orientation for the St. Joseph Worker Program of Orange, California. I am still figuring out if this is where I belong. I was not the most engaged in the Catholic faith compared to the other girls in the program, so you can imagine my anxiety participating in the prayers and retreats. The word "unworthy" circled through my head countless times. Nevertheless, I powered through. One particular retreat, though, felt different.

Sr. Mary Beth Ingham, general superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, led me and my fellow volunteers on a silent retreat representing the pilgrimage of the

Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James. It was a weekend retreat of meditation, reflection and discussion on the lessons of the Camino, a network of centuries-old pilgrim routes that come together in northwest Spain.

Other than discussing our lessons, we kept complete silence as we worked to find God. To be honest, I was prepared for the same anxiety of worthlessness to cloak me.

However, when Sister Mary Beth taught the final lesson, I was stunned. She told a story about an atheistic woman who lived on the path of the Camino. After moving there, the woman was curious about the pilgrimage and asked the pilgrims why they were doing this. They told her that they wanted to know God, to find peace, and to find purpose in their lives. She was touched. At that moment, she dedicated her life to house the pilgrims of the Camino at no cost.

Advertisement

Sister Mary Beth said, "She lives a life serving people. Despite her atheism, I see God is with her. God dwells in the service you do unto others."

Upon hearing that phrase, I felt my breath leave me.

For the first time, I prayed. "Is it true? This whole time, even when I never prayed to you, even when I never visited you, even when I never joined your people, you have been with me as I served others?"

I felt my worthlessness transform into welcoming, loving, embracing worth. I felt God's warm smile as he said, "Yes. Yes, I've been with you. You have always been enough for me."

I loved to serve; I never questioned it. Whenever there was someone in need of help, whether it was a child struggling with math, a homeless woman asking for bus money, a classmate wanting to talk because their father passed away, I never hesitated; I was there.

There was no debt to be owed or any doubt that it was urgent to serve them. In fact, I remember hearing a voice call to me in every moment, "Go to them." And I followed.



Me with my freshly cut hair in front of the Statue of the Valiant Women, showing foundress Mother Bernard Gosselin and the pioneering Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange (Courtesy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange)

Now, I am here with the St. Joseph Worker Program of Orange, devoted to a year of serving God's people. There was a calling. And I followed.

So, it did not matter when I had never prayed to him nor visited him; God was with me. We were never strangers. I knew him. For the first time in my life, I felt worthy of him.

Inspired by this moment and as a sign of my spiritual rebirth, I started my year of service by cutting my hair short for the first time in 10 years and donating it to Locks of Love. I decided to approach this year with an open heart, knowing God is with me.

Now, 100 days since the lesson of the Camino, I have engaged myself entirely into my service site of Mission Hospital. I have helped facilitate free COVID-19 clinics for the poor; I have helped homeless patients obtain medicine, food and housing; I have managed psychiatric appointments for the uninsured; I have served food to the hungry at numerous food distributions; I have helped advocate for youth substance use prevention to high schools and middle schools; I have served food and clothing to immigrants in migrant hotels at the U.S.-Mexico border; I have educated workforces on cultural and racial disparities; I have helped explain the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange and the Sisters of Providence to Mission Hospital.

I will continue to serve. Like the woman on the Camino, I have found my purpose in serving others, even with my wavering faith and my constant feeling of worthlessness. In doing so, I have found my true self fully intertwined with God.

This story appears in the **Notes from the Field** feature series. View the full series.