

Jay Bohman
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The Blessed Mission

Each summer, around forty teens, ten adult leaders, and a dedicated kitchen crew depart my hometown parish for the Vinton County Fairgrounds. The mission: complete much needed home repairs for residents in the poorest county of Ohio. This is Gospel Road. When asked to recall times that I felt truly joyful, most deeply connected to others, and nearest to God, this week-long service trip is the first experience that comes to mind. I am blessed to have participated in this journey of service and spiritual growth, woven by the bonds of Christian unity.

After packing up my own clothes and tools (and sunscreen I won't use), I head to the Church to do my part in the spectacular teamwork of loading ladders, wooden planks of all sizes, power tools, shovels, post-hole diggers, food stores for the week, and luggage onto the Penske. We form a human conveyor line, passing laughs and excitement down the line along with all the supplies. Even before departure it is easy to see: together is the way all work is done for this trip. We load ourselves into trucks and vans driven by the adult leaders and make the two hour drive to the lowly fairgrounds, which will become our cherished home base for the week. The conveyor line reforms to unload the Penske and set up camp. After playing some fun, silly games to get to know new people's names better, we gather into our groups for the week and get our project assignments.

With the adult leaders serving as engineers and construction managers, we have a wide array of missions. The construction includes replacing roofs, gutters, vents, and faucets, building stairs, small decks and wheelchair ramps, and painting classrooms. No

matter the work to be done, the center of each group's mission is the residents they are serving. Treating every person with dignity and charity by reaching out to meet their needs is the most important interaction between humans, for in this God blesses both giver and receiver with His own joy.

For our group's project, we will be serving Bobby and a boy she takes care of, Carson. Donning our boots and gloves, we arrive at her house with shovels, roof rakes, and crowbars in hand to remove the leaking roof. Most of our group members have never done this sort of work before and therefore learn as we go from our adult leader. As our hands and minds learn the required skills and how to use the various tools, our hearts learn to let nothing stand in the way of serving.

At first, we clamber up the ladders and tentatively pull off a few shingles at a time, but soon our team is ardently ripping up the shingles, tar paper, and hundreds of nails to expose the bare wood upon which the new roof will be laid. It is sweaty, hot work with little shade to be found. Summer rains roll through intermittently, causing hurried tarp-laying and uneasiness about getting the project done in time. Yet our team pushes on because we recognise the value of our work and eventually we begin installing the new roof. This entails putting down chalk lines, nailing in tarpaper, and lugging numerous eighty pound bags of shingles up the ladders to be laid and nail gunned in. Through it all, Bobby and Carson amaze us by wanting to help with what construction they can, making sure we stay cool and hydrated in the hot summer sun, and sharing their profound gratitude for the work we are doing. At the end of the week, the new roof is affixed to the house, but, much more importantly, the beautiful blessings of serving with Christian love

are affixed to the hearts of Bobby, Carson, and our whole group as a result of the successful construction of teamwork.

That our focus for Gospel Road may always be this deeper mission of service, each day includes time given to spiritual growth through community prayers of praise, thanksgiving, and petition. The first sound to our ears each morning of the journey is Katy, our youth minister, singing Psalm 118:24 “This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!” As people wake up, progressively more voices join in this song of wonderful joy, fuelled by the knowledge of our God’s blessings on the day ahead of us. After getting dressed, we gather to say grace before breakfast and then together pray a rosary for our residents and any other personal intentions. We also read reflections on a Saint and the mysteries of the rosary in relation to living the Gospel through every moment of our service. Once we get to our residents’ homes, upbeat Christian music is easily heard streaming from our radios and voices. When we break for lunch, we read and reflect on passages from Sacred Scripture, continuing our unified commitment to building our relationship with God.

It is certainly a blessing to keep faith in focus during our work, but our spiritual well-being also requires time of deeper self-examination, learning, and praise. To this end, most evenings of the service trip include a witness talk from an older student about how they have overcome their struggles to become better sharers and doers of the Word. There are many pearls of wisdom from these talks that have stuck with me through the years as guiding inspiration. In addition, Wednesday evening is devoted to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Christ, in the flesh, comes to be with us at the meagre fairgrounds amidst all the tools, sweat, and sawdust that has accumulated throughout the week. This

serves as a vivid reminder of the immeasurable blessing of Christ's birth in a lowly manger. During our time of adoration, priests come, often from great distances, to administer the sacrament of Reconciliation. At the end of this evening, the peace permeating every soul present is tangible. Finally, to conclude each day, grateful for sleep to rejuvenate us for a tomorrow of work and prayer, we offer the Chaplet of Divine Mercy together to ask God's blessings upon our rest and all those whom we serve.

During the bits of time on Gospel Road that are not specifically devoted to service and profound spiritual growth, our invigorated Christian spirits are united in all manner of merry games. Passing baseballs, soccer balls, footballs, and Frisbees; playing euchre, spoons, Bananagrams, Spot it, Wordaround, and the couch game; through all these and more we are united in pure, Christian fun. The most eagerly awaited games, however, are a water balloon toss and crazy bingo, led by the beloved local pastor, Father Maroon. On the last day of the week, all of the residents and their kids are invited to join us at the campgrounds for a picnic dinner. Precious few things can build kinship with someone as magnificently as sitting around a table and sharing a meal. Once everyone has finished eating, the gentle, elderly Fr. Maroon walks over to his old car and returns armed with a huge smile and massive squirt guns. Everyone finds a partner and follows Father's instructions to get in a very straight line. He then gives each pair a water balloon and the fun commences. We step further back each round, excitement ever building as those who have gotten out enthusiastically cheer on anyone still cautiously tossing. Each person's face is filled with a smile, a smile bonding our hearts together through the blessing of God's joy. Eventually, all the balloons but one pop with a splash and Father Maroon declares the winners to glorious applause!

If it can be imagined, this shared excitement is but a precursor to the one, the only, crazy bingo. Equipped with scorecards, ink dotters, and our groups as teammates, we are about to let show all of the undignified joy gathered from spending a week so wholly devoted to service and prayer with our great friends and siblings in Christ. Every letter and number Fr. Maroon calls leads up to the glorious exclamations of “BINGO!!” accompanied by leaps into the air, teammates bellowing their cheers, and every goofy victory dance imaginable. By the time everyone has had their chance to win, laughter is streaming from many people’s eyes as the result of such pure Christian joy weaving us all into a unified, blessed companionship.

Though we have much immense, holy fun with Fr. Maroon, the culmination of the week is undoubtedly celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with him on Thursday evening. The outnumbered daily churchgoers kindly welcome us into their parish to receive with them the Word of everlasting life and the Bread of salvation. Our voices rise to fill the chapel with joyful song and faithful prayer as we lay our hearts open to fully participate in the Sacred Mysteries. It is here that our togetherness is ultimately fulfilled, for it is here that we receive the Eucharist: the Blessed Sacrament of unity.

As we near the end of Gospel Road, we celebrate having lived the commission we receive at Mass: to go forth and build the Kingdom of God, on earth and in our hearts. We celebrate the service we have done together to repair our residents’ homes and we celebrate the prayer, self-reflection, and praise that have built our spiritual devotion to God. To conclude our trip of blessed togetherness, we drive to the top of a nearby hill surrounded by open fields for a breathtaking view of the sunset. In these marvellous moments of the sun’s warmly glowing glory, I stand in awe of God’s beautiful creation

and in complete gratitude for my journey on Gospel Road, a blessed journey of service, spiritual growth, and Christian unity. The mission: Heaven.