



Catherine McNeal - Catholic Student Union

I just graduated from Florida State University (FSU) with a degree in nursing. I grew up in Tallahassee, FL and was born into a Catholic family. While we went to Mass every Sunday and prayed before meals, faith was not something we normally discussed at home; it was more just something that was part of our routine. I was exposed to it enough to make me want to join my church's youth group when I got to high school, and doing so helped me learn more about my faith. However, my faith in high school was focused more on things that I could "do" instead of on having a relationship with Jesus. When it came time to decide what college to go to, the fact that FSU had the Catholic



Student Union (CSU) played a role in me choosing it as my home for the next 4 years.

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I started coming around CSU at the beginning of my freshman year, but I didn't truly feel connected with the community until I attended a Spring Break Mission Trip to New Orleans later that year. 12 other students and I traveled to Louisiana for a week to serve the poor of the community in whatever ways they needed. This week of service opened my eyes to the different levels of material poverty experienced in our own country. We talked a lot about why we were serving and how it is our mission as Christians to share Christ's love by serving those in need.

My junior year, I was blessed to go on the Women's Spring Break Mission Trip to Ohio. We stayed with and worked alongside the

Franciscan Sisters, TOR. This trip changed my life in ways that I never thought it would. Much of the work we did could be considered pretty simple. While focusing on loving the poor, we served at a soup kitchen, worked in the Sisters' thrift shop, visited the elderly at a nursing home, and helped clean and organize service areas. It was work that most people would probably not consider to be life changing. What made this experience so amazing was how much I was able to grow in my understanding of service. I learned how to make service a prayer, how to truly love those that I am serving, and how to invite God into the service that I do. Seeing the joy in which the Sisters embraced service inspired me to be a joyful servant, and as I served others who were struggling with material poverty, I came to recognize my need for God in my spiritual poverty.



This past summer, I had the opportunity to attend the School of the New Evangelization (SNE). This weeklong retreat-conference taught me so much about sharing God's love with others. It was the push that I needed to make some changes in my life in order to truly trust the Lord and the plans He has for me. I think the best way to describe my experience there would be to write down a quote from a journal entry I wrote on the last night of SNE. I said,

"I've literally never been this convicted to grow in my faith before. I spent the past three years of my life knowing that there was more that I should be doing, but not being able to figure out what that actually looked like. God has placed so much on my heart this week.

I have been living a life of comfort —

scared to do more because I was scared it would become uncomfortable. I knew that Jesus is Lord and that he died for my sins, but I believed the lie that how I was living my life was good enough. I was making a mockery of the cross. Jesus gave everything for me. He died on the cross for me. If I know this truth and can't give my whole life back to him then there is something fundamentally

wrong here. If I believe these things, then I must also believe that Jesus Christ is worth everything — any sacrifice, any hardship, any challenge. I am called to live a radical life because of what was done in order to give me life."

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This was the start of a much needed transformation in my life. It allowed me to see that serving Christ was not always going to be easy and that there were things that I was going to have to do that were out of my comfort zone. However, there was also a peace in knowing that there is hope through every trial.

This past semester, my longing for service culminated with me attending the CSU Spring Break Mission Trip to Haiti. This was my first time being able to attend an international service trip, and it opened my eyes to so much about the world. Everything about Haiti was different than the United States. There was so much material poverty — there was nothing that would even equate to a building in the U.S., and their daily life was so different... but the people were the same: the way you made a child laugh was the same; the way you brought comfort to someone in pain was the same; the way you offered your life in service was the same. It opened my eyes to how universal God's love truly is. It made me thankful for the life that I have been given and the ways in which God has shown me love in the past 22 years.



Through these experiences and many more with the Catholic Student Union, I have been formed and shaped in countless ways. I knew what the life of a disciple looked like, in following Jesus, but my heart has been changed to longing not only to be a disciple, but to become an apostle, to be able to share this love with others and to make my life truly focused on working for Christ. If you were to ask me a year ago what I was planning to do after graduation, I would have said that I would find the best job as a nurse possible that would help me grow in my professional career. God, of course, had different plans. I have recently accepted an offer to do a year of medical mission work in the South Sudan and the Dominican Republic of Congo. Going into college, I never thought this would be a part of my life, but I have learned so much about what it means to serve. Christ has instilled this longing in me to serve Him in a deeper way. There is something so beautiful about being able to be completely present to a community for a full year. Through this mission, I would not only be serving their physical needs through my nursing care, but serving their spiritual poverty as well by shining the light of Christ. In *Redemptoris Missio*, St. John Paul II said, “The urgency of missionary activity derives from the radical newness of life brought by Christ and lived by his followers.” There is an *urgency* in following Christ’s mission and sharing this mission with others. When I felt the call to do a year of mission after graduation, I knew it was not something that I could ignore or try to put off. Christ needs apostles now. He needs people serving him in radical ways so that they may also experience this “newness of life”.

There is no way I would have even been open to serving Jesus and His Church in this radical way without the

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experiences that I was able to have with the Catholic Student Union. The very first Spring Break Mission Trip that I went on my freshman year started a spark in me to look at what Christian service was. That spark was fanned into a burning flame by the time I concluded my trip to Haiti this past spring break. If more people had the opportunity to attend trips such as these, this desire to serve would be sparked in communities as a whole. People’s lives are changed through experiencing God’s love, especially through experiencing His love in such a way that puts them outside their comfort zone. These trips stretch people and open their hearts to learning about and serving Christ in ways that they may never consider otherwise. It exposes them both to different groups of people that are all God’s children and to different parts of the world that are all part of God’s Kingdom.

The Catholic Student Union is building God’s kingdom in a unique way. It is shining Christ’s light. It is providing opportunities. It is full of missionaries. It is creating apostles. It is a community of love.



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