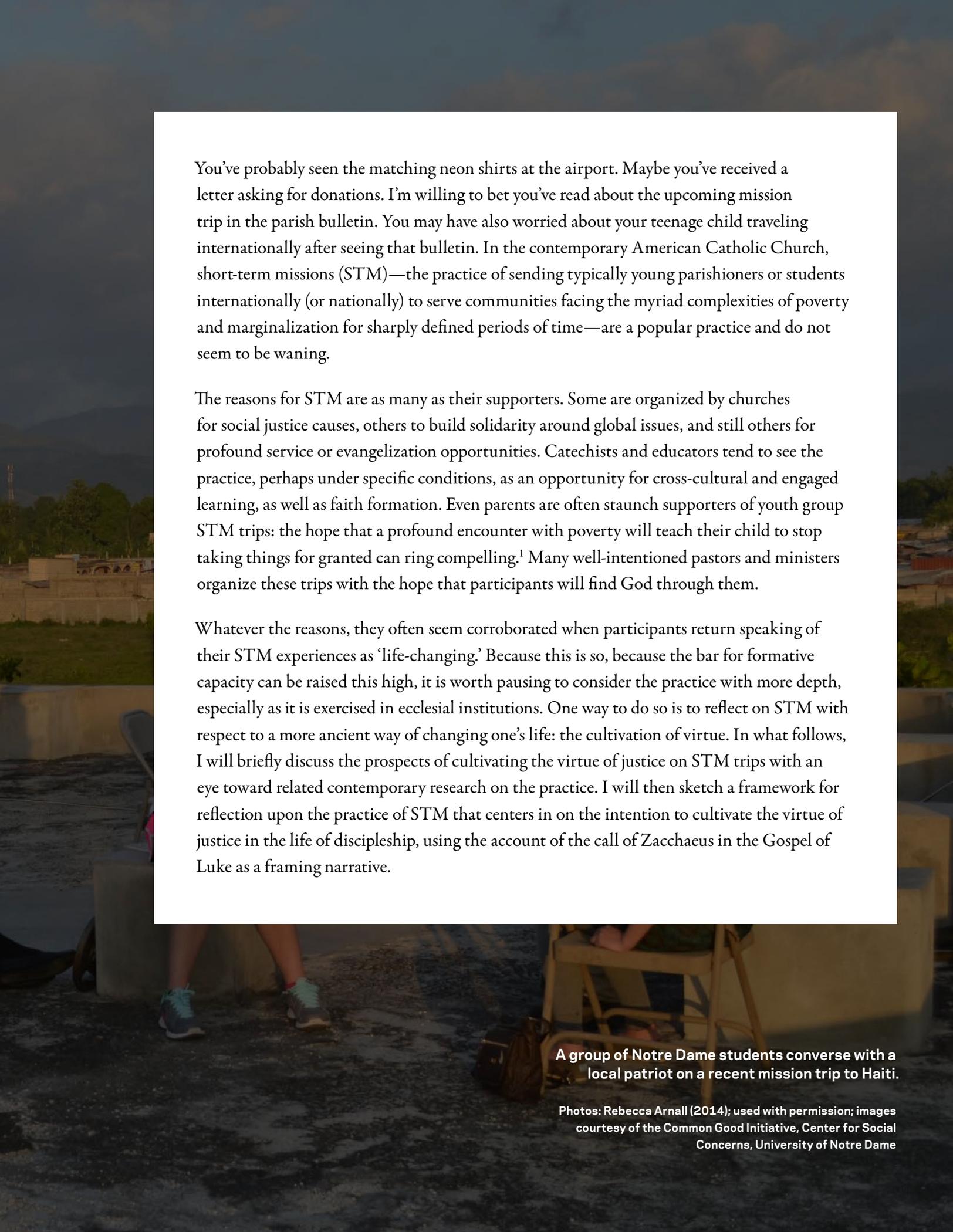


A group of people are gathered on a rooftop at dusk. In the background, a large satellite dish is visible. A man in a blue shirt is standing and looking towards the right. A woman in a pink shirt is sitting on a white folding chair. Another woman in a black shirt is sitting next to her. A man in a green shirt is standing and looking towards the left. The sky is dark with some clouds. The overall scene suggests a community gathering or a meeting.

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST'S MISSION: SHORT- TERM MISSIONS AND JUSTICE

BY ROBERT PFUNDER

A background photograph showing a group of people in an outdoor setting, likely in Haiti. In the foreground, the lower legs and feet of several people are visible, including one person wearing bright blue sneakers. In the middle ground, a person is seated in a wooden folding chair. The background shows a simple building and some greenery under a clear sky.

You've probably seen the matching neon shirts at the airport. Maybe you've received a letter asking for donations. I'm willing to bet you've read about the upcoming mission trip in the parish bulletin. You may have also worried about your teenage child traveling internationally after seeing that bulletin. In the contemporary American Catholic Church, short-term missions (STM)—the practice of sending typically young parishioners or students internationally (or nationally) to serve communities facing the myriad complexities of poverty and marginalization for sharply defined periods of time—are a popular practice and do not seem to be waning.

The reasons for STM are as many as their supporters. Some are organized by churches for social justice causes, others to build solidarity around global issues, and still others for profound service or evangelization opportunities. Catechists and educators tend to see the practice, perhaps under specific conditions, as an opportunity for cross-cultural and engaged learning, as well as faith formation. Even parents are often staunch supporters of youth group STM trips: the hope that a profound encounter with poverty will teach their child to stop taking things for granted can ring compelling.¹ Many well-intentioned pastors and ministers organize these trips with the hope that participants will find God through them.

Whatever the reasons, they often seem corroborated when participants return speaking of their STM experiences as 'life-changing.' Because this is so, because the bar for formative capacity can be raised this high, it is worth pausing to consider the practice with more depth, especially as it is exercised in ecclesial institutions. One way to do so is to reflect on STM with respect to a more ancient way of changing one's life: the cultivation of virtue. In what follows, I will briefly discuss the prospects of cultivating the virtue of justice on STM trips with an eye toward related contemporary research on the practice. I will then sketch a framework for reflection upon the practice of STM that centers in on the intention to cultivate the virtue of justice in the life of discipleship, using the account of the call of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke as a framing narrative.

A group of Notre Dame students converse with a local patriot on a recent mission trip to Haiti.

Photos: Rebecca Arnall (2014); used with permission; images courtesy of the Common Good Initiative, Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame

VIRTUE IN THE SHORT TERM

At first glance, STM opportunities seem to be an unlikely ally to cultivating virtue. Virtue is mundane. It takes time. It involves stable communities and discipline. There is no leaving it; virtue comes home with you. A mission trip is *extra*-mundane. It involves the adventure of travel. It takes little (vacation) time and you get to go home afterward. In other words, an STM experience will not make anyone virtuous by itself. Virtue is about the formation of our deepest desires and inclinations, and such deeper roots demand one to be slow and patient in forming them. As time-bound and relational creatures, the roots of virtue lie far deeper in the human person than STM's reach. Nevertheless, an STM experience can provide the occasion to see those deeper roots and to see their need for growth in new directions, toward new sources of life.

Though they are not typically discussed with such language, I want to suggest that STM trips can be revelatory in ways that are important to the life of virtue. Participants encounter otherness, their own finitude, and their own aspirations for life in novel ways. Participants also typically encounter a newly revealed world in front of them: a world marked by much beauty, truth, and goodness, by vibrant culture and heroic characters, but also by suffering, sin, and unimaginable injustice, by violent aspects of culture and tragic characters. Indeed, many participants encounter their lives in relation to this (new) world in front of them for the first time, and that reality can *call* much of their lives into question. That encounter can even feel like an accusation—consider how many participants return with feelings of guilt! Such encounters demand response, and many report the response as a decisive shift in the trajectory of their lives. Such ‘vital contact’ with injustice on STM trips can become the pivot point for considering how one can live *more justly*.²

In the Christian life, we also ought to give due consideration to the reality that many return from their STM trips feeling that they have encountered God through their service. Of course such an experience cannot be planned or put in the itinerary, but it is important to consider how STM practices might be a spiritual discipline that can draw us near to Christ, that can attune our eyes to his work of redemption. For such is at the very heart of the Christian moral life, and thus the life of virtue in a Christian key. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §1). This is not to romanticize STM, but only to suggest that as a spiritual practice it can draw one near to Christ in transformative ways in the life of virtue.

To suggest that STM trips can be interpreted as opportunities for revelatory encounters with injustice, with service, and with Christ, is to offer a possible framing narrative for the practice. In his illuminating work, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience*, Brian Howell notes that there are typical narratives and metaphors that tie together the rationale and objectives for STM—the relationships between guest and host communities, and, really, all details of the practice. Framing narratives are imaginative constructions that focus on how all the parts of such trips (travel, service, short and long-term relationships, ethos, spirituality, etc.) fit together into a cohesive whole. Howell also notes that for participants, such narratives form the interpretive possibilities of their experiences by drawing their attention to particular realities and obscuring others.³ Joby Taylor, Director of The Shriver Center Peacemaker Program, makes a similar point while discussing service-learning and how framing metaphors such as ‘service as charity’ and ‘service as democratic citizenship’ are generative of particular interpretive possibilities for participants.⁴ Taylor even suggests that practitioners generate new metaphors for experimentation and further consideration.

In light of Taylor’s invitation for new metaphors, I would like to suggest a framing narrative that centers its focus on the cultivation of virtue in the life of discipleship: the call of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke. This is not the first instance in which this narrative has been used for framing the service experiences of STM. Hunter Farrell has done so as well in his insightful article, “Short-Term Missions: Paratrooper Incursions or ‘Zacchaeus Encounter?’” Here Farrell identifies crucial factors in STM such as “intergenerational teams, an emphasis on mutual mission, intense preparation, coaching and follow-up, and a culture of context sensitivity” that help to facilitate ‘Zacchaeus Encounters,’ wherein participants “meet Jesus in the brokenness of the poor and oppressed communities in which [they] work.”⁵ Expanding on Farrell’s proposal, the present reflection seeks to draw the STM pre-trip preparation process, the trip itself, and the post-trip debriefing stages typical to such experiences into the scriptural narrative itself. For each phase of the STM experience, we can draw upon three movements in the narrative of Zacchaeus’s call: Zacchaeus climbing the tree, his encounter with Christ, and his response to Christ. The heart of the narrative, though, is the conception of STM experiences as opportunities for encounter with Christ on mission, an encounter which issues forth in justice.

ZACCHAEUS CLIMBS

Researchers on the subject note that the pre-departure phase of STM can benefit group dynamics and provide contextual preparation before the trip itself,⁶ which are key ingredients to sending STM participants with “eyes to see and ears to hear” (cf. Mt 13:16). This stage is also an important way of minimizing paternalistic and stereotyped attitudes about the host country.⁷ Though the specifics of orchestrating pre-departure meetings are beyond our reach here, the Zacchaeus narrative draws our attention to two important facets of STM preparation, especially when considered in light of the cultivation of virtue. One facet we can understand under the metaphor of climbing, the other of seeing.

Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a better view of Jesus, to set himself apart from the crowd. Pressured by the ethos of self-advancement in twenty-first century America, perhaps we can see something of our collective desire to ‘climb to the top’ in Zacchaeus’ act. His climb reveals to us his motivation, his *seeking*, and asks us of our deepest motivations and of our own seeking.⁸ In cultivating virtue, this is a particularly important exercise, as it draws us to the heart of the moral life. We tend to focus in on questions about particular actions during these trips and afterward: How can I give back? How can I live more simply? Where can I buy fair trade coffee? But, as Stanley Hauerwas has noted, ‘Who ought I to become?’ is a more primary question in the moral life than ‘What ought I to do?’⁹ The question of our becoming is one that gets at the heart of our active life. Our motivations spring forth from this question that lies deep in our hearts, often uncovered. Asking participants to enter into their more profound motivations for service, for participating in STM, and for travel are important ways to reveal these deeper questions at the root of their being. It is a practice of helping them tap into deeper roots in their character during the trip itself. To use earlier imagery, intentionally engaging these questions reveals to us the roots of our strivings and hopes and dreams, and

in so revealing these roots, opens them for intentional cultivation.

The second facet concerns Zacchaeus’ need to *see*. His ascent allows him to see the topography of the land, to more clearly see the crowds and commotion in front of him. In a similar way, it is helpful to consider the pre-departure sessions as opportunities for the group to attune its vision. Learning of the culture, politics, and history of the STM host community is crucial to helping participants engage their surroundings more thoughtfully and intentionally during the trip. The pre-departure sessions are also an important way to draw the participants and the service being done into the greater narrative of salvation history, of God’s special love for the poor. This can be joined together with the participants’ reflections on their own motivations for service so as to give each an opportunity to learn to attend to the world through the eyes of the faith. To quote Hauerwas again, “being a Christian involves more than just making certain decisions; it is a way of attending to the world. It is learning ‘to see’ the world under the mode of the divine . . . This learning requires training of our attention by constantly juxtaposing our experience with our vision.”¹⁰ Such habits of attention ought to be cultivated in the STM preparation process.

ZACCHAEUS ENCOUNTERS CHRIST

Many return from their time on mission with reports of experiences of God. For some, these experiences are born through important conversations with team members or new friends in the host community, and for others, these are born of experiences of service. In light of the scriptural narrative, these are indeed two places where we might encounter Christ while on mission. While these are indeed rich subjects for further consideration, what I would like to draw our attention to here is a contemplative sense of encountering Christ during the STM trip. Let us turn to our narrative.

Zacchaeus sits waiting in the tree for Christ to pass by. But Christ looks up to him, calls him by name, and calls him down from the tree. It is the personalized call by Christ that draws Zacchaeus into participation with the scene. Christ then invites Zacchaeus to show him hospitality. Zacchaeus encounters Christ on mission and is invited into that mission. Those traveling for STM experiences would do well to remember this narrative of invitation. A student of mine remarked that those traveling on STM experiences would do better to think not that *we* are the ones bringing Christ, but rather to ask *what* is Christ doing here in the host community?

In *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*, Rowan Williams makes a similar point about speaking the truth in love in the Christian life. He reflects that “if God has made all things by the Word, then each person and thing exists because God *is speaking* to it and in it. If we are to respond adequately, truthfully, we must listen for the word God speaks to and through each element of creation—hence the importance of listening through expectant silence.”¹¹ We must ready our ears for the Word who dwells and speaks among us. Correspondingly, Williams continues,

a genuine love of our neighbor “is not a feeling of goodwill toward the neighbor but the active search for that word—so that I can hear what God has to say to me and give to me through the neighbor, and also so that I can speak to what is real in the neighbor, not what suits me or interests me and my agenda.”¹² Though Williams seems to be focusing here on speech habits, it is a fair extension in this discussion to direct his work to the acts of service and advocacy typical of STM. Often we bring certain expectations that service will speak to the host community in a variety of ways: for instance, that it will express concern and hope, and that it will proclaim the love of Christ. Service is often viewed as a language that transcends typical linguistic and cultural boundaries.¹³ The *doing* typical to STM is also a *saying*.

What makes Williams so helpful here is his appeal to be quiet and listen. He says that those with the intention of speaking the truth in love, or in our instance in *service*, need to recognize that “sometimes this means that what at first looks like the ‘loving’ response won’t quite do”; rather, “what is needed is a certain degree of *hesitation* in our willingness to offer the first kind of help that comes to our minds,” otherwise there is a risk of submitting to the “pressure to make *myself*

feel better.”¹⁴ These words should not be taken lightly. Williams is alerting our attention to temptations in service experiences that lead to injustice—not giving our neighbor what is due. Part of the reason that considering motivations in the pre-trip phase is so important is that such reflection allows participants to better see the reasons for their service that might lead to well-intentioned but ultimately unjust behavior. The ways in which unjust behaviors on STM occur are well-documented. Host communities might not be treated as equals; they might not be given the dignity of self-direction in determining work projects, or the service performed might not actually be needed or might be poorly done. The host community might even be deprived of a formative voice in the STM itinerary creation. The call to hesitate is a call to integrate practices of attention to our neighbor into the STM such as active listening and prayer to encounter the Word working in our neighbor’s depths. Such practices assist in attuning us to the ongoing work of Christ in each and all that we meet. And in so doing, these practices attune us to the integral human development of each and all. This formation in attention prepares us for justice. It prepares us by displacing us from our own gravitational orbit and selfish reasons for serving. We might call these practices and dispositions of attention the beginnings of an education in the virtue of justice in the Christian life.

To offer a summarizing word on this, the rationale for STM trips is typically found in their offer of some sort of service. We would do well, we would be more just, in attending to the concrete reality of our neighbors by searching for that Word in each person that we cannot initially see. Placing a primary emphasis on learning during the trip and integrating practices of active listening and mutual and reciprocal collaboration with the host community will prepare participants to encounter this Word.¹⁵ Indeed, such a disposition to hesitate and to seek Christ ‘passing by’ in the depths of our neighbors prepares one to serve in a more dignifying way. This is what is required by our cooperation with the Word in our neighbor’s depths: “an intensive listening for the rhythm of divine life in what may at first seem to be unintelligible, and a gradual learning of how to echo it, to make sounds [and to act] in union with it.”¹⁶

RESPONDING TO CHRIST IN JUSTICE

At this point, it is fair to ask what this narrative has to do with cultivating the virtue of justice. Cultivating the virtue of justice involves doing things. The above seems more focused on contemplation than action, yet this narrative is a vision of contemplation that draws one more truthfully into the reality of one's neighbor. Any discussion of justice, of giving to another what is due, is also a discussion on how we learn to see our neighbors and what is, in fact, due to each of them. Williams notes that without any sort of basic education in a contemplative attention to our neighbor, "no deeply ethical behavior is really going to be possible."¹⁷ The reason is that our doing the right thing, our service, "will not be grounded yet in who we are, in the person God wants us to become."¹⁸ This is a vision of justice, yes, but it is a vision of justice formed by the ongoing work of Christ in each and all. It is justice formed by the disciple's call to participate in this love and work of Christ which seeks to eliminate all that offends the dignity of the human person (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, §27).

It is justice formed by charity. Moreover, this reflective shape of the STM process can begin this education in attention to the neighbor. In so doing, participants are more disposed not only to the revelatory encounters mentioned above, but also to the cries for justice of their neighbors both near and far. Indeed, this sort of contemplative hesitation before our neighbor is the *first act* of justice.

But there is more to our scriptural narrative—a second act. Upon encountering Christ, Zacchaeus' own entanglements with unjust structures and oppressive behavior are revealed. Zacchaeus has robbed and oppressed those of Jericho. His response to Christ, then, is a response that seeks to make just amends. His encounter with Christ was a revelatory encounter that occasioned the first steps in living a just life. So too can a short-term mission be a Zacchaeian encounter. According to this framing narrative, at each phase the STM participants are drawn more deeply not only

into their own interiority, but also into the narrative of salvation history and the complex socio-political realities of the neighbors they encounter. Such encounters can have the capacity to reveal many of the more modern entanglements with injustice that participants normally do not see. Such revelations can be profound calls to not only do justice, but to live justly.¹⁹ Moreover, by introducing and nourishing a contemplative dimension to these encounters, participants can see that this newfound vigor for justice can be cultivated into virtue through habits of prayerful attention and encounter after the STM trip. By providing an opportunity for forming how participants attend to the world before them through the eyes of faith and justice, participants are drawn more deeply into a just life.

For the post-trip follow-up phase of STM, it would be helpful to meditate upon Zacchaeus' response to Christ. The follow-up phase is important for helping participants to reflect critically upon their experiences and to make

substantive plans of action for the future in light of those experiences. What I would like to do here is show two framing mechanisms from our narrative that can be helpful in constructing these follow-up sessions. Two dimensions of the narrative stand out. First, Zacchaeus' response is a response to Christ. What nourishes and directs Zacchaeus' just act is encountering the God who dwells among us. In considering our own just responses upon return from STM, we would do well to draw the typical follow-up questions for participants about simplifying life and participation in community service, justice, and advocacy initiatives into the Church's greater faith formation and liturgical practices. Each encounter with the living God purifies our love of God and our love of neighbor. Each encounter draws us more deeply into the love of the God who became poor so that we might be enriched by his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9).

Second, Zacchaeus' response comes from the particularity of his own life. He seeks to restore not only wrongs done in his own community and to his own neighbors, but also wrongs that *he* has done. A subtle temptation in STM practices is to identify injustice and social evils as lying *outside* of oneself or even one's own community.²⁰ This comes in many forms, for instance: the injustices I encountered lie only in the country I visited; my return home separates me from those realities. To avoid this temptation, one must help participants to reflect upon their own entanglements with injustice and larger social practices that leave members of even their own communities marginalized. Such reflection is difficult. It requires vulnerability and humility. But it is reflection that is in accord with the reality of injustice: its roots lie in our communities, even in our own hearts. Honesty in facing these realities draws one into a more just life.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The narrative of Zacchaeus' call shines a particular sort of light upon the practice of STM. Its gravitational orbit is the encounter with Christ, which means that STMs are re-narrated at a fundamental level as spiritual practices shaped to draw participants into the ongoing work of Christ, into the mission of the same Christ who once proclaimed in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18; cf. Is 61:1). The framing narrative seeks to draw one near to the Christ in whom these words are still fulfilled.

Much of what makes this narrative compelling is its scriptural imagination and emphasis on contemplation. The narrative also provides a way of envisioning the relationship between justice and discipleship, as well as the cultivation of the virtue of justice through vital contact with injustice and, indeed, with Christ.²¹ This said, the Zacchaeus call narrative should not be approached as the only narrative needed to inform STM practice. Such trips are not one-size-fits-all. Ultimately, any framing narrative needs to be crafted in conversation with the host community itself.²² The above should be seen as a sketched framing narrative that could be helpful for those planning and coordinating short-term missions. Its general movements and the emphases seen in the scriptural narrative will likely be most helpful for those reflecting on the practice in ecclesial institutions, especially those who are most commonly engaged in the practice: North American parishes and educational institutions.

STM trips can provide occasions for revelatory encounters with injustice, for the cultivation of a contemplative attention to our neighbors, and, indeed, for drawing one into the scriptural narrative. They can provide the bedrock and some of the first steps of

cultivating the virtue of justice in the Christian life. STM opportunities can also become opportunities for long-standing friendships between guest and host communities, friendships in which ‘guest’ and ‘host’ become blurred and mutual. Such friendships, too, can draw all more deeply into a virtuous Christian life. Indeed, in drawing near to Christ we encounter the God who draws us, guest and host communities both, together into peace and justice as he draws us to himself.²³



NOTES

1 Don C. Richter, *Mission Trips That Matter: Embodied Faith for the Sake of the World* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2008), 31.

2 See the document produced by the 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, especially §53.

3 Brian Howell, *Short-Term Mission: An Ethnography of Christian Travel Narrative and Experience* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

4 Joby Taylor, “Metaphors We Serve By: Investigating the Conceptual Metaphors Framing National and Community Service and Service-Learning” in *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall (2002), 45–57.

5 Hunter Farrell, “Short-Term Missions: Paratrooper Incursion or ‘Zacchaeus Encounter?’” in *Journal of Latin American Theology*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2007), 83, 74.

6 Cf. Farrell 78–82.

7 Cf. David Maclure, “Wholly Available? Missionary Motivation Where Consumer Choice Reigns,” in *Evangel*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2001), 134–37. See also David Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013).

8 For a complementary discussion on the seeking of Zacchaeus in contemporary times, see Tomas Halik, *Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us*, trans. by Gerald Turner (New York:

Doubleday, 2009).

9 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 116–7.

10 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 45–6.

11 Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2005), 82.

12 Ibid., 83.

13 Cf. Howell, *Short-Term Mission*, chapter 7.

14 Williams, *Where God Happens*, 84.

15 Cf. Farrell, “Short-Term Missions,” 77–78 and Joann Van Engen, “The Cost of Short-Term Missions” in *The Other Side* (January–February 2000), 20–23.

16 Williams, *Where God Happens*, 83.

17 Ibid., 86.

18 Ibid., 85.

19 See chapter two, “Why We Do Justice” in Eugene Cho’s *OVERRATED: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the World than Actually Changing the World?* (Elgin, IL: David C Cook, 2014).

20 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov, “Memory as a Remedy for Evil” in *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 7, no. 3 (April 2009), 461–2.

21 *Justice in the World*, §53.

22 Farrell, “Short-Term Missions,” 74.

23 Cf. chapter 8, “Jesus, the Justice of God” in Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).



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