

I offered this reflection at our Spring Retreat for CRS Parish Ambassadors on June 29, 2019. I surprised even myself by the emotion that I expressed during my presentation! My travel with CRS as part of a PAC delegation was truly transformative and I hope to convey that in a way that brings others to fuller engagement in the work of transforming lives around the world.

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He is a Beautiful Baby

I want to share with you my experience traveling with Catholic Relief Services to Ethiopia this May. I was part of a delegation of people who do the same kind of work we do here in the Diocese of St. Augustine, engaging fellow Catholics in U.S. parishes with the work CRS does around the world. I experienced firsthand how this work brings us into closer solidarity with our global human family, especially those in circumstances of immense need.

I was witness to CRS's collaboration with the local Catholic Church, the local government, and with local communities facing serious poverty. This collaboration allows us to not only meet immediate need, but to move toward sustainable development and long-term solutions which allow true human flourishing. I am so proud of this work our Church is doing, and that we here in the Diocese of St. Augustine are a part of through programs such as Rice Bowl and through our advocacy efforts influencing U.S. policy.

Everyone in our delegation was impacted by our time in Ethiopia in a way unique to the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I was particularly honored to have a chance to spend a brief time with new mothers and babies when we visited the Missionaries of Charity in a town called Dire Dawa. You may be familiar with the Missionaries of Charity as the Roman Catholic religious congregation established in 1950 by Mother Teresa or Saint Teresa of Calcutta. CRS has a long-standing relationship of collaboration with this congregation.

My own work in family life ministry over the years draws me toward the experience of families. As I was visiting with a mom nursing a very new baby, I remarked how beautiful her baby was. She replied in careful English, "He *is* a beautiful baby."

This encounter brought immediately to my heart an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and a prayer for her intercession that I am familiar with. This icon dates from before 1499, with popular claims that it is a copy of a painting by St. Luke using the meal table of the Holy Family in Nazareth. In 1867 Pope Pius IX granted the image its present title. The feast day of Our Lady of Perpetual Help is June 27, just a couple of days ago. Images of Mary and Jesus and of the

Holy Family help me to remember the great love God has for each of us and the way God wills this love to come to life in each and every family.

When we were visiting the Missionaries of Charity, I was struck by the way the sisters establish a space of beauty and order for those whose lives have been marked by poverty and insecurity. The pregnant women that come to the sisters are without adequate care from their family. The Missionaries of Charity provide them with residential medical and spiritual care, companioning them through childbirth and the early months of the baby's life.

How does CRS fit into this? We were able to visit with women working in the kitchens with the sisters in Dire Dawa. They used ingredients provided in part by your donations to CRS Rice Bowl for a traditional Ethiopian flat bread called injera and for a stew of yellow peas to eat with it. Rice Bowl funds are a way to help CRS and our partners fill in gaps to provide much needed food to the poorest of the poor around the world.

Of course, families grow from one baby to more. Our delegation was able to meet with several small communities in Ethiopia blessed with many beautiful children full of potential. These communities struggle with basic issues of safety, food, water, shelter, health, and education. These basic needs find response from CRS, again, in collaboration with the local church, with the local government, and with community members themselves.

We learned about water projects led by CRS staff. We also learned about farming improvement, peace building initiatives, programs empowering girls, and transitional housing assistance following internal displacement. And, we saw how international aid from the U.S. government helps people have a healthier and more stable diet by providing basics like wheat, peas, and vegetable oil. This is aid from the American people made possible through your voting and advocacy for policies which share our resources with those most in need around the world.

All of these efforts help each new beautiful baby have a much better chance of thriving. Moms and dads can shift from basic survival goals to focus on farming their own fresh food in the very challenging climate of Ethiopia as well as selling produce from their land to pay school fees. They can develop other means of income. Girls and boys are freer to go to school when they do not have to spend as much time fetching unclean water from far away sources or contributing to family income. They are healthier when food and water is safe and reliable. This transforms communities. CRS, your Catholic international response and development organization, is doing this very good work right now all over the world.

I returned from my time in Ethiopia deeply impacted by a proud, smiling new mom and her healthy, beautiful baby boy. I want more than ever to share stories of hope from the work we all do as part of CRS's mission of global solidarity so that our engagement in that work, through programs like Rice Bowl and through advocacy, can increase.

I'd like to close with this Prayer asking for the intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help:

"He is a beautiful baby."

Missy Parkison

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, today we face so many difficulties. Your image reminds us to reach out and respond to those in need. We ask for your intercession in helping us to understand that our lives belong to others as much as they belong to us.

Mary, model of Christian love, we know we cannot heal every ill or solve every problem. But with God's grace, we intend to do what we can. May we be true witnesses to the world that love for one another really matters. May our daily actions proclaim lives humbly modeled after yours, in service to your son, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.