



THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

“There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. (Luke 16:19–21)

Each year, more than 1.6 million Christians in the United States pack up their passports and bug spray, and board planes to go on short-term service trips overseas. Many of these trip participants might describe their motivation this way: “I have so much, and there are others who have so little. I am going on a mission trip to give back and serve the poor.” The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus offers us a metaphor for their motivation. The parable paints a stark divide between the world’s rich and poor, warning of eternal anguish for those who do not respond compassionately to the poor at their doors.

Mission trips frequently engage participants in construction and other types of service projects. After they return home, many participants would like to make a meaningful difference beyond their experience, yet are not sure how to do it. Facing extreme poverty up close, especially for the first time, can be overwhelming. It tosses us out of our comfort zones and leads us into a spiritual and vocational journey we may not be prepared for. We may prefer to place our experiences in a box, on a high shelf, or in a back closet. And we prefer to leave it there, like old love letters or clothing that no longer fits. We don’t know what to do with the experience. We leave the United States to serve the poor overseas, but after a week or so we come home and resume our lives. The poor remain poor, and we remain divided.

The Lazarus parable teaches us that this division does not reflect God’s vision for humanity. Each of us—rich and poor—is created in God’s image to love and serve one another as one Body of Christ. Jesus was a healer during his public ministry. But he needed the healing love and presence of his companions as he suffered on the cross. Similarly, Lazarus was in need of healing—in the form of food and attention—but he was also a healer. His presence alone was healing: It manifested injustice and provided the rich man a lens to reflect on his own contribution to this injustice, and to change his life.

The Lazarus parable points to a humanity divided and in need. Yet we are all healers in need of healing. Each member of the human family has spiritual and material gifts to offer, and each of us needs these gifts as well. The Christian sojourner, in humility and vulnerability, encounters others in their giftedness and their neediness. She offers the same of herself. And she seeks to heal the divisions that distort the oneness of the Body of Christ.

This neediness and giftedness in everyone invites a new model for reflection upon mission experiences. Rather than focusing on what participants can give (service, action, time, donations), we reflect upon the giftedness of host communities and the neediness of participants—and ask how we can overcome divisions between the two. This requires a relationship-based approach that forges bonds between sending and receiving communities and leads participants to address the disease of poverty when they return home. The experience then becomes more than a short trip overseas. It is a first step in the larger Christian mission to heal divisions.



Photo by Jake Lyell for CRS

What does a relationship-based approach look like? CRS—with more than 70 years of encountering Christ in people who are poor—has developed guidelines, based in Catholic teaching, for working in partnership with local communities. These principles, which focus on relationship-based service grounded in mutuality, can help groups frame their trip as one of mutual healing.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH MEANS working with the host community to plan the trip.**

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Lazarus voices his need—but the rich man does not hear. Even though we may be trying to help, we must resist the urge to identify a community’s needs for its people. If a work project is included, it should be designed according to the needs the local community articulates and it should be sustainable after the group leaves.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH IS ABOUT more than building and bringing “stuff.”**

If the exchange is based solely on resources, then those with few material resources are excluded from full and mutual participation. When the relationship itself is highly valued, it allows for mutual participation and transformation. We all have the ability to love, pray and be present to one another.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH DEEPENS OUR FAITH BY inviting us to experience the universality of the Catholic Church.**

We grow in a deeper recognition of our unity in Christ when we pray and worship with our host community. As we come to know brothers and sisters of faith from other cultures, we understand Scripture in new ways and see new models of parish communities. We concretely experience our oneness in Christ and are encouraged to enlarge our tent, expanding our sense of shared humanity with all God’s people.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH ASKS questions about the injustices facing the host community and our part in those injustices.**

Immersion trips can provide participants with a first glance at the challenges that people in a community face. It is important to pay attention to these issues and to analyze their causes. We should also reflect on how our daily decisions, including how we vote and what we buy, affect communities like our host community.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH MEANS we reflect on and pray about our experience.**

Sometimes the last thing we want to do after a tiring day or trip is to gather together to talk and pray about it. Groups should set aside time before, during and after a trip to reflect intentionally on how to contextualize their experience within our Scripture and Tradition, and on how it invites our personal healing as well as the healing of divisions within the Body of Christ.

■ **A RELATIONSHIP-BASED APPROACH MEANS the trip is only the beginning of the relationship.**

If you choose to enter into relationship with others during your immersion trip, something unusual will happen to you when you leave. The stories you hear and share will forever shape how you care for other people around the world, even those you will never meet.

St. John Paul II wrote, “[Solidarity] is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, no. 38)

Many people return from international service immersion with a passion that eventually fades into a vague compassion and shallow distress for the masses. Although the initial passion is great, the challenge is deepening it into a real and lifelong love for Christ, who is present in everyone, especially in those who are most vulnerable.

When we enter into relationship with people who suffer beyond what we can imagine, our hearts open. The divide between Lazarus and the rich man begins to close. And we can no longer turn away when we hear about something that seems removed from our own lives, because we realize that our own woundedness and healing are bound up with the woundedness and healing of all members of the Body of Christ.