

Reflection 2014

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In May 2014, I went on a FOCUS mission trip to St. Michael, Alaska. St. Michael is a small Native Alaskan village on the coast of the northern Bering Sea. From Russians to American missionaries, Alaska has had a lot of exposure to the Catholic faith. St. Michael was also a military outpost, but after the U.S. military withdrew, it became a place few would visit for any reason.

St. Michael is certainly quaint, established on a small bay on the coast. Technically, it's on a volcanic island, separated from the mainland by a river. The scant airport is a strip of fine volcanic soil raised up off the marshy plains that the reindeer call home. The small houses the villagers cram into are raised at least four feet off the ground because of the inevitably high snow drifts that hit in the rough winters. The streets are gravel and lined with the electricity and plumbing that is insulated by thick metal and used as sidewalks by the children. Children and dogs roam in packs without chaperones, a shock to us from the lower 48. But then, as we roamed the village, we realized that no one is going anywhere anyway.

When we boarded the plane to St. Michael, we had no idea what to expect. We had goals that we wanted to achieve, strategies to achieve them, and a willpower to see it through. We knew the plights of despair that the people faced: depression, hopelessness, suicide, alcoholism and domestic violence. We understood that these were hard issues, but we were aware of them. Thirty minutes before we arrived in St. Michael, though, we learned of more terrible wounds: perhaps even the roots of the brokenness we were set to face.

We learned that in the 1960s and 1970s the clergy in St. Michael sexually abused the majority of the children that were in the village. An entire generation. The presence of the Church withered to almost non-existent after a while. The wounds, of course, did not. Now grown up, there was a good chance that any adult we met in the village in their 40s or 50s had been a victim of the abuse. It definitely wasn't something we expected to run into. It changed the dynamic of our mission. We thought we were going in to just lead some Bible studies and give children the catechesis they didn't often receive. And while superficially that hadn't changed, the type of battle we were fighting was.

I was afraid of what would become of our mission since these people had been wounded this way. How were we going to minister to them? How were we going to even begin to

have empathy with them? Were they even going to want to be around us? Would they be afraid of us? Did they even want to learn about Jesus?

The first to greet us from the village were the children. It was instant celebrity status with them. They wanted to race, play tag, eat candy, and had a million questions. They also had some demands, of which “pack me!” was paramount. This is the local jargon for “I want a piggy-back ride.” I was surprised at how easily the children took to us. All they needed was your name and they were good to go. For example:

“What’s your name?”

“Kaitlin.”

“My name’s Richard. Pack me.”

The children were the light of our days there (besides Jesus). Truly, we could see Christ easily in them. They were “the little ones.”

But the shadow of the past was still with us, and we wondered when we would encounter it. Pinned on the wall in the parish church was a list of names belonging to priests, deacons, brothers, sisters, and lay persons from all over Alaska who had been found guilty of or had a lot of evidence against them for sexual abuse. From the local priest (who had four parishes spread over many square miles) we learned a little more about the circumstances of St. Michael. But then, he was gone to do his duties, and it was just us and the villagers.

There were other obstacles to face; obstacles I suppose are more typical of any mission trip. The water to the village was cut off after day one due to a busted pipe somewhere out in the plains. Half our food that was supposed to meet us there never arrived. Our first approach to meet the villagers had to be scrapped. But with every obstacle that was raised, we fired back with persistence to bring the Gospel to as many villagers as possible. It quickly became apparent that each person on our team was meant to be there. Everyone’s strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices meshed perfectly. When there was discouragement in one part of the day, there was more encouragement at another time. When someone’s spirits were cast down, they were uplifted by a teammate’s story where God triumphed. It reminded me of Romans 5:20: “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

In the evenings, we offered Bible studies for adults. The first night, I met an abuse victim and his daughter. They were kind and welcoming. During the Bible study, he began speaking of the abuse. Those of us leading the study just sat and listened and

offered what seemed like pathetic condolences to him. There was nothing to prepare us for it. We weren't psychiatrists or ministers. We were just college missionaries. What hit us hardest, though, was when we were describing God's love. I asked the daughter what she thought.

She was silent for a long moment, looking down at the table. When she looked back up, she met our eyes and said, as if with shame: "I don't think I know what love is."

While my mouth hung open like a goldfish and my mind raced to figure out a response to that, her father interjected. "They don't know what love is because I couldn't love them the right way."

There were no words; only our hearts could respond now. We were going to show them what God's love was.

In short, that was how the rest of our mission was: us reacting with love and sacrifice to wounds we really had no way of healing. We were just the instruments. All we truly had to offer was ourselves. We loved on the children and taught them about God. We sacrificed by listening to the stories we didn't want to hear. We allowed ourselves to be vulnerable and to fall in love with these people, from the children and up. When the villagers wouldn't come to us, we went out to them; for their souls.

We knocked on their doors, inviting them to Mass and presenting the Gospel to them. Many times, they would just stare at us. Sometimes, they pretended like we weren't even there. But then, there were the times when the family would be happy to see us; happy that their children got to know us; happy that the priest with us would bless their homes and pray with them. One lady proclaimed about how great it was to have a priest in her house again.

Pride told me it wasn't enough. Humility told me it was what we were there for: to open the door to Jesus and the Church a little wider for these people. The victims we talked to, though despaired and lost, did not blame the Church. They blamed the individuals who had abused them. These people desired Christ, they just didn't know how to seek Him out anymore. We wanted to show them the way.

One of the last days we were there, I heard some of the worst stories about the abuse from yet another victim and his wife. It was the lowest moment on the trip for me. It was the deepest sadness and hurt I have ever felt. Looking back, I understand that I had been feeling profound compassion. I was hurting for the victims and for Jesus—Who loved all the people involved in this atrocity. There was little time to face all these

emotions though. There were kids to play with outside and more doors to knock on. There were still more chances to encounter the graces of God out there.

There were many graces being showered on us. I'll never forget the first time the children said the Our Father with us during Mass. I won't forget the woman who came to us about an hour before we were heading home, seeking to go to confession. Each day, we met someone new, as the adults began opening up to us more and more. I remember running outside to greet an old man coming to Sunday Mass, after we had invited him. I could go on forever and ever. Each missionary has their most cherished high moments of the mission.

After the trip, though, I had many things to work out in my head and my heart. I was angry about the abuse and had no mercy for the people who had committed the crimes. I asked God often where his angels had been back then. I asked him where his miracles of healing were right now. I wondered what would happen to these people. The other girls and I feared that if we were to let go of the pain we had for the people, would we still love them? If we were to let go of the kids, who were so dear to us, would we still love them?

The day after we returned from Alaska, I sat with the priest (who had been on the mission trip as well) in the confessional, crying at how I couldn't forgive. I couldn't forgive those people for the abuse they inflicted on the children all those years ago. I couldn't forgive them for the damage that was still being inflicted now. I cried for the children who I feared may become their parents, not knowing what love is.

Father told me that this was the effect of sin. Even now, fifty years later, someone was getting hurt by it. I was getting hurt by it. He told me that I had to learn to let go. These were not my sins nor my wounds to bear. They belonged to Christ. I had to put it on the Cross.

That day, during Mass, I was moved in my heart to pray the *Agnus Dei* differently. I prayed for the priests in St. Michael who had abused the children. I didn't know where they were: if they were dead or alive; in prison or in rehab; or even if they had repented yet. I just knew that I had to pray for them. I had to pray for their own wounded souls or I would never be able to forgive them. When I beat my chest as we say "have mercy on us" I pray in my heart "have mercy on *them*."

The concept of true Christian forgiveness was, of course, introduced to me in the person of Jesus Christ. It was His forgiveness of our sins and His willingness to die on the Cross for us that taught me what forgiveness really means. He is the gate that allows the

grace to forgive to enter my heart. But after that Mass, it was Our Lady, the Bl. Virgin Mary, who took my hand to guide me the rest of the way. She showed me three things.

She showed me that we had been a light for the people; just there to help point the way and that we had to trust in God's providence for the rest to happen.

She showed me that at the foot of the Cross she had to let go of her Son, but that she didn't have to stop loving Him or suffering with Him.

Lastly, she taught me something about forgiveness. In order for her to pray for all of us, she had to forgive us. During the Passion, she witnessed Jesus's persecution. She witnessed Jesus's torture and terrible death on the Cross. And yet, she prayed for the men who did that to Jesus. And she most certainly prays for us, whose sins sent Jesus to the Cross.

It can be hard to forgive someone for hurting you. But it is always harder to forgive someone for hurting one whom you love. That was how I had been wounded. I was hurt for these people and was angry at the people who had hurt them. But Mary's insight from the Cross intervened. She was forgiving of all of us, despite that we had helped the sword pierce her heart.

When we don't let go of anger or hate towards someone, we have less room in our hearts for charity. We cannot love as God calls us to love when we cannot forgive. I went on a mission trip to be changed, and I was transformed by the power of love. The person who left for St. Michael was certainly not the same person who returned. Jesus led my heart beyond that village and closer to Him.