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The Graces of 2020: Catholic Campus Ministry Students Seek Out Blessings Amid a Tumultuous Year

Amanda Thompson, MDiv, & Dan Paul Borlik, C.M., DMin

BIO

DAN PAUL BORLIK, C.M., DMIN, was born in Baltimore, MD, in 1949. He was raised near Galveston, TX, with one brother and three sisters. He joined the Congregation of the Mission in 1967 and was introduced to the Vincentian priests and brothers at Saint Vincent de Paul Preparatory Seminary, then located near Beaumont, TX. Since his priesthood ordination in 1976, he has ministered in seminary formation and as a pastor, as a missionary in Guatemala, as a teacher of theological reflection and intercultural skills, as provincial leader (visitor) within the Congregation, and as a program director and instructor in Paris, where he lived and worked in the Vincentian motherhouse for about six years, directing and teaching at its Centre International de la Formation (CIF). Offered to priests and brothers from the Congregation's fifty worldwide provinces, the CIF programs were usually one to two months long, intensive, and multilingual (English, Spanish, and French). More recently, other Vincentian Family members have participated as well. Along the way, Borlik earned two graduate degrees, an MDiv from DeAndreis Seminary and a DMin from Catholic Theological Union. Since the summer of 2017, he has worked as priest chaplain in Catholic Campus Ministry at DePaul University.

AMANDA THOMPSON, MDIV, is the director of Catholic Campus Ministry in the Division of Mission and Ministry. She

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holds an MDiv from Loyola University Chicago. She is the part-time coordinator of faith formation at St. Mary of the Woods Parish and also works as a chaplain at Lutheran General Hospital once a month. Prior to her work at DePaul, she worked in Catechetical Ministry, Youth Ministry, and Marriage and Family Ministry for the Archdiocese of Chicago. She was the host of a radio show called “Made for Life,” a program about marriage and family in the Catholic Church. She has been a presenter at workshops and retreats in parishes throughout the Archdiocese and occasionally presents with her husband, Deacon Chuck Thompson. Amanda and Chuck live in Chicago and are blessed with three young adult children.

Who among us has not yet described their experience of the calendar year 2020 as one they would rather forget or move past? Certainly, living through a pandemic has been painful to all persons worldwide. It has been catastrophic to those who have lost their lives, their health, their livelihood, their confidence in the future. In addition, in our own United States, we are experiencing a radical shift in our worldviews due to the constant disregard of Black and Brown lives, political-cultural polarization, and deep questions about what we know and what we don't know, what we have believed, and what we now must question and reassess.

We are Amanda Thompson (a Vincentian laywoman) and Father Dan Paul Borlik, C.M. (a Vincentian priest), two staff members at the Catholic Campus Ministry (CCM) of DePaul University. We offer our reflections along with those of a few student leaders, drawn from their experience of this extraordinary year. We comment on what we are learning and what we hope to do. Our perspective draws from the Vision Statement and the Mission Statement of Catholic Campus Ministry:

Vision Statement

Catholic Campus Ministry proclaims the Good News of God's love by providing students a full experience of the mystical, prophetic, and communal baptismal promises.

Mission Statement

Faithful to the Catholic Vincentian tradition and teachings, Catholic Campus Ministry accompanies students in growing their lived expression of the Gospel and strives to create an inclusive community of faith. Being grounded in the teachings of Jesus Christ, students gain the freedom to actively engage in the Mission with an ecumenical, interfaith, and intercultural spirit.

Guided by the ethos of these statements, we work together as colleagues and assist our student leaders to develop as servant leaders for other students and our neighbors. We begin by relating how we form our students in theological reflection. Informed by this practice, we will then look at how the students in CCM reacted to and coped with the pandemic as well as other societal issues the pandemic spotlighted.



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The Egan statue outside of the Lincoln Park Student Center is decorated with a face mask during the COVID-19 pandemic, August 3, 2020. The bronze likeness of Monsignor John J. Egan, who began and ended his career at DePaul, was known to be a lifelong human and civil rights activist. The statue sits on a limestone block just outside of the Lincoln Park Student Center at the corner of Belden and Sheffield.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

CCM integrates the practice of critical theological reflection

“Do good for others, not just yourself,” “learn to serve, not be served,” “your faith is about action, not just doctrine.” These and so many other aphorisms are common enough in our culture and certainly heard often in conversations with student leaders when asked why they want to be involved at CCM and, indeed, why they were attracted to DePaul University in the first place! However, we value and model reflection as an essential step when learning to commit to serve others *effectively*. Indeed, students themselves will comment that “working without reflection is just work,” acknowledging that even good action itself is not enough at DePaul. So, whether students commit to tutoring middle school neighbors, or cleaning the yard of a neighbor, or feeding hungry guests at our soup kitchen, theological reflection is at least recommended and often expected of them. Integrated into our monthly formation sessions and personal practices, we often refer to it simply as “See, Judge, Act,” but in practice it is quite rich and always dynamic.

Critical Reflection (of a practice)

The first moment (“See”) is to consciously remember in detail our own perceptions of a specific past experience, such as an emotional conversation touching upon our values, or a service hour at the soup kitchen. We recall it in as much detail as we can: What were we doing? What were we thinking or feeling while doing it? How attentive were we while doing it? What meaning did it have for us at that moment?

The second moment (“Judge”) is to consciously place that experience’s meaning alongside a value or belief that we hold and want to be accountable to. At CCM, we call this a “wisdom source,” and it is wide ranging. It could be a remembered story of what a parent or coach once told said. Sometimes it’s from the Scriptures, for instance, a saying of Jesus or a prophet’s warning. Official Catholic teachings and writings are another source. In Islam, the wisdom source can be sayings from the prophet Muhammad, the *Hadith*, and from other Islamic scholars. Wisdom sources can also be quotes from a hero, such as Martin Luther King. Sometimes, it can be a longer narrative, such as what we see in Exodus: the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert were seemingly endless and marked by doubts, dread, and feelings of abandonment but, in the end, they were clearly an experience of purification and growth as a people. So, how does the experience, or better, our practice in this setting hold up next to these values we espouse?

The third moment (“Act”) is to consider what to do next. We choose to deepen or make our practice of service more authentic, personal, or interesting next time. We choose to learn from our memories of that past event and to grow. With whom and when shall we review and critique this new or restated practice?

Once our student leaders are familiar with such a deliberate approach to critical reflection on their own practices, they soon are leading similar reflection sessions with other students, using a variety of practical experiences and wisdom sources. In this, they are increasingly able to acknowledge, respect, and honor their own experiences (and others’ as well) as rich sources for personal and professional growth.

Stories reveal our truths

While we welcome all DePaul students to join us and attend our retreats, small group discussions, worship services, programs that advocate justice issues, and social and fun events, we rely on DePaul student leaders to facilitate programming. Working closely with the four CCM professional staff members, they serve in a multitude of ways ranging from advocacy to graphic design to leading retreats and small groups. Staff members’ guidance is an essential component part of their commitment,¹ offering planning, evaluation, and encouragement. Throughout our formation and supervision, sharing our own stories with others is essential. For the students and for the staff, these stories are both joyful and painful. It can be remarkably effective to realize one’s own unique self and capacity for goodness and service. Pope Francis says it well: “In an age when falsification is increasingly sophisticated, reaching exponential levels (as in *deepfake*), we need wisdom to be able to welcome and

¹ CCM’s initial formation of student leaders takes place during an intensive retreat at the beginning of each year’s fall quarter. Student leaders sign their covenant letters at that time, committing themselves not only to the work but also to a Vincentian and Roman Catholic style of service and relationship with others.



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August 2020. Room 102 in Arts and Letters Hall on the Lincoln Park Campus is a trimodal classroom, equipped with cameras, touchscreens and other Zoom teleconferencing hardware and software. DePaul equipped more than 100 classrooms with technology to enable some class members to be physically present while others access the class online at the same time.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

create beautiful, true and good stories. We need courage to reject false and evil stories. We need patience and discernment to rediscover stories that help us not to lose the thread amid today's many troubles.”²

Sacred Scripture is one endless source for CCM, used not only for worship and prayer but also during our monthly formation sessions and regular theological reflection practice. The Bible's Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are truly a story of stories,³ setting before us events and people caught up in life, struggling to find their identity and realize their purpose. Most striking is that the Bible begins with a God who is both creator and narrator. Students make the connection between *their* stories and Scripture. The students very often find these stories, proverbs, soulful prayers, and laments remarkably helpful and personally engaging.

During COVID, certain psalms and prophets have resonated deeply with those feelings of anxiety, sadness, lament, and loss. Overall, however, the narrative of Exodus has been most striking as a shared and lived experience with oneself, each other, the community, and the Creator: “For the Chosen People, Exodus is an indelible portrait of the community of God, called from false and demeaning servitude in an alien land to journey to the promised land. Israel did not ‘wander.’ It was led in purposeful stages by the fire and cloud.”⁴ This,

² Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 54th World Communications Day,” 24 January 2020, *Vatican.va*, at: [Message for the 54th World Communications Day](#).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. CARM., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 44.

one of our remarkable “sources of wisdom,” helps us to listen to our students’ reflections and marvel at their insights. Throughout the pandemic, we watched the students become more aware of a compassionate God accompanying them.

The Pandemic reshapes our university experience

March 2020 shocked the DePaul community. In one day, students were told that they needed to move out of the dorms within a week. This happened on the Wednesday of the last week of classes for the winter quarter. Students had to suddenly move home. They had to take everything with them because they were not sure when they would return. It was chaos. Students and parents were terrified of the pandemic and worried how to get home safely. There was crying and consoling, hugging (something we can hardly imagine now) and nervous laughter. We were headed into uncharted territory, and it was frightening.

The prevailing sentiment shared by these students is that these are desert times. We are wandering around like the Israelites, trying to trust God, but anxious about this whole path. Where are we going? Who will we be when we emerge? This generation of college students has already experienced so much in their lifetimes. Those in the freshman class were born the year of 9/11. Their families have experienced the fallout from 9/11, the recession, the birth of social media and the iPhone, and now this. Terrorist attacks in the US suddenly became a reality. They saw businesses closing, their families’ financial stability shaken, and all of it bombarding them every hour of the day through social media. It was overwhelming!

Researchers say that Generation Z is resilient. We see that too. As the Director of Catholic Campus Ministry at DePaul and the mother of two college students, a freshman and a junior, Amanda watched them navigate this new reality in good and bad ways. Many vacillate between dark depression and anxiety and hopeful resilience and creativity. Who will they be when they emerge from this desert time?

In their book *Generation Z Goes to College*, authors Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace look at this generation that spans those born in from 1995 to 2010: “Generation Z sees the world through multiple screens, but as evidenced by their we-centric attitudes, they recognize that societal issues are much larger than just themselves. With their loyalty, determination, and responsibility as well as realistic outlook on life inherited from Generation X, this generation is committed to those around them and motivated by making a difference. Add to that their characteristics of care and compassion, and you can expect Generation Z to use both their heads and their hearts to solve the world’s problems.”⁵ So how did the students cope? The answer is they coped in many ways. Amanda reached out to

5 Seemiller and Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College* (Jossey-Bass, 2016), 17.

a few student leaders in Catholic Campus Ministry to talk to them about their experiences and could see how they used the See, Judge, Act model (SJA) in their own lives.

Kara Callahan, a junior, found ways to take advantage of the world slowing down. She says, “COVID gave me more time for reflection. I was able to reconnect to myself. I appreciate things that I took for granted, particularly interactions in person. Every interaction seems more meaningful.” Her limited interaction with others brought new attention to the ordinariness of daily life. She devoted her time to social action and advocacy. As CRS (Catholic Relief Services) ambassador, she took more time to delve into the CRS materials and attend their online conferences, workshops, and monthly check-ins so that she could inform other students about this organization and its work. She used the SJA model to observe what was going on around her. Her work with CRS gave her the Catholic language to articulate how social issues are also Catholic issues. She created a series called “40 actions, 40 days” during Lent to help students learn how they can act in ways to create a more just world.

These students are justice oriented. They will not stand for inauthentic behavior. Notably, they are the generation that came of age during the sex abuse scandal in the Church. Although they are understandably skeptical and questioning, they are also searching for meaning and belonging. They have an ease with mass media and much access to information, diving deeply in it, both for good and for bad. Clara Dennison, a sophomore, is the coordinator for social justice and advocacy. She says the pandemic gave her an opportunity to dig into all the information she could get her hands on and go to conferences to get more informed on the justice issues she wanted to spotlight, such as human trafficking and climate change. She developed the skills to amplify her voice through the online platforms available because of her position in CCM. She feels empowered to give voice to these issues and to elicit compassion from other students to also advocate for justice.

Many of our students have embraced the Vincentian mission and are dedicating their time to caring for the poor and the marginalized. In a time when so many are looking inward, these students have also looked outward. They heard the call to help their neighbor and responded. Clara spoke about “seeing” more clearly an injustice, doing the research about that issue, connecting it to her faith, determining why and how it is wrong and specific ways it can and should be changed, and then creating an event to amplify the issue. She intends to get other students involved in advocacy now that she has learned to look critically through the lens of her Catholic faith and connect to what must be done.

Nelson Mendoza Hernandez is a graduate student in the School of Music. He serves as the Elizabeth Ann Seton Sandwich Kitchen Coordinator. Nelson and his wife came from Venezuela where they have witnessed great poverty caused by an authoritarian regime that

rules the oil-rich country and keeps its people poor and hungry. He knows what hunger and suffering looks like, and it breaks his heart. He was moved to take the position so he could be close to the poor and live out the Vincentian mission. He accompanies the guests who come to the kitchen and builds relationships with them. He reflects: “Since the first day, most of my stereotypes went away. Speaking with the guests and listening to them, I began to realize the stereotypes I had were wrong. Feeding people improves my faith life. I try to prepare good meals for the guests. I talk to them about their past lives; they were not always poor.”

Nelson has learned what solidarity truly means. He also took a page out of Vincent’s story of Châtillon. Preparing to preach his Sunday sermon in the village church, Vincent hears the news of a family in desperate need because all of them had fallen ill. He preaches about them at Mass and the parishioners’ response is remarkable. By that afternoon, the townspeople line up to bring food for the family, but it was too much and in danger of spoiling. Vincent saw the need for organization. Nelson deals with this as well. During the pandemic, people have been remarkably generous with donations, but Nelson must make the decisions on what they can and cannot take in the kitchen, and how to share these gifts elsewhere. These are important organizational decisions he has learned, just like Vincent. Nelson saw the need of the community, judged it through the lens of faith, and acted by becoming the coordinator.

The students are involved in activism because of the Church’s pro-life stance. Elizabeth Amaya, a sophomore sociology major, stated it well when she witnessed a lack of response to the murder of George Floyd. At the time, she was involved in a Christian group that would not make the statement, “Black lives matter.” She could not understand why they wouldn’t respond to a truth that is grounded in the dignity of Black lives. She ended up leaving that group. She says, “Faith has taught me that it is not enough not to be racist or discriminatory, you have to be actively saying something and showing support.” She and a group of her friends organized protests and raised money for the movement and her community. They saw, they judged, and they acted. They started a blog called “History Never Taught,” which is meant to teach others some of the history that has been swept under the rug because racism is a hard truth to face.

We saw many students stand up for the poor and the marginalized, especially those being targeted because of their skin color. Cell phone videos caught it all on camera. Students saw the inhumane treatment of Black people, and these students knew that enough was enough. Suddenly they were not too busy to watch, they were not too preoccupied to notice, they had time to make a difference. That is part of the grace of the pandemic.



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Students wait outside their classrooms in Arts and Letters Hall during the first day of classes of the 2020–2021 academic year. September 9, 2020, on DePaul’s Lincoln Park Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs

Conclusion

Living through and working during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to challenge all of us. We still see and hear of loved ones, friends, and neighbors sickened and lost as well as the devastation in other countries. We can and do find ourselves lost during moments of sadness, anger and even despair. However, we can also delve more deeply into what we personally value, and open ourselves to that wider, grander story we claim as followers of Jesus of Nazareth and as Vincentians. We can and do find deeper meaning and a fresh direction. Acknowledging and respecting our own feelings and questions helps. Drawing from our own “sources of wisdom” helps. Taking time to weep, pray for our world, and seek aid from our Creator helps. Remaining aware and present in this long period of crisis also leads to hope. There is time and energy for new learning and new action.

Indeed, as this pandemic has demonstrated for us at DePaul, we are always more than “acted on” by events as catastrophic as COVID and issues as overwhelming and complex as racism and all kinds of (too often) hidden injustices in our lives and society. We can and must act. After all, this is our world, a truth carefully and constantly enunciated here at DePaul.

As we do our own “inner work” we have found ourselves better suited to invite students to go deeper in their understanding of the Catholic faith and their relationship with God. Finally, recasting, promoting, and modeling simple critical reflection (See, Judge, Act) certainly influences the way they relate to the world.

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