Theology in the Pit of the Stomach

Pursuing Creighton’s Educational Mission in the Dominican Republic

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It’s Good Friday in Port-au-Prince, Haiti — easily the most undeveloped, most miserable nation in the Western Hemisphere.

Fr. Ron Voss, an American priest who has joined his lot to that of the Haitian people, is leading a group of Creighton students and professors through the crowded, trash-ridden streets of this capital city for a uniquely powerful version of the traditional Catholic devotional practice, the Stations of the Cross.

Our first stop is St. John Bosco Church, where a prophetic young “priest of the poor,” Fr. Jean Bertrand Aristide — later President Aristide — had made a reputation in the 1980s by speaking out against the human rights abuses of successive Haitian governments.

On Sept. 11, 1988, Fr. Ron informs us, before Sunday morning Mass was to begin, Fr. Aristide was warned that government thugs were on their way to the church. After consulting with worshippers who had already arrived, Fr. Aristide went ahead with the celebration of the Eucharist. The gang arrived, scaled the walls around the church, and attacked the congregation with machetes, firearms — and fire. Thirteen people were killed, many others wounded, and the building itself was torched. Now roofless, gutted and weed-infested, St. John Bosco Church stands as a solemn monument to the courage and faith — and suffering — of the Haitian people.

After taking in this story, we head back to our van to make our way to the next “station,” and I casually remark, “That sure gets theology down out of the clouds.” One of the students responds, without missing a beat, “Yeah, right into the pit of your stomach.”

Long journey

It had taken us 12 hours to negotiate the 250 roundabout miles (and the border crossing) from Santiago, in the

St. John Bosco Church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, as it appeared in September of 1988 after armed government thugs had set it ablaze and attacked the congregation, killing 13 people.
Dominican Republic (DR), to Port-au-Prince. In another sense, it had taken our group three months to teach this destination. We were engaged in the College of Arts and Sciences’ semester abroad program, housed at La Misión, a permanent Creighton facility just outside the city of Santiago. Since our introduction in mid-January to the reality of the developing world in the DR, we had been working up to this trip to Haiti.

Semestre Dominicano, as the program is called, combines academics, community service, cultural immersion, spirituality and other dimensions. The goal is not only critical knowledge of the world but also personal growth and even moral transformation. Our Holy Week trip to Haiti embodied much of what makes the program, for many students, “my best semester.”

Worse than this?
As Creighton professor of Latin American history Richard Super aptly puts it, the contrast between the DR and Haiti can seem as great as that between the United States and the DR. As a community service, two of our students had been spending one day and night each week in a Haitian batey (agricultural workers’ community) outside of Santiago. All of us had visited the batey at least once. Conditions were so poor—for example, six latrines for as many as 900 people—we couldn’t imagine how they could be attractive enough to draw Haitians from the other side of the island.

On Good Friday, in Port-au-Prince, we found out.

Context is everything
To a professor who fears that theology may mean little more to students than a course to be endured on the way to a degree and a career, the “pit of the stomach” rejoinder was revelation. The insight was at least twofold. While formal theological study may be for the privileged few (such as Creighton professors and their captive-audience students), it ought to be undertaken with a view to its real-world ramifications, such as dying for one’s faith.

Second, in education, especially an education inspired by a commitment to “the promotion of justice” (Creighton Mission Statement), context is everything. As one of the students remarked in a final paper, “I can’t imagine taking this course [Jesus Christ: Yesterday and Today] in Omaha. It just wouldn’t have been the same. It wouldn’t have meant so much.” Another student explained why. On Good Friday, she said, we had encountered Christ himself in the crucified people of Haiti.

Just what is this pedagogical context that makes such a difference?

What is Semestre Dominicano?
Many Creighton alumni and friends are familiar with the university’s long involvement in the Dominican Republic through the Institute for Latin American Concern (ILAC). Originally a summer program of health clinics in remote mountain villages (campos) staffed by volunteer professionals, and professional and preprofessional students, ILAC has grown to include year-round programs to improve the health of the poor throughout the region. A relatively recent innovation, Semestre Dominicano (SD), is the first of the ILAC-affiliated programs to add academic study to the commitment to service in the developing world. The College of Arts and Sciences’ spring program just completed its seventh year; the College of Business Administration’s fall program is two years younger. One hundred nineteen students have participated in Creighton’s SD programs. Students interview and are chosen based on their commitment to service, openness to new experiences and grade-point average. Most are sophomores and juniors and have had at least a semester of Spanish.

Academics
The Arts and Sciences semester includes 15 credit hours for 1) a course in sociology of the Caribbean taught by a Dominican professor, 2) several levels of Spanish also
taught by local instructors, 3) a course in community service organized and taught by the director of the program with assistance from an intern, usually a "graduate" of SD, and 4 & 5) two courses taught by the accompanying Creighton professor. My wife, Dr. Wendy M. Wright, professor of theology, and I were the first faculty couple to participate in the program. We each taught courses emphasizing Latin American perspectives. The beautiful ILAC Center includes two classrooms, a library/study area, and a computer facility. All the courses except Spanish are taught in English.

**Immersion**
Although SD is not less than a full academic program, it is also much more. It is a cross-cultural immersion experience. Few of the staff at the ILAC Center and even fewer Dominicans in general speak English. If you need a roll of toilet paper, you’ve got to ask for it in Spanish. Traditional Dominican cuisine, with few exceptions, is served three times a day. Each student was placed with a local family for an evening and overnight stay once a week. We spent a total of a week with coffee-growing campesino families high in the verdant and cloud-haunted Dominican mountains. We took trips many weekends, one, for example, to the ruins of Columbus’ first house and another to the infamous and monumental lighthouse built to commemorate the 500th anniversary of his "discovery" of the Americas. We visited zonas francas (free trade zones) and their clothing and electronics assembly plants, which lure campesinos to the city with wages the equivalent of one U.S. dollar an hour, and we visited the congested and polluted barrios (squatter communities) where these workers try to make a life for their families.

**Service and Spirituality**
Each student’s service site also provided immersion into the Dominican reality as well as the opportunity to work with and on behalf of some of those most in need: poor children in barrio or campo schools with the slimiest of resources, public hospitals struggling to provide even minimal health care to the poor, a preschool for the children of zona workers, a Haitian batey, a support center for the city’s ubiquitous shoeshine boys, and a bare-bones orphanage for handicapped, autistic and retarded children.

These service sites often provoked break-your-heart experiences. Two of the students volunteered two mornings a week at Hogar Laity, the orphanage. My family joined them one morning a week. After our first visit, many of us found ourselves in tears, so moved were we by the plight of such children living in such deplorable conditions. Four months later, we again left in tears, this time because we were saying goodbye to...
Jorgito, Gary, Maria, Daniel — children we had taken care of and into our hearts. Those two leavings are, for me, symbolic “bookends” on our experience not just at the orphanage but in the DR as a whole. We moved from apprehension of and shock at the conditions of poverty, to friendship, solidarity and even intimacy with the poor themselves. Such a movement is fundamental to any “promotion of justice,” especially in Christian perspective.

In this and other ways, Semestre Dominicano has a strong spiritual dimension. Weekly reflection sessions and two weekend retreats serve as formal structure to what might be thought of as a four-month retreat — a time away from normal life and concerns to reflect anew on one’s life and calling in the world. Informal reflection seemed to go on nonstop. The ILAC Center has a lovely chapel, where Masses are held in both Spanish and English.

Pre- and post-semester weekend retreats also are held to prepare students for the experience and to help them translate its impact into action upon return.

**Outward Bound**

According to the Book of Job, God speaks out of the whirlwind. Perhaps God also speaks out of the waterfall. Only three days into our semester, we found ourselves climbing seven cascadas, aided by the derring-do of two youthful Dominican guides. The semester, we discovered, was all about risk. We were then invited to slide and jump down those same seven cataracts. Sometimes God — or at least the director of the program — calls us beyond our comfort zones. SD has about it, in addition to academics, immersion, service and retreat, an element of “outward bound.” Even negotiating public transportation around Santiago was not for the faint of heart!

**Community**

Nori was living in community. We did almost everything together, in challenging and foreign situations, for four months. Students lived four to a room, almost all meals were taken together, all but the Spanish classes contained the same 16 faces, all the trips jammed as many as 24 travelers, luggage and a picnic meal into a van and a small car — and once, for several trying hours, into the van only. We survived, bones and friendships mainly intact.

And as community, we confronted more substantive issues of living together. For example, how do we respond to Hector, a neighborhood shoeshine boy for whom our group and the Center represented more attention, more beauty and promise than he would otherwise experience? But Hector could overstay his welcome, interfere with study time, and annoy staff by being underfoot. We met, we talked, we brainstormed, we proposed, we implemented. We learned something about how neces-

*Students helped paint a community center (pictured at right) at a Haitian batey. Service is a big part of the Semestre Dominicano program — immersing students in the Dominican reality and providing them with an opportunity to work with and on behalf of some of those most in need.*
sary it is to translate youthful idealism into real-world solutions. We learned that integrating the good of the individual with the common good is fundamental for human flourishing. We learned that educational context — in this case, communal living — is everything.

Vacation

But the secret is out. We also learned that the Dominican Republic has beautiful beaches and affordable tourist hotels. That it is possible to scramble up a tropically forested mountainside where there is only the trace of a trail. That whales in the Bay of Samana are bigger and faster than whale-watching boats. And that the best pizza in Santiago is to be found at ...(well, you'll just have to find out for yourself).


Conscientization

Indeed, Semestre Dominicano is even more than the sum of its parts, as enticing a package as that is (and at bargain prices: in addition to regular tuition and board-and-room costs, students pay only for roundtrip airfare, about $700 — plus, of course, Saturday night pizza). At the heart of SD and indeed its very purpose for existing, is the goal of “conscientization,” a hybrid of consciousness-raising and conscience-formation that is the indispensable foundation to a credible and sustainable commitment to justice. What makes SD a rare program even among Jesuit universities is this focus on critical awareness and personal responsibility through an academic program in a developing country.

With the support of a College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Development Grant, I am working on a project to document, describe and analyze this conscientization and moral development of the students. Fourteen of the 16 agreed to 1) meet with me three times over the semester in small groups to discuss their experience, 2) keep a weekly journal of reflections on consoling and disconsoling moments (an Ignatian-inspired assignment!), and 3) take a pre- and post-test of moral reasoning widely used in moral development research.

Good Intentions

Our first interviews were conducted early in the semester. I characterized the euphoria of this time as "the honeymoon phase." Paul Burson, the director, thinks of it as "the National Geographic stage." We tended to be enchanted by the charm of the simple wooden houses, the bumpy and bustling of a crowded guagua (public van), the warmth and hospitality of the Dominican people. Then someone mentioned that the average annual income in the DR was $1,000 in U.S. money — precisely the amount we had been advised to bring as spending money for just four months. Jaws dropped and hearts squirmed at this news. The phrase "reality check" came into our common vocabulary.

In this contradictory context, a famous speech by social critic Ivan Illich titled "To Hell with Good Intentions," read for the community service course, knocked the students unceremoniously out of the honeymoon phase. By the time of the second interview near midway in the semester, we had seen past the warmth and charm to the exploitation and deprivation, and had been forced to acknowledge that the good — even magnificent — intentions of 20-year-old North American undergraduates were only that. A research colleague had advised me to be on the lookout for "moral distress." What I heard and saw — tears flow copiously down darkened faces — was better described as "moral anguish." The cute little waifs in the ads for this or that overseas relief agency now had become Julio or Marisa, and Julio and Marisa had become one of us: bright, energetic and full of promise, but they seemed doomed to mere survival for lack of the educational, cultural, athletic and employment opportunities that most of us take for granted.

Open Your Eyes

By the middle of the semester, we had learned that, in only four months, about the only thing good intentions can be usefully translated into is "down time." We learned that sitting with the poor, not doing for the poor, but getting to know them and their stories, sharing their frustrations and their dreams, may not change their prospects, but it may change us. We learned a little solidarity by letting go of our false sense of power, by confronting our own privilege (only one out of 100 people in the world today has a college education), and by beginning to see the world from the perspective of those at the bottom.

The Big Question in the last part of the semester was this: What are we going to do — or do differently — when we get back home? (Although,
Juniors Jennie Pick and Emily Kruse hold two children at Hogar Luby, a Dominican orphanage for handicapped, autistic and retarded children.

at this point, it was painful to think of returning.) Now that we’ve been changed and had our eyes opened (the returned-student organization on campus is known as Abre Los Ojos, Open Your Eyes), how can we re-enter the life we lived in the States before this trip? By the time of the final interviews shortly before departure, students were eager to try out their new identities and world views in old contexts. Context, we had learned in so many ways, is everything.

What the eye doesn’t see, doesn’t move the heart. (Haitian proverb)

Christian educator Russell Butkus has described the key to conscientization succinctly and insightfully. “Any hope of sponsoring people to critical consciousness and social action is directly related to their capacity to reflect on experiences and situations that deeply touch their lives.” (My emphasis.) The process of conscientization in a faith context depends on 1) personal encounter with the poor, 2) analysis of their situation and its structural causes, 3) theological reflection (Where is God to be found, and what does God call us to do?), and 4) a commitment to intelligent and responsible action. All of this happens best in a community of support. Semestre Dominicano provides all of these ingredients through its various components.

I have been involved in justice education full time for 17 years. I know of no program that does it better than Creighton University’s Semestre Dominicano. I know of few programs that do it so well. The extended Creighton community can take considerable pride in this effort.

Just ask this year’s 16 students if they thought the semester achieved its purposes. But only if you’ve got some time on your hands. “And this picture shows me with my campo mom and dad and their kids. They were poor, but they gave me so much food it was incredible! And here we are at the batey. We helped paint their community building. It was awesome!”

End Note: Creighton’s presence in the Dominican Republic expands beyond Semestre Dominicano and the health care focus of ILAC, through the Montesinos Center for the Study of the Dominican Republic. The campus-based center, established in 1996, facilitates research on the DR so we may come to a better understanding of the country and its people.

Sixteen students from Creighton’s College of Arts and Sciences took part in the university’s Semestre Dominicano program this past spring. Bargman and his wife, Dr. Wendy M. Wright, professor of theology, were the first faculty couple to participate in the program. They are pictured at the front of the van, just left of the passenger side door). Their two children, a student intern and program director Paul Barson (far right) also are in the picture.