

“Border Crossing” or “Immersion” Experiences

Our Catholic faith and Biblical tradition extend an invitation to each of us, as well as to our faith communities, to become agents of God’s compassion and healing in a wounded world. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is both a comfort and a promise for the poor and, at the same time, a call to those of us who are not poor to be linked with God’s vision of *shalom* for all.

Immersion (or “border crossing”) experiences are a kind of spiritual pilgrimage or journey that takes us to the margins of society so that we can meet with, and learn from, those who suffer neglect and oppression. Participants of “border crossing” experiences have the opportunity to put faces, names, stories and deeper meaning to “issues” or “social justice teachings” or to “others,” as they hear the stories and struggles directly from those who live the struggle.

We live in a society and in cities where the rich and the poor often live isolated from each other. For there to be relationship, reconciliation and restoration (*shalom*), there must first be an effort to gather as one people. People of faith must “cross barriers” that divide them and put themselves in the presence of those who are kept hidden from view and ignored. This can involve moving from a place of comfort and familiarity and a willingness to cross a kind of physical and/or spiritual “border,” so as to be present in a place where we have not been before in order to meet people in situations very different from ours.

The majority of our parishioners (students, etc.) come from backgrounds of some privilege. (Many are from white, middle-class backgrounds, and have limited experience with the poor, the homeless, people of color, prisoners, immigrants, etc.). This limited experience makes for limited interaction, limited camaraderie, limited reflection and limited insight. “Border crossing” or “immersion” experiences create “bridges” between those of privilege and those in need, by providing *contact* with real faces, names, persons and stories that bring deeper meaning to the abstract teachings of our church. Such experiences can significantly impact participants, prompting a kind of rethinking and reorientation (*metanoia*) that we often associate with the movement of the Holy Spirit. A “border crossing” experience “works” when people are prodded by experiences that ask them to reconsider their relationship with vulnerable brothers and sisters whom they have begun to know as real people.

“Border crossing” or “immersion” experiences are **NOT** “service” experiences (i.e., painting a homeless shelter or serving a meal at a soup kitchen). Rather, they have three key elements:

(1) **Face-to-face encounters:** *actual human interaction and a personal conversation with those who are vulnerable* is the essential element of these experiences. In other words, while an AIDS walk (to raise money), or a parish discussion re: an immigration documentary, or pounding nails at a Habitat for Humanity build, etc.,

are all worthy experiences, these are usually done in the absence of an encounter with those who are hungry, homeless, undocumented, etc.

Ample time must be provided to **hear stories** and **make connections** with those people that a given organization represents or serves. This allows for conversations with those who are willing to talk about their experience of oppression or prejudice or hardship. It is essential to make sure that the people meeting with your group have agreed in advance to share their stories and their struggles.

For example: I have found that simply inviting a number of undocumented parishioners to tell their stories (why they left their countries, what it was like to cross the border, what life has been like here, how they maintain their dignity, faith and humanity in these situations, etc.) with other US-born parishioners has produced heart-opening and life-changing encounters in the lives of many.

(2) **Staff insights:** “border crossing” or “immersion” experiences should also include the voice of a ‘veteran’ who has worked extensively with the people you will meet and has developed rapport with them. This ‘veteran’ can offer reflections and insights that will help the group understand the experiences of the marginalized. It would be even better if the ‘veteran’ could begin to help the group to see the root causes or the root solutions to the overall problem/issue.

(3) **Discussion and Reflection:** the “border crossing” or “immersion” experience should also include (afterward) an opportunity for group reflection on that experience. In some cases this might involve inviting the participants simply to share what they saw, heard, felt, and thought. It might also include some key reflections on relevant insights of faith (biblical, testimonies of saints, Catholic social teaching, etc.).

Examples of “Border Crossing” or “Immersion” Experiences:

- attend a Mass in Spanish and share a meal with undocumented parishioners
- have a meal and spend time with those who are served in a soup kitchen
- visit a homeless shelter and spend time in conversation with the homeless
- visit a day center for the homeless or elderly
- visit a local prison and share conversation with some of the prisoners
- spent time with undocumented working in the area
- meet with refugees who have resettled in the area
- meet with parishioners from an inner-city black or Hispanic church
- meet with volunteers and students from an ESL language class
- visit a half-way house for men or women recovering from addiction
- visit a half-way house for men or women conditionally released from prison

(Adapted from the **JustFaith** Program)