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*"At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received
how much money we have made, how many great things we have done.
We will be judged by 'I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was
naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in.'"*

Mother Teresa

Youth for Christ: The Welcome Home Project

As Christians, having faith is the most important part of our beliefs, but the Holy Bible continues with "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:14). Applying faith can be done in so many different ways, from the simplest thing such as giving a compliment to someone or a more elaborate endeavor such as a group of determined youth trying to help the community. When a group of youth works together, habits of faith being put to work would start forming and as Aristotle said, "Good habits formed at youth make all the difference."

We believe that the first step in trying to help others is to reach out to the people closest to us. Recently, we have seen an increase in the numbers of newcomers to our Church and thought that we could help them get accustomed to their new way of life. Thus, as a project to put our faith into action, we decided to make a project to help newcomers to our church, thereby exercising Christian hospitality.

As St. Antony said, "Why not rather get those things which we can take away with us--to wit, prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, kindness to the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from wrath, hospitality? If we possess these, we shall find them of themselves preparing for us a welcome there in the land of the meek-hearted." (St. Athanasius- Life of St. Antony)

The Project Description

The project consisted of two phases:

- 1) Tutoring the children of newcomers on Sundays.
- 2) Creating welcome and helpful baskets for all the newcomers present in St. John the Baptist's church.

Fr. Timothy announced to the congregation that we would be offering tutoring services in all subjects for ages 6-12 years old.

Here was the list we sent him as to our respective specializations:

Marina Youssef..... Math, Chemistry, History
Mariam Farag..... Math
Marian Bekheit..... Math
Romany Harkas..... Math, Science
Christina Attia.....Math
Isaac Ghobrial..... Math, English, Science
Antony George..... English, Science
Christopher Fahmy.....Social studies

After we put an end to the tutoring sessions, we started work on the baskets. We brainstormed about useful things that they could contain. Then, we each picked an area to write information about. Here is what we chose:

- the contact information of our priest and bishop (*Antony George*)
- a list of Coptic Orthodox Churches in South Florida (*Romany Harkas*)
- places to visit (*Marina Youssef*)
- a list of Mediterranean grocery stores (*Marina Youssef*)
- the locations of certain DMVs (for driver's licences) (*Marina Youssef*)
- a list of libraries (*Marina Youssef*)
- common names of grocery stores (for food), malls, dollar stores, supercenters (where you find everything), stores that sell school supplies and stores that sell furniture (*Mahlet Yared*)
- information about hurricanes and safety (*Marian Bekheit*)
- information about the school system in general (*Mariam Farag*)
- a list of schools in the Miami area (*Isaac Ghobrial*)
- information about special needs services (*Mariam Farag*)
- the lyrics of the Star-Spangled Banner and the Pledge of Allegiance (*Marian Bekheit*)

Marian Bekheit also made cards for the newcomers. One of our servants wrote a welcome message in Arabic inside. Baskets and English Bibles were purchased.

Fr. Timothy told us he wanted 12 baskets. "So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained." (Mat. 14:20)

Impact of the Project

Although we are a small group of youth helping in their church, with God's help our project can make a difference to the new families. With some kids struggling to learn a new language, school can be hard, and with someone available to help with school work it can make their lives a little easier. We were thanked by two moms that approached us and were told that this could make a practical difference in their children's lives. As St. James says, "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (James 2:15-17)

As for the baskets, we believe that Fr. Timothy can give out our very useful basket of information and love. When people arrive here and are greeted with an offering of love, we know that it can make all of the difference to them. As the Lord said to the Israelites, "The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 19:34). And again in the New Testament, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels." (Hebrews 13:2)

St. John Chrysostom writes in his Homily on Acts, "For all these qualities ought to be in that man who entertains strangers—readiness, cheerfulness, liberality. For the soul of the stranger is abashed, and feels ashamed." Again he writes in another Homily, "The bee is more honored than other animals, not because she labors, but because she labors for others."

His Holiness Pope Shenouda once said "Service is an expression of love overflowing from the heart, it is a desire to serve." In serving this way, we are pouring out our love directly to our Lord since He said, "I was a stranger and you took Me in."

Obstacles and Solutions

We encountered certain obstacles. Firstly, we had trouble finding 12 baskets after the Easter period had passed. God, in His mercy, lead us to find baskets that were

being liquidated. We ended up purchasing them at a great price! “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Secondly, we started tutoring the kids on the Sunday right before FCATs. This was unfortunate as most kids would have benefitted from our services at the beginning of the school year and not this late on. Only two mothers came to see us. They asked for information regarding the FCATs which we gladly provided them. We also gave them information about available resources to help their kids and families in general. For instance, we explained to them some of their children’s rights regarding language. This was new and very useful information for them. They both said that they would speak to school authorities as soon as possible. They also said that the services we were offering were useful but came too late in the year for their children. Regardless, we were happy to be there. We conveyed to the people we were serving that there was someone supporting them if they needed any help. Moreover, we are certain that now that people know about us, they will approach us next year if need be.

The final obstacle we encountered was language. We had to find a way to communicate with Arabic speakers. As St. Paul said, “and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). Most of our writings were in English but we managed to get some of it translated to Arabic. God willing, if these resources prove as useful as we think they will be, we can form a committee of Arabic speaking youth who can act as translators. Indeed, some Arabic-speaking youth have recently come to our church but are having trouble integrating the Sunday school system which is exclusively in English. Maybe, this could be a good ice-breaker that can get help them fit in.

Personal Reflections

The people serving and the newcomers both benefited and were happy. We hope that this project has brought as much joy to the new families as it brought to us. By starting with the closest members of our community in the church, we know that “many small people, in many small places, are doing many small things, that can alter the face of the world.” (Slogan on the Berlin Wall)

We also have grown closer as a group involved together in a good spiritual work, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth.” (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

We look forward to continuing our service with each other in Christ. "Rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free."
(Ephesians 6:7-8)