

BUILDING DOMINICAN VALUES:  
EVALUATING 20 YEARS OF “LA BAMBA” IMMERSION TRIPS

Good afternoon:

I am extremely pleased to be a part of this Tenth annual Dominican Colloquium, especially with the topic that was chosen for the central theme of our gathering: “Educating toward a just and compassionate world.” This topic is extremely relevant for our world and for the academy—especially within the Dominican tradition as it reaches out to meet and respond to the needs of society in the context of the particular times we find ourselves in.

Having said that, I would like to share with you today some of the research and study I have done with one particular program sponsored by Dominican University of California for the last twenty-two years. This is the “La Bamba” program—an immersion trip that takes place in Tijuana, Mexico. Let me begin by first introducing you to the program.

INTRODUCTION OF THE PROGRAM:

The origins of the program were rather serendipitous. In 1986, one of our students, Denise Garcia, accompanied a San Rafael Dominican sister to Tijuana, Mexico, to visit the “Casa de los Pobres,” which two Mexican Franciscan Sisters (with the encouragement of Fr. Alfred Bodecker, OSF) started a few years before. [Fr. Bodecker had started St. Anthony’s Soup Kitchen in the Tenderloin area of San Francisco.] The Casa at that time was a simple building which had a kitchen and dining room. The sisters were serving two meals a day to the local people in one of the new colonias, which had sprung up in Tijuana.

To quote Denise:

It was just the two of us. And that trip changed my life forever. My eyes were OPEN for the first time. When I returned to Dominican College, I recruited some dear friends. Nobody had an idea what this trip was going to be about... They just know we were driving far. We made a sign that was taped to the rear of the van, “TIJUANA OR BUST.” We were bringing clothes, toys, and desks across the border. When we arrived at the gate at “Casa de los Pobres,” we were flooded by laughing children. It was there on the steps that Eileen Grady took our her guitar and we started to sing, “La Bamba...” And there you have it—our mission had a name: Project La Bamba.

I went to Tijuana four times. I wrote my entire thesis about these experiences. Until this day, I always dream of gong back...to see what became of all our work.

I came on board at Dominican as Director of Campus Ministry in August 1989. The Vice President for Student Affairs asked me if I would be willing to work with the group of

students who were taking this trip—remember, this is back in the days before we were overly concerned with insurance liability and the like. Since I had been doing this type of experience in my previous diocese, I readily agreed. I enlisted the help of Sr. Susannah Malarkey, OP, who became an indispensable resource for the program. Susannah had spent six months working at the Casa, and had worked extensively in one particular neighborhood near the Casa. This neighborhood was one of the poorest areas of Tijuana at the time.

Keeping with the serendipitous nature of the “founders,” our first trips were adventures, to say the least! We would let the Sisters know when we were coming. They arranged for us to sleep on the floor (cement) of a classroom and had a shower available in another building. We would work at the soup kitchen and in the bodega, where students sacked and gave out donated food to long lines of people. While the students were working on this, Susannah and I would go over to her neighborhood, visit with the families, and select a particular building project that needed to be done. This usually involved re-roofing, adding on a bathroom, painting or similar types of projects. As time went on, we found numerous projects needing attention. With hammers, nails, saws, concrete blocks, cement, and paint, off we would go to work on the particular project of the day. I think that our most difficult work was that of re-roofing a house. The common material used by the poor in that area were rolls of asphalt nailed down on the roof, and then liquid cold tar was applied to the seams of the rolls. [Remember that Tijuana is a very arid area.] We would do fine until we came to the application of the tar. No matter how hard we tried not to, we managed to get the tar all over ourselves. I still remember one of the students who was working with the tar who needed to use the baños. The elderly woman who lived in the house pointed her in the direction of the chicken coop, where the facilities were also located. About fifteen minutes later, we heard this desperate cry from the direction of the chicken coop/baños—and out walks our student with chicken feathers and toilet paper stuck to her hands and other places!

On the final day, we would gather up the young children of the neighborhood, fill up our vans and trucks borrowed from the Casa, and go for a beach picnic at Rosarito beach. This was always an exciting time for the children, as many had never seen the ocean before—even though it was only ten miles away. In spite of the pervasive poverty, our students would come away from the experience glowing with reports of new friends, both young and old. In no time, we quickly became friends with the people of the Casa and the colonia.

Since those first trips, I have gone on 35 of the 37 trips that we have taken to date.

#### EX CORDE ECCLESIAE

In August of 1990, Pope John Paul II published his document Ex Corde Ecclesiae, with which we are all familiar. The document had an impact on our “La Bamba” project in several ways. In paragraph 32, one of the defined roles of the university is:

A study of *serious contemporary problems* in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level. University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time...

Further, in paragraph 34 we find:

The Christian spirit of service to others for the *promotion of social justice* is of particular importance for each Catholic University, to be shared by its teachers and developed in its students.... The Gospel...is an urgent call to promote “the development of those peoples who are striving to escape from hunger, misery, endemic diseases and ignorance; of those who are looking to share in the benefits of civilization and a more active improvement of their human qualities; of those who are aiming purposefully at their complete fulfillment.” (Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, n. 1:AAS 59)

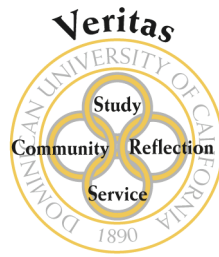
A second area of impact on the “La Bamba” program came about as a result of the section of the letter dealing with the Identity and Mission of the Catholic University. The document addresses the different constituents of the University and their unique role within the organization. Of particular interest for us in San Rafael was the role of the Religious Congregation who were our founders. In 1971, the congregation and the college had a formal separation, with the college under the direction of a separate Board of Trustees. The letter urged “those Religious Congregations dedicated to the apostolate of higher education...to assist these Institutions in the renewal of their commitment...” (*Ex Corde*, n. 25)

As many of you may remember, this prompted a lot of discussion in the academic arena, especially around the concerns of the responsibilities of the local bishop in the role and affairs of the University. We are a suspicious lot—especially when it comes to the role of the hierarchy and academic freedom!

However, at Dominican, we set up a “Catholic Identity and Mission Committee.” When in doubt, refer to committee! This group actually met and discussed the issue over a period of three years, ultimately coming up with a “Catholic Identity Statement” for the institution. More importantly, our discussions led us to the realization that we were losing our Dominican roots as fewer and fewer Dominican Sisters were available to the faculty and staff of the school. It was from these discussions, then, that a concerted effort began to educate the community on Dominic, his mission, and what we termed “the Four Dominican Ideals.”

In the process, the Campus Ministry program became the “home” for promoting and educating these Ideals for the community. Our first efforts were to incorporate them into our

own programs and to consciously make them the base for our programming objectives. We even developed a new logo for Campus Ministry using these Ideals.



Finally, we found that the Bishops' document, "*Empowered by the Spirit*," was very helpful in its six practical applications for forming the faith community of Campus Ministry as well as a particular Campus Ministry project.

#### APPLICATION TO THE "LA BAMBA" PROJECT

When we first began to evaluate the "La Bamba" project, our initial assessment was that we were fulfilling most of the requirements that we wanted to achieve. However, in taking a closer look, we began to realize that we were deficient in using the Dominican charism to guide and influence the program in the ways that we hoped. Originally, we had little time scheduled for prayer, study, or reflection. We were constantly "busy" trying to get as much service time into our limited schedule. We were building community with the people of Tijuana, as best as possible in such a short time (a matter of 5 days per visit), but we were also losing the opportunity to build a stronger community amongst the participants in the program. Other than the trip, we only came together for initial orientation sessions and a picture sharing session several weeks after the trip.

Another interesting situation arose during our evaluation process. As I described at the beginning of this talk, the program rose out of a student-organized process. Consequently, there was a strong feeling of "ownership" of the program by the students. As the successive number of trips continued, I was constantly reminded, "this is the way we do things."

However, we were gradually able to change the program in order to incorporate some activities that would help us in fulfilling our goals of truly reflecting the Dominican Ideals within the process and the project. I say gradually here—one advantage that Campus Ministry has as compared to a parish, for example, is that we see a constant turn over in students as they matriculate and graduate. Many times, we wish we could "keep the good ones," but for our purposes in this particular situation, as people graduated and moved on, it allowed us to introduce new ideas in a non-threatening way.

Several events allowed this to happen. First and foremost, we were able to hire a Dominican Sister of San Rafael to a full time position in the Campus Ministry office. Sr. Carla Kovack came to the University after being the vocation director for the Congregation. She was well versed in the Dominican charisms and way of life. This allowed us to

build in a nightly reflection session, which not only allowed students to vocalize their feelings and reactions to the daily events, but it also allowed for educational moments when we could share the mission of the gospel. In a very real sense, these sessions became *preaching* sessions—the sharing of the Gospel in a group from their shared mission and identity.

A second factor that aided in our immersion experience came from Sr. Gene McNalley, another San Rafael Dominican. Sr. Gene had taken some time off from teaching to spend six months working at the Casa de los Pobres. During her time there, the head of the Franciscans asked her to start working with a new colonia that had sprung up on the very eastern edge of Tijuana, some fifteen miles from the Casa. People from Colonia Esperanza would travel all day to seek aid from the Franciscans. Sr. Gene went out to the colonia, and realized that there was a real need for a permanent place, similar to the Casa, in the area. She founded the San Dominico de Guzman Mission. From a small beginning, the mission now houses a church, a medical clinic, a computer classroom, a catechetical center and a playground.

Sr. Gene is an educator in the Dominican tradition by profession. Her guiding principle in the work she conducts is to meet the needs of the people, but in the process provide the necessary education whereby the people can raise themselves out of their poverty. She has worked especially hard at helping people in the colonia to start small businesses—somewhat like the micro-banking that we see elsewhere in Africa and Asia.

Sr. Gene opened her mission up to our students to work on projects similar to the ones we have been doing through the Casa. However, in this situation, she knows the family, its history and its story. By her sharing this with the students, it brought a new spectrum of insight into the students' awareness of the people whom they were helping. The friendships between our students and members of the colonia developed a deeper level than previously.

Sr. Gene also continues the education formation of the students while they were on-site. She gives the students a lesson on the economic situation of the third world countries, and then gives a tour of the U.S. factories that have set up in Tijuana. As the tours are given, she relates stories of how the people from her colonia are treated, what their wages are, and how “undervalued” they are treated by the factory personnel. She is able to put “a face” on the people and their plight, which enables our students to develop a closer bond with the people of the colonia.

As a side comment, we also developed a “Carnival” for the children of Colonia Esperanza to replace the trip that we took to Rosarito Beach. On our last trip to the beach, the numbers had grown to such a point that we had 85 people crammed into one fifteen passenger van, one minivan, and one pickup with a camper shell. I said, “Never again!”

## EVALUATING THE PROGRAM

To evaluate the effectiveness of our program, I first began with a review of the existing literature. I found many articles and studies; however, most centered on programs that were ten years old or less. One particular study did stand out, conducted by the Center for Social Concerns of the University of Notre Dame. This report studied the Summer Service Learning Participation of the program from 1980 to 1999. This study, although having many differences in the types of service, covered the time period and the “generational group” of our earlier La Bamba participants. These reports are available at [http://centerforsocialconcerns.nd.edu/sub\\_research.html](http://centerforsocialconcerns.nd.edu/sub_research.html). In these reports, they noted that the immediate outcomes of service-learning/immersion type programs were: “Increased intellectual growth, enhanced problem solving abilities, gains in self-esteem and feelings of social efficacy, greater social responsibility, more principled moral reasoning, and reduced feelings of isolation and alienation.” (Report 8, Feb., 2005) The question posed was whether these desirable effects last, or do they fade over time? For their research, they focused on 1) Commitment to a life of service: a demonstrated commitment to serving those who are disadvantaged; 2) Relationship to society: a sense of ones’ role in the world and connection to others, including family, friends, community, and beyond; 3) Spirituality: a sense of connection to God, however conceived, or a spiritual force that is integrated into one’s personal life; and 4) Growth: an orientation to actively learn and participate in activities that enhance personal development.

The results of the study were not that surprising. Those who had participated in service-learning/immersion programs showed significantly higher scores on three of the four areas examined. Commitment to service showed the highest rating, with 82% reporting some type of participating in action and involvement within a community setting. In the area of Relationship, 75% reported a greater sense of connectedness and enhanced involvement in healthy relationships. With respect to the Growth variable, 79% demonstrated a stronger orientation toward active learning and opportunities for development of self-actualization. Interestingly, Spirituality scored very closely to the control population at 59%. However, in research conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999), spiritual growth was a robust and somewhat unexpected outcome of service learning in a primarily secular context.

## THE SURVEY

In order to collect data, I sent a “scatter email” (email to all addresses that I had on file), as well as sending an announcement out through the Alumni Office, asking participants to go to the electronic link on the University’s web site. We received 120 responses to our request, which included participants from 1991 to 2008. In addition to the years a person attended, we asked for the number of times that the person attended the program, as we tend to have many students who like to repeat the experience. Then, we asked basic questions which centered on the Four Dominican Ideals: 1) *Reflection*; 2) *Study*; 3) *Community*; and 4) *Service* to the community. We allowed space on the survey for comments.

Below are results from data collected:

**How many times did you attend**

1 Time	40	33%
2 Times	52	42%
More than 2 times	28	25%
TOTAL	120	100%

**Time for Reflection**

	A lot of time	More than average	Average time	Little time	No time	N/A
Did you experience time for reflection/contemplation/prayer	45 33%	57 42%	15 17%	3 8%	0	0

Sample Comments:

- Discussions with group and self about cultural awareness, acceptance, and about being grateful.
- On the second trip, we had a lot of time to reflect and participate what it is like to live in poverty. We shopped and cooked for under \$1. Then we had prayer and worship time.
- We set aside time to journal and pray and speak on experiences. I found myself reflecting between van rides and spaces during the day—within the dialogue I had with the people. I was moved in just looking around.
- Whenever we sat together as a group and ate a meal, I felt connected with everyone. When we were helping others, I also felt a spiritual connection with those who had less than I did.

**Further Study**

	Extremely encouraged	Very encouraged	Encouraged	Somewhat encouraged	Not encouraged	N/A
Were you challenged to study further on aspects of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> World or Mexico?	30 25%	68 58%	12 8%	5 4%	5 4%	0

Sample Comments:

- Made me more socially aware—I’ve always been environmental, but the La Bamba trips made me see how important social justice is to helping the environment.
- I have learned more about Darfur, other events in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world, and aspects of development in China and India.

- Seeing the huge walls that divided our two countries, I gained a personal perspective of why people want to cross the border and how promising the US is to Mexicans.
- I wrote my senior thesis on US military intervention in Latin America, pursuing a Master's Degree in International Relations.

### Sense of Community

	Great Sense	Good Sense	Average Sense	Little Sense	No Sense	N/A
Did you feel a sense of community with the students/faculty on the trip?	91 75%	19 17%	10 8%	0	0	0
Did you feel a sense of community with the people of Tijuana?	59 55%	40 36%	0	11 9%	0	0

### Sample Comments:

#### *People on the trip:*

- Absolutely! Some of my best/favorite memories and friends are from the La Bamba trip. There are many things I would have done differently in college—but La Bamba was one of the best decisions I made.
- We really worked together to accomplish so much and shared so many experiences. It really brought us closer together.
- Everyone came together. I had in depth conversations with people I probably wouldn't have ever spoken with.

#### *People of Tijuana:*

- Yes, there was a tight sense of community at Mass, especially since the chapel was so small.
- Cusicinda's family and Sr. Susannah's colonia remembered/embraced me each time I went there.
- They look like me. They are exactly the same as me, with the same needs as any human being. I realized this even though I was struggling with a language and cultural barrier in trying to communicate with them.

### Make a difference

	Huge Difference	Great Difference	Average Difference	Little Difference	No Difference	N/A
Did you feel like you made a differ-	53 45%	37 36%	20 18%	0	0	0

ence with your service on La Bamba?						
-------------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--	--

Sample Comments:

- I wish I had more skill and knowledge to offer the projects. I think projects could further the self-sufficiency of the people of TJ—gardens, livestock, educational efforts—would accomplish more than painting or roofing.
- The house painting and roof removal were objective differences. I don’t feel like other long-term differences were made. Perhaps cultural awareness increases (on both sides) were beneficial in the long term.
- We helped build someone’s home, fed some hungry people, and brought toys to orphans. All those things made me feel like I made a difference in someone’s day down there.
- The woman whose house we were working on (new roof) prepared us an authentic Mexican lunch. I know she didn’t have much, but she shared what she had with us out to true appreciation for our work. I have never forgotten that experience.

**Life Changing?**

	Extremely Life-changing	Very life-changing	Life-changing	Little life-changing	Not life-changing	N/A
Was the trip “life-changing” for you?	62 55%	30 27%	18 18%	0	0	0

Sample Comments:

- Absolutely—While remaining generally misanthropic, I owe all the humanity I feel to the humanity and grace the people of TJ gave me.
- I’ve done a lot of service work and this was the first time in another country. It is just amazing how much of a difference you can make for someone in just a few days and how with a language barrier you can still come together.
- Yes! It gave me a greater focus to provide food and healthcare for those who cannot pay. I have great respect for some of the people I met. Also, I am very thankful for what I have. It was wonderful to be a part of daily Mass—we are one family.
- It allowed me to realize that no matter how much we think we are separated from others, we all have the same human needs and desires.

Along with the survey, we also had a reunion of La Bamba attendees. This provided an opportunity for people to reconnect with one another, share their stories, and relate how they found their lives changed by the experience. During the study, I found that our La Bamba alumni have done/or are engaged in very interesting projects. One student is now

going to medical school in the West Indies, planning to practice there. Another student taught school in Uganda. Another student is now building homes for disadvantaged in Belize. After returning to Dominican, other students got involved or started projects such as bringing a tent from the refugee camps in Darfur to raise awareness on campus. Another student is currently involved in helping with the Iraqi Student Project, providing support for two Iraqi students who will be attending Dominican University beginning this fall. Another student went into his father's business, and gradually turned the focus of the business towards working on third world environmental needs.

## CONCLUSIONS

Fr. Liam Walsh, OP, talks about Dominican spirituality and the "sacra praedicatio." For him, the Dominican spirit shows in what "Dominicans, men and women, are and do in the Spirit" (2002). Dominic discovered in Fanjeaux that the Gospel is only preached when the whole church preaches it and lives the Gospel. What Dominic recognized was that the preaching could become effective if the people doing it were truly living the Gospel they preached. These people had to take on various forms of evangelical life. By doing so, Dominic wanted to put a pressure on all structures that would eventually change them. Thus, from their shared mission to the Gospel, Dominicans find a shared spirituality.

Study is also an essential element of Dominican spirituality. Dominic discovered his preaching call in the midst of the Albigensianism turmoil. However, his dominant attitude towards those who were considered "heretics" was compassion. He was ready to speak to them in a language they could understand and give them ways of dealing with the changing world as they were then experiencing it. One needed to listen and to get people talking with one another.

For Dominic that is what study was. It was the cultivation of the listening ear, using all the human techniques of language and science. It was the careful cultivation of a listening ear that would be hearing all truth, wherever it was coming from. It was limitless immersion in the Word of God, in the Scriptures as handed on in the Church of God. It was at the same time limitless immersion in the words of men and women, in the world of nature, so that the truth that is there would be brought to light. But most of all, it was the thoughtful effort to build bridges of understanding and conversation between people, so that they could see a way through their differences and be drawn together in communion. The Gospel is for drawing the whole of creation together in unity. The right preaching of the Gospel must be able to affirm what unites people, to face up to the sources of division, and to offer people ways of overcoming them. (2002)

Ultimately, people begin to see things as God sees them.

In reflecting on the "La Bamba" program, especially in light of studies of similar experiences provided by other academic institutions, there is clearly a "Dominican charism"

which comes through in the program. In all the programs, there is the opportunity to provide service and the building of community. However, what I find unique to the “La Bamba” program is the prayer and reflection pointed out by the study. We can find ourselves as part of the “*Sacra Praedicatio*” of Dominic through the understanding we have of preaching the gospel. Whether it be nightly reflections, nailing up a wall, putting tar on a roof, handing out bags of groceries, or dipping up a spoon full of beans to put on a plate—all become part of that charism when we truly reflect on our purpose. “La Bamba” provides our students the opportunity to listen—not only to the gospel of Jesus, but to the poor widow whose house consists of one room, to the mother of six children who is trying to find a way to educate her children, to working with an American doctor who is staffing a clinic one day a week in the midst of poverty. All of these speak to us of the gospel. They also allow us to become gospel to one another and the people whom we encounter in the slums of Tijuana, Mexico.

## References

- Brandenberger, Jay W, Cunningham, Sue, Trozzolo, Tom. Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame: Research Report, "Summer Service Learning Participation: 1980-1999", Report 1, November 2001.
- Brandenberger, Jay W., Hill, Trey, Howard, George S. Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame: Research Report, "Lasting Effects? A Longitudinal Study of the Impact of Service-Learning", Report 8, February, 2005
- Pope John Paul II, "Ex Corde Ecclesia," 1990  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apc\\_15081990\\_ex-corde-ecclesiae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae_en.html)
- U.S Catholic Bishops, "Empowered by the Spirit," 1985  
<http://www.usccb.org/education/highered/empowered.html>
- Walsh, OP, Liam, "Sacra Praedicatio and Dominican Spirituality," 2002  
[http://www.op.org/international/english/Documents/Articles/sacra\\_predicatio.htm](http://www.op.org/international/english/Documents/Articles/sacra_predicatio.htm)