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Empathy Arising from Facing Injustice and Violence

By Todd Waller

The Spring Hill College (SHC) Italy Center, initiated in 2011, calls Bologna, one of the world's oldest university towns, home. Our classroom, though, is the broader Mediterranean region, thus providing the ideal setting for Jesuit justice education. Lectures take place both in Bologna and in classrooms without walls, in the homes of friends, U.S. Embassy conference rooms, and churches and mosques across Italy, Eastern Europe, and North Africa, often in places where few American students venture.

Italians are experiencing donor fatigue after nearly three decades of welcoming refugees from as close as neighboring Albania and as far away as Afghanistan. In 1995, the year that the majority of our college students were born, foreigners were less than two percent of Italy's population. Sadly, the year 2015 will likely be documented as the largest movement of humans fleeing wars and famine to land on Italian shores. By hearing stories from former mafia members, priests, and recent arrivals during our tours to Puglia and Sicily, students are able to put a face on these complex issues.

Our pedagogy strives for each student to have conversations with those on the margins: war survivors, refugees, and community leaders who are saying "no" to injustices. Aida Omanovic, a Muslim native of Mostar, Bosnia, who buried 27 of her college-age friends during the 1992 – 95 war and witnessed her brother being carried off to a Croatian Catholic-run concentration camp, is one of the many extraordinary human beings who helps us challenge our students to think critically about peace and reconciliation. Such encounters demand that we move away from theoretical discussions into the emotional, personal realm and simultaneously push students to further define their own faith lives. Student Matthew Zupardo, reflecting on his time in Mostar, states, "This experience has been very humbling. I have learned many things about divisions, but I learned a great deal more about crossing them." Peace and reconciliation are no longer jargon as students ask themselves if they could forgive their brothers' killers in the way that Aida models for us.

As Americans, we too have our house to clean up; fewer students express an interest in the humanities where ethical questions are debated, and the negative forces imbedded in social media appear to have taken root. Many students land in

our study abroad programs in what St. Ignatius would identify as varying realms of desolation. Pope Francis in his recent climate-change encyclical "Laudato Si'" writes, "[Social] media at times shields us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations or harmful sense of isolation can also arise."

We are trying to document what students are thinking, but we also want them to connect with the pains, fears, and joys that Pope Francis is referring to. In the Ignatian tradition we are trying to generate contemplatives who will take action, which resonates with an emerging field of research on empathy and moral development. Influenced by Stanford University education professor Nel Noddings' 40-plus years of studies on "caring," Martin Hoffman (New York University) and Michael Slote's (University of Miami) research bridges the divide between the intellectual discussions about justice and the field of empathy education. Results can often be measured by commitments from individuals who are able to express empathy for a family member, as well as concern about those who live in distant lands, those whom they will never meet – like earthquake victims in Nepal or the migrants crossing the Mediterranean.

Jordan Byrne, reflecting on her SHC Italy Center experiences after participating in our social justice tours to Poland and Bosnia, captures how empathy skills can lead to justice thinking: "I've been to Auschwitz and Srebrenica, both places of genocide where thousands were murdered solely because of ignorance and hatred. It is an experience that I will never be able to explain. However, once I walked away, I vowed to never judge anyone on his or her race, religion, or way of life. May we never forget all of the people who have died because of genocide."

Our preliminary results indicate that for many of our students the practice of face-to-face encounters with those overcoming situations of extreme hardship not only develops empathy skills but also leads to a commitment towards justice. ■

Todd Waller is the director of the Spring Hill College Italy Center.