CHAPTER EIGHT

Coming Full Circle

In 1963, when Sacred Heart University first opened its doors, Bishop Curtis and Dr. Conley, the founders, envisioned a school dedicated to graduating young Catholic women and men knowledgeable in faith and committed to social action and social justice. So in retrospect it seems reasonable to suggest that the impetus for many of the volunteer efforts at the University over the years can be traced back to the founders’ vision. And now, in keeping with that rich legacy of social action, two of the most recent initiatives—a new scholars’ program that weds the best of service-learning to rigorous academic studies based on Catholic social thought, and a special return visit to El Salvador—bring the University’s experience with service back full circle to its roots.

*The Catholic Social Thought Scholars Program*

The Catholic Social Thought Scholars program, an interdisciplinary three-year learning experience, combines the “study of the Catholic Church’s social teaching with a field placement in the community,” and culminates in a “research project designed to address a particular social justice issue.” Dr. Reid, the director of the program, explained that “the University of Notre Dame in Indiana received a grant from a foundation to encourage the teaching of Catholic social thought in colleges and universities, and the idea was to solicit proposals from colleges and universities
that wanted to be part of this.” On our campus, the grant caught
the attention of several administrators who believed that Sacred
Heart University, because of its success with service-learning and
its emphasis on Catholic social thought, was uniquely positioned
to qualify. “I think Donna [Dodge], Eilene [Bertsch], and Margaret
[Palliser] were the people who got it started,” said Reid. “It
wouldn’t have happened without them. They invited a number of
faculty members and staff people to sit down and come up with
ideas. The group got together periodically and whatever discussion
there was, Margaret would type it up, refine it, then send it back
to us for a response. So it was a collaboration.”2 Palliser recalled
that one of the initial questions posed by the group was how to
integrate the academic components of Catholic intellectual
thinking into the program. “Catholic intellectual thinking, in light
of our mission and the social teaching of the Church,” she said,
“would be the ideal piece. If you look at the programs we have,
everything is already in place and happening, and this program
tied in with Christian leadership but gave it a more specific
academic focus.”3

Notre Dame “selected a dozen or so of the applicants whose
programs looked promising,” Reid said, including the proposal
from Sacred Heart University. “The idea was that these dozen or
so schools would then begin to develop a program to encourage
the teaching of Catholic social thought on their campuses. Then
the proposals from each university would be presented, critiqued,
contacts would be made, and there would be a support network
for doing whatever the project involved. At the end of the first
year all the representatives of the schools would be brought back
together again to report on progress and to continue making
contacts.”4

“The Sacred Heart proposal was very unique,” said Reid. “Our
program, unlike the other ones, was not aimed at doing something
with the core, or encouraging faculty throughout the university to
think about infusing Catholic social thought in some way into a
lesson plan or a course.”5 Our program calls for “a pedagogical
methodology that is permeated by theological reflection,” which
in turn would allow students to “encounter a living Tradition that
will speak to the social problems they encounter in their
fieldwork.” The proposal announced this is “a program for persons who want to change the world!”

The plan calls for fifteen students each year “to participate in a fully integrated faith and justice educational program with eight major components”:

- Weekend immersion experience in Bridgeport accompanied by Community Service Field Placement with bi-weekly seminars.
- Two-semester (six credits) interdisciplinary course organized around the Church’s social teachings and related social justice themes.
- Catholic Social Thought Visiting Scholar.
- Theological Reflection: Methodology and Praxis.
- “Policy Plunge” week in Washington, D.C., including meetings with organizations that exemplify CST [Catholic social thought] and social action (e.g., Network, Catholic Relief Services, etc.)
- Internship Year (optional).
- Capstone Course/Research Project (three credits).
- Supervised experience in mentoring freshman CST Scholars.

“When we found out our proposal had been accepted,” said Reid, “I was asked if I would coordinate the first year of the program, trying to recruit students. So I went around talking about the program with various groups, and then I received recommendations from people. I had about thirty or so names recommended to me, and I contacted the students, spoke with them, and invited them to a session where we talked about the program. Out of that group we had some students who applied, and now we have sixteen people accepted into the program.”

According to the program’s guidelines, each group of incoming students is subject to a probationary period “to see if they are really going to be able to commit themselves, to see if they can manage the work well,” said Noelle D’Agostino, from Campus Ministry. After participating in an immersion experience in Bridgeport, the students “identify social issues that they are going
to focus on, and then learn what the church teaches about those issues,” said D’Agostino. It’s “more of a seminar approach,” added Machledt. “It’s a program based on service-learning in the broadest sense, and very much tied to Catholic thought.”

Once the students select a social justice issue to study—“a Criminal Justice major may choose to focus on justice in our prison system and work as a volunteer in the local jail; a Social Work major interested in women’s issues may work at a battered women’s shelter; an Economics major interested in welfare reform may choose a placement at a local social service agency”—they meet bi-weekly to discuss their on-site experiences and reflect on social justice themes. At the end of the first year “candidates who successfully complete the requirements will become Catholic Social Thought Scholars and will be awarded scholarships of $1,000 per semester for each semester they participate in the program.”

During the fall of the second year the scholars enroll in a six-credit, two-semester colloquium that explores key Church themes, such as “option for the poor, the dignity of human life, human rights and responsibilities, the principle of the common good, the dignity of work and the rights of workers.” At the same time, the students continue fieldwork experiences in the community. “They would start out as freshmen or sophomores,” said Machledt, “get their feet wet, find something they enjoy, delve into it more, and then bring that back and tie it to the philosophical underpinnings of Catholicism.” Then in the spring of the second year, students and mentors “spend five days in Washington, D.C., studying the relationship between social policy and issues of social justice.” That same semester, the scholars begin work on a capstone research project by meeting with a “faculty mentor to identify a specific topic for further research and study, as well as appropriate internship possibilities.”

The third and fourth years of the program include the internship placement, the independent research project, and a supervised mentoring experience in the last semester. During the internship placement, the scholar works “with an agency/institution/organization whose work is related to the specific issue/topic that the student has identified for research.” Then in the fall of the fourth
year, the scholar is responsible for completing the research project with three major components:

1. A description of the social justice issue being studied and relevant data relating to the topic.
2. In-depth study of the teachings of the Church that inform the issue being analyzed.
3. A realistic proposal for a plan to address the problem.¹⁴

The plan, said Reid, is to involve students in social analysis. “I think one of the objectives of this program,” he said, “is not only service and addressing the needs of the poor, but social analysis of the social and economic conditions that create the situations. That’s something that is a hope for this program.”¹⁵ After completing the research project, the scholars then “assume the role of mentors for the first-year seminar discussion groups.” Under the supervision of Reid, the scholars “act as discussion leaders and field placement advisors,” and “present their own research to the first-year candidates during the seminar sessions.”¹⁶

“I am very excited about this program,” said Palliser. “It’s something that few people are doing directly. The social teaching of the Church is so integral to the lay person’s mission within the Church. For the lay person, it’s the transformation of the world. The secular order becomes transformed through the work of the lay person. That is their sphere. So it’s perfect. This program speaks directly to it.”¹⁷

Coming Full Circle: A Return to El Salvador

“The story has come full circle,” said Bertsch. “We began with El Salvador, and we’re back there again in response to a call, in the face of a terrible calamity that happened to our friends.”¹⁸ The call came to Dodge from Sr. Elena in El Salvador; the calamity was the earthquake that struck that country on January 13, 2001.¹⁹ Elena called to request that the annual spring student delegation—the members of which had already been selected—be postponed because of the demands placed on the rural communities by the
earthquake that measured 7.3 on the Richter scale, left nearly 1,000 dead with some 2,000 people unaccounted for, and turned over a million homes into rubble. Instead of the annual student delegation, would it be possible, Elena asked, to send a group of faculty to video the aftermath of the quake, the efforts at rebuilding, and the testimonies of the people? Such a video, it was hoped, would help to solicit aid to rebuild the devastated communities and provide an organizational model for grassroots responses to future crises.

Dodge immediately put out the call to several people, asking if they would be willing to make the quick trip to El Salvador. Dr. McAllister wrote:

Donna Dodge formed an emergency delegation of five faculty, adjuncts, and alumni from those of us with prior familiarity with the communities and individuals involved, the ability to speak fluent Spanish and communicate with people there, and skills in writing and video production. Three of my colleagues on the delegation, Lauren Kempton, Brooks Parmelee, and Terry Neu, have accompanied the student trips, supervised the projects, and know Sister Elena and the families in the communities personally. Another delegate and former student, César Muñoz, made a prior video of a similar community in Calle Real in 1995.

The purpose of the trip was for the delegation to “go down and see exactly what had happened in the community,” explained McAllister, “to see whether a student delegation would be feasible a little bit later, and what purpose it would serve. And also whether there were more effective kinds of aid that could be sent down there.” Part of the problem with sending aid in response to a crisis, said Muñoz, is that “aid agencies face the dilemma of how to assist people without stimulating their dependency from outside help, how to aid the country without turning it into a nation of victims.”

When the University delegation arrived in Tierra Blanca on February 8, it found a community mobilized by Elena and Fr. Pedro de Clerk, the Belgium-born pastor of the town, to deal as
best it could with the devastation. The first night, Elena talked about the role of a neighborhood organization “to establish priorities and decide whose houses in each neighborhood should be rebuilt first,” said McAllister. “She explained how they had learned from mistakes trying to distribute aid in the aftermath of hurricane Mitch.”

Muñoz recalled the organizational efforts as follows: “First, they mobilized members of the parish to make a census of the whole town. Each person covered a block listing its residents and inquiring about land ownership and damages suffered.”

Dr. Neu explained how Elena had set up the tasks: “Each block asked for leaders, for volunteers. They had to go in and take a census of the block. Who lives where? Who owns the property where? How many children are in these houses? How many are from neighboring families? They were trying to sort out how many individuals are affected by this.”

Then, said Muñoz, “Each block elected a ‘captain’ and every four captains selected one among them as their representative. Thus, seventeen delegates, who had never held any office, met just a few weeks after the earthquake, creating an organization still without a name. Every citizen of Tierra Blanca had participated in the process.”

Neu explained this as “a very massive organizational movement that they have never had before.”

Part of the problem faced by the community stems from the people’s unfamiliarity with organizational effort. “The meeting of representatives I later attended,” wrote McAllister, “was as much a process of education for the participants involved as a straightforward planning session. Difficult decisions had to be talked over, ideas had to be understood by the villagers in terms that made sense to them. For some, thinking of neighbors or strangers as deserving aid as much as their own family was strange; for others, realizing they had to decide what to do instead of Father Pedro telling them was difficult to understand at first.”

Still another hardship members of the community faced was working to dig out from under the rubble while at the same time trying to eke out a subsistence living. “A lot of these people are trying to carry on working at their current jobs, whether it be in the cane fields or in the salinaras,” said Neu. “Here are these people trying to continue their work, and then coming home to build temporary
shelters, or help their neighbors clear the debris out of the roads so the traffic can get past. So it’s an around-the-clock effort.”

McAllister offered this first-person account of some of the second day’s activities:

The next day, February 9th, Sister Elena drove us around Tierra Blanca visiting the houses of some of the families whose neighborhood representatives had been designated for aid. César Muñoz and I interviewed and videoed four or five separate families. We saw the extent of the earthquake damage for the first time. Almost every house had collapsed. Often walls were standing, but they had to be demolished as well because they were cracked. Most of the rubble had been cleared off by the time we arrived in Tierra Blanca, and people were living outside where their houses had stood making do with plastic sheets, cardboard, and some tin sheeting from the roofs. We ate lunch and continued visiting and interviewing people laying down lines to begin digging foundations, digging with shovels, breaking the ground with bars and picks, no power tools or machinery. Outside a health clinic that was damaged and open to the sky, empty of any equipment or patients, the woman who was the director told us people continued to fear more earthquakes, and the emotional strain on children was such that any time a loud truck might go by on the street shaking and noisy, children would start crying thinking it another quake. Aftershocks were constant.

In the face of the disaster, said Neu, the government “is supplying what they call temporary housing, which means a wheelbarrow, a shovel, a pick, and I think they said about ten yards of sheet plastic. That is what they are considering temporary housing. It’s actually a kit. Now what are they going to do with that?”

On Sunday, February 11, after Mass at La Virgen de Guadalupe Church in Tierra Blanca, Elena and members of the community held a special celebration of thanksgiving, commending the delegation and “the students of Sacred Heart for coming in the
past and asking about many by name.” McAllister wrote, “It was apparent that many students had left a lasting impression among those they visited for only a short time each spring.”32 During the celebration, caught on videotape by Muñoz, Elena gave this speech of thanksgiving:

I’d like to say a few words to Sr. Donna Dodge, to the faculty at Sacred Heart University, to the graduates, to the students at the University and to friends. I want you to know that for us it has been a privilege and a great support to feel your solidarity here with us in this moment of crisis. We feel like one family, and we have felt like one family for many, many years. We feel that this relationship is something that is deep in our hearts. When the delegations are not present we remember you, and we remember you because we feel you are about your mission as students from a Catholic university helping people find their dignity. You have supported them economically, but even more important you have become personal friends with them. They feel that they are on an equal basis with you, people to people. And I think that that is a very rich supportive experience.

Elena talked about Sacred Heart University and the people of El Salvador growing together, and said, “It will only happen when human beings—people like you and people like the people from this community come together—people who have an interest, see the need, and say ‘I will do what I can.’ Hopefully the good work that Sacred Heart University has done here in El Salvador for many years will continue at this time when there is a great need.” Then, after specifically asking students and faculty for help to rebuild communities later in July and August, she spoke of the work of the current delegation. “It has not been a vacation,” she said. “They have worked very, very hard. But they are taking the message, and they are interviewing, and they are out there visiting people and communities.”33

As it turned out, the fears of the children about recurring earthquakes were not unfounded. The morning the group was
scheduled for the return flight, a 6.6 Richter Scale quake struck the region. “As I was thinking of packing,” recalled McAllister,

suddenly I realized that there’s this roar like a train and everything is moving and churning. I kind of went into a dream almost. It was sort of like, what’s going on here? And then I saw Sr. Elena hurrying past the open door. She said, ‘Come on out. Get out.’ I got out and we stood under a tree and it just kept going for a long time. It didn’t bring anything down where we were. We were kind of on the outer fringes. But by the airport and San Vicente and closer to the capital, entire towns were turned into rubble. Several hundred people lost their lives and then we couldn’t get out because the airport was closed.34

Much to the relief of the University community back in Fairfield, the delegation remained safe and returned to campus two days later.

This most recent journey to El Salvador, in response to Elena’s call for assistance, provided a continuing testimony of Sacred Heart University’s good will toward and solidarity with the people of our adopted sister community in Tierra Blanca. As McAllister wrote of the people in his journal, “Although they appreciate any money or material help we could make available, even more important was that someone from the outside community had come to hear their story and see what had happened to them. Thank you for showing hermandad, brotherly and sisterly support for us, they would say.”35 Similarly, Kempton said, “Near the end of the trip—maybe the last night—I was helping Elena with the dishes after our supper when an elderly woman, an abuelita, came up behind me and kissed my cheek and said ‘Buenas.’ In that moment, the great importance and power of the service-learning experience became immediate and almost overwhelmingly real for me. I will never forget that unexpected kiss on my cheek.”36 So the connection with a community of the poor in Usulutan continues; in fact, the University, in recognition of her years of work among the Salvadoran people, bestowed an
honorary doctorate on Sr. Elena at the commencement exercises held on May 20, 2001.

There is no way, I think, that these people—and their brothers and sisters in other Salvadoran communities visited by our many delegations over the years—could comprehend the lasting effect their actions and spirit have had on our University's commitment to live out the implications of its own mission statement. In fact, the spirit of the Salvadoran people lives on in the multitude of the University's social action programs—in the good works of each participant during CURTIS Week, during Community Connections, during Operation Bridgeport, during service-learning courses, in the clinic of the Wellness Center, in the agencies served by the Catholic Social Thought Scholars program, and in the myriad volunteer activities of our sororities, fraternities, and sports teams. It is an enduring legacy.

A Wish List for the Future

To matriculate at Sacred Heart University is to be encouraged to serve. But today there is a difference. More so than at any other time in the history of the school, the drive to institutionalize community service enjoys the attention and support of the highest University administrators. Apart from the students' volunteer efforts that flow from clubs, organizations, and athletic teams, apart from the community service core of the service-learning classes, even apart from the several initiatives outlined in the last two chapters, advocates at the University hope to see service evolve in new and exciting directions. What follows is a wish list of ideas, impressions, and hopes for the future.

- A Fifth Year Volunteer Experience. For Donna Dodge, the question is: "What is the responsibility of a University to its community?" One answer would be the realization of a dream shared by Dodge and others to extend the University's presence in Bridgeport. "A dream we have had for a number of years is to offer a fifth-year volunteer experience for students," she said. "We have the students, but we need housing." Eilene Bertsch agreed. "We would have students. I feel very certain about that," she said.
"We talked about a house in Bridgeport for students who are graduating who might wish to do something similar to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and do their work for the community out of that house." But, Bertsch said, "without money, we don't have a house. And then we've got to figure out a way to sustain the house once you've got people in it." Dodge recalled thinking about this project while walking through the East Side during an Operation Bridgeport weekend. "It's a neighborhood kind of thing," she said, adding "something will come along."

- **Service on the Graduate School Level.** For Bertsch, the call to service should extend to the graduate school programs. "While service is institutionalized on an undergraduate level through all our clubs and organizations and residence halls and through many, many different kinds of courses," she said, "I think for it to genuinely take off with the kind of impact it can have on a community of a more structural nature, as opposed to a service nature, it has to move to a graduate level, and be taken over to some extent by colleges." Dodge noted, "We really haven't done too much with our graduate and part-time students. We need more ways to weave that in."

Bertsch recalled attending a meeting in Providence and hearing about the Department of Housing and Urban Development giving out grants. "We must have listened to fifteen different proposals, and they were all coming out of structured graduate programs where the faculty and the students in the department did their teaching and their service work in collaboration with a community."

"What kind of projects am I thinking about?" asked Bertsch. "I'm thinking about the impact on housing in a neighborhood. Universities were giving low mortgage loans to get faculty to live nearby. Faculty were buying up houses in areas that were surrounding universities." Bertsch then called attention to the Wellness Center initiative, "where a department's activity becomes incorporated in this relationship with the community by creating a new structure. It could be a school. It could be economic development. It could be research on the economic impact of various activities on a neighborhood, run by a management,
finance or economics department. But right now it's course-specific to a person. It's not seen as part of the overall activity of the department. So it's that kind of thing that I think takes service to the next level."

- **Collaborative Partnering.** "We had a meeting with the Regents the other night," said Bertsch, "and I came out of that very excited about something that we haven't thought of yet, and yet might be the next step for Operation Bridgeport. An executive from People's Bank asked whether or not we had ever thought of making the Operation Bridgeport experience a cooperative or collaborative program between a major corporation—in this case a bank—and our faculty. Executives from People's Bank or GE or Chase would go to St. Charles with us and we would live there together, and then think about what we could do collaboratively." Bertsch added, "It was very exciting, and I thought, there's the next step for Operation Bridgeport. Because then you've got private enterprise, you've got a university, and you've got a community. Then we can talk about the needs."

- **Faculty Scholarship.** For matters of annual review or for promotion and tenure, community service traditionally receives the least attention. But the atmosphere in the past that under-valued community service is slowly being supplanted by the realization that service-learning classes can be a source of scholarship. "It's really taking that service-learning philosophy and practice several steps further," said Dr. Taylor Sullivan. She noted:

I don't think it's the best use of faculty time—I don't mean to be elitist—but I don't think it's the best use of time to go out and volunteer at something. I think we have something different to contribute. We need to look for these opportunities where we don't know as much as we should, and use our research and evaluation and scholarly analytical skills. The range of scholarly activity that's possible is really limitless. How do we best teach and work with students in that environment? What is the reaction to students in those environments? What curricular
changes make a difference and what doesn’t? But it does need to be scholarly. I think that that’s where we’ve made the mistake in the past. It’s been more service for service’s sake, and I think we have a different contribution to make.41

• **Peace and Justice.** “I would love to have a peace and justice group on this campus,” said Noelle D’Agostino. “And something that I might tie into peace and justice is that it is important to support students in moving from service and charity to advocacy. Part of what I envision is working more closely with the Catholic Worker and the Jeremiah House in Bridgeport. Because they are very much tied in to peace and justice issues both at the local and global level. That’s their cause. But it’s not something I want to force on the students. I want to see if it comes from them first, then help them organize it.” For example, D’Agostino pointed to the Pax Christi organization as something she would like to see on campus. “Pax Christi is also an international peace and justice organization,” she said, “and Fr. Bob and I were talking about having a chapter at Sacred Heart.”42 Similarly, Fr. Bob (Fr. Bob Malone, C.S.C., campus minister) talked about starting an Amnesty International group on campus, “to at least get it off the ground somehow. The possibility is there for making a contribution to justice for people that are oppressed, and badly depressed,” he added.43

• **Service-Learning.** “If I could wave a magic wand,” said Machledt, “I would ask the faculty to be more involved in the daily commitment to service. We need people who are willing to make a commitment to a group, like AIDS or Habitat. There’s nothing that beats working alongside the students, because then when they come back to discuss things, you know what they are talking about. You’ve met the situation. You’ve seen the person.”

Then too, there is the question of how service-learning should be incorporated into the classroom. “We’re still way ahead of most schools in service-learning,” said Machledt, “but where we fall behind is in evaluation and what the students do in the classroom. You’ve got the kids out there in Bridgeport. But how much
do you bring the community into your classroom? That has to rest on the faculty’s shoulders.”

As for offering more service-learning courses, Machledt points out, “if you want to have several hundred more students involved in the program, then you have to have secretarial support and three competent junior, senior, or graduate-level community service assistants working at least twenty-hour weeks. Then I could say, you’re in charge of Habitat, and you’re in charge of Read Aloud or the schools. I could parcel some of these off and feel that the assistant would be able to handle the issues. They would have a program that they could help design and work through. That’s what I would like to see.”

- Recruiting for Service. “We recruit for athletics,” said Dodge. “We recruit students with a real interest in football or baseball or wrestling. We go out and we say we have something special here, and we’d like you to come, and we are going to reward you for that with scholarship money or a grant. We need to do that for students interested in service. We need to recruit them.” But these students would not be recruited just to serve, said Bertsch, “but for leadership. You come here and you come on some kind of a work-study or scholarship, and what we promise you is that not only will you have the service experience, you’ll have it in such a way that you will become a leader in service.”

A Parting Thought

When the Director of Service-Learning and Volunteer Services arrived on campus several years ago, she realized “that most of the volunteer work being done wasn’t necessarily in Bridgeport.” That changed. “Now I’d say 90 percent of the volunteer work done by the students is done in Bridgeport,” said Machledt. “They look for things in Bridgeport now. They’ve established some relationships with agencies and organizations and that’s very positive. More and more students have become involved, and they are saying, ‘I’d like to do this.’”

“What makes community service so fulfilling,” said Machledt, “is when students begin to realize there is a world out there that
needs their help. There are times,” she added, “when a student walks in and talks about a child that he’s been tutoring, and it’s obvious that our Sacred Heart student has got it. He understands, he cares, and he starts to ask important questions.”

Perhaps President Cernera best summed up the University’s commitment to make a difference. In his welcoming remarks to students in a recent University undergraduate catalog, he explained that the mission of the school is “to foster a sense of social responsibility and of compassion so that you will be motivated to use your knowledge and talents on behalf of the wider community through service to others, especially the poor.” And in a statement quoted earlier in this story that bears reiterating, he said, “Thousands of students and faculty and staff have been involved in some form of community service. . . . You name it, and we have students and faculty who have done it. There is a genuine concern for the poor.”

In fact, community service, in all its manifestations, will continue to be a central part of the mission of the Sacred Heart University. A defining characteristic of the school in its early years, community service remained integral to the University’s commitment to social action and social justice during its formative years, and has flowered recently in exciting, innovative ways. The call to service is answered daily in the personal volunteering efforts of the faculty and in the service-learning courses they elect to teach; it permeates the creative thinking of several key administrators on campus; and it continues to attract the hearts, minds, and physical labor of the best of our University’s young women and men.

And so the dreams of Sacred Heart University’s founders live on . . .