

WIKTORIA BĄCZEK

CELEBRATING THE SEASON OF CREATION “LET JUSTICE AND PEACE FLOW”

What follows is my report on the Celebrating the Season of Creation entitled “Let Justice and Peace Flow”, a meeting organized by the AFM Salesian Sisters.¹ Season of Creation activities are coordinated by an ecumenical steering committee, which was formed to help Christians around the world fulfill the purpose of the season. As the urgent need to solve the environmental crisis continues to grow, Christian churches have been called to strengthen their united response. The Season of Creation ecumenical steering committee came together to provide resources to empower Christians to respond to our faith, each in the way of his or her own denomination, during this shared season of reflection and action.² On September 17 in the form of a video conference. The Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco, formally known as the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians are a female religious institute formed by Saint Maria Domenica Mazzarello in 1872.

Let me precede my brief report with a short self-presentation. My name is Wiktoria and I am from Lublin, Poland. I am a volunteer and representative of VIDES Poland founded by the Salesian Sisters. I completed my bachelor’s degree in Applied Anthropology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. I was inspired to work as a volunteer after a three-month internship at the Charterhouse of Aula Dei (Cartuja de Aula Dei) in Spain,³ where I took care of children and performed various tasks for the community. I have

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¹ <https://seedsofcommunion.wordpress.com>.

² On Season of Creation see <https://seasonofcreation.org/about>.

³ The Charterhouse of Aula Dei, <https://www.spain.info/en/places-of-interest/cartuja-aula-dei>.

been actively involved in volunteering for one year in VIDES and CARITAS.

First, I describe my volunteering experience at VIDES Poland. Next, I list the challenges of volunteering and the opportunities a volunteer can gain by selflessly helping others. Finally, I describe a deeper understanding of Pope Francis delivered during his address and I present suggestions for volunteer activities.

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I first came into contact with VIDES a year ago when my Professor from John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, offered me a three-week voluntary service outside Warsaw, which involved one week of helping in a refugee shelter and two weeks at summer camps for children from Ukraine. After this stay, I understood how much even a person like me, who did not have much experience with children, can contribute to children's happiness. In the refugee shelter, I served food to those in need, sorted parcels that came to the center and spent time with these people. The center was well prepared for the wave of Ukrainians, they were provided with accommodation, food, medical care and, above all, mental and physical safety. During my first meeting with the children, I was slightly stressed because I realized that some of them had recently arrived from the war front. Some of them had been through a lot and needed more tenderness and understanding, which they did not always receive from their family. I was most surprised when a day of gratitude was organized and the children talked all day long about how much Poland had done for Ukraine and how grateful they were for what they received. I was surprised because I had no idea how much the children saw and how aware they were of the outbreak of the war.

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Then I signed up for the international project "Youth Exchange Camp in Support of Ukrainian Refugees", also organized by VIDES. The camp was divided into three groups by age. I was chosen by the sisters to be the leader of the guardians of the oldest group. I took care of children from 11 to 14 years old. The teacher's tasks included constantly spending time with the pupils, conducting games at the beginning and end of the day, presenting

themed scenes to the children for each day, but also encouraging to integrate and supporting them in difficult moments.

The key role was played by the sisters who supported us, the volunteers, and motivated us to act. I realized that through our involvement with the summer camps we help children first and foremost, their guardians as well, but also ourselves—we shape our character, break the monotony of everyday life, build courage, and learn how to react in stressful situations. This project inspired me to be even more committed to helping others. I understood that we influence children by our example and it is up to the caregiver how much energy and free time to devote to children and consequently make them happy. Continuing this path, I joined CARITAS, for three weeks in August 2023 I helped an elderly lady, cleaned her apartment, shopped, cooked, I still have great contact with her and I am at her service. And at the beginning of the Ukrainian war, there were a lot of parcels to sort, especially clothes, and later they were sent to those in need beyond the Ukrainian border.

In the volunteers I met, I saw a lot of strength and willingness to build solidarity, and with our attitude, we formed children's sense of importance and openness towards the world and other people.

The challenges I see are primarily: a small number of volunteers as well as linguistic and cultural differences. But these challenges are negligible in terms of what volunteers will gain: experience and skills, interesting connections, learning empathy and gratitude, possibility to improve English, developing a sense of agency, to name but a few.

Pope Francis, in his message for the World Day of Prayer for the Protection of Creation, likened the synodal Church to a river, which gives life, sowing seeds of justice and peace in every place it reaches.⁴ We can compare each volunteer to a river with many branches, large or small, which through voluntary actions reach those in need and, just like the synodal church, foster peace and solidarity.

One might ask oneself how to contribute to such a mighty river? And my straight answer is that VIDES activities should be continued. My first proposal is organizing camps for those most in need. I live in Poland, there is a war abroad in Ukraine, only 200 km from where I am, children coming to Poland are in a difficult situation and need mental support and activities that will help them forget at least a little about the difficult situation in their

⁴ Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (1 September 2023), <https://laudatosimovement.org/news/message-of-pope-francis-for-creation-day-2023>.

homeland. I believe that after the end of the camp, the children felt at least a little integrated with the Polish community. In addition to being a good example for children, our pupils could also be a good example for themselves and their caregivers. Only one child is enough to initiate a change that can bring peace.

The next is involvement in initiatives for the school and the school community but also in all aid campaigns and charitable undertakings. These can be pre-Christmas collections of the Polish Red Cross, Caritas or other NGOs. It is a very good initiative because children learn from the very beginning what selfless help is and maybe this way they will learn to do something regularly as a volunteer.

I constantly encourage all willing volunteers to participate in VIDES activities, it is a truly unforgettable experience, and in addition to contributing to children's happiness, it is an opportunity for you to discover yourself, find out what you are good at, and as a result, start building your future. And besides that, I believe that there is nothing better than selfless commitment.