

# Partnership as a Model for Mission: Lessons on Solidarity from Augustine and the School Sisters of Notre Dame<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper highlights the partnership approach to mission adopted by the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (AMSSND), which is working to empower the people of Haiti through collaboration with Beyond Borders, an established NGO in the region. I explore this approach in light of the spirituality of St. Augustine that grounds the charism of unity of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND). Examining the connections between Augustine and the mission and ministry of the SSND community, through reflecting on the ways partnership has been an effective means of engaging the SSND mission of facilitating unity, or “oneness,” illuminates helpful ways to conceive of solidarity.

**KEYWORDS:** Augustine, mission, oneness, partnership, School Sisters of Notre Dame, solidarity

## INTRODUCTION

The Religious Order of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSND) was founded in 1833 as an apostolic community. The mission of the SSNDs is “to proclaim the good news . . . directing [their]

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Kay O’Connell, SSND, Arlene Flaherty, OP, and Amy Rumano for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent.”<sup>2</sup> This mission is motivated by their charism of unity, which “flows from [their] spiritual heritage, especially the gifts of St. Augustine, who formed a community to be of one heart and one soul in God, seeing in the Trinity the basis, source and goal of all community.”<sup>3</sup> The charism of unity brings focus to the mission, as the activities of the SSND community are directed toward facilitating “oneness.” The SSND community has chosen to express its mission specifically “through ministry directed toward education,” which “means enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential as individuals created in God’s image and assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Like many religious orders, however, the SSND community has experienced a significant decline in vocational commitments in recent years, and the SSNDs are no longer comprised primarily of young, physically resilient sisters—the average age of sisters in the Order is eighty-one years old, and there are more sisters over ninety than under seventy. This combination of decreasing numbers and increasing age demands innovative solutions for carrying out the mission of their community, so that “in accord with Church teaching and directives, [they can] work actively . . . to eliminate the root causes of injustice in order to realize a world of peace, justice, and love.”<sup>5</sup>

The Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (AMSSND) recently adopted a “partnership” approach as one way of doing this, whereby the sisters collaborate with an established organization that reflects their values, furthering the goals of both through significant financial contributions and participation in project development. Having made a congregational commitment to respond to the needs of people in Haiti, AMSSND joined forces with Beyond Borders, an NGO with demonstrated success in the region. Together, they have developed a system of mutual effort, in which AMSSND collaborates with Beyond Borders in support of projects that reduce the systemic causes of poverty on La Gonâve, an underdeveloped island off the west coast of Haiti. These projects assist the people of La Gonâve in attaining sustainable livelihoods through education, community-building activities, and an asset-building approach to the elimination of poverty. The AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership “supports complementary education and protection

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<sup>2</sup>*You Are Sent: Constitution and General Directory of the School Sisters of Notre Dame* (Milwaukee, WI, 1986), Constitution, 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, Prologue. Note that other sources of the SSND spiritual heritage include Alix Le Clerc, Peter Fourier, Michael Wittman, Francis Sebastian Job, and Mother Caroline Friess, SSND.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, Constitution, 22.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

projects that enable rural communities in La Gonâve to overcome vulnerability to poverty and better protect the welfare and rights of their children,”<sup>6</sup> and it enables SSNDs to be directly involved in mission, without having to provide the “boots on the ground.” The lessons we can learn from this model have implications not only for aging religious communities imagining new ways of engaging in mission, but for all people searching for ways to be in solidarity with their neighbors in a globalized world.

In section one of this paper, I will explore the connection noted above between the mission and charism of the SSND community and the “gifts of St. Augustine.” Anyone familiar with the monastic Rule of St. Augustine, which served as the foundation for the Bishop of Hippo’s own religious community and continues to be one of the most valued sets of principles for religious life today,<sup>7</sup> will recognize the similarities to the SSND mission. Recalling the way of the early Church of Acts 4:32, for example, Augustine urges his community: “Let all of you, then, live together in oneness of mind and heart, mutually honoring God in yourselves, whose temples you have become.”<sup>8</sup> Unpacking Augustine’s robust theological anthropology will be helpful in understanding this concept of “oneness”—of what it means to be a self, united with other selves. As the SSND Constitution states, the focus of their “ministry demands a Christian vision of what the human person is called to be and what the world is destined to become,”<sup>9</sup> and Augustine’s contribution to this personalist Christian vision is invaluable.

In section two, then, I will describe the partnership approach to mission taken by AMSSND. Understanding Augustine’s conception of selfhood and “oneness” will help to clarify the SSND mission, and examining this partnership model with the lens of facilitating “oneness” will illuminate an innovative way for women religious to engage in mission in the twenty-first century and for all of us to practice solidarity.

The picture of solidarity that emerges from the partnership model and the Augustinian underpinnings of SSND mission is one that empowers the other to embrace his or her own dignity as an integral participant in “oneness.”

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<sup>6</sup>Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, “The Haiti Water Initiative,” accessed July 25, 2019, [https://atlanticmidwest.org/files/attachments/post/handout\\_amsnd\\_beyond\\_borders\\_haiti\\_water\\_initiative.pdf](https://atlanticmidwest.org/files/attachments/post/handout_amsnd_beyond_borders_haiti_water_initiative.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>Villanova University, “Augustine’s Rule,” accessed July 25, 2019, <https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/RegularSpiritualPractices/resources/spirituality/about/rule.html>.

<sup>8</sup>Augustine, “Augustine’s Rule,” I.8, trans. Robert Russell, O.S.A., CE 397, accessed July 25, 2019, [https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/RegularSpiritualPractices/resources/spirituality/about/rule/chapters.html#question\\_fa](https://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/RegularSpiritualPractices/resources/spirituality/about/rule/chapters.html#question_fa).

<sup>9</sup>*You Are Sent*, Constitution, 22.

I will conclude this paper by working through some of the nuances contained within this vision.

### I. AUGUSTINE ON “ONENESS”<sup>10</sup>

To understand Augustine’s conception of “oneness” and its manifestation in SSND mission, we should start by looking at his view of personhood. As Paul Henry recognizes, Augustine’s “doctrine of the person, though highly tentative and perhaps incomplete, serves to bring Augustine’s creative genius and originality to the fore. Nowhere is he more impressive than in this area. . . . This doctrine has been a decisive factor in fashioning the modern world. Indeed, it is precisely this which makes him belong to the world of today and tomorrow.”<sup>11</sup>

Augustine bases his account of human selfhood on what he takes to be its key descriptor—i.e., that human beings are made in God’s image. As Augustine emphasizes, God is a Trinity of persons, integrally related to one another, each enlivened and constituted by its relationship with the others; this Triune God also goes out of itself in creative love, seeking oneness with creation.<sup>12</sup> God thus represents both an intrapersonal union and an interpersonal one, and human beings reflect this fundamental relationality, on Augustine’s view. Sister Mary Clark, RSCJ, explains that for Augustine, “a relational concept implies that for a human being to be a person is for [one] to stand in certain relations. . . . Augustine explicitly exhorted human persons to image the relational character of God by individually relating by love to the Trinity and to one another.”<sup>13</sup> Earlier in the same work Clark elaborates:

By reflection upon creation, Augustine came to appreciate the religiousness of the human person, that is, the necessary and intimate relation between the creature and the Creator. As a creature of God, the human person therefore is himself or herself. . . . only insofar as the relation to God becomes a conscious one. . . . In choosing image as the most fundamental aspect of human persons, Augustine accented their relationship to the Trinitarian

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<sup>10</sup>I have explored these themes elsewhere—in my dissertation, “The Heart of Justice: An Augustinian Ethic of Relational Responsibility” (ThD diss., La Salle University, 2016); and in “‘Oneness’ in Saint Augustine,” accessed July 25, 2019, <https://atlanticmidwest.org/posts/oneness-saint-augustine>. Some of the language, here, is borrowed from those texts.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Henry, *Saint Augustine on Personality*, ed. Robert P. Russell, The Saint Augustine Lecture Series: Saint Augustine and the Augustinian Tradition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 1.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. John 17:21.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Clark, “Augustine on Person: Divine and Human,” in *Augustine: Presbyterian Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske, *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 114.

God as fundamentally a call to a growing union with the divine Persons by a continual growth in the relationship of love.<sup>14</sup>

It will be helpful, here, to unpack the intra- and interpersonal aspects of human persons that Augustine recognizes as reflecting the Triune God.

The defining characteristics of God as maintained by the Catholic faith are that God is Truth, God is Love, God is Creator and Sustainer of Reality, and God is Trinity.<sup>15</sup> While this succinct definition is, of course, anachronistic to Augustine's thought, Augustine does recognize these attributes of God and maintains that human beings will express aspects of these characteristics as well. Augustine thus maintains that human beings are intellectual, affective, volitional, and relational beings, who are created and sustained by God.<sup>16</sup>

He explicitly develops this account of human nature throughout his writings, but the most interesting presentation of his view is found, I think, in his *Confessions*, in the narrative structure of his own conversion experience. There we see his spiritual life proceed from "solitary and intellectual" to communal and affective.<sup>17</sup> His experience evolves from a discrete and fleeting Neoplatonic glimpse of truth;<sup>18</sup> to a visceral and emotional struggle to love that truth wholeheartedly and to assent to the implications this love has for his life and identity (the well-known "garden scene");<sup>19</sup> to a communal experience of ecstasy that reveals his fundamental finitude and dependency (at Ostia).<sup>20</sup> In this narrative, we observe the gradual integration of Augustine's whole self—intellect, will, emotions, and relationships—into his conversion, and we can see the way in which he holds an integrated self to be necessary for love of God and a life of virtue.

As Augustine progresses through his conversion experiences, all facets of himself become engaged in his pursuit of God, and this enables a more authentic union with his neighbors. Frederick Van Fleteren recognizes that in Augustine's conversion, "the intellect, the will, the spirit, and the emotions act

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>15</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), I.2.1.1, accessed July 25, 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_\\_\\_P16.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P16.htm).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Bonnette, "The Heart of Justice," 2.1.

<sup>17</sup>For more on this, see Richard B. Miller, "Evil, Friendship, and Iconic Realism in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Harvard Theological Review* 104, no. 4 (October 2011): 400.

<sup>18</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), VII.17.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., VIII.12.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., IX.10.

together,”<sup>21</sup> and “conversion has a social element.”<sup>22</sup> From this, I have noted that “the rationality, volition, affectivity and sociality of a person must be engaged as one relates to God, or that relationship—and consequently, one’s human relationships—will be impoverished.”<sup>23</sup> These distinct but interconnected facets of the self must be aligned if one is to live a fully integrated life.

Augustine thinks of this in terms of the *ordo amoris*, or right order of love: right love, dependent on truth, attaches to what is good and beautiful, and moves the will to pursue it. Disordered love attaches excessively or deficiently to goods, failing to heed the dictates of truth and thereby distorting reality and pursuing goods in ways that are inauthentic. As Augustine cautions, “falsehood consists in not living in the way for which [we were] created.”<sup>24</sup>

In addition to this intrapersonal right order that gives proper place to our internal capacities as they form an integrated self, Augustine further maintains the interdependency of human beings in God: as each person of the Triune God is constituted by the others, so human beings are constituted by their relationships. Our identities are dependent not only on our “autonomous” nature, but on our relational character—I am I because you are you. While Augustine recognizes the importance of maintaining order among one’s internal facets, of ensuring that each facet of the self is properly valued and contributing to one’s personal character, he maintains that this internal order will motivate the pursuit of right order in one’s external activities as well.

When our own selves are integrated and rightly ordered, we will act in ways that promote authentic dignity and engage with others in ways that facilitate right relationships. Indeed, Augustine calls this justice. As Robert Dodaro perceptively recognizes, Augustine’s definition of justice evolved over his lifetime until he settled upon “‘righteousness’ . . . the condition of the soul whereby it stands in a ‘right,’ because rightly ordered, relationship with God, its Creator.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, I have noted elsewhere,

Love of God enables one to love earthly things properly and in the right amount, and actions stemming from this love are virtuous. This is why Augustine maintains that “a brief and true definition of virtue is ‘rightly

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<sup>21</sup>Frederick Van Fleteren, “St. Augustine’s Theory of Conversion,” in *Augustine: “Second Founder of the Faith,”* ed. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick Van Fleteren, *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 73.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Bonnette, “The Heart of Justice,” 52.

<sup>24</sup>Augustine, *City of God*, ed. David Knowles (1467; repr., Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican Classics, 1972), XIV.4.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

ordered love” (*City of God*, XV.22). I should emphasize, here, that because love is the condition for the possibility of justice, the internal motivations of an agent are a critical aspect of justice, on this view. Justice is the activity of rightly ordered loves: justice is that which maintains rightly ordered loves internally, and works to make manifest this right order in the public realm. Insofar as rightly ordered loves will serve to recognize and uphold the fundamental equal worth of human beings, true justice will aim to facilitate right relations.<sup>26</sup>

Relationality is both internal—in the way our intellect, will, and emotions work together to form an integrated self; and external—in the way our own identities are bound up in our experience of others. Self-integration—maintaining right relationships internally—is the virtue of justice, but, as virtue always entails activity,<sup>27</sup> a fully integrated self is one that works actively to facilitate right relations externally, upholding the equal dignity of all human beings and participating in caring for all of God’s creation: “Augustine argues that, on an internal level, the human intellect, affect, and will—each critical to human selfhood—must be brought into alignment if one is to participate in loving communion with God and neighbor [including the environment]; and he affirms the inherent goodness of all creatures, each of which contributes in a particular way to the goodness of the universal whole.”<sup>28</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain puts it well, arguing that for Augustine, “human beings are . . . social all the way down. Created in the image of God, human relationality defines us. . . . and the more we are united at all levels in a bond of peace, the closer we come to achieving that good at which we aim and which God intends.”<sup>29</sup>

### 1.A. Augustine on “Oneness”—Dignity in Dependency

One important item to note: being made in the image of God entails that we are not, in fact, God. This awareness, for Augustine, is imperative if we are to relate rightly to others. On Augustine’s view, it is only when we value others in light of their distinctive quality as creatures of God that we can relate rightly to them. In other words, to appreciate another person, we must recognize her

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<sup>26</sup>Bonnette, “The Heart of Justice,” 83.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.6.11 (1106b), trans. Terence Irwin, second ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>28</sup>Bonnette, “The Heart of Justice,” 208.

<sup>29</sup>Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Why Augustine? Why Now?,” in *Augustine and Post-modernism: Confession and Circumfession*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 249.

iconicity—i.e., the way in which the other, distinctively, reflects the Creator.<sup>30</sup> Without this iconic outlook, we miss an entire aspect of the other's nature, thereby failing to appreciate her full dignity. When we recognize the equal dignity of others, it is as human beings “linked together by a common fellowship based on a common nature,”<sup>31</sup> not as totally atomistic, autonomous beings. It is precisely, for Augustine, by appreciating the finite dependency and contingent nature of human beings that we can be most fully and authentically ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

Augustine clearly values friendship and community, but, he emphasizes, friends must love each other in God—recognizing their finitude, imperfection, and iconicity—or community is illusive.<sup>33</sup> Augustine thus sees a great distinction between the “oneness” of friends apart from God, and the “oneness” of those for whom God's love grounds their relationship. In the former, “oneness” turns to a dominating, oppressive, self-identification of the other—an inability to grasp the full “otherness” of the friend because there is no horizon beyond the self or the relationship. In the latter, “oneness” is a just and unitive experience of difference—an outlook that appreciates the distinctive qualities of the other and allows them to enrich one's own identity, because there is an eternal reality that “contains and fills all things.”<sup>34</sup>

Loving others in this way—as expressions of God's love, dependent upon God for their very being—frees us to act for the good of others whom we encounter. This is why, according to Mary Clark, Augustine distinguishes justice “by emphasizing ‘right relationship.’ Rightly related to God, [a person] is properly related within [him- or herself] and to the external world of people and things. Not only does justice produce harmony within [a person], peace among [people], but like the other moral virtues, its value lies in preparing us for the vision of God.”<sup>35</sup> In seeking justice as right relationship, then, as Elshstain points out, “selves might recognize one another in their distinctiveness, yet come together in friendship or solidarity.”<sup>36</sup>

As we look at the mission of the SSNDs, then, we can see the influence of Augustine's understanding of personhood as it relates to “oneness.” SSNDs

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV. For further discussion see Miller, “Evil, Friendship, and Iconic Realism.”

<sup>31</sup>Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII.2.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.7.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*, IV.8–9.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>Mary T. Clark, “Augustine on Justice,” in *Augustine and Social Justice*, ed. Teresa Delgado, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth, Augustine in Conversation: Tradition and Innovation (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 3.

<sup>36</sup>Jean Bethke Elshstain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 6.



“educate with the conviction that the world can be changed through the transformation of persons,”<sup>37</sup> so their “ministry demands a Christian vision of what the human person is called to be and what the world is destined to become.”<sup>38</sup> Augustine promotes a Christian vision of a person as a rational, volitional, affective, and relational being, created by God, linked together with others by the bonds of humanity, and destined to abide in God’s kingdom; and this helps to clarify and direct the activities of the SSNDs. Indeed, the SSND Constitution recognizes the interdependency of human beings and its implications for the community’s pursuit of justice: “Through our ministry, we and those to whom we are sent are mutually enriched. We are enabled to grow in communion with God and with one another and in acceptance of responsibility for the earth and its people. This mutual giving and receiving is itself a witness in our interdependent world.”<sup>39</sup> These themes of “oneness,” interdependency, and mutual enrichment based on an iconic conception of the human person are brought to bear in the partnership model of mission that the SSND community has developed.

## II. AMSSND/BEYOND BORDERS PARTNERSHIP<sup>40</sup>

Because “oneness” is premised on the inclusion of every person in community and on every person’s integral contribution to the common good, seeking the good of all requires that we act in ways that facilitate the full participation—the full engagement in relationship—of others in community. As Augustine writes, “each single thing is good and collectively they are very good, for our God made his whole creation very good.”<sup>41</sup> Affirming the appropriate use of free will, intellect, and emotional response in our encounters with others is thus a good place to start, since doing so encourages those facets of the self that constitute the core of the human person, on Augustine’s view. AMSSND, in partnership with Beyond Borders, supports the flourishing of these faculties within the people of La Gonâve—educational programs address intellectual needs; sustainable living programs enable those in poverty to exercise choice; and communal support programs respond to emotional needs.

The SSND Constitution codifies the community’s need to engage its charism of unity with all people: “As members of an international congregation, we recognize our obligation and opportunities to develop a world vision and

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<sup>37</sup> *You Are Sent*, Constitution, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Kay O’Connell, SSND, Arlene Flaherty, OP, and Kristie van de Wetering of Beyond Borders for much of the language contained in this section.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.12.

a sense of global responsibility. Our internationality challenges us to witness to unity in a divided world; to discover unsuspected ways of sharing what we have, especially with the poor and marginalized.”<sup>42</sup> In accordance with this challenge, AMSSND has committed to addressing the needs of the poor and marginalized in Haiti.

At its 2013 Assembly in response to the Directional Statement of the 2012 SSND General Chapter, AMSSND determined four areas of social justice on which to focus its resources. These include a commitment to promote the sustainability and universal accessibility of water; justice for immigrants and comprehensive immigration reform in the United States; the elimination of human trafficking; and supporting development in Haiti. The latter was inspired by a talk given to the Assembly by Sister Limétèze Pierre-Gilles, one of the community’s newer members, who spoke of having had a youthful dream of founding a school in her homeland of Haiti. Sister Charmaine Krohe, Provincial Leader, recalls that “her vision immediately electrified the delegates; the strong presence of the Spirit was universally perceived as moving among them.”

Shortly thereafter, Sister Limétèze visited Haiti with a small group of representatives from the province. After reviewing several areas of need across a swath of Haiti’s mainland, the delegation visited La Gonâve—a small island 13 miles west of Haiti’s mainland—and determined that to be the place toward which to direct AMSSND efforts. La Gonâve is home to approximately 80,000 people, many of whom live on less than \$1.25 a day. Many of the island’s children, especially girls, struggle to obtain primary education due to pervasive poverty and lack of infrastructure, and they are highly vulnerable to forced labor and abuse. In addition, most teachers at local community-based schools in La Gonâve have had limited opportunity to further their own education.

The SSND charism of unity and the Order’s long history of educating women and girls, as well as the SSND mission to promote the dignity of all persons, struck the members of the delegation to Haiti as inviting SSNDs to solidarity with the people of La Gonâve. Aware that most action in Haiti would require more physical participation than their province could provide, the AMSSND began considering potential partners for their work. A committee assigned to this endeavor received support and resources regarding the partnership model from Catholic Relief Services, and the members began to conceive of partnership “as a model way of being in mission [that] enabled mutual learning, sharing of resources, wisdom and values, while challenging the partners to grow into greater and greater transparency, mutuality and a commitment to achieving through the practice of partnership what could not

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<sup>42</sup>*You Are Sent*, Constitution, 26.

be achieved by going-it-alone in mission.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, a partnership would enable AMSSND not only to be in relationship with the people of Haiti, but also to be united to another organization with a common goal.

AMSSND considered many potential partners, including bishops, clergy, and ministry leaders, but most were looking to the SSNDs to send sisters to underserved areas or participate in building projects. The AMSSND Director of the Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation, Arlene Flaherty, OP, explains, “This model was no longer viable for us and we felt drawn to create something different and doable.”<sup>44</sup>

One respected NGO that had been working on the island for many years, Beyond Borders, caught their attention. While in Haiti, members of the SSND delegation had met one of the Beyond Borders staff and had a spontaneous conversation about the work the non-profit had been doing in the region for over 20 years. Serendipitously, one of the SSND Associates had heard about Beyond Borders’ work to end the practice of child domestic labor in Haiti and already had arranged for the Executive Director of Beyond Borders, David Diggs, to give a talk at one of the SSND centers in Maryland. Members of the province who attended this session were deeply moved by the mission of the organization. The Haiti committee arranged another trip to observe the Beyond Borders initiatives on the island of La Gonâve, and recommended approaching Beyond Borders to begin a partnership. Their common values and approach to mission resonated deeply with the SSNDs.

Beyond Borders aims to end the widespread practice of placing children in domestic servitude, which often devolves into child slavery and abuse; to guarantee universal access to education; to end violence against women and girls; and to replace systems that oppress the poor with systems that support dignified work and sustainable livelihoods. These aims, and the model of empowering local people in Haiti, were clearly compatible with SSND mission and history, and Beyond Borders agreed to enter into a discernment process with AMSSND regarding partnership.

By 2016, reports to the Provincial Assembly and another presentation by Diggs had resulted in a vote by the AMSSND delegates to commit the province to a five-year collaboration with the NGO. Members of Beyond Borders also met to dialogue with the provincial council. The Provincial Leader of AMSSND, Sister Charmaine Krohe, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Diggs on February 8, 2017. It included a pledge

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<sup>43</sup>Arlene Flaherty, Director of the Office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame—Atlantic-Midwest Province, email message to Kathleen Bonnette, July 25, 2019.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

of \$65,000 annually to Beyond Borders for five years, with biennial reviews of the partnership's progress. The AMSSND province has agreed to work with Beyond Borders toward the four goals listed above in two small towns on the island of La Gonâve: TiPalmais and Nan Mango.

### *II.A. AMSSND/Beyond Borders Partnership—Implementation*

Through what they call Model Community Initiatives, which aim to mobilize local resources and develop the capacity of individuals in community, the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership takes a multifaceted approach that works to increase educational opportunities, eliminate dire poverty, and engage communal protection of and support for vulnerable children and families. In solidarity with the people of Haiti, AMSSND works with Beyond Borders to empower people—especially women and girls—with education and sustainable livelihoods, enabling families to pull themselves out of poverty and live with dignity.

In Haiti, there currently are approximately 250,000 children trapped in domestic labor.<sup>45</sup> Many parents in rural areas like La Gonâve live in abject poverty, and they make the heart-rending choice to send their children to live with more economically secure families on the mainland, hoping that the children will receive an education and experience stable living conditions. Sadly, this is often an ill-founded hope, and the children—known as “restavèks”—are forced into domestic servitude, where they are subjected to all kinds of abuse and denied necessities of child development, such as education, familial relationships, and playtime.<sup>46</sup>

In response, the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership works to promote children's rights and helps to develop Child Protection Brigades, comprised of local community members who are trained to “intervene in cases of child slavery, abuse, and neglect, and work to raise awareness about the rights of children in their communities and the dangers of sending children away to the city to live with others.”<sup>47</sup> Over 270 child rights activists were trained by the partnership in 2017-2018.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Beyond Borders, “Ending Child Slavery,” accessed July 25, 2019, <https://beyondborders.net/what-we-do/ending-child-slavery/>.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Model Community Initiative: School Sisters of Notre Dame Partnership with Ti Palmais and Nan Mango, La Gonâve, Haiti, “Project Description July 1, 2017—June 30, 2018,” 1.

<sup>48</sup>Note, here, the connection to one of AMSSND's other commitments—the elimination of human trafficking.

Protecting the rights of children also involves guaranteeing their access to quality education, so the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership is focused on supporting the development of the rural school system on the island. The partnership contributes financial resources to schools in La Gonâve, providing monthly stipends to assist with financial stability and ensure that the schools can pay their teachers. The partnership has also created “book banks,” which give students access to required textbooks that are written in their original language—Creole. Teaching students in their native Creole rather than French, which is often imposed by many schools in the region, is a revolutionary—and highly successful—endeavor.<sup>49</sup> In the words of Beyond Borders,

[We] reach children who are the most vulnerable—children from the poorest families and children who have grown too old to start first grade. We provide training and materials to teachers to improve their performance and make schools more vibrant and liberating using non-violent, participatory teaching methods. . . . We mobilize local people to hold the government accountable for using new funding for education in the most responsible and effective way possible. We are also working to provide more tools and educational methods that teachers can use to prepare their students to face Haiti’s challenges outside the classroom and build a brighter future.<sup>50</sup>

One of the projects of AMSSND and Beyond Borders involves Notre Dame of Maryland University (NDMU), an SSND mission since the nineteenth century. Sharon Slear, SSND—in collaboration with NDMU and La Gonâve’s Matèwa School colleagues—has developed a four year program of professional education for Haitian teachers, focusing especially on enabling them to recognize and address students’ learning difficulties. The Matèwa Community Learning Center, which is considered to be the best school in La Gonâve due, in part, to its successful innovation of educating the children in their native language of Creole, is growing its capacity to extend teacher training due to the collaboration with NDMU.

In year one of the NDMU teacher-training program, a four member team from the University provided four days of professional development to Haitian teachers from La Gonâve. Each morning, they taught the skills necessary for success in the early years of education; afternoons allowed teachers to practice strategies learned in the morning with children from a summer camp at the school. Year two, in summer 2018, provided additional professional devel-

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<sup>49</sup>Model Community Initiative, 2. Cf. Michael DeGraff, “Mother-tongue Books in Haiti: The Power of Kreyol in Learning to Read and in Reading to Learn,” *PROSPECTS: Comparative Journal of Curriculum, Learning, and Assessment* 46, nos. 3–4 (2016).

<sup>50</sup>Beyond Borders, “Ending Child Slavery.”

opment, including strategies for grouping students, classroom management, and identification of reading difficulties. Years three and four will focus on reading and math skills. Teachers who complete the four sessions will receive a certificate from NDMU. Currently, 13 highly motivated Haitian teachers are participating in the program, and the hope is that they will go on to train others.

To complement these educational opportunities, the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership helps to facilitate sustainable livelihoods for the families of La Gonâve. The model they use is called the “Graduation Model,” which is “an asset-building approach” in which participants, over an 18-month period, are trained and coached to manage and grow productive assets. At the end of the program, the hope is that they will graduate with the ability to sustain themselves and their families. This approach is based on the work of Fonkoze, Haiti’s largest micro-finance lender, whose “implementation of the model with 150 women—97% of whom graduated—resulted in a 50% drop in hunger among participants. The number who also reported that all or most of their children were regularly attending school increased too—from 27% to 70%.”<sup>51</sup>

The Graduation Model program consists of the following components: first, participants choose two income-generating assets, such as goats, pigs, or mules, and they are given a cash subsidy to help prevent the need to sell their assets; second, participants receive training on how to manage those assets effectively; third, individual coaches visit with participants weekly in their homes to provide training and support in using and developing their assets; fourth, participants are provided with access to free veterinary services and personal medical care, as well basic home repairs, the construction or repair of latrines, water filters, and life-skills training, in order to maintain health and safety; and finally, participants join a village savings and loan group to assist with investment and emergency funds.<sup>52</sup>

In addition, AMSSND helps to provide water catchment systems to ensure sustainable access to water and the ability to grow food.<sup>53</sup> La Gonâve is extremely water-insecure, so a system for catching rainwater has proven critical to the success of families in the Model Community Initiative and the wider region. In 2018, 96 families received these systems, and AMSSND aims

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<sup>51</sup>Freda Catheus and Brian Stevens, “The Graduation Model: A ‘Self-Help’ Model Proven to Lift up the Poorest,” *Beyond Borders*, accessed July 25, 2019, <https://beyondborders.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Graduation-Model-Story.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>AMSSND, “The Haiti Water Initiative,” Accessed July 25, 2019, [https://atlanticmidwest.org/files/attachments/post/handout\\_amssnd\\_beyond\\_borders\\_haiti\\_water\\_initiative.pdf](https://atlanticmidwest.org/files/attachments/post/handout_amssnd_beyond_borders_haiti_water_initiative.pdf).

to provide systems to at least 100 families in 2019.<sup>54</sup> This “Water Initiative” includes instruction in sanitation and maintenance to ensure proper and sustainable use of the catchment systems. It also involves assistance micro-irrigation for the development of family and school gardens, which “provide food for daily meals and help students and parents learn how to improve their farming techniques to produce higher yields.”<sup>55</sup> Further, increased access to clean water decreases the number of hours women and girls traditionally have had to spend fetching water, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will be able to attend school.

These programs, which involve high levels of relational involvement between participants and AMSSND/Beyond Borders, address the financial and educational deficiencies that are often the impetus for violence, abuse, and child trafficking,<sup>56</sup> and they establish strong communal ties to support families in their efforts. By assisting families in developing sustainable livelihoods and providing access to quality education for those who are most vulnerable, the AMSSND/Beyond Borders partnership provides an example of a practical and dignified approach to countering the cycle of poverty and illiteracy that undermines human flourishing.

Sister Charmaine said of this partnership, “I believe that our sisters are proud of this development as it is giving us new life as well as a new vision of mission.” It will be helpful now to conclude this paper by identifying what is entailed by this “new vision of mission.”

### III. “ONENESS” AND PARTNERSHIP IN A VISION OF SOLIDARITY

The SSND community has been “called and sent” to “proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom” and to “deepen communion with God and among people wherever [they] are—in every place, in every time, in every situation.”<sup>57</sup> Sister Charmaine, speaking of the SSND approach to mission, has said that “a mindset in which ‘all seek the good of all’ . . . describes what reality will be like when God’s Kingdom comes in its fullness.” We recognize in this mindset the principle of solidarity, which, Pope John Paul II reminds us, “is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination

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<sup>54</sup>Note, again, the interconnection of this initiative with one of the other provincial commitments—universal access to clean water.

<sup>55</sup>Beyond Borders, “Guaranteeing Universal Access to Quality Education,” accessed July 25, 2019, <https://beyondborders.net/what-we-do/guaranteeing-universal-access-to-quality-education/>.

<sup>56</sup>See page 14, above, for more on the link between these issues.

<sup>57</sup>*You Are Sent*, Constitution, 1–2 and 9.



to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>58</sup> The “good news of God’s kingdom” to which the SSND community is called to bear witness is thus easily tied to the principle of solidarity—the “oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent” is expressed, for them, through solidarity.

Seeking the good of all, however, turns on an authentic account of what is *good* for a human being. The Catholic Magisterium thus recommends “to all men and women a humanism that is up to the standards of God’s plan of love in history, an integral and solidary humanism capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity.”<sup>59</sup> Applying this principle, known as “integral human development,” further requires a robust understanding of both the nature of human beings generally, and the specific characteristics and circumstances that a particular person embodies.

As we have seen, the Augustinian conception of personhood—especially as it reflects the Trinity in intra- and interpersonal relationality—offers a compelling picture of humanity that grounds activity in reality. By rooting our actions in the truth of God’s eternal being, while interpreting experiences through the lens of creative love, we can approach the common good with an ethic that is stable enough to provide a standard of right action, but fluid enough to allow relational considerations to shape the contours of our lives. “When we understand ourselves to be related to others (and constituted by others) in a universal community, our actions will reflect a desire to make our relationships right and good—i.e., we will engage in actions that ‘fit,’ as it were, the continuous process of seeking good.”<sup>60</sup>

We should note that the AMSSND commitment to the Haitian people developed from a personal connection with Sister Limètèze, and its implementation through partnership with Beyond Borders, an established NGO in the region, demonstrates an effort to empower the people of La Gonâve to direct their own lives and to participate fully in their communities. In accord with Augustine’s recognition that authentic relationship depends on affirming the uniqueness of the other, the partnership has sought to promote the integral development of the Haitian people by learning about and responding to specific

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<sup>58</sup>John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, Encyclical letter for the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, Vatican Web site, December 30, 1987, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html), §38.

<sup>59</sup>Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), Introduction.d.19.

<sup>60</sup>Bonnette, “The Heart of Justice,” 208.



needs in ways that fit Haitian culture and cultivate La Gonâve's natural resources, while working to transform those structures that deny dignity.

AMSSND has committed to financing and collaborating where possible in programs that affirm the dignity of their Haitian neighbors, and this commitment is reflected in the province's budget and annual goals. Thus, the people of Haiti and the programs that are needed to support their development are the beneficiaries of AMSSND resources. This is evidence of solidarity: choosing to include one's neighbor among those to whom one's own goods belong. Further, the relationships that have developed reflect the "mutual enrichment" that occurs when we encounter others in a way that is open and responsive to their dignity and our interdependency. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* reminds us, "Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity."<sup>61</sup>

I should emphasize, in closing, that while we might embrace the sentiment of solidarity, the context of globalization can make it difficult to ascertain who constitutes a particular neighbor to whom we owe concrete care. Augustine offers practical guidance in this regard:

All [people] are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you. For, suppose that you had a great deal of some commodity, and felt bound to give it away to somebody who had none, and that it could not be given to more than one person; if two persons presented themselves, neither of whom had either from need or relationship a greater claim upon you than the other, you could do nothing fairer than choose by lot to which you would give what could not be given to both. Just so among [people]: since you cannot consult for the good of them all, you must take the matter as decided for you by a sort of lot, according as each [person] happens for the time being to be more closely connected with you.<sup>62</sup>

This seems to me to be helpful advice. In general, we should seek to be "one" with those who "by lot" are within our immediate circle of contact. The global scope of potential relationships in our time, however, adds another dimension

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<sup>61</sup>Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium*, I.4.VI.a.192.

<sup>62</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.28.29, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 2, trans. James Shaw, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887,) rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1202.htm>.

to consider. Our activity and immediate relationships always should be conditioned by the knowledge that every action has a global effect.

What the AMSSND partnership approach to mission demonstrates for us is that our neighbors—as the parable of the Good Samaritan instructs—are those to whom we offer ourselves in relationship. By working to meet the needs of others, we make ourselves neighbors to them. Still, while globalization has made it possible for us to be neighbors to distant people, we should remember that we are embodied, finite beings, who physically cannot relate to every other person. For some, then, the pursuit of global solidarity might take the form of activism, charity, or education; but for others who are called to deeper engagement, like the SSNDs, partnership is an exciting possibility.

Pursuing partnership as a model for mission offers a practical solution to those of us who feel called to practice active solidarity with our physically-distant neighbors, but who feel bound to our location by age, family, relational commitments, or various other responsibilities and callings. By following the Holy Spirit's prodding, as the AMSSND community has, we can discern actions that fulfill both sets of responsibilities—proximal and distant; because, of course, insofar as an integrated self is required for seeking right relationships, we will not be called to do something that is opposed to other callings or relational responsibilities. When we, like Augustine and the SSNDs, take the Trinity as the model for our sense of self and community, we can see that doing justice depends upon our willingness to embrace our interdependency; in our willingness to include more and more neighbors in "that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>*You Are Sent*, Constitution, 4.

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