

Missionary apostolate sends students, grads 'to the nations'

The call to the missionary life is a large cornerstone in the history of the Catholic Church. However, without the means to support such service or the guidance to pursue independent trips, some people are unable to follow the call.

One organization is trying to change that. Ad Gentes Mission is a Catholic apostolate established to help independent lay missionaries with financial support, practical instruction and spiritual guidance as they travel the world bringing souls to Christ. It began by helping send young missionaries to assist an American priest operating a mission in Russia in 2017, and today it supports six missions worldwide.

"It's been humbling to see the growth of Ad Gentes Mission in such a short period of time," said Heather Perry, founder and president. "At our last meeting, my board of directors and I sat back in awe at the response we've received. We've really met a need for students who want to do independent missions."

Pilgrimage to Poland

Perry was a stay-at-home mother of five from the Washington, D.C., area when she went on pilgrimage to Poland in 2013 and felt a "call to global evangelization." Over the next two years, "I couldn't shake this burning desire in my heart each time I went to Mass," she said.

In 2016, she learned of a student-led mission to Magadan, a far-eastern Russian coastal city that had been a gulag during the Stalin era. The students went to assist the missionary work of Father Michael Shields, a priest of the Diocese of Anchorage, who is serving as pastor of Magadan's Church of the

Nativity. Perry supported the students both financially and through her prayers.

In 2017, Perry bought a home in Steubenville, Ohio, near the campus of her alma mater, Franciscan University. Its purpose was to serve as a mission house for students interested in doing missionary work – a place where they can “connect and find community with one another.”

Wanting to do more, she founded Ad Gentes Mission (Latin for the missionary cry “To the nations!”), which in three months was helping missionaries going to Peru, Alaska, Russia, Ireland and Ukraine with such needs as fundraising, training and leadership skills. Missionaries to Russia were given an introduction to the Russian language.

In its first year, the organization helped nearly 50 students turn their desire to be a missionary into a tangible reality. “It’s been very exciting,” Perry said. “I really believe we’re following a call of the Holy Spirit.”

Ukraine mission

Caroline Reel, a first-grade teacher from Scottsdale, Arizona, volunteered to teach English in Lviv, Ukraine, through a program called English Summer School, which served Ukrainian Catholic University students in 2017. “After returning, I felt a deep call to bring back a team of Catholic, American missionaries to serve those in Ukraine through the same program,” she said. Ad Gentes facilitated her return in 2018, helping send 12 total missionaries to serve 250 students this past summer. The three-week immersion camp helped Ukrainian students learn English and receive an introduction to American culture, with students invited to take part in daily Mass and praise and worship.

“To learn, walk and pray with peers from Ukraine is our ministry,” Reel said. “As volunteers, we understood that this

was the Lord's mission and that the Holy Spirit would work in our lives. We chose missionaries ready to serve, willing to give and eager to live the joy of the Gospel."

This was Reel's first mission trip, and the support Ad Gentes offered was "monumental." The organization's mission house near the Franciscan University campus offered space to pray and "gather and form a community." It also helped the Ukraine mission streamline its fundraising process and organize its donor information.

Reel is anxious to return to work with the Ukrainian students, serve the Church and "fulfill God's plan for my life.

"The love I have can only be of the Lord," she said. "I've yet to experience anything like it, and it has transformed every aspect of my life. The idea of returning to that community we've all worked to foster makes my heart sing. I believe this is the Lord's work."

Bottom-up approach

Christopher Thorpe of Newton, Iowa, participated in a weeklong trip to Lima, Peru, in the spring of 2018. His team interacted with the local poor who lived in neighborhoods scattered across the rocky mountain slopes outside the city. The team built concrete staircases up the sides of the mountains, providing an infrastructure to a part of the city that has none.

Thorpe describes Ad Gentes as a "practical answer to the call for a New Evangelization, which I think to be completely unique. They enable lay, college-age Catholics to participate in the missionary activity of the Church at a time in our lives when we are most free to leave behind the responsibilities we have as students."

He noted that Ad Gentes encouraged the missions to be independent and student-organized – "a bottom-up approach

where they refrain from setting up missions themselves and instead leave the students free to go where they feel called.”

Variety of opportunities

Ad Gentes also provides opportunities to students at Franciscan University such as internships, working alongside the team behind the scenes. The mission house also has a staff of three young women who facilitate events at the home, such as Sunday night community dinners and a speaker series. Many of the missionaries, including Reel and Thorpe, are students or recent graduates of Franciscan University.

The missionaries may work in conjunction with a diocesan bishop, as in the case of the Alaska mission, or work with existing Catholic missions, such as in Magadan. The missionaries are typically well-versed in the Faith, many with degrees in theology and catechesis.

Although Ad Gentes is a new organization, Perry already has seen much success, not just in the places that have had missions, but in the lives of the missionaries themselves. Reel, for example, noted that “my life has truly been transformed by mission work,” prompting her return to be a full-time missionary.

Another missionary to Magadan, Melody Doudna, has established a full-time mission in her home diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska.

“That is a big success,” Perry said. “Our short-term missionaries feel called to doing full-time mission work.”

Perry welcomes prayers and donations to support the work of Ad Gentes and inquiries by prospective missionaries.

Jim Graves writes from California.