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## Chapter 6: How Can We Move Away from Social Injustices? A Catholic, Marianist Perspective

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## CHAPTER 6

# **How Can We Move Away from Social Injustices? A Catholic, Marianist Perspective**

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My experiences in Ghana and Togo challenged me physically, but more importantly they presented an opportunity for me to reflect upon the different forms of social injustice present in our world today. Given the complexity of social injustice, it is reasonable to conclude that we can all learn more about this broad topic by listening to others' experiences. With humility and gratitude for this experiential travel opportunity, I would like to share what my first journey through West Africa taught me about social injustices through the lens of a Marianist university faculty member.

At the foundation of every Marianist institution lies the community-building charism. This core charism was an integral piece in William Chaminade's foundation of the Marianist society for William Chaminade encouraged the formation of small communities to revive the Catholic Church in post-revolutionary France. The same sense of community-building was ever present in our Global Education Seminar (GES) traveling cohort, in our interactions with Ghanaian and Togolese individuals, and in various

destinations throughout Ghana and Togo. Our traveling cohort consisted of eight professionally diverse faculty members from the departments of history, sociology and criminal justice, teacher education, music, engineering, and physical therapy. Each member of the cohort consistently shared his or her strengths for the betterment of the group experience. One of our group members shared every type of medical necessity imaginable, others provided comic relief during stressful events, and still others were leaders in communication and translating local languages.

Despite our diversity in backgrounds and strengths, I observed how remarkable it was that each member was able to accomplish his/her individual academic goals, goals that were outlined prior to the in-country experience. The accomplishment of these respective goals were achieved through individual sacrifices, such as waiting longer periods or changing plans unexpectedly. In my opinion, however, each individual's ability to adjust to unexpected situations was what made the group, our small community, successful and what spawned respect for all group members.

Community building was also present outside of our traveling group of faculty. We interacted with and were hosted by Catholic Marianist sisters, brothers, and priests in two separate regions of Togo. There warmth, hospitality and sense of inclusiveness were evident. Each host offered beverages and gifts, but most importantly they offered their time to share the mission of their community and to make us feel welcome, asking nothing from us in return.

Apart from the cohort's collective experience, however, I witnessed a clear sense of community in my interactions with physiotherapists in both Ghana and Togo. Among the physiotherapists in both Ghana and Togo, there was an obvious sense of altruism for their country, other physiotherapists, and the patients they served. The Ghana Physiotherapy Association regularly organizes health brigades on selected weekends to reach out to underserved and disabled individuals in their country. In Togo, physiotherapists readily admit that continuing education programs are somewhat of a luxury, so it is the responsibility of those receiving physiotherapy continuing education to share the gained

knowledge and skill set with other physiotherapists, even those not affiliated with their network of hospitals or clinics.

Finally, I was reminded of the importance of community building in some of our specific destinations. Approximately halfway through our travel time, our faculty cohort embarked on an unplanned journey across Lake Togo to tour the island of Togoville. We were escorted in a large wooden fishing boat across the lake and were able to take in the picturesque scenery until we docked on the sandy beaches of Togoville. For me, there was an immediate sense of inclusiveness and community on the island. As we started the tour, our guide explained that in the 1970's there had been a Marian apparition on the lake of Our Lady of Lake Togo, Mother of Mercy. Subsequently, Saint John Paul II in 1985 had visited the island and had given his blessing.

Part of what John Paul II accomplished in his pontificate was international unity and community building. In order to promote global unity, he often visited and prayed for remote areas of the world largely forgotten by the developed world. Rightly so, Togoville is proud to have been a host of John Paul II, and so there are many signs and pictures of his visit to the island. I suspect the origins of this sense of community in Togoville is multifactorial, but I believe that John Paul II's outreach and acceptance of the Togolese people unifies the village and contributes to this aura of community clearly felt when outsiders visit.

There were many other examples and themes of community building embedded within our group's collective three-week experience in West Africa, but too many to discuss them all in detail. Overall, the sharing of talents, resources, and time were consistent themes. Other strong community building characteristics that I witnessed were acceptance of diversity, empowering others who have limited access to resources, a warm sense of welcoming to outsiders, and individual willingness to make sacrifices.

During the last leg of our journey, I was reminded of an example in history when the concept of true community was completely broken and distorted. Our cohort toured two colonial castles in the Cape Coast region that were ultimately used as a trading post for

slaves. At one point during our tour of Cape Coast Castle, I became physically sick as I thought about the contradiction of a church service being held just above a dungeon for female slaves. Most of us have read about the atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade, but to experience the lighting, smells, and heat of the castle dungeons encourages one to reflect on how these injustices were allowed, and more broadly, on what injustices are still occurring today.

Then, during meals and evening nightcaps, our cohort, in community-like fashion, discussed our personal reactions to the castle tours, followed by our posing of those broader questions about current and ongoing injustices and forms of slavery. Why are there still many areas of the world without access to water, education, or health care? Why is there still human trafficking? Why are we not protecting those without a voice? What are the answers?

Clearly, the answers are complex, but perhaps what I recently witnessed in West Africa about strong community building is part of the solution. The more I reflected, the more I realized that I am part of many small communities in my life and that I can be more accepting, welcoming, sharing, and willing to make sacrifices. Perhaps I will start with my family and work life, and given the resources, I can help contribute to a better sense of community within my country and parts of Ghana and Togo. But everyone is part of some type of community, so I now challenge all individuals reading this to reflect and to take action in promoting true community building in your families, work communities, local communities, and religious communities. Let us pray for a true sense of community throughout the world as we work together to move away from the atrocities of unjust treatment.