Columns
Horizons
Ministry



Mercy Sr. Jennifer Wilson, center, with Mount Mercy Academy student Anani Debose, right, on a service trip to Guyana in 2019 (Courtesy of Jennifer Wilson)



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A friend said, "Well, you got your service hours for this week," referring to some extra hours I spent helping a struggling family. I laughed, knowing she was talking about something one inquisitive student had asked me one day.

I am always reminding my students about working toward their required 25 annual service hours and letting them know about service opportunities. One day, a student said, "Sister, do you have to do service hours?" I laughed to myself and explained the vow of service that Sisters of Mercy take.

All religious communities do service. The Sisters of Mercy are unique in taking a vow of service.

People sometimes ask me about my favorite part of being a Sister of Mercy. I love my life and could go on for a long time about this, but what I often say is linked to the vow of service. I cannot be everywhere and do everything; however, together as Sisters of Mercy, we can and do make a difference in this world that is plagued by so many problems. Whether it is here in Buffalo, New York, or as far away as the Philippines, you will find the Sisters of Mercy, associates, companions, Mercy Volunteer Corps members and those who work with us striving to relieve the suffering of others. This might be through direct service or through advocacy work.

I like to say there is always a Sister of Mercy somewhere causing trouble. By this, I mean that one of us is out there advocating for God's people in some way.



Mercy Srs. Jennifer Wilson, left, Colleen O'Toole, center, and Beth Dempsey at O'Toole's final vows in May (Courtesy of Jennifer Wilson)

At the end of May, Sr. Colleen O'Toole, with whom I live, made her final vows. After listening to one of our sisters reflect on the vows, I started to think about that vow of service and how Colleen has lived it and is living it every day, how each of us there had performed countless hours of service to others and to each other regardless of whether we are sisters or not.

I often explain to my students that we do service because it is a way of expressing our love for others and for our community. At first, for many of them, it is a requirement, and they often complain. I love being able to witness the moment when it goes from being something they are forced to do to something they want to do. They realize that they made a difference in whatever small way. Their reflections become about how they made someone smile, or they reassured a scared child, or they talked with someone who needed some encouragement. One student wrote, "When I serve others, I feel as if the God in me is coming out."

Last weekend, the Gospel at Mass was one of my favorites: the good Samaritan. The priest talked about how in that time, there were no good Samaritans, at least not to the Jewish people. The Samaritans had different customs and were looked down upon.

Later that day, I was taking a walk in my parents' neighborhood, and I saw a political sign that I did not agree with. I saw a man rushing out of that house and realized he was first responder. This man does a service we all might need at some time. He serves the community, never knowing what he will find when he arrives at a call. If this man believes the sign in his yard, who am I to judge? But judge I do.

I began to think about the Jewish people and the Samaritan people. How today, we might say there are no good Democrats or there are no good Republicans, how as a nation we are divided. The Jewish people would have said there was no good Samaritan, and yet on that day, there was: a person who saw another in need and reached out regardless.

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It can seem like there is nothing good happening in our world. The recent horrific mass shootings have rocked our sense of safety and have highlighted for me the need for each other more than ever. I am reminded of an old Irish proverb that says, "In the shelter of each other the people live." We need each other, regardless of race, political views, sexual orientation or anything else. Each of us serves others in different ways. The large majority of people are good and serve people in big and small ways.

The guy I saw rushing out to respond to an emergency — to help those in need — and the parable of the good Samaritan were a reminder to focus on what I can do for others and to remember what others do for me. To remember what my student said in her service reflection, "When I serve others, I feel as if the God in me is coming out."

God is in all of us, regardless of our views. We are all called to serve in ways that are unique to each of us to make the lives of those around us better by using our gifts in big and small ways.