

Gleaning the Fields
Parish Diary
Fr. Peter Daly
July 27, 2012

Fr. Daly talks about the youth on mission who gleaned the fields around his parish for the poor.

In ancient Israel, the rich were not supposed to harvest everything in their fields. They were supposed to leave something for the poor.

In the Bible, Ruth goes out to “glean” the fields of Boaz, so she can feed herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. In Leviticus, chapter 19, the law of Israel forbid the “gleaning” of the fields by the owner, so that something would be left over for the poor. The prophets like Jeremiah thought that one of the social injustices of Israel and Judah was that the rich left nothing in the fields for the poor.

This past week in our parish we have seen those Biblical instructions lived out.

Some of the farmers in our area have set aside part of their fields for the poor. They call the program “Farming for the Hungry.” A portion of the corn, potatoes, beans and other produce from their fields goes to our local hungry through our local food banks. This gives poor families fresh produce in season, instead of just canned goods.

The problem is, how to harvest this food.

The youth from the Catholic Heart Work Camp, who have been staying at our parish, came to the rescue. They went out into the fields and “gleaned” them. They picked over 30,000 pounds of corn and dug up several thousand pounds of potatoes. They harvested other produce.

After they were done, other teams helped distributed them to more than 200 families in our community through our parish food bank.

They did this all in 100 degree plus weather. The temperature in the fields had to be over 110 degrees on the July days they were harvesting. It did not deter these healthy teenagers. They even sang while they worked. They did all this with such cheerfulness and enthusiasm that everyone was overwhelmed.

And they did it all for free. They were all volunteers. They traveled to us from Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida and other parts of Maryland.

The farmer who set aside his land for the poor came and gave a testimony at their closing prayer session. He was impressed by what wonderful young people they were. The manager of our food bank talked about how hard they worked and how joyful they were.

These mostly middle class Catholic kids did not shy away from hard work. It is common for older people to complain about younger people not wanting to work. We have no such complaint with the 250 young people who were at our parish this past week.

What drove them was their love of God and their neighbor. St. Paul says that the love of Christ impelled him to preach the gospel. These young people were preaching the gospel all week with the most marvelous joy. For a week our parish was given over to their witness.

In the evenings when they were cooking for dinner, the camp staff also reflected that joy. They had their music cranked up in the kitchen and the kitchen staff danced while they cooked.

Youth are full of energy. Even after a long day picking corn or digging potatoes in the field, they came home and prayed, danced, sang and celebrated late into the night.

They also have a great desire for meaning. Their work and their skits and their prayers showed that they are not far from the kingdom of God. Amazing what happens when the scripture comes alive. God’s grace becomes real. The poor are fed and the good news is preached.