

# THE NATIONAL SOLIDARITY PROJECT IN COSTA CANAL

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The experience takes place among the six Company of Mary Schools in Argentina and attempts to offer an integral response to the different challenges that today's world present to our mission of education.

## 1. Description of the Experience

This Educational Project consists of three phases:

- a. work on site at each school during 2006
- b. a national meeting in April of 2007
- c. a new onsite work in each place during 2007 and 2008

### a) Work onsite

Taking into account the proposals for the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the Pastoral Committee took up the goal of "*realizing true solidarity*" in order to bring to fruition a joint project among the six schools in Argentina which are geographically very far from one another. From Buenos Aires to Mendoza 1,100 km; Gualeguaychu 300 km; to Bahia Blanca, 800 km.

The Argentine Province has a solidarity program named FAS (*Fondo Argentino de Solidaridad*): the Argentine Solidarity to which the poorest areas annually present small projects. Their purpose is to collaborate with small entrepreneurs as best they can and produce what may be of help for groups in need.

In 2006, a group of women who live in the area called "Costa Canal" (because their houses are on the edge of a water canal) presented to FAS an expansion project of a small sewing shop, adding also the idea that it might be used as a studio for painting and the arts.

The expansion would promote the apprenticeships of many women and a greater sale of their manufactured garments. This would help these families give shelter to their children. This project was approved in its entirety by the Pastoral Committee of all of the Company of Mary schools who planned the way to accomplish it.

Early in 2006 each school coordinator presented the project to the young people of the first year (Polimodal=15 year olds) with a free and voluntary invitation. With the elements that they were given, the young people were to decide on their level of participation. The commitment consisted of working on 'the project' for one year and at the same time meet at each place weekly or twice a month for personal reflection when possible. The young people who decided to participate had meetings at which they shared moments of reflection, organization and evaluation of their assignments, and personal or group attitudes.

They worked to cover the breadth of the Project in its totality also bringing other materials for the work of the shop; fabrics, threads, tools used in sewing... etc. In order to achieve the economic goals, the young people used a variety of activities during the year, involving their families, the teachers of every educational center, the neighbors (the sale of sweet and salty items; raffles; soccer tournaments; and theater presentations that brought everyone together.)

For group reflection the idea came up as an axis around which the six schools were centered:

sentences about Jeanne de Lestonnac, each prepared by a different school who used them to get to know each other. They were brought out again at the final meeting to share from their experience and what they had learned from them.

### **b) The National Meeting**

The important part of the experience was the big meeting of all of the youth who took part in the project. This took place at the end of April 2007, and 100 young people and their 17 guests attended. At the meeting they shared their actual experience during their year of work and reflection; they got to know each other, “Costa Canal” for whom they worked together throughout the year; and they became acquainted with the “Our Lady of Milagro” Shop. At the meeting, one day was dedicated to recalling the recent activities of the past year with various dynamics that helped them to share what they had achieved. Another day was dedicated to their work and their reflection about “today” the “present” and to meet with the people there; another day to think together about “tomorrow” and the future because *“we cannot ignore what we have seen and heard...”*

During and after the meeting the young people have expressed that...

- the experience showed that a process can be as important, or even more so, than the goal of the action
- the building up of the team in each site (going beyond being merely a group) required effort and work but it was one of the greatest lessons.
- the life experience of being **“Body”** which gave us a sense of belonging to the Company of Mary, was a gift, and led us to **“Fulfill Our Name”**
- the meeting and the closeness with other young people, so similar, yet so different, opened new possibilities, created new friendships...was very rewarding. It was a good life lesson to share, to tolerate, to dialogue, to live together... It has been helpful in order **“To Maintain Friendship Among Us...”**
- the meeting with the people of Costa Canal changed the way we look at life...we could look beyond what you see at first sight, to discover the face of Christ in the most needy people... we were moved by these people, their situation, their fighting spirit of hope to make a better life for themselves
- we learned that unity and solidarity are an attitude and **work**, it is a personal surrender, it is putting yourself in the place of another and having another person’s view... it is to **“Extend Our “Hand” and to “Maintain the Flame”**
- these experiences create a commitment with the whole community to continue with new experiences of service and solidarity. Growing in reflection, discernment, spirituality and prayer... **“to serve in an ever new way...”**
- we feel great appreciation to those who made this experience possible...we have had many rich and educational opportunities in so many ways: knowledge, self worth and respect for others, the development of individual and group life skills, the achievement of the original goals, to meet other people, to discover other realities, to examine our own attitudes and for our own personal growth, in order to *be “like Mary Our Lady...”*
- now we ask ourselves, Where do we go from here? What do we do? And ideas and projects start developing among us... in order **“to continue uniting our strengths.”**

### **c) Breaking New Ground**

Upon returning everyone shared their experience in their individual schools - with the Administration Teams, the teachers, and the students. Then the students had to reflect on what way to proceed that could give continuity to the group - in prayer and in deed, allowing and encouraging other young people to commit to new projects.

Some of the projects that they are thinking about and designing include:

- continuing to communicate with the people of Costa Canal, and continuing to work in groups to send them something of what they need.
- maintain the bonds with the students of the other school, to continue on the internet, continue to deepen their solidarity, incorporating it in their daily lives
- to be passionate about their school subjects, organizing themselves for local solidarity projects to found and maintain a missionary Group (Club) to offer service in schools for the blind: recordings of stories, poetry, conversations in another language...etc.
- to sponsor a Youth Meeting with their families, to share and dialogue about this experience, proposing everyone's involvement in the future
- to propose the organization of some seasonal events: in winter, collect clothes, for the party of the children: toys, etc.

#### ■ Proposed General Objectives

- to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Company of Mary with the group of young people who in each school worked together during the year, organizing events and preparing themselves for the celebration
- to bring together two realities, two worlds with diverse possibilities, and form an analysis of the reality, to allow themselves to be affected by it, to feel compassion and desire to promote social justice
- to share with Costa Canal what has been achieved in solidarity by the young people of the six schools as part of the Universal **“to make solidarity real”**,
- to get to know the places and the people of the Solidarity Project, talk with them, celebrate with them
- to meet the youth of the other schools, bond with each other, create ties, become friends, and exchange life experiences
- share with catechists and young people the common road in the Company of Mary while reflecting on the sentences of Jeanne de Lestonnac that give us our identity
- cause us to know new ways of proclaiming the gospel, promoting values and building among us all another possible world, from an agreement to seek justice and solidarity
- to integrate the union that exists between: faith-commitment, social-work, intellectual service and the transformation of reality

#### ■ **“The Recipients,” people who are chosen for specific experiences**

In a direct way:

- the families of Costa Canal who have been visited and who received the materials
- the women of the sewing shop, the art and design studio, and salon. All were recipients, to receive help and materials
- the young people who have achieved their goals throughout the year

Indirectly, all of the school community, the families of the young people who supported the acts of charity... all were chosen “recipients” by being a part of this experience

#### ■ **Activities Achieved to Obtain Our Goal**

- Meeting of the Pastoral Committee to discuss how to achieve the goal- “to make solidarity real”
- Meeting of the Pastoral Committee to design a National Solidarity Project
- become familiar with projects presented to FAS
- selection of the project to present to the students of the first “Palimodal” of the six schools of Argentina
- presentation of the project to the Administration Teams
- Meeting of the catechists of each school to familiarize everyone with the project and see the activities to implement it
- presentation of the project to the students as an open call and invitation for the meetings

- and work for the year
- variety of raising events to earn the money required for the project: festivals, group get togethers, kiosks, recreational and sports activities, food sales... etc.
- collection and deposit of all funds necessary for the sewing shop and the materials needed
- preparation of the students by way of reflection and meditating on the words of Jeanne de Lestonnac, each one prepared by one of our schools
- meeting of the Pastoral Committee to prepare for the annual National Youth Convention
- meeting with the parents to inform them of all the details of the Convention and to get their permission slip.
- each school prepares the activities that they have chosen to coordinate for the Convention
- attendance at the National Convention, the closing party for the students, families, catechists...
- the sharing of the life experiences in their schools, after their return from the meeting in Costa Canal

■ **Methodology Used**

- Executive board dialogue for reflection, to seek, to design to agree, and to elaborate
- Group presentations (Administration, faculty, parents students... etc.)
- collaborative work, by entire groups and/or subdivided into different assignments
- evaluations and subsequent modifications

■ **Time Line of the Experience**

- meeting agenda: several meetings of the Pastoral committee-preparation of the students and the work required to achieve the project: 2006
- The National Meeting: three days after the meeting: designs and strategies for new community projects that benefit others

■ **Coordination With Other Groups and Entities...**

**At both internal and external levels for the development of the experience**

- on an internal level : with different organizations, individuals, groups... to acquire the resources needed and for the housing during the days of the meeting

■ **Ways and Means and the Budget**

- the youth of the schools creatively came up with the ideas- activities to raise the funds for the project, for the trip, and for the meeting

**2. Analysis of the Experience**

■ **The most valuable aspects of the experience**

- the important growth of every person in the group
- the work accomplished in teams, uniting both the criteria and the options
- the compassionate and the human community perspective about a very needy situation, coming up with a project and responding together to the need
- the work over the internet by the Pastoral Coordinator from all six schools
- the celebration of the 400 year anniversary with the young people in such a united and community way
- the depth of our identity as Company of Mary
- the knowledge about the Company of Mary at a national level, knowing that we are a part of that 'body'
- the contrast, living the two economic realities which are so different within our country

- the meeting, from our lived experience, from a formal and informal education

■ **The Difficulties We Faced and How We Dealt With Them**

- the long distances between many of the schools
- the travel expenses to get to Costa Canal
- the overseeing of these charity activities in the six schools
- at the conference there was some lack of coordination and organization

**3. Conclusions**

This is a practical life experience because :

- it responds to a concrete need in a specific and designated place - Costa Canal
- it is also a response to students who are in search of their identity... the students need their own space and this activity allowed them the opportunity to come up with proposals to meet each other, create, help others, to focus on someone else, and to share
- it provides the students and their parents human and Christian growth
- it strengthens the network among the six schools
- it creates a bond between education in formal schools and the 'popular' education
- it brings together very different socio-economic realities, creating bonds and new insight
- it makes possible, for our young people, as well as their parents, a greater sense of belonging and identity with the Company of Mary, it promotes evangelization, fosters spiritual growth, and bears fruit in works of social justice