

ASSESSMENT OF THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL FACULTY INVOLVEMENT IN THE “ALAY PASKO” PROGRAM OF UNIVERSITY OF SAINT LOUIS

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Abstract— The University of Saint Louis, as a Catholic CICM institution, initiates and participates in constructive and relevant social activities for the promotion of justice, peace, and integrity of creation. This is attested by its gift-giving program called “Alay Pasko,” which has been sustained since 1990. Funds for this project come from the initiatives and donations of the whole Louisiana community. Its prime purpose is to make the marginalized families feel the Christmas spirit of sharing. The practice of giving is done during the Christmas season, where employees and students distribute grocery/noche buena gifts to the recipients. This exemplifies a person who shares his blessings with others. Reflection sheets are filled out by the participants after the conduct of the program to process their experiential learning and critically assess their experiences in relation to the objective of the program and vision-mission of the university. The reflection sheets filled out by 27 teachers were used to materialize the purpose of the study. The reflections are studied, and three themes were deduced, which include social awareness and responsibility; Christian spirituality and values; and self-realization and worthiness. Results of the study show that the “Alay Pasko” has permitted the teachers to recognize their talents and blessings and their clients, which will only be appreciated if these are shared with others, especially those who are in most need. Consequently, the program made them realize that happiness and contentment are also achieved through sharing one’s blessings and helping others. Furthermore, the study reveals that the “Alay Pasko” has awakened the teachers to the realities and needs of the society, hence, prompting them to be responsible not only for themselves but also for others. Also, it shows that reaching out to people made the teachers exemplify their Christian obligation of involving oneself in the life of others and the community, thus, serving. Finally, the results attest that the university has always been consistent in its involvement in constructive and relevant social activities, therefore, developing individuals as responsive citizens of the country and worth emulating Christians.

Keywords— *outreach program, faculty involvement, alay-pasko*

I. INTRODUCTION

The University of Saint Louis, as a CICM Catholic educational institution, aligns itself with its trifocal functions of instruction,

research, and extension. Believing that community involvement is a basic and persistent aspect of university education, the university, through the Community Extension Services Office, initiates and implements extension/outreach/community service activities that allow students, faculty, and personnel to apply new knowledge they generate to address specific social development problems. The extension function of the university is articulated in its four core values: True Christian Living, Academic Excellence, Professional Responsibility, and Social Awareness and Involvement. Having been founded and inspired by the CICM missionaries, the university does not only seek to fulfill the academic standards set forth by the state but is mindful as well of her responsibility and identity as a missionary Catholic institution. As such, its community outreach programs are deemed transformative and more aligned to the CICM pastoral priorities, which are directed towards the poor, the marginalized, the indigenous peoples, the youth, and the environment. Moreover, these programs should emanate from a spirit of volunteerism among the faculty, employees, and students of the university.

Charity is a virtue innate to man. It is a perfection of human spirit, for it glorifies and reflects the nature of the Divine Creator, who is a generous God. It is with this belief that the University of Saint Louis exemplifies this greatest virtue through its “Alay Pasko Program,” the sustained gift-giving program of the University since 1990. The program seeks to make the less fortunate individuals feel the spirit of Christmas—the spirit of love and sharing. Funds come from the monetary assistance of the university’s stakeholders, which include the employees, alumni, and students. The selection of Alay Pasko community recipients undergoes three stages. First, the Community Extension Services Office, in collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare and Development, annually identifies the ten municipalities with the most number of indigent families in the region. Second, criteria that include the following: the community should have a population of 100-200 families, be economically depressed, have no strong

resistance from the community, have no serious peace and order problem, have no similar group or organizations holding the same program, and have not been a recipient of the program are used to select qualified municipalities. An ocular visit to the municipal office is conducted to identify the specific barangay recipients. Only one barangay is selected from each selected municipality. Third, after the selection based on the set criteria, a team that consists of the Community Extension Services Director and Academic Extension Coordinators conducts a house-to-house visit to prospective Alay Pasko family recipients. The final list of the family recipients serves as the basis for the number of goods to be purchased and distributed. The actual distribution takes place every December of the year. The eight academic departments (College of Health and Allied Sciences; College of Tourism, Technical-Vocational Education; Grade School; High School; School of Business Administration and Accountancy; School of Education, Arts and Sciences; School of Engineering, Architecture and Fine Arts; and School of Information and Computing Sciences) are clustered into groups depending on the final number of municipalities and the number of identified family recipients. Believing in the value of reciprocity, the family recipients, through their barangay officials, showcase their talents through dances and songs in a short program. "Paskong Pambata," celebrated through parlor games, is also organized prior to the actual gift-giving.

Considering the twenty-two-year existence of the program and to assess the high school faculty involvement in the "Alay Pasko" program of the University, this study was conducted.

II. METHODS

The paper is qualitative research for it involves the analysis of unstructured data gathered through open-ended questions among the respondents. The Alay Pasko Reflection Sheets were floated to 27 teachers after the activity. The filled-out reflection sheets were analyzed by classifying the responses according to themes. These themes guided the researcher in the analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the findings.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results showed that the university has materialized its purpose of initiating and participating in constructive and relevant social activities. The study served as a testament to the importance of the "Alay Pasko" program in developing responsive citizens of the country and worth-emulating Christians. Four themes were deduced from the reflections of teachers who participated in the University's Alay Pasko program. These include social awareness and involvement, Christian spirituality and values, and self-realization and worthiness.

Social Awareness

Generally, the teachers believe that the "Alay Pasko" program they participated in awakened them to the realities and needs of the society. One stated,

"Outreach programs are manifestations that we are aware of our surroundings most especially of our society. They serve as eye-openers to all of us".

The teachers believe that it was through the program that their students were also immersed in community life, providing them the avenue to exemplify their social skills. As one teacher reflected,

"Students were exposed to the dimensions of experiences of other people. The spirit of social skills was deeply rooted to the heart of students".

Alay Pasko has awakened the teachers to the realities and needs of the society. They realized that they are responsible not only for themselves but for others too. It is through participation in voluntary associations that individuals will develop a keener appreciation for civic affairs and understand more completely their obligations to participate in the political process (Smith, 1999). Indeed, people learn about the politics of their civic systems by experiencing and observing the effects of the policies in the communities (Michigan State University, 2011). People gain access to the range of supports and opportunities they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003). It was through the gift-giving program that students were also immersed in community life and were provided the avenue to exhibit their social skills. By participating in outreach activities, students forge bonds with each other, as well as other members of the community. These bonds improve their interpersonal skills and increase their social network. Additionally, reaching out can lead to increased care for others and a desire to cooperate and get involved in positive ways, even among those who had previously exhibited antisocial tendencies (Smith, 1999).

The Louisiana culture of awareness of the issues and concerns prevailing in the society promotes the initiation and participation of the University's stakeholders in constructive and relevant social activities for the promotion of justice, peace, and integrity of creation (USL Bulletin of Information, 2007).

Christian Spirituality, Values, and Responsibility

Most of the teachers believe that to be socially responsible does not merely mean immersing oneself into another's condition, but this requires action. The program has motivated them to be responsible not only for themselves but for others too. The following were noted:

“The value of magnanimity. An offer of a helping hand assures comfort and refuge to a person who is in need, that is, charity sees the need, not the cause.”

“Gift-giving programs are manifestations that we are aware of what is happening in our society and that we are doing our responsibility as members of such society.”

The faculty firmly agreed that reaching out to people brought the real essence of serving Christ. As a Catholic institution, the teachers affirmed that the university plays a vital role in the spiritual and moral transformation of its stakeholders, and it has extended this function to the communities. One mentioned,

“We are in a Catholic institution. It is our mission to help those who are in need through simple ways of sharing, we are made aware that those little things mean great things to others.”

One added,

“In life we must always be good servants to other people. We must value life with utmost care, that is, doing unto others what we want others do unto us.”

Also, the teachers are in unison in their belief that serving others is not selective but should be given to those who are in need. One mentioned,

“It contributed to the mission of helping the needy and those who emotionally need comfort.”

When asked about the values they learned, all the teachers said that reaching out helped them develop and exemplify charity, the Christian queen of all virtues. As one of them wrote:

“It provides opportunities for the teachers involved to share their talents and skills to help the clientele for their livelihood.”

Similarly, another teacher replied:

“It is the value of giving and sharing.”

Reaching out to people brought the real essence of serving Christ. Christians have the unique opportunity to touch the lives of others. We are not to look out merely for our own personal interests, "but also for the interest of others" (Phil. 2:4). Study findings suggest that regularly volunteering in social services positively affects a person's faith. Garland in his study revealed that individuals who have been involved in outreach activities for six or more years had a significantly higher overall mean score on the Faith Practices Scale than did those who had been involved in ministry for five years or less. More specifically, they scored significantly higher in participation in the practices of evangelism, giving financial support to the church, providing hospitality to strangers, volunteering time to help those less

fortunate than themselves, promoting social justice, and discussing Christian responses to contemporary issues.

It is a Christian spirituality to involve oneself in the lives of others and the community. It was affirmed that the university, as a CICM-run school, plays a vital role in the spiritual and moral transformation of its stakeholders and extends this function to the communities. It is the first and most important task for Catholic schools to maintain and continually strengthen their Catholic identity (Miller, 2006). It is the responsibility of the university and its stakeholders to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-16). All who are blessed are given responsibility. Each should light the world through sharing his/her blessings in rendering an unconditional service to others. Christian education is not self-seeking. It is not given for the purpose of gaining power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of, and communion with, man, events, and things. Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others (Ex Corde Ecclesiae #56).

Self-Realization and Worthiness

The majority of the teachers said that the "Alay Pasko" program permitted them to recognize and appreciate their talents and blessings as well as their clients'. One said,

“Be thankful for all the blessings you have.”

The teachers realized that they could only appreciate their talents and blessings if these are shared to others especially to those who are in need. As one put it,

“We must be thankful for all the blessings we have in life; there are some who are unlucky. So, we must also share what we have.”

Another mentioned,

“I discovered my own self worth. I learned how to share my gifts and precious moments to our less privileged brothers and sisters.”

When asked about their notable observation during the conduct of the "Alay Pasko" Program, the teachers were in agreement that happiness could also be felt through sharing our blessings and helping others. One stated,

“I observed that the clients were overwhelmed during the activity. I realized that the feeling is great if you make a certain person/family happy.”

Generally, the teachers believed that contentment is achievable when one is to live a simple life and a life shared with others. When asked about what they felt after helping their clients, most of them responded,

“The people in the barangay are very happy after receiving their gifts which made us happier upon seeing the smiles on their faces.”

The Alay Pasko permitted individuals to recognize and appreciate their talents and blessings as well as their clients'. Consequently, one could only appreciate his/her talents and blessings if these are shared with others, especially those who are in need. As individuals engage in community life, perspective taking exists. As this exists, they take perspective in order to truly understand the benefits that come out of differences. By becoming involved in various aspects of community life, facets that individuals would be unlikely to involve themselves in otherwise, individuals gain new information to consider new ways to think about things (LeSourd, 1997).

Happiness could also be felt through sharing our blessings and helping others. Helping others serves as a reward, although individuals have to learn that helping others can make a person feel good, thus serving as a socialized, secondary reinforcer (Cialdini, Kenrick, & Baumann, 1982). This supports the idea that engaging in outreach activities contributes to decreased psychological distress and buffers the negative consequences of stressors (Rietschlin, 1998); it increases life satisfaction and decreases depression (Van Willigen, 1998).

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The University of Saint Louis' "Alay Pasko" program is a gift-giving outreach activity that is beneficial for the gift-givers for a number of reasons. First, the program builds a social bond between the gift-givers and the recipients. The former are awakened to the social realities and needs of the society, therefore reminding them of their responsibility and/or obligation to do right not only for themselves but for others too. This speaks of social responsibility realized through building social bonds.

Second, the program improves emotional well-being. Happiness could also be achieved through a life shared with others. Third, giving means receiving, for God-given blessings are not tools for material prosperity but tools to be of responsible service for others. Serving others permits one to recognize his/her self-worth. One who humbly serves is rewarded with God's promise of eternal life.

Finally, the program nurtures spirituality. Christianity obliges one to do things not only for his/her personal interest but also for the interest of others. After all, one could exemplify Christian spirituality through involving oneself in the lives of others and of the community.

Separate research should be conducted among the "Alay Pasko" recipients and students who participated to identify the impact of the gift-giving program. Continuous assessment and evaluation of the program is suggested for its sustenance and intensification.

The study also recommends that a framework for charity work be formulated to encompass other implementers (students) and program recipients. This will certainly guide the institution in the conduct of charity work programs that benefit both the gift-givers and the recipients.

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