

***“We Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it.”***

This quote from Pope Francis tells us it is our responsibility as Christians to personally step up in leadership and respond to the global issue of poverty. When there is injustice and pain it is our duty to personally work to find solutions rather than sitting in complacency waiting for the situation to resolve itself. This quote calls us to action; each one of us has the capacity to be the change-maker our world needs. Our society needs leaders, people who have the bravery to face problems rather than turning a blind eye. Pope Francis' advice to personally confront poverty applies to my life because of my experience addressing this crisis in my community through leadership.

I was in first grade when I first came into contact with impoverished people face to face. I attended a Catholic elementary school with a parish that gave meals to the poor, and it wasn't unusual to see homeless people waiting in line on the sidewalk during school hours. I remember being dropped off at school one time and seeing a man sleeping on the grass in front of the church. I pointed him out to my mother, thinking it was funny that the man was sprawled out in public during the day with only a blanket. My mother did not share my amusement and taught me a valuable lesson: that man was not sleeping in public by choice. He was homeless and had no place better to rest his head than the front lawn of a church. This experience opened my eyes to a serious problem and gave me the desire to fix it in some way. My mother noticed my willingness to help out, and under her guidance I joined my parish's Christian Care program. The program gives needy and homeless people the groceries they need to get through the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. This is accomplished mostly through donations and the

help of volunteers who pitch in to help organize grocery bags. In my early years as a volunteer, I did little more than collect the trash around the site to keep the workspace clean. However, much more impactful than my actual service was the lesson in human dignity that I learned from interacting with the people who came to collect food. I came to understand that although these people had the same bodily needs as I did, theirs often went unmet. I developed a genuine desire to make a bigger contribution to this problem.

The opportunity make such a contribution arose last year, when a group of friends and I were brainstorming ideas about starting a service club at our school. A close friend of mine has a passion for baking, and she proposed that we capitalize on her talents in the kitchen to make and sell baked goods to raise money. When I heard her idea, I immediately knew that this was the chance I had been looking for to step up and make a difference. I nominated myself to be the Treasurer of the organization, and the Baking for a Cause Club was born. As Treasurer of the club, I have the pleasure of keeping track of our funds, delivering checks, and choosing which charities to donate to. Handling the financial situation of the club requires decision making, organization, and especially responsibility. Managing the bake sales has required me to do a great deal of leadership, but every dollar going to a charitable cause is worth the effort. The money we've raised has gone to organizations like local soup kitchens and breast cancer treatment charities, but the most impactful place I've chosen to donate to has been the Christian Care program at my own parish.

Being a leader of a successful service club has allowed me to give back to an organization that I am personally involved in. It was so meaningful to contribute to this underfunded program that helps to fulfill the needs of the disadvantaged in my community.

Every year since first grade I have helped to organize the grocery bags, but this year I had a hand in filling them. I had the opportunity to personally interact with the people I was serving, handing bags of food to families and hearing their words of thanks. The best part of the experience was helping children pick out their Christmas present. It was so gratifying to see the smiles of children as they received their toys and to know that I helped to bring that joy into their lives. Helping to satisfy the needs of the poor in my community through leadership is the greatest contribution I have made to the world.

The best way for Christians to respond to the issue of extreme poverty is through personal service, using our God-given talents to make change. This experience of empathizing with the pain of the impoverished around me has changed the way that I understand the worth of every human being, and this is an understanding that all people need. Christ calls us to see him in even the lowliest amongst us and serve with genuine compassion in our hearts. Something as small as running bake sales provided groceries for underprivileged families in my community; imagine the radical change that would occur if all Christians took steps to alleviate the burden of the poor. Our world would become God's Kingdom, a peaceful place where respect and dignity would be afforded to everyone. That's not only the kind of world that I would like to live in, that's the that kind of world that I will work to make happen.