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## Alternative spring break brings Easter triduum experience to students

by Jocelyn A. Sideco

Young Voices

I remember the first time the local newspaper reported "spring ache" when hundreds of thousands of high school and college students came pouring into the New Orleans area to spend their spring breaks in the most unconventional of ways: helping to gut, drywall, paint, clean and rebuild the neighborhoods.

Traditionally, pictures of students on their spring breaks would include bikinis and bare chests, dancing at daytime parties, drinks in hand, at a tropical resort. Since Hurricane Katrina and other recent tragedies, a student revolution has taken the form of an alternative to drunken nights to relieve the stress of rigorous education. These students have chosen to be of service, to actually get deeper into the "work" by getting their hands dirty and their ideas challenged.

"I have to keep in mind that my own discomfort is at the service of someone getting back into the comfort of their own homes, their own lives," says Daija, a high school senior, as she spoke of the difficulty and challenge of drywalling for the first time with her peers from California.

"I've never done this before, but I am learning a lot about communication," says Cate, another senior, who hopes to get into AmeriCorps upon graduation.

These students from Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, Calif., were part of a group that spent the triduum and their spring break helping families in New Orleans get back into their homes. The girls ranged from sophomores to seniors with little or no experience painting, drywalling or tiling, but they did it. Others volunteered to lead their work crew, teach them how to work safely, and encouraged them as they learned. The girls learned how to use a drill, how to stand on a ladder and, most importantly, how to be present and show compassion to their neighbor.

So instead of parties on a beach, this revolution of service is seen in muddied boots, sweat-soaked T-shirts, dry and painted-on hands, and tired eyes.

The girls experienced their own triduum as they began the week in memory of Christ's example and ended with a somewhat eerie and unknown certainty of Easter that is still filled with great and indescribable hope.

"The week was hard, but I would do it again if I could. I want to take my family back here and show them around," says Makalah, a graduating senior who wants to be a child specialist.

Just like the aftermath Hurricane Katrina, human suffering, especially as we remember through Jesus' own story of salvation, is like a dramatic story of love waiting to unfold. We stop because we are shocked, and we choose to either dive in or step away and pretend everything is fine. Some try to drown their worries in drugs, alcohol or promiscuity.

As we celebrate these indescribable days of Easter in a post-Jesus, post-Katrina, post-life kind of way, we are invited to engage ever more fully in the discomfort to help bring healing to ourselves and our neighbors. Perhaps this time of the church -- post-discovery of sex abuse, post-scandal, post-unorganized management of parishes -- is dawning a new time of uncertainty. Like most people who are hopeful for Pope Francis, perhaps this, too, is a "spring ache" for the church as we stretch beyond the comforts of our knowing and our past into the discomfort of the challenge and opportunity of developing a stronger community of believers -- a place where people are heard, respected and treated with dignity, no matter who they are.

May the church come into a deeper openness to systemic and seismic changes as we reflect on the alternative so many of our students have shown us. Let us all continue grow as people of faith and service and as people of hard work, conviction and vision.

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[Jocelyn A. Sideco is a retreat leader, spiritual director and innovative minister who specializes in mission-centered ministry. Visit her budding new online ministry, In Good Company, at [contemplativecompanions.org](http://contemplativecompanions.org) or email her at [jocelyn@contemplativecompanions.org](mailto:jocelyn@contemplativecompanions.org).]

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