

## How can I, as a young Catholic woman, contribute to the SPDCCW Mission? (Word Count: 749)

I feel qualified to discuss my future enacting the SPDCCW Mission Statement because I've already lived it through the opportunities given to me by my wonderful church. For my whole high school career, I have become closer to my parish and now as I'm considering universities, it's been an emotional time to reflect on my service throughout these years. The Diocese of St. Pete will always have a special place in my heart, and it will always be the first place I took joy in real friendship, fulfilling ministry, and my relationship with God.

I was raised in Catholicism. I received my sacraments and went to church every week. As a child, I never realized there could be something greater associated with my actions as a Catholic young woman and for the first two of my teenage years, I felt like I was being strung along by the traditions of my parents. I hadn't made meaning in it for myself. In eighth grade, I joined St. Michael the Archangel's Youth Group. For the first few months, the friends and the snacks kept me coming back, and the Catholic concepts I was being introduced to were unknown bonuses at the time. So, every week I returned. My youth minister brought light to a phenomenal retreat organization called Good Samaritan Project (GSP) that first year and we fundraised to go.

That first GSP set me on fire. We were a force of volunteers, the power of 20 churches bringing our food, comfort and physical labor across Tampa Bay. Some of my favorite places we served were Pinellas HOPE, the Homeless Empowerment Program and The Kimberly Home. At the end of each workday, I felt happiness in knowing that every muscle in my body had done God's work. It is essential that I credit GSP for igniting my desire to be a Catholic model of leadership and service, because it is the marking place where my attitude about faith began to change. I started to share everything I had with my church. In ninth grade, with my love of musical worship, I joined the music program at my church and have played cello accompaniment every Sunday mass since.

I had another calling my sophomore year, which was to aid in religious education, and I must mention the book that gave me the advice I needed to feel certain I could be the right model for these students. *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S Lewis illuminated my faith and was truly the book that made living with Christ my lifestyle. For me, it was a steppingstone I don't think I would've taken otherwise. My new understanding deepened my thought and prayer tenfold. I now had an educator role in my Diocese and my goal was to be the loving and supportive presence for kids struggling with the explanations of their faith. I resonated with them because I too, had faced their same questions.

This new involvement with my church had me feeling as if I was soaring miles beyond my previous understanding. It's all been beautiful, not only with our strength in numbers but with our devotion to expand those numbers. A few weeks ago, I was speaking to a group of students advertising GSP. I said, "At GSP, everyone there is truly alive because finally, your current understanding of faith is backed by an emotion that makes you feel. I was a person who thought it just couldn't come naturally to me, that maybe I wasn't an emotional person when it came to religion. But wouldn't you know I had tears streaming down my face when I experienced God for the first time at GSP. If you feel a little bit sidelined as a Catholic, like

you're missing out on something you know you want to have, come to GSP this year and let God work through you because you'll never regret it.”

Sometimes when I'm speaking about God, I feel like the words are not flowing from me anymore. Like right now, I feel the spirit using me as a mouthpiece to give this testimony of my journey in faith. I can only hope the impact I make grows greater as I enter this new chapter in my life and continue the endeavors I started here in the Diocese of St. Pete. Leadership in faith is my highest passion. I will never stop fighting for people's enthusiasm to work for God and it'll always be kept in my career.