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Inside NCR: Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida's proposal for mandatory social service duty for students in Catholic colleges

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Inside NCR. (Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida's proposal for mandatory social service duty for students in Catholic colleges) (Editorial) *Tom Fox*.

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Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida last week unveiled a creative and intriguing proposal. He suggested forming a kind of urban Peace Corps that would put college students to work in the city's soup kitchens and other social agencies.

The new cardinal, speaking at an interfaith breakfast in his honor, said he and Catholic college officials want to incorporate social service into the curriculum.

"Why not establish as a curriculum requirement some hands-on projects like ministry in soup kitchens or warming centers, swinging a hammer in the rebuilding of a home, helping in a nursing home or being with those dying of AIDS?" he asked.

"In such joint labor, not only would actual service needs be met, but friendships could be formed among the leaders of the next generations, friendships between black, white and brown, between economically gifted and challenged, among people religiously or politically diverse."

Maida said he'd like to see businesses and other congregations get involved as well. Eventually, he'd like to include high school students. Nothing that his ideas are still in "very rudimentary form," he said he unveiled them "to spark ideas and creative energies."

The idea sounds promising. A creative initiative, it is especially satisfying to hear a prominent church official looking for ways to bring rich and poor together for the common good.

I hope we hear more from Detroit on this. It would also be great to hear suggestions from other parts of the church. As we know, the so-called playing field for good works is wide open these days. Projects that open minds, build bonds and unleash goodness need to find their way into the light.

The time could not be better for Catholics to become examples of countercultural idealism. This is not to say this hasn't already happened in many parishes in recent years where soup kitchens, pantries for the poor and generosity to immigrants has been exemplary. It is, however, to admit that far more can and needs to be done -- and dimensions of the social problem only seem to grow.

As this paper noted in a Dec. 2 editorial, Catholic social teaching has forced a visible wedge between the U.S. bishops and the "cutback social services" mentality currently preoccupying Congress. Catholics must protest that the poor are not expendable.

Christianity teaches us something revolutionary. That the poor not only have value but hold treasure. We look to the oppressed and learn from them, much of it about ourselves -- if we dare. This is not to celebrate poverty. It is to shoulder the challenge of Christian faith. In this regard, Maida may have given us one more nudge.

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