

"To hell with good intentions"

Ivan Illich's Talk Delivered at the Conference on Interamerican Student Projects, April 20, 1968

Ivan Illich, CIASP Canada

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[CIASP Canada](#) - This talk was delivered on the evening of Saturday April 20 at St. Mary's Lake of the Woods Seminary in Niles (Chicago) Illinois. Monsignor Illich was invited to make a presentation to the American Midwest Regional Meeting of CIASP (The Conference on Interamerican Student Projects). The Conference had an especially strong line-up of speakers and it was opened to all other regions of CIASP (all US regions and Canada) as well as the public.

This text version of the speech was scanned from an original mimeograph distributed to Conference participants on the following day. The document was typed version of Monsignor Illich's speech. This original document was not edited and this document reflects the exact wording and punctuation used by Illich. The audio tape of this talk also shows it did not stray from the remarks represented in this scanned version.

Monsignor Illich had prepared a speech in Cuernavaca before travelling to Chicago; he added introductory remarks after an afternoon attending sessions and meeting with CIASP members. He drafted a quick introduction to the original presentation and modified the written presentation. The entire speech is usually cited as being given in Cuernavaca Mexico... but it was delivered in Chicago on April 20.

In the conversations which I have had today, I was impressed by two things, and I want to state them before I launch into my prepared talk.

I was impressed by your insight that the motivation of US volunteers overseas springs mostly from very alienated feelings and concepts. I was equally impressed, by what I interpret as a step forward among would be volunteers like you: openness to the idea that the only thing you can legitimately volunteer for in Latin America might be voluntary powerlessness, voluntary presence as receivers, as such, as hopefully beloved or adopted ones without any way of returning the gift.

I was equally impressed by the hypocrisy of most of you: by the hypocrisy of the atmosphere prevailing here. I say this as a brother speaking to brothers and sisters. I say it against many resistances within me; but it must be said. Your very insight, your very openness to evaluations of past programs make you hypocrites because you - or at least most of you - are decided to spend this next summer in Mexico, and therefore, you are unwilling to go far enough in your reappraisal of your program. You close your eyes because you want to go ahead and could not do so if you looked at some facts.

It is quite possible that this hypocrisy be unconscious in most of you not in all, of this I am very certain. Intellectually, you are ready to see that the motivations which could legitimate volunteer action overseas in 1963 [\[1\]](#) cannot be invoked for the same action in 1968/69. "Mission-vacations" among poor Mexicans

were “the thing” to do for well off US students earlier in this decade: sentimental concern for newly-discovered poverty south of the border combined with total blindness to much worse poverty at home justified such benevolent excursions. Intellectual insight into the difficulties of fruitful volunteer action had not sobered the spirit of Peace Corps, Papal and Self-Styled Volunteers.

Today, the existence of organizations like yours is offensive to Mexico. I wanted to make this statement in order to explain why I feel sick about it all and in order to make you aware that good intentions have not much to do with what we are discussing here. To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions: this sums up the same theological insight.

I would prepare my statement differently, particularly in style, had I had those five hours of conversation with you. I would have made it less harsh and even more definitive. I cannot change now because my control of English is not good enough to keep my statement understandable if I change it while reading it.

Before I prepared this statement, I wanted to say something more. In the course of this day I came to believe in the survival of CIASP. On coming here I considered it my duty to continue my efforts toward getting you out of business. I now see that too much money, too many vested interests, too many illusions back CIASP to allow this organization to disappear. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves: what to do with CIASP - since it cannot die.

I have reached the conclusion that, quite conceivably, there are a few people who could profit from the experience of the past years of CIASP and develop some kind of educational agency which makes it possible for North American students to live in Mexico. By live, I mean “Live” with a capital “L”; live in the biblical sense in Mexico for a month, fully aware of the limitations of such an experience, of the danger of narcissistic illusions in such a short encounter and yet to LIVE there.

I have no evidence that CIASP as a whole should or could serve this purpose in the future because it might be too much marked by the sins of its origin, which are not recognized as sins by you, but rather considered as simple shortcomings. I do not think that real conversion is possible unless one says: “I was not mistaken, I was wrong. I let myself be led into the organization and to the first structure of CIASP by my deep rooted pride, belief in my superiority, my conviction that I had something to give”. I do not believe that such conversion is possible for a whole organization, but I do believe that it is possible for a few individuals.

Some of you might still profit from the past experience in and through CIASP. The very frustration and humiliation which participation in CIASP programs might have meant for you, could lead you to new awareness: the awareness that even North Americans can receive the gift of hospitality without the slightest ability to pay for it; the awareness that for some gifts one cannot even say “thank you”.

Now to my prepared statement.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For the past six years I have become known for my increasing opposition to the presence of any and all North American “do-gooders” in Latin America. I am sure you know of my present efforts to obtain the voluntary withdrawal of all North American volunteer armies from Latin America - missionaries, Peace Corps members and groups like yours, a “division” organized for the benevolent invasion of Mexico. You were aware of these things when you invited me - of all people- to be the main speaker of your annual convention [2]. This is amazing! I can only conclude that your invitation means one of at least three things:

Some among you might have reached the conclusion that CIASP should either dissolve altogether, or take the promotion of voluntary aid to the Mexican poor out of its institutional purpose. Therefore you might have invited me here to help the others reach this same decision.

You might also have invited me because you want to learn how to deal with people who think the way I do - how to dispute with them successfully, and how to refute them. It has now become quite common to invite Black Power spokesmen to address Lions Clubs. A "dove" must always be included in a public dispute organized to increase U.S. belligerence.

And finally, you might have invited me here hoping that you would be able to agree with most of what I say, and then go ahead in good faith and work this summer in Mexican villages. This last possibility only open to those who do not listen, or who cannot understand me.

I did not come here to argue. I am here to tell you, if possible to convince you, and hopefully, to stop you, from pretentiously imposing yourselves on Mexicans.

I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer. However, his good faith can usually be explained only by an abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy. By definition, you cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middleclass "American way of Life", since that is really the only life you know.

A group like this could not have developed unless a mood in the United States had supported it - the belief that any true American must share God's blessings with his poorer fellow men. The ideas that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it, explains why it occurred to students that they could help Mexican peasants "developing" by spending a few months in their villages.

Of course, this surprising conviction was supported by members of a Missionary order, who would have no reason to exist unless they had the same conviction except a much stronger one. It is now high time to cure yourselves of this. You, like the values you carry, are the products of an American society of achievers and consumers with its two party system, its universal schooling, and its Family car affluency. You are ultimately - consciously or unconsciously - salesmen for a delusive ballet in the ideals of democracy, equal opportunity and free enterprise among people who haven't the possibility of profiting from these.

Next to money and guns, the third largest North American export is the U.S. idealist, who turns up in every theatre of the world: the teacher, the volunteer, the missionary, the community organizer, the economic developer, and the vacationing do-gooder. Ideally, these people define their role as service. Actually, they frequently wind up alleviating the carnage done by money and weapons, or seducing the "underdeveloped" to the benefits of the world of affluence and achievement. Perhaps this is the moment to instead bring home to the people of the U.S. the knowledge that the way of life they have chosen simply is not alive enough to be shared.

By now it should be evident to all America that the U.S. is engaged in a tremendous struggle to survive. The U.S cannot survive if the rest of the world is not convinced that here we have Heaven on Earth. The survival of the U.S. depends on the acceptance by all so called «free» men that the U.S. middle class has "made it". The U.S. way of life has become a religion which must be accepted by all those who do not want to die by the sword - or napalm. All over the globe the U.S. is fighting to protect and develop at least a minority who consumes what the U.S. majority can afford. Such is the purpose of the Alliance for Progress of the middle classes which the U.S. signed with Latin America some years ago. But increasingly this commercial alliance must be protected by weapons which allow the minority who can "make it" to protect their acquisitions and achievements.

But weapons are not enough to permit minority rule. The marginal masses become rambunctious unless they are given a "Creed" or belief which explains the status quo. This task is given to the U.S. volunteer - whether he be a member of CIASP or a worker in the so called "Pacification Programs" in Viet Nam.

The United States is currently engaged in a three-front struggle to affirm its ideals of acquisitive and achievement oriented "Democracy". I say "three" fronts, because three great areas of the world are challenging the validity of a political and social system which makes the rich ever richer, and the poor increasingly marginal to that system.

In Asia, the U.S. is threatened by an established power - China. The U.S. opposes China with three weapons: the tiny Asian elites who could not have it any better than in an alliance with the United States; a huge war machine to stop the Chinese from "taking over" - as it is usually put in this country, and; forcible re-education of the so called "pacified peoples". All three of these efforts seem to be failing.

In Chicago, poverty funds, the police force and preachers seem to be no more successful in their efforts to check the unwillingness of the black community to wait for graceful integration into the system.

And finally, in Latin America the Alliance for Progress has been quite successful in increasing the number of people who could not be better off - meaning the tiny, middleclass elites- and has created ideal conditions for military dictatorships. The dictators were formerly at the service of the plantation owners, but now they protect the new industrial complexes. And finally, you come to help the underdog accept his destiny within the process!

All you will do in a Mexican village is create disorder. At best, you can try to convince Mexican girls that they should marry a young; man who is self made, rich, a consumer and as disrespectful of tradition as one of you. At worst, in your community development spirit you might create just enough problems to get someone shot after your vacation ends and you rush back to your middle class neighborhoods where your friends make jokes about spics and "wetbacks"...

You start on your task without any training. Even the Peace Corps spends around \$10,000 on each corpsman to help him to adapt to his new environment and to guard him against culture shock. How odd that nobody ever thought about spending money to educate poor Mexicans in order to prevent them from the culture-shock of meeting you!

In fact, you cannot even meet the majority which you pretend to serve in Latin America - even if you could speak their language, which most of you cannot. You can only dialogue with those like you - Latin American imitations of the North American middle class. There is no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged, since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet on.

Let me explain this statement, and also let me explain why most Latin Americans with whom you might be able to communicate would disagree with me.

Suppose you went to a U.S. ghetto this summer and tried to help the poor there "help themselves". Very soon you would be either spit upon or laughed at. People offended by your pretentiousness would hit or spit. People who understand that your own bad consciences rush you to this gesture would laugh condescendingly. Soon you would be made aware of your irrelevance among the poor, of your status as middle class college students on a summer assignment. You would be roundly rejected, no matter if your skin is white - as most of your faces here are - or brown or black, as a few exceptions who got in here somehow.

Your reports about your work in Mexico, which you so kindly sent me, exude self complacency. Your reports on past summers prove that you are not even capable of understanding that your do-gooding in a Mexican village is even less relevant than it would be in a U.S. ghetto. Not only is there a gulf between what you have and what others have which is much greater than the one existing between you and the poor in your own country, but there is also a gulf between what you feel and what the Mexican people feel that is incomparably greater. This gulf is so great that in a Mexican village you, as White Americans (or cultural white Americans) can, and so, imagine yourselves exactly the way a white preacher saw himself when he offered his life preaching to the black slaves on a plantation in Alabama. The fact that you live in huts and eat tortillas for a few weeks render your well intentioned group only a bit more picturesque.

The only people with whom you can hope to communicate with are sons of the middle class. And here please remember that I said "some" - by which I mean a tiny elite in Latin America. You come from a country which industrialized early, and which succeeded in incorporating the great majority of its citizens into the middle classes. It is no social distinction in the U.S. to have graduated from the second year of college. Indeed, most Americans now do. Anybody in this country who did not finish high school is

considered underprivileged.

In Latin America the situation is quite different. 75% of all people drop out of school before they reach the sixth grade of grammar school. Thus, people who have finished high school are members of a tiny minority. Then, a minority of that minority goes on for university training. It is only among these people that you will find your educational equals.

At the same time, a middle class in the United States is the majority. In Mexico, it is a tiny elite. Seven years ago your country began and financed a so called "Alliance for Progress". This was an "Alliance" for the "Progress" of the middle class elites. Now, it is among the members of this middle class that you will find a few people who are willing to waste their time with you. And they are overwhelmingly those "nice kids" who would also like to soothe their troubled consciences by "doing something nice for the promotion of the poor Indians". Of course, when you and your middle class Mexican counterparts meet you will be told that you are doing something valuable, that you are «sacrificing» to help others.

And it will be the foreign priest who will especially confirm your self image for you. After all, his livelihood and sense of purpose depends on his firm belief in a year round mission which is of the same type as your summer vacation mission.

There exists the argument that some returned volunteer have gained insight into the damage they have done to others and have become maturer people. Yet, it is less frequently stated that most of them are ridiculously proud of their "summer sacrifices". Perhaps there is also something to the argument that young men should be promiscuous for a while in order to find out that sexual love is most beautiful in a monogamous relationship. Or that the best way to leave LSD alone is to try it for a while - or even that the best way of understanding that your help in the ghetto is neither needed nor wanted is to try, and fail. I do not agree with this argument. The damage which volunteers do willy-nilly is too high a price for the belated insight that they shouldn't have been volunteers in the first place.

Of course, for those of you who go in the full conscience that you are simply utilizing an organization to go on an expense paid vacation - and I'm sure that those are few in number - you will not understand such reasoning, since your first self admitted purpose is fraudulent.

If you have any sense of responsibility, at all, stay with your riots here at home. Work for the coming elections. McCarthy might lose. But certainly by campaigning for him you will know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how to communicate with those to whom you speak. And you will know when you fail. If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don't even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves, when you define, something that you want to do as "good" a "sacrifice" and "help".

I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you. I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the "good" which you intended to do.

I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.

Footnotes

[1] By all accounts, CIASP was formally established in Mexico City in 1963 with strong support from Father Placido Reitmeier and the Maryknoll Order. It emerged out of California group called Amigos Anonymous. CIASP was established as a university-student directed organization; 4 regional organizations in the United States elected directors and a national board was elected by these regions. The Canadian wing of CIASP developed parallel to the American organization and shared resources with the American organization. The Canadian group first appeared at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. Canadian CIASP used some of the American Training Material and also provided an orientation for CIASP volunteers in Mexico City. This was organized by the Mexican Office of CIASP. In 1967, a Canadian was the director of the Mexican Office. Canadian members of CIASP were observers at the conference on April 20, 1968. Illich later travelled to Toronto several times and had contact with CIASP members during visits to St. Michael's College. During several of his visits to Toronto he was to be interviewed on CBC. These tapes are still available for purchase from CBC radio - Canadian CIASP's note.

[2] CIASP made contact with Monsignor Illich in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Several members of CIASP leadership visited his institute (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca for informal meetings and to attend some of the sessions that were organized there in 1967. The major contact was with Mr. Larry Grimes who was the institute's registrar (he used the pseudonym Esperanza Godot on the institute literature) - Canadian CIASP's note.