Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Student Ambassadors led this gathering after a week of advocacy, prayer, and fundraising to aid refugees of the Syrian civil war. Villanova University CRS Student Ambassadors encouraged each person to engage with the cause of justice in their everyday lives. The hymn “God of Day, God of Darkness” centered around the call for each person to respond to the cause of justice in their everyday lives. The hymn accompanied the portion of the vigil during which attendees were invited to “text to donate” to CRS refugee relief funds. Villanova University CRS Student Ambassadors led this gathering after a week of advocacy, prayer, and fundraising to aid refugees of the Syrian civil war. Ambassadors, CRS officials, and university administrators spoke about the crisis and reflected on the importance of faith in responding to it.

The vigil took place during a Week of Solidarity, when Villanova CRS Student Ambassadors were stationed around main areas of campus, encouraging their peers to write letters to congressional representatives urging support of refugee aid, collecting donations, and allowing students to sign a banner expressing support for Syrian refugees in both English and Arabic.

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These Villanova events were one example of the efforts instigated and led by CRS Student Ambassadors, which Catholic Relief Services describes as “the flagship program of CRS University Engagement.” Every fall, CRS trains students to understand the world’s poor and to educate their peers on this issue and other injustices. CRS gives the ambassadors the skills needed to mobilize their campus to respond to these issues through advocacy and solidarity in prayer and faith formation. ambassadors can then initiate events such as Villanova’s Interfaith Vigil for Solidarity with Syria’s Refugees, guiding the campus dialogue to reflect Catholic Social Teaching. Thirty-six ACCU member institutions participate in the CRS Student Ambassador program.

CRS Student Ambassadors reflect the value that the agency places on advocacy as a vehicle to address the root causes of poverty. “CRS believes that students have the strength and unique position to effect systemic and structural change. Being smart, young potential members of the workforce, their voice is of special interest to legislators. They are able to proclaim and call for justice in a way that others cannot,” explains Peggy Jean Craig, CRS lead staff on college and university outreach.

Ambassadors regularly send letters to congressmen and visit congressional offices to call for more just action on issues of global poverty. Ambassadors also facilitate massive letter-writing campaigns on campus. In April 2014, CRS Student Ambassadors at Cabrini College supported a “Stand for Freedom,” during which students stood for 24 hours to raise awareness of slavery and human trafficking. Ambassadors also urged students to write letters to their congressmen supporting Senate Bill 75, an anti-trafficking bill aimed to better protect victims, better prosecute offenders, and combat the root causes of trafficking.

“CRS Student Ambassadors are able to affect this reality of injustice by raising awareness in and around the university community and by amplifying the voices of the poor and marginalized through advocacy,” says Suzanne Toton, coordinator for the Villanova CRS Partnership. Advocacy “allows students to have a real relationship with CRS and with the Church overseas,” she adds.

CRS also stresses the importance of simply engaging college students in global issues and the effect that their engagement has on Catholic charity leaders, who “find it energizing to see that there are young people who care about these issues and this reality,” says Toton.

CRS Student Ambassadors also have the unique ability to respond to injustices informed by their faith and Catholic Social Teaching. “CRS Ambassador program allows students to be more assertive agents for the common good, and to become such agents in a way connected with their faith tradition,” says Will Stehl, faculty adviser for Villanova’s program.

“Ambassador actions—whether big events or smaller ones—constantly remind the university that we are called to respond to global suffering by the gospel and the social teaching of the Catholic Church. CRS invites us to be part of it, not just to play at it, to dabble, or volunteer. CRS invites the university community and Student Ambassadors to be part of significant efforts to effect change,” reflects Toton.

If you are interested in bringing CRS Student Ambassadors program to your campus, contact university@crs.org.