

# *Vocations and Prayer*



The Catholic Magazine on Vocation Ministry

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**New Strategies in Vocations Promotion**



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# From Crisis to Opportunity

## Vocation Ministry During and After Covid-19

By FR. ANTONIO FIORENZA, RCJ

The Covid-19 world pandemic is marking, if not changing, our habits. It is affecting our relationships and even influencing our way of thinking. Crisis or opportunity? This is the question that many people are asking themselves. There are those who stress the crisis that the pandemic is creating in all sectors, especially in the financial sector. There are also those who emphasize the opportunities.

It is ascertained sociologically that new opportunities arise from every crisis.

What about vocation ministry? Certainly, it is also affected by the phenomenon of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Already heavily in crisis for many years due to the continuous decrease in the number of vocations to the priestly ministry and to consecrated life, vocation ministry today is receiving a strong backlash from Covid-19. The reasons for the pandemic's negative consequences are so evident that there is no need to explain them. We are rather interested in highlighting the opportunities that may come out of this current crisis. Certainly, this pandemic, of which the end and consequences we still know little, obliges us to rethink vocation ministry and to seek new strategies for the promotion of vocations.

The articles in this issue of Vocations and Prayer offer important reflections and suggestions for vocation ministry during and after (hopefully soon!) this pandemic. Alongside the thoughts of the various authors, I like to share some points that seem important to me for promoting vocations in this time we are living.

**Prayer.** First of all, prayer. It is the primary and permanent strategy of vocation ministry. It knows no obstacles of any kind, even the Covid-19 pandemic cannot stop it. We can consider it a new strategy, insofar as the current pandemic helps us to rediscover its need and leads us to live prayer more intensely on a personal level, in religious communities, seminaries, parishes, and in families. Yes, prayer for vocations must become the usual, ordinary prayer of Catholic families.

**Poverty.** Certainly, this pandemic is creating new forms of poverty. There are many newly poor people. Some of them sit on the steps of the doors of our churches. We must not be afraid to approach and to take care of them. In this time of social distance, we are called to find new ways to be close to people and to the poor in a special way. If we approach the poor,

our prayer to the Master of the harvest for the gift of vocations becomes more authentic, and, therefore, effective. New strategies for helping the poor mean developing new vocational strategies.

**Welcoming Culture.** The Covid-19 pandemic is creating more isolation and social distance. They are situations that can feed cultural distances, leading even to hatred and racial violence. The goal of vocation ministry today is to promote, especially among young people, mutual acceptance, dialogue, respect and love for one another, regardless of different cultures and nationalities. Whoever decides to follow Christ more closely in priestly or consecrated life, with his/her own life, tells the world that black lives matter.

**Social Media.** During the time of Covid-19, forced by necessity, we have learned to appreciate and use social media for evangelization better than before. Today's vocation ministry cannot help but make the most of these means to communicate with young people and, above all, to reach young people where they are (social media channels, photo and video-sharing social networks, online game platforms, etc.), regardless of this pandemic.

**Vocation Workshops.** Vocation promotion today cannot be only the fruit of the goodwill of individual people, nor the fruit of improvisation. Preparation, collaboration and exchange of experiences are needed. The various diocesan and religious Vocation Centers should look beyond the interest of their immediate vocation results; they must open themselves to the elaboration of vocation pastoral strategies that arise from common reflection and the exchange of experiences. It seems to me important to create in this regard, at least on a diocesan or inter-diocesan level, vocation workshops that develop vocation strategies for our time and take care of the formation of vocation promoters. ■



FR. ANTONIO FIORENZA, RCJ

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# Nurturing Religious Vocations During a Time of Pandemic

## Discussion and Prayer for Vocations at the Family Table



By Fr. MICHAEL WENSING, S.T.L

In order to hear confessions during this time of pandemic, I rearranged the furniture in my rather spacious reconciliation room to provide sufficient distance between myself and the penitent. And confessions were then heard during certain scheduled times in the months of the shutdown of our churches. After confession one day a mother of several teenagers told me that in some strange way she was in no hurry for things to get back to normal. When I looked surprised she related how before her kids were up to their eyeballs in extra curricular activities and it seemed during normal times she and they were always running, eating on the run, never home, etc. With homeschooling and otherwise quarantined home time she said, "We

all had to get reacquainted the first week of our stay at home life. There were some rough moments of conflict until we had a week or two under our belts and learned how to get along once again in a shared space. Now we eat together and take our time doing it, we talk on various subjects of the world and even our faith lives are shared. I don't want to lose that when we go back to normal."

Then I remembered the words that 'the family is the domestic church' and therefore the first seedbed of religious vocations. I can only hope that with teenagers at home with parents for unusual stretches of quality time together there could be encouragement by parents to look at a life path toward a commitment in a religious life or the priesthood. I therefore made

my resolve to mention to families to bring up such discussions while together during these times. It is up to me to plant the seed for such discussions whether on our Facebook account or web page or a paragraph in our direct parish mailings encouraging such discussion and prayer for vocations at the family table.

### Vocation Encouragement is a Relational Matter

But how otherwise do I communicate such thoughts and encouragement to families when I am in my own bunker? We hear the gospel accounts which take mobility for granted: "Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues... At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they



Photo by Dylan Ferreira

were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest'" Matthew 9:35-38 (cf Luke 10:2). How do we obey this 'being sent' gospel when under 'stay at home' guidelines? Fortunately in our day and age, we can take advantage of the 'sending' gospel for laborers in the vineyard via cyberspace, through our parish social media accounts, and one on one communication and dialogue by email and even strategic phone calls. Evangelization as well as vocation encouragement is still a relational matter, we just find new ways to be relational.

Now during the warmer weather of Summer into Autumn with the gradual opening up of our cities, I find myself moving about the neighborhoods on my bicycle or small scooter. This has become a great way for some face time. The young people

are out on their driveways playing a game of buckets or other lawn games and they tend to wave or call out. I pull over and sit on my scooter at the curb to visit with those young people hanging out. Many adults set up lawn chairs out front as the open air is safer against the virus and people are visiting outdoors. They too attract my attention and some visiting time. What I used to do at the doorway of the church after Masses, I am now doing in a new way at curbside. The advantage of enjoying an assignment for nine years in this one town is that I recognize the Catholics out in front of their houses and they know me. This pandemic time speaks loudly for the stability of the pastoral assignment.

## **The Family is the First Aid for Vocations**

In prayer this morning, I was taken back in imagination to the silent years of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph. In

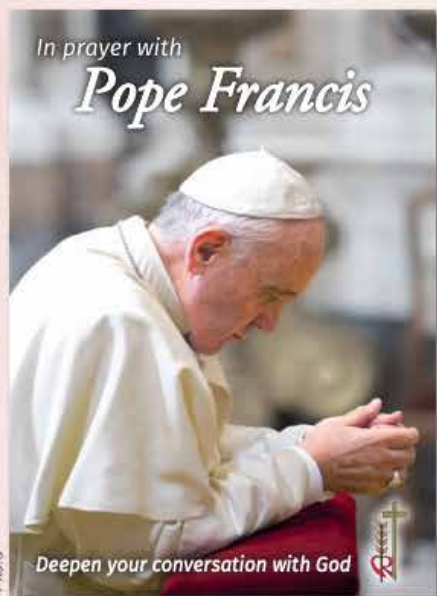
Luke 2:19 we see a kind of mantra for the silent years when after the good news of the shepherds in Bethlehem we read: "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting (pondering) on them in her heart." For thirty years Jesus reflected on the prophets and built his earthly relationship with his Father in heaven, strengthening himself for his public mission. And now we were forced into a certain silent time if not years than many months. We must trust grace to be operative in our families as it is in our own hearts to ponder, like Mary, the will of God and the marvels of salvation history.

Our immigrant ancestors coming to newly opened territories in America often lived without the leadership of religious or priests, at least for their initial years of homesteading. The rosary became the primary family prayer and even after churches were built in the rural areas but lacked sufficient priests for Mass, every weekend they would often gather, even if only a repre-



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sentative group, to pray in community the rosary. Thus as we have been gradually reopening to a certain safe percentage of our congregations we must remind them they are the intercessors for all the rest not yet able to be with us.

I recall my childhood during blizzards and extreme cold spells in our northern state when we were unable to drive the country roads to church for weeks at a time to attend Mass. In our house there was a finished attic which, with the peaked rafters, made one feel like one was in a kind of church. At least the five of us brothers and sisters thought so and we would construct a kind of sanctuary and use our artistic skills to decorate for a time of 'play Mass.' We would take our child missals, or the one or two we had, and take turns reading the Mass prayers. I am convinced this was a powerful stimulus toward my future thoughts of the priesthood. This kind of holy play acting for those children homebound should be encouraged.

### Learning New Ways of Evangeliza- tion

There is spreading across our country and dioceses a formal program of catechesis for young children called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (CGS) which promotes this very thing. The catechists construct small models of the various instruments and vestments and objects common to the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, in house or classroom settings. The children are involved in setting the stage for various times of the year, changing liturgical colors according to the season. With the seasons, while the setting of the liturgy is the primary focus, they prepare for Christmas by recreating a crèche scene, or constructing a way of the cross of the devotion of the Stations, or to honor Holy Week followed by constructing an empty tomb site to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. They come to understand the symbols, gestures, and meaning of the Mass through hands-on participation in their play world. I have observed one of these programs in action in a neighboring parish and was taken right back to my childhood memories. This, too, will surely plant seeds toward thinking of vocations of leadership in the future

Church. However, only a few parishes or schools had this in place before the pandemic. When we return to normal or a new normal more fully, we may think in new categories about how to prepare for other future isolation periods with more stress on what the domestic church of the family can do during such times. All of us are learning about new ways of teaching and evangelizing and praying together in 2020 and this time of pandemic. It is our mode of "pondering and reflecting on these things in our hearts."

The wisdom of the ages about martyrs of faith in the Church has been the saying repeated by Church Fathers and Mothers that the blood of martyrs is the seed for growth of the gospel. Likewise, a study of times of economic depression and unemployment struggles often produced a new growth in numbers admitted to seminaries and religious houses. Ireland was a prime example of this in their previous poverty before the birth of prosperity because of their new independence and the European Union. Our own country's spike in vocation numbers after the great depression and especially after World War II is another example. While we do want people everywhere to return to work, there may come a grace out of this difficult time as well. We can only hope so.

Most of all, we need to develop a new devotion to the Holy Family and find new inspiration from Jesus' home, especially imagining the silent years and what transpired in prayer and study and faith sharing in that holy household.

*Jesus, Mary, Joseph, pray for us in our time of need and we do pray for your guidance. Amen. ■*



**MICHAEL WENSING, S.T.L.**

Recently director of the Priest Sabatical Program in Rome. Fr. Michael is currently the pastor of Holy Name Parish in Watertown, South Dakota.

# Vocation Promoters: Jobless in a Time of Crisis?

## The Sisters of Notre Dame New Vocation Strategy



BY THE SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME VOCATION TEAM

Being on a stay-at-home order during a pandemic is challenging for many people. Those in vocation ministry are no exception. What is a vocation director to do? What else, but put on the creative thinking cap, and look at various ways to reach out to young adults in new platforms! The Sisters of Notre Dame would like to share what they did to update and to continue to have an impact in their vocation outreach.

The five hundred or so Sisters of Notre Dame (SND) in the United States have been

engaged in a nine-year process of bringing four provinces (geographic areas) into one national province on July 5, 2020. The process took place on many levels with different functions within the community. The Vocation Team is one of those functions. During this time of the pandemic, the new national team set to work on some of the behind-the-scenes aspects of vocation ministry. Since the team members had been operating separately, while collaborating where they could, the sisters wanted to consolidate documents, processes and procedures. They set out to accomplish the following:

- Have weekly Vocation Team Zoom meet-

ings during which time is given to shared prayer, personal check-in, and continued work on the shared to-do list.

- Work with the Formation Team on updating the SND USA Plan of Formation to represent the new national structure.
- Update forms for an SND live-in experience and application process.
- Work on developing resources for the various phases of discernment so that each director is using similar documents and resources for discerners across the United States.
- Make strides in using technology more efficiently, creating a Vocation Team cloud drive that holds all of the shared





resources for retreats, prayer services, events, videos, photos and more so that each team member can access these resources from any location.

- Further develop the marketing aspects of vocation ministry – For eighteen months, the team worked with a part time marketing consultant who was able to move the team forward with consistent vocation branding of the website, social media and promotional materials of the team.
- Work with two young adult women who help with video editing and digital graphics, and with the SND IT and Communication departments in continued efforts to share the SND spirit across the country and the world through marketing.

Vocation ministry is one of those ministries that definitely involves engagement with people – either in person, on the phone or online. Obviously, during the pan-

demie, some things had to be put on hold – travel for in person meetings, retreat offerings at various locations, in person talks/presentation on discernment, and women coming to take part in live-in experiences. However, the sisters were able to continue digital outreach to discerners and young adults whom they mentor from across the country. Those conversations became more intense with the uncertainties that the pandemic has brought into the lives of young people and the future direction of their lives. The sisters have found it a joy to continue connecting with students at local universities and other young adult contacts by providing spiritual mentoring and discernment support.

One team member participated in a four-week prayer experience based on the Ignatian Awareness Examen. Christus Ministries (a group that empowers young adults and parishes to grow spiritually, change lives and transform communities) provided this

online opportunity called Breathing Gratitude. Close to one hundred participants and twenty facilitators took part in the experience. Using Zoom's breakout room resource, 30-minute small group conversation took place during the 90-minute prayer experience. This team member facilitated one of the small groups, which consisted of four wonderful young women from Boise, ID, Houston, TX, Oakland and San Jose, CA.

One sister took part in a six-week retreat called Overwhelmed No More. The retreat was led by Becky Eldredge, an Ignatian-trained spiritual director, retreat facilitator, and writer from Baton Rouge, LA. Small group conversations were an enriching part of this retreat. Since the SND Vocation Team continues to discern ways to expand their online presence, it was beneficial to see how Becky had created her online ministry retreat platform.

Photo by Sisters of Notre Dame





Since retreats needed to be cancelled, another team member held a Sunday afternoon Zoom meeting with her Charis Retreat team. After time for prayer and checking in, the team looked at how they might proceed. Ideas were shared and a Google Doc page was set up for more input. Because of the amount of time many of the team members were in Zoom meetings for work, it was decided it was too much to put on a Zoom event at the time. Information was shared from Charis Ministries (a Jesuit-based retreat ministry for young adults) about a free online evening retreat for anyone who felt so included. Again, Becky Eldredge was the director and sent materials ahead of time for the times of prayer and reflection. She gave three presentations followed by time for reflection and small group sharing in Zoom breakout rooms. The time was blessed with good input and faith-filled dialogue.

The Vocation Team decided not to rush into starting any new online offerings because of the abundance of online spiritual resources since the COVID-19 pandemic began. In talking to young adults from various geographic regions, many had expressed feeling overwhelmed by all the online options of late. They were spending so much time online with school or their jobs while working from home, they did not have the time to participate in all the online events to which they were being invited.

One vocation team member listened to a YouTube webinar called, "Moving Beyond a

Life on Hold: Young Catholics in a Time of Crisis," sponsored by Salt & Light from Georgetown in Washington. One of the panelists said a positive she saw coming out of the pandemic was the Church had to embrace online outreach. This had provided many opportunities for young adults to get involved in their parishes assisting to adapt to the needs of the times.

Since the sisters were unable to have women take part in live-in experiences due to the pandemic, it was another opportunity to put on the creative thinking cap. The Vocation Team put together a Virtual Summer Discernment Series for women in serious discernment with the Sisters of Notre Dame. The program will be six-weeks long. The women will have occasion to meet digitally with a number of sisters through the presentations given and the discussions that follow. The topics will include aspects of life in Notre Dame and the ministries in which the sisters engage to help further the mission of Jesus.

Another part of our pandemic staying-at-home time was professional development. A plethora of possibilities were offered and gave valuable information in various aspects of our ministry with young adults and discerners. Some of the online offerings that team members took part in were:

- National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry's webinars on Christus Vivit
- Boston College's Manresa retreats
- Catholic Theological Union's presenta-

tion on "The Wisdom of Thomas Merton in the Midst of a Pandemic"

- Paraclete Press' talks by authors of newly released spiritual books
- The McGrath Institute of Notre Dame University's "Journey with The St. John's Bible" and "The Pillars of the Church"
- Gospel Discipleship from Ministry Matters
- Barna Group webinar Caring for Souls in a New Reality

The pandemic has changed all lives significantly during the past months. The Vocation Team is no exception; it is working differently than it did six months ago. As the team looks at what they each have done during this time, they can see that they have made progress on internal operations and they have looked at ways to continue to reach out and share God's goodness and provident care with young adults and those discerning a call to the Sisters of Notre Dame. They have experienced blessings in the midst of sorrow and isolation as they continue to pray for all impacted by the coronavirus. ■

The Sisters of Notre Dame Vocation Team (from left to right, page 7): Sr. Valerie Marie Roxburgh, Sr. Ruth Lubers, Sr. Kelley Rush, and Sr. Jennifer Zimmerman.  
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# A Good Vocational Ministry Means a Good Parish

## Five Key Ingredients to Foster Vocations



Photo by: Korean Martyr Catholic Church

By Fr. EUGENE J. LEE

When I was first asked to write my reflections of vocational ministry in the time of COVID-19, my thoughts were, first that I didn't really have a vocational ministry, and second, I especially didn't have a vocational ministry during the time of COVID. Certainly way before I arrived at this small parish where I have been serving for nine years, there already had been a long history of producing vocations to the priesthood and sisterhood. But, we never really had a "vocational ministry" per se. However, I believe that good vocational ministry essentially means a good parish. More importantly and specifically, good vocational ministry means good young adult ministry.

The summary of my proposition of how to maintain good vocational ministry is as

follows: provide ample space for young adults to be involved in the parish, and for them to create a family style community, and keep all of it deeply centered in the Eucharist.

Before I begin, I would like to make a disclaimer. I am at a small parish that is 99% Korean and Korean-American. We were founded about 43 years ago and from the earliest days we have had vibrant and active children, youth, and young adult programs in English. There is no doubt that our common Korean culture coupled with our small size helps to create a natural and comfortable bond among the young adults that in turn leads to a vibrant community. So, I would understand how a large parish that has three or more ethnic cultures could see that we are in another playing field. Nonetheless, I offer you my experience and reflection that you may be able to

glean some ideas and apply them to your own setting.

Below are just my thoughts: debatable, unscientific, and purely a perspective from my own experience. I identify five key ingredients to young adult ministry that can help foster an environment favorable towards producing vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

### First: Service. Service. Service.

The key is to give young adults ample space and empowerment for them to be involved. Almost all of the young adults who have gone into a vocation of religious life or priesthood, have served in some capacity in the parish. Our children's faith formation classes, our children and youth retreats, summer camps, vacation Bible school, and other events for the children are all run by





## Third: Leadership. Leadership. Leadership.

For ministry specifically for young adults (beyond asking them to serve) there must be a good team, specially chosen, empowered, trained, united, and dedicated. I believe young adult leadership development must be among the highest priorities for a priest or a parish sister. The priest and or parish sister must strive to develop a team that is truly rooted in Christ, aware of the urgency of evangelization, united in a noble vision and sense of mission, open-minded, collaborative, responsible, and committed. It takes many meetings, one day retreats, and lots of pizza and chicken. To develop such a team, a priest or parish sister may need to prudently micromanage the process for a little while. But in the end, the team needs to own the mission for themselves and fly. The team along with the priest and or the parish sister should periodically spend time studying the dynamics of effective Christian leadership and teamwork.

## Fourth: Eucharist. Eucharist. Eucharist.

It is often stated in vocations forums that Eucharistic adoration is key, and it absolutely is! Of all the points I make in this article, I cannot emphasize enough how crucial this part is. But the Eucharist cannot be used as a promotion's prop or relegated to an "of course." The Eucharist must be a way of being, a way of ministry. The most important role of a priest and sister is to lead people into a reverent devotion and posture before the Blessed Sacrament. He or she must lead the young adults to visit the tabernacle often, all the time. And flowing from this Eucharistic devotion should be a rich array of other devotions. Go ALL-IN with Catholic devotions: novenas, rosary, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Divine Mercy, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, relics, candles at the shrines, Miraculous Medal, scapular, Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary, etc. I have even created a year-long calendar of opportunities to receive a plenary indulgence.

After all the fun, fellowship, service, eating, and socials, there must be special opportunities for the individuals to interiorize

young adults. Also are programs, events, and opportunities for young adults themselves, such as small faith communities, Bible studies, retreats, socials, mission trips, pilgrimages, etc. I say, let them loose. Empower them, encourage them, and don't over regulate them. There is no paid leader that can have overly centralized leadership, no policies, no bureaucracy, no budget reports, no fancy packaged programs, no committees, no job descriptions, no superiors to answer and report to, no approvals process, and no procedures. Just let them be, even if it's a little messy. The priest stays engaged, giving framework, gentle guidance, and corrections when necessary, but for the most part, let them shine and let them fly. When people are focused on a project with noble goals and the basic qualities of good team work are in place, there inevitably will be friendships that sprout. This is how a community can form.

## Second: Community. Community. Community.

After a team has successfully spent weeks planning for and then putting on a vacation Bible school for the kids, or a summer camp, or some other event, the bond should continue after the project is over. Priests and sisters of parishes must put their heart and soul into helping foster a community life that is warm, inviting, open, fresh, and holy. We budget a lot for food which is so important to good community life. In our community, the older ladies of the parish often help prepare food for the young adults providing such love and warmth and it bridges the older Korean speaking adults with the young English speaking adults. The fellowship and spirit that sprouts is beautiful. The young adults are truly friends with each other. They genuinely enjoy being with each other.

Photo by: Korean Martyrs Catholic Church



Photo by: Korean Martyrs Catholic Church

what exactly they have been doing. Why are we serving? What is the ultimate purpose to church? There must be moments of transcendence where deep within one's heart there is a connection or an interiorization of that which is most fundamental, the glorification of Jesus Christ.

An area where I find the Korean culture such a blessing is how reverent and pious their manner of worship and devotion is. At Mass, most of the women wear their veils contributing to a Mass that is reverent, harmonious, and holy. Very few parishioners come to Mass late, and nobody leaves early. Everybody dresses modestly and there is such earnestness in all the liturgical ministers, from the sacristans to the lectors. What's most important to me is that very few come to Mass for the homily, the music, the priest, or because the parish has good hospitality or even good children's programs. Most come to Mass because it is Mass, period. They come to Mass to worship God, and everything else is secondary. Such spirituality then naturally will yield beautiful fruits for the individual.

### Fifth: Retreats. Pilgrimages. Mission Trips.

Among all the programs, activities, and events that young adults can be a part of,

the extra special experiences can also have a profound impact on their spiritual lives. In addition to an annual weekend retreat, a couple of one day retreats, a priest or religious sister might consider doing an annual mission trip. For us, we go to Jamaica to join the Missionaries of the Poor for 10 days. It will take me pages to describe the amazingly intense spiritual experience this place affords for all who go, but suffice it to say that I believe this experience has helped tilt a few people into the seminary and the convent. We have organized pilgrimages to Israel, the Marian apparition sites, and to World Youth Days. These can be pivotal experiences.

As I conclude, I feel compelled to say that no parish is perfect, and I assure you that our community struggles in many other ways. Yet, when we are anchored in the Eucharist, and devotional prayer, and when we continue to foster and empower sacrificial service which leads to a unified young adult community, then from among the many, one or two emerge with a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. Even now, in this time of COVID, they remain active through Zoom meetings; the young adult catechists still put together their lessons via video, and a small size still participates in livestream Eucharistic adoration. One key principle I also maintain is

that it is always quality over quantity. Our annual young adult Christmas party always has more than 50 people, but our weekly adoration only has about 10 to 15 people coming regularly. The fun stuff always gets more, but I am convinced that providing beautiful moments for devotion in a consistent and persistent manner has a lot of power that cannot be measured. The priest and the religious sister just remains steadfast in modeling devotional prayer and sacrificial service and in empowering disciples to be apostles and somehow, someday, the Holy Spirit does his work and produces vocations. ■


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# Being Present Amongst God's People

## A Conversation with Mother Maria Balvina Medrano Villatoro, Superior General of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

By VOCATIONS AND PRAYER STAFF

Mother Maria Balvina Medrano Villatoro was born in El Salvador, Central America in 1971. After three years of intense work in the pastoral youth ministry in her parish, she felt strongly called to follow the Lord in consecrated life. At the age of 17, she entered the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in El Salvador. After her initial formation in the Congregation she completed her studies in Pastoral Theology at the Salesian Don Bosco University in El Salvador and in Educational Administration at the Mariano Galvez University in Guatemala.

She has carried out her ministry in the various fields that the Congregation serves: Training and formation of women in occupational workshops, spiritual attention to senior citizens in government institutions, teacher of religious education with students in Junior High Schools, General Director of San Bernardino de Siena School for indigenous children in Guatemala, catechesis coordinator in San Bernardino de Siena Parish in Guatemala, and foundress and administrator of San Francisco de Assis Retreat House in El Salvador.

From 2000 to 2020 she has rendered various services in the governing of the Congregation: Local Superior, Provincial Vicar, Coordinator of Provincial Formation, Provincial Superior of the Province of El Divino Salvador in Central America. Since 2013 to the present, she has served as Superior General of the Congregation of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

**Describe in a few words the mission and charism of your Congregation.**

Our Congregation's mission statement is: To repair the Lord's Vineyard, by building His Church with seraphic and Marian



love, thus preserving and spreading the values of consecrated life in prayer, sacrifice and apostolic action, and by practicing the works of mercy in while following the poor and humble Jesus Christ.

The charism of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception is: To be constructive members in the Church through total commitment to the poor and humble Christ to restore the Lord's vineyard through prayer, sacrifice and apostolic actions. We serve the people of God in the apostolate of education, in the field of health, we also exercise our mission in hospitals, sanatoriums, clinics, and dispensaries, homes for senior citizens, homes for high-risk children, and day-care and feeding Centers for children. We collaborate in parochial missions and retreat houses.

**Where is your Congregation present worldwide?**

We are currently present in the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Peru, Argentina, Chile, Italy, Spain, and Guinea-Bissau, Africa.

And your presence in the United States?

We are in the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, and Santa Ana in California.

**Describe the presence of the Congregation in the U.S.A.**

The Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception arrived in the United States in 1926 and dedicated themselves

to the care of senior citizens and catechesis in the parishes, and later dedicated themselves to opening schools and a retreat house.

## **How many communities are there in the North America Province?**

There are eight religious communities in California as well as two other religious communities in Hermosillo and Tijuana, Mexico.

## **What kind of apostolate do you do?**

We serve two rest homes for senior citizens, a retreat house, two pre-schools, two hospitals, two houses of formation for religious life and the provincial house of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, Province of Saint Clare of Assisi.

## **Is your Congregation experiencing a greater interest in vocations to the Religious Life throughout the world?**

Yes, there are many young women who express their interest in our Congregation as well as a considerable commitment on the part of the laity, who identify with our charism and who have become collaborators in pastoral vocational activities.

## **Is it principally the young people who are considering a vocation?**

Yes. Thanks be to God. Young people between the ages of 18 to 35 come to us with genuine vocational purpose and desire to consecrate their lives in service to the Lord.

## **Worldwide, where has your Congregation seen the greatest increase of vocations?**

Our Congregation has seen the greatest increase of vocations in Central America and Mexico.

## **How are vocations to religious life in your Congregation in the United States?**

The young women who have entered our Congregation in this country are

mostly mature young women who have been leaders in parish groups, financially secure, independent, with a job, and students. They have experienced a call to serve the Lord in consecrated life and have taken their vocational accompaniment quite seriously, putting aside their usual comforts and securities of life that the world offers, looking for a radical change of life where they can follow the Lord truly committed to the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi, with the charism of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, and ready to repair the vineyard of the Lord. With joy and generous self-giving they have begun their initial formation to be Religious and some have already made their first vows.

## **As Superior General, do you attend various meetings with Superiors of other Congregations in the world?**

Yes. I have participated with Superiors of other Congregations in the International Union of General Superiors in Rome and in the Conference of Religious of Mexico and other countries in Central America.

## **What is your impression of the general tendency of vocations to the religious life for women?**

The majority of Congregations of women religious experience a decrease in the number of women in formation who enter the initial stages. However, there is a greater interest and control in the selection process of the candidates, which favors a more stable and lasting formative process and guarantees the young woman's perseverance in religious life.

## **According to your experience and charism, what are the main points for effective ministry for vocations to religious life?**

Constant prayer by the whole Congregation, especially with Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

- Good witnessing by the Sisters of the Congregation.
- Creative fidelity to congregational charism.

- Witnessing of generous service on the part of the Sisters, especially in works of mercy to the poorest.
- Participation and closeness to God's people in parish communities.
- Evangelization in the digital world.

## **How does your Congregation organize pastoral activities for vocations?**

Each community of the Congregation names a vocational promoter, and at the provincial level, there is a vocational pastoral team, which organizes activities to accompany the vocational discernment process of the young women who so desire.

Three years ago our Congregation opened "Semilleros Vocacionales" ("Vocational Seed Houses"), which are formation communities ready to receive young women who experience vocational restlessness and who, for various reasons: geographic, economic, social, political, cultural and family-related, have not finished their academic studies, which would have helped them enroll at the university. In these communities, young women have the opportunity to know our Congregation and the mission of the Sisters at a closer level. In addition they can continue the process of their vocational accompaniment and commit themselves to the state of life that they feel called to in their personal collaboration of their program for the Kingdom of God. Every year all the formators of the Congregation meet to unify and expand the criteria to promote a vocational culture. The Sister-promoters of vocations get actively involved in the vocational activities that are organized by their respective diocese and parishes.

## **Is there any other topic you would like to share with us?**

We have recently integrated in the formation of our young vocations "Sanctity as a program for life." In fact, Sanctity is the most urgent pastoral need and curiously, it is very well received and accepted by today's young women, who come to us looking for a radical commitment to Christ. ■



# The Eucharist, Source of All Vocations

## 1. Introduction

Each believer finds in the Eucharist the interpretative key of his own existence and the courage to fulfill it. In the encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist, everyone discovers his or her own original vocation and mission.

## 2. Exposition/Eucharistic Song

*Brief silent adoration prayer (kneeling before the Holy Sacrament)*

## 3. Liturgy of the Word

*The presiding minister then goes to the chair, where he prays the following opening prayer:*

### Opening Prayer

O God, who in this wonderful sacrament have left us a memorial of your passion, grant us, we beseech you, so to worship the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood that we may constantly experience in our lives the fruit of your redemption. Who live and reign with God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

*A Reading from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians (11: 23-26)*

*Responsorial Psalm (or an appropriate song)*

*Psalm 23:1-3A, 3B-4, 5, and 6*

**R. The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

In verdant pastures he gives me repose;  
beside restful waters he leads me;  
he refreshes my soul. **R.**

He guides me in right paths  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk in the dark valley  
I fear no evil; for you are at my side  
with your rod and your staff  
that give me courage. **R.**

You spread the table before me  
in the sight of my foes;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows. **R.**

Only goodness and kindness will follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
for years to come. **R.**

## 4. Meditation

*A Reading from the Writings of Saint John Paul II (see p. 18, #1)*

*Homily*

## 5. Adoration/Prayer Time

*Silent Prayer (The Rosary may also be said here, whole or part)*

### Intercessions

Our hope is in God, who gives us help. Let us call upon him, and say:  
*Look kindly on your children, Lord.*

- Lord our God, you made an eternal covenant with your people, keep us ever mindful of your mighty deeds, let us pray:
- Allow us, your children, to celebrate the Holy Eucharist with such faith and devotion that we can discover in the mystery of the body and blood of Christ the meaning of our life and the mission you entrust to each of us, let us pray:
- Lord our God, grant us that while contemplating the mystery of the Eucharist we may learn to make our lives a gift for others, let us pray:
- Lord Jesus, present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, give the youth of our parish the wisdom to listen to your invitation to follow you more closely in the priestly ministry and consecrated life, let us pray:
- Lord of the harvest, send workers into your vineyard and glorify your name among the nations, let us pray:
- God our father, through the mystery of the body and blood of Christ, let your ordained ministers grow toward perfect love and preserve your faithful people in unity, let us pray:

*(Other intercessions may be offered here)*

### Our Father...

Enkindle in our hearts, O God, the desire for heaven, and give a burning thirst for eternal life to us who, with profound adoration, confess the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ. Who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

### Community Prayer for Vocations (kneeling before the Holy Sacrament)

O Father, rise up among Christians abundant and holy vocations to the priesthood, who keep the faith alive and guard the blessed memory of your Son Jesus through the preaching of his Word and the administration of the Sacraments, with which you continually renew your faithful.

Grant us holy ministers of your altar, who are careful and fervent guardians of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the supreme gift of Christ for the redemption of the world. Call ministers of your mercy, who, through the sacrament of Reconciliation, spread the joy of your forgiveness. Grant, O Father that the Church may welcome with joy the numerous inspirations of the Spirit of your Son and, docile to His teachings, may she care for vocations to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life.

Sustain the Bishops, priests, and deacons, consecrated men and women, and all the baptized in Christ, so that they may faithfully fulfill their mission at the service of the Gospel.

This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.  
*(Pope Benedict XVI)*

## 6. Benediction/Reposition

# Life as a Vocation

### 1. Introduction

The word "vocation" is a very good definition of the relationship that God has with every human being because "every life is a vocation" (Paul VI, Enc. Lett. *Populorum progressio*, 15). God, after completing his work of creation, looked on man and saw that he was "very good" (cf. Gen 1, 31): He made him "in his image and likeness," he put the universe into his operative hands and called him to an intimate relationship of love. Vocation is the word that leads us to understand the dynamisms of God's revelation, and thus reveals to man the truth about his existence.

### 2. Exposition/Eucharistic song

*Brief silent adoration prayer kneeling before the Holy Sacrament.*

### 3. Liturgy of the Word

*The presiding minister then goes to the chair, where he prays the following opening prayer:*

#### Opening Prayer

O God, source of all life and goodness, you fashion human lives in your image and likeness, and through your love, you give each human life dignity, sacredness, and priceless worth. Lord, awaken in every heart a new reverence for the least of your children, and renew among your people a readiness to nurture and sustain your precious gift of human life at all stages, and in all conditions. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

*A Reading from the Book of Genesis (1: 6-31)*

*Responsorial Psalm (or an appropriate song)*

*Psalm 139:1B-3, 13-14AB, 23-24*

**R. Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.**

O Lord, you have probed me and you know me;  
you know when I sit and when I stand;  
you understand my thoughts from afar.  
My journeys and my rest you scrutinize,  
with all my ways you are familiar. **R.**

Truly you have formed my inmost being;  
you knit me in my mother's womb.  
I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made;  
wonderful are your works. **R.**

Probe me, O God, and know my heart;  
try me, and know my thoughts;  
See if my way is crooked,  
and lead me in the way of old. **R.**

### 4. Meditation

*A Reading from the Writings of Saint John Paul II (see p. 18, #2)*

*Homily*

### 5. Adoration/Prayer Time

*Silent Prayer (The Rosary may also be said here, whole or part)*

#### Intercessions

Let us confidently raise our prayer to the God of life and say together:  
*Show us, O God our Father, the path of our life.*

- Father, you called us into existence out of love, creating us in your image and likeness, allow us to find the meaning of our life in a continuous loving dialogue with you and in the service to our neighbor, let us pray:
- Father, by calling us into life, you entrusted each of us with a special vocation. Help us to be grateful for the gift of life and faithful in carrying out our own mission, let us pray:
- God, our Father, look lovingly at our young people; send your Holy Spirit upon them: enlighten them, strengthen them, and show them the path of life, let us pray:
- Father, call men to serve at your altar, and to follow you more closely in chastity, poverty and obedience, let us pray:
- Father, take care of your handmaidens vowed to virginity, that they may follow you, the divine Lamb, wherever you go, let us pray:
- God, our Father, teach us to defend, respect and enhance life in every stage of its development, let us pray:

*(Other intercessions may be offered here)*

#### Our Father...

All-powerful and ever living God, grant us the grace to accept life as a gift of your love and as our mission. Allow us to discover and live your will day by day, and be faithful to the project of love that you have entrusted to each of us. We ask this through Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

#### Community Prayer for Vocations (kneeling before the Holy Sacrament)

Holy Father, eternal source of existence and love,  
who, in living man, show the splendor of your glory,  
and who put in his heart the seed of your call,  
let no-one, by reason of our negligence, ignore or lose this gift,  
but may everyone walk, with wholehearted generosity,  
towards the realization of your Love. *Amen.*

*(St. John Paul II)*

### 6. Benediction/Reposition

## Vocation to Service

**1. Introduction**

*To be a servant* has a very positive connotation in biblical culture and in the life of the church. It expresses the identity and mission of every authentic disciple of Jesus, “who came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10: 45). Service shows that we are free from the intrusiveness of our ego and that we have a responsibility to other people. Service then becomes both the path and the valuable means for arriving at a better understanding of one’s own vocation.

**2. Exposition/Eucharistic song**

*Brief silent adoration prayer kneeling before the Holy Sacrament.*

**3. Liturgy of the Word**

*The presiding minister then goes to the chair, where he prays the following opening prayer:*

**Opening Prayer**

O God, you call us to serve your people, above all the most in need; grant that, contemplating your divine presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we may strengthen our vocation *to love you above all things and our neighbor as ourselves*. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**A Reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke (22, 24-26)****Responsorial Psalm (or an appropriate song)**

*Psalm 40:2- 5, 7-8A, 8B-9, 10*

**R. Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.**

I have waited, waited for the Lord,  
and he stooped toward me and heard my cry.  
Blessed the man, who makes the Lord his trust;  
who turns not to idolatry  
or to those who stray after falsehood. **R.**

Sacrifice or oblation you wished not,  
but ears open to obedience you gave me.  
Burnt offerings or sin-offerings you sought not;  
then said I, “Behold I come.” **R.**

“In the written scroll it is prescribed for me.  
To do your will, O my God, is my delight,  
and your law is within my heart!” **R.**

I announced your justice in the vast assembly;  
I did not restrain my lips, as you, O LORD, know. **R.**

**4. Meditation****A Reading from the writings of Saint John Paul II (see p. 18, #3)****Homily****5. Adoration/Prayer Time**

*Silent Prayer (the Rosary may also be said here, whole or part)*

**Intercessions**

Lift up our hearts to the Lord who gives his people every spiritual blessing. In the spirit of devotion, let us ask him: *Bless your people, Lord, with the gift of new vocations.*

- Merciful God, strengthen Pope Francis and our bishops, keep them free from harm, let us pray:
- Look favorably upon our community, Lord, free us from all evil and make us generous in serving the poor, let us pray:
- Lord Jesus, you came into the world not to be served, but to serve, help us to live in our family and in our community as those who serve others, let us pray:
- Lord Jesus, instill the love of neighbor and service to the poor as an ideal of life in the hearts of our young people, let us pray:
- Lord Jesus, call men to serve at your altar and to follow you more closely in chastity, poverty, and obedience to be completely free to serve your people, let us pray:
- Merciful Jesus, send workers to your Church to announce the kingdom of God, to preach justice and peace, and to evangelize the poor, let us pray:

*(Other intercessions may be offered here)*

**Our Father...**

Keep us, O Lord, always engaged in good works and available to serve your people; in such a way that many of our young people can choose to dedicate their life to the service of their neighbor as priests or consecrated people. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Community Prayer for Vocations (kneeling before the Holy Sacrament)**

Father, we're your people, the work of your hands.

So precious are we in your sight that you sent your Son, Jesus.

Jesus calls us to heal the broken-hearted,

to dry the tears of those who mourn,

to give hope to those who despair,

and to rejoice in your steadfast love.

We, the baptized, realize our call to serve.

Help us to know how.

Call forth from among us priests, sisters, brothers and lay ministers.

With our hearts you continue to love your people.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God forever and ever. *Amen.*

*(USCCB)*

**6. Benediction/Reposition**



## Readings for Meditation

### 1. From the Message of Saint John Paul II for the 37th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 2000

*The Eucharist, source of all vocations and ministries in the Church*

The Eucharist constitutes the culminating moment in which Jesus, in His Body given for us and in His Blood poured out for our salvation, reveals the mystery of His identity and indicates the sense of the vocation of every believer. In fact, the meaning of human life is totally contained in that Body and in that Blood, since from them life and salvation have come to us. In some ways, the very existence of the human person must be identified with them, so that this existence is fulfilled in so far as it can, in its turn, make of itself a gift for others.

In the Eucharist all this is mysteriously signified in the signs of bread and wine, the memorial of the Passover of the Lord: the believer who is nourished by that Body given for him and with that Blood poured out for him, receives the power to transform himself, in turn, into gift. As Saint Augustine says, "Be what you receive and receive what you are" (Discourse 272, 1: On Pentecost).

In their encounter with the Eucharist, some men discover that they are called to become ministers of the Altar, other people, that they are called to contemplate the beauty and depth of this mystery, others that they are called to pour out again its impelling force of love on the poor and weak, and others again that they are called to grasp its transforming power in the realities and gestures of everyday life. Each believer finds in the Eucharist not only the interpretative key of his or her own existence, but the courage to actualize it, indeed to build up, in the diversity of charisms and vocations, the one Body of Christ in history.

### 2. From the Message of Saint John Paul II for the 38th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 2001

*Life as a vocation*

To consider life as a vocation encourages interior freedom, stirring within the person a desire for the future, as well as the rejection of a notion of existence that is passive, boring, and banal. In this way, life takes on the value of a "gift received which, by its nature, tends to become a good given" (*Document New Vocations for a New Europe, 1997, 16, b*).

[...] Within the Christian community, each person must discover his or her own personal vocation and respond to it with generosity. Every life is a vocation, and every believer is invited to co-operate in the building up of the Church... However, we turn our attention, in a special way, to the need and to the urgent requirement for ordained ministers, and for persons who are ready to follow Christ on the arduous path of consecrated life in the profession of the evangelical counsels.

We need ordained ministers who are "in different times and places the permanent guarantee of the sacramental presence of Christ, the

Redeemer" (*Christifideles laici, 55*) and who, in their preaching of the Word and celebration of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments, guide Christian communities on the paths of eternal life.

We need men and women who, by their witness, "remind the baptized of the fundamental values of the Gospel", and who foster "in the People of God an awareness of the need to respond with holiness of life to the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit, by reflecting in their conduct the sacramental consecration which is brought about by God's power in Baptism, Confirmation or Holy Orders" (*Vita consecrata, 33*).

May the Holy Spirit stir up an abundant number of vocations to special consecration, so that these, in their turn, can encourage the Christian people to adhere ever more generously to the Gospel, and so that they can help all people to understand more easily the meaning of existence as the manifestation of the beauty and holiness of God.

### 3. From the Message of Saint John Paul II for the 40th World Day of Prayer for Vocations, 2003

*Vocation to service*

In the Bible, service is always linked to a specific call that comes from God. For this reason, it represents the greatest fulfillment of the dignity of the creature, as well as that which invokes the creature's mysterious, transcendent dimension. This was the case in the life of Jesus, too, the faithful Servant who was called to carry out the universal work of redemption.

[...] In truth, Jesus is the perfect model of the "servant" of whom Scripture speaks. He is the one who radically emptied himself to take on "the form of a servant" (*Phil 2:7*) and to dedicate himself totally to the things of the Father (*cf. Lk 2:49*), as the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased (*cf. Mt 17:5*). Jesus did not come to be served, "but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (*Mt 20:28*). He washed the feet of his disciples and obeyed the plan of the Father even unto death, death on a cross (*cf. Phil 2:8*). Therefore, the Father himself has exalted him; giving him a new name and making him Lord of heaven and of earth (*cf. Phil 2:9-11*).

How can one not read in the story of the "servant Jesus" the story of every vocation: the story that the Creator has planned for every human being, the story that inevitably passes through the call to serve and culminates in the discovery of the new name, designed by God for each individual? In these "names", people can grasp their own identity, directing themselves to that self-fulfillment which makes them free and happy. In particular, how can one not read in the parable of the Son, Servant and Lord, the vocational story of the person who is called by Jesus to follow him more closely: that is, to be a servant in the priestly ministry or in religious consecration? In fact, the priestly vocation or the religious vocation is always, by their very nature, vocations to the generous service of God and of neighbor.

# Planning the Return to "Normal"

## Five Essential Pivots Needed in Your Ministry



Photo by Mateus Campos Felipe

By JOHN M. RINALDO, D. MIN.

The date was March 11, 2020. It was one of those moments that I will always remember exactly what I was doing and what was going on. Like September 11, 2001 before it, March 11, 2020 was the day the world and the Church changed in an instant.

I was with a parish coaching client on the east coast. I was coaching the pastoral staff as we began to look at the next year. We were setting up plans, metrics, budgets, and reimagining their ministries to children and adults.

Covid-19 was already in the news, but, to be perfectly honest, we didn't give it much thought. We were plowing ahead as we continued to become a parish more focused on evangelization and discipleship-making.

We had made substantial changes over the past year. We had a ton of momentum on our side. We were excited.

### "What do we do now???"

That night, in an instant, we were stopped dead in our tracks. That was the night that the travel ban to and from Eu-

rope was announced. That was the moment, at least for me, that I realized that this was much more serious than I previously thought.

In one night, our conversations with my parish client changed from visioning the future to "what do we do now???"

Three days later, the parish shut their doors. No Mass. No faith formation. No community. Nothing. In literally 72 hours, we went from executing all of our amazing plans to build the kingdom of God to throwing everything, and I mean everything, out the window.

Covid-19 turned the world of the Church upside down. We had two options: do nothing or pivot.

In basketball, when a player stops dribbling the ball, she cannot start dribbling again. She cannot take any extra steps. She is basically stuck in one spot. Inevitably, what happens is that a defensive player comes right next to her to prevent her from doing what she needs to do with the basketball. All she can do is pivot. Meaning, she leaves one foot planted on the ground while the other foot moves her body to provide a different angle where she can avoid the de-

fender and either pass the ball or shoot a basket.

Covid-19 is the defensive player in our way. The Church has no choice but to pivot.

In these times, I am constantly reminded of what St. John Paul II said: "Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one gospel given in Jesus Christ. Evangelization can be new in its ardor, methods and expression. It must be adapted to the people of our day."

As we continue to navigate our new Covid world, there are five pivots that all parishes must make to remain relevant and essential in fulfilling its mission.

### Embrace Digital in All Ministries

In a matter of weeks, many parishes went from being digital novices to being quite adept at streaming Masses, using social media and other digital tools to reach out to parishioners, and utilizing Zoom to gather the community virtually.

This cannot stop as we begin to return to the parish campus. There will always be a need to use communications tools.

For instance, there is no reason to stop streaming Mass just because our doors are open again. The hope is to always bring people together in person at Mass to celebrate the Word and Eucharist.

However, for those that are searching and seeking, the Mass can be quite intimidating when you don't know when to stand, sit, kneel, process, or shake hands. We take for granted that everyone knows all the responses. Attending a streaming service is a tool of evangelization, giving seekers a way to engage in the community in a way that is safe and comfortable.

That's just one example. We must note that "the communications media have become a fundamental arena in which Christ's message must be conveyed to the whole world. Today the media affect our lives more than ever. In order to be faithful to her mission, the Church should employ all modern means of communication technology as effectively as possible to bring others to Christ" (National Directory for Catechesis, 26).

## Pivot from Teaching to Equipping

This is not a new concept for the Church. We know that traditional classroom models of formation for children, youth, and adults are not an effective way to evangelize. Our formation needs to move from being focused on the head (what they know) to the heart (Who they know and who they become). This is about knowing and loving Christ, and living a life of discipleship through their actions, not just their words.

As I continue to coach parishes, a common refrain I share is that no one has expectations of what your program offerings will look like moving forward. Covid-19 threw it all up in the air. Now is the time to embrace more apprentice-based formation models that focus on behaviors and relationships and move away from head knowledge.

If people have a relationship with Christ and the Church community, they will come to seek the head knowledge.

## Pivot from Gathering to Connecting

Covid-19 taught us how desperate we are for authentic community. For the first time ever, many were forced into isolation. And people did not fare well in that climate.

It's not good enough that we gather people for Mass or other community events. If there is no opportunity for authentic connection building, then it's just a gathering of Catholics who don't know each other.

How do we turn donuts and coffee after Mass as a means for authentic relationship building? How do we turn the parish fish fry or summer festival into an opportunity to intentionally connect people together? That requires a shift in how we operate.

Belonging leads to believing. If people feel connected to their community in a real way, faith in Christ and involvement in evangelization becomes much more commonplace.

## Pivot from Complex to Simple

Jesus told his disciples, "'Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic'..... Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere" (Luke 9: 3, 6).

We have turned the mission of evangelization into something that is much more complex than it needs to be. As parishes deal with less resources, less money, and less staff following the Covid pandemic, we have to simplify much of what we do.

After Jesus ascended, the local community of believers did relatively few things, yet the Church steadily grew. They celebrated Eucharist in small groups; they served the poor; and they shared the Good News with those they encountered.

Although resources are limited for many parishes, we still have more resources than the early believers did. Focus on what's

essential. Everything else is just gravy. (By the way, the list of essential things a parish does is smaller than you would think.)

## Pivot from Global to Local

Mother Teresa once said, "Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering and the lonely right there where you are in your own homes and in your own families, in your workplaces and in your schools."

We have a community in need right next door. It's not a bad thing to do mission trips to far off places. But if Covid showed us one thing, it was that human suffering and the economic, mental, emotional, and physical fallout of the pandemic is right in our own backyard.

A recent publication from the Springtide Research Institute called, *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation* (2020), discovered that one in three young people feel completely alone much of the time and that nearly 40% have no one to talk to and feel left out (ages 13-25).

Our own communities are ripe opportunities to serve and evangelize.

As we begin to live into a new reality which Covid-19 has shaped, we really have no choice but to pivot. This article is not meant to be just a few novel ideas. This requires urgent action on our part as Church. We cannot afford to do what we have always done. It really didn't work that well prior to Covid. It's certainly not going to work post-Covid.

Now is the opportunity to pivot, adapt, and change to further the mission of Christ in our world today. ■



**JOHN M. RINALDO, D. MIN**

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# Vocation Work in a Time of Pandemic

## What Have I Learned?

By Sr. Emily Beata Marsh, FSP, and the  
Daughters of St. Paul Vocation Team

Last fall I was in Toronto, Canada, and St. Louis, Missouri. January found me in Boston and February in Texas. As is the case for many vocation directors, my life and ministry involves a lot of traveling, and I was looking forward to spending March in my community before hitting the road again in April.

Needless to say, I have not been on the road (except the road to the grocery store) since March! The coronavirus pandemic has affected all sectors and levels of society, including how we think about and carry out vocation work. The past months have been filled with difficult challenges as well as positive and creative ideas. I would like to share some of the ways our vocation ministry has responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic, as well as some of the signs of hope that I have noticed in my work with young people.

The first decision that we had to make was to cancel our spring discernment retreats. Every year, we host a discernment retreat at our motherhouse in Boston during Holy Week. In a typical year, eight to fifteen women travel to attend this retreat and spend Holy Week and Easter with the Sisters. Being Daughters of St. Paul (whose apostolate is evangelization with the media), when we made the decision to cancel the in-person retreat, we instantly turned to developing an online version.

We were surprised, delighted, and overwhelmed by the response to this, our first ever online discernment retreat. I received over a hundred inquiries about the retreat. Nearly 50 women registered and participated, and more than 200 followed along without registering. Beyond the numbers, the retreat was such an experience of grace for the women who participated, as well as

for the Sisters who helped with the retreat. I personally could feel God at work, and many others expressed the same to me.

The Holy Week online discernment retreat so far surpassed our expectations that we decided to hold another online discernment retreat. We just concluded our second online retreat experience, with an even registration and participation than the first, and we are currently planning a third retreat.

Outside of online discernment events, I have noticed a few patterns about vocation work. The first is an increase in the number of inquiries that we receive—by email, phone, and social media. The pandemic has created extra time for some, and has offered us all the opportunity to reflect on our priorities. I am impressed by the honesty and courage of those who feel God calling them to discern religious life at this time and are reaching out to do something about it.

The second pattern is the level of participation and commitment from those discerning at home. For an online discernment retreat to work, it depends a great deal on the personal commitment of those making the retreat. They are responsible for downloading prayer guides and praying with them, listening to the talks on video, and setting aside silent prayer time. From what I can see, those participating in our online retreats are just as committed as if they had come on an in-person retreat. This is truly beautiful, because it allows God the space to work in their hearts.

One of the most common questions I get now is about how to discern at a time like this when travel is at least discouraged if not prohibited, borders are closed, and visits to religious communities are for the most part not possible. There are a few

things that I can recommend. To start with, it's a great time to do online research on religious communities that you are interested in. There are a great many online vocation events taking place at this time; besides our online discernment retreats, many other communities, dioceses, and organizations are offering online talks, tours, events, etc. If you find a community that you want to know more about, I encourage you to contact the vocation director and have a conversation—that's what we're here for! Finally, pray. This is the perfect time to grow in relationship with God, and growing in relationship with God is the key to vocational discernment.

Our co-foundress, Ven. Mother Thecla Merlo, had a habit of asking herself after her travels, major experiences, or even at the end of a day: What have I learned? I, too, have found myself asking: What have I learned from this time? I have learned that this is God's work. I have learned that when I might think there is only one way to do something, God can help us create an entirely new and beautiful way of doing that same thing. I have learned that there is nothing more powerful than God's presence.

God will continue to create new and beautiful things. Whether you are a vocation director, or someone discerning his or her vocation, I pray that you know that God is holding you close and guiding your every step. God bless you! ■

*Daughters of St. Paul*

# Words that Convict Us

## Amos: A Prophet For Today



By Fr. ISAAC KALINA, OSB

Our next prophet, Amos, entered the center stage in Israel, the Northern Kingdom, but was called from among the shepherds of a small southern community in Judah. God put His hand upon an outdoorsman, anointing a herdsman of Tekoa, a village located about 5 miles south of Bethlehem. So, Amos had no authority to speak of, no prophetic lineage, beyond the words he chose to express God's sentiments. And, what words he chose! They can be applied to our most recent historical events.

Amos was called during a time of relative prosperity in the north. We are talking about 150 years or so after the Prophet Elijah, 600 years before Christ. In contrast, it was also a period of great wickedness and evil as prevails even today in many modern Western cultures; where there is material prosperity, a spiritual decline simultaneously takes place.

Though Israel had thrived in peace for a time, Amos was more than willing to pick a fight with them, so he honed-in on the core of their corruption. Whereas the Torah had emphasized the Hebrew

people's calling to seek peace and justice, it was the most vulnerable people in the community, widows, orphans and aliens, who suffered the most, those for whom the Law gave special consideration. These poor people of society just fell through the cracks or were ignored.

Amos became God's spokesperson, predicting their very doom. "You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them." We hear the warning more than halfway through his book. Their problem had to do with social injustice. Their acts of worship were sinful because



they assumed they could live with injustice and piety together. The people were confused about how to integrate life-giving worship of God and social justice; they are inseparable now as they were then.

## The Day of the Lord

The prophet Amos was a humble shepherd and a grower of sycamore figs. But when he spoke, the people listened because his words cut them to the quick. And, meanwhile the people thought they were something special; they thought themselves protected because God had singled them out and had chosen to love them. They thought this privilege protected them; they were acting pridefully because of it; they ignored God's commands, neglecting His word and committed immoral acts. They treated the poor in their land as less than human, selling them into debt-slavery for profit. Through Amos, God condemned their pride. He promised that judgment would soon come to them. They believed that the Day of the Lord would bring more prosperity for them, but Amos makes it clear that the Day of the Lord would be a dark and fearful day, involving judgment, destruction and exile from the land. They imagine they will be protected while they are treating poorly those without as much knowledge of God. God humbles us all! In our prideful moments, as we condemn others, we end up condemning ourselves.

## God is slow to anger

Amos first spoke primarily and preached these things to the people face to face; they were then only written down much later for the sake of Judah and the succeeding generations of God's people. He prophesied about things that happened almost 3000 years ago. But all of this conflict and troubling stuff seems so familiar because it is a part of our story and remains rooted in our human nature which has fallen. If we dare to take a good look at ourselves, are we any different than the Hebrews? Are we all not guilty of having a prideful heart? Amos condemned Israel for their pride and injustice, but God gladly accepts repentant sinners and turns His anger from those who are contrite. God

told Moses that He was slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving all iniquities, rebellions and sin. Will we ever recognize our own hardened and loveless heart?



Amos' message speaks the truth and invites people of all times and places to repent. And, in our own day, we see how this can cause power structures to tumble. This is what happens when truth is spoken, and people and institutions fail to hear the call for repentance. A heart that is humble enough to recognize when it is wrong, or a conscience that admits when it does not know how to love as it ought... These are the things God is referring to through Amos' words. He was sent to admonish, to scold them for these sins and to invite a nation to apologize to God, to come to their knees or "to choose to take a knee."

## Words for our time

As time passes, we cannot help but notice the world around us becoming a very complicated place. We forget that

our world is changing. It has always been changing. We human beings have a tendency to ignore problems in our own day until they come back to bite us; when they get worse, our own lack of tools, of humility, cooperation and understanding can easily make a bad situation worse! This has been the case during these last Covid-19 months of lockdown.

We struggle as a nation to comprehend the "Black Lives Matter" movement and all the events that have led up to and contributed to this moment in our history. We did not arrive at this point in a vacuum. We have a long, common and sorry history and a collective memory. Even little things can have a great impact on society; many little things soon become too big for us to resolve in 90 days or less. In the prophecy of Amos, God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is reflected in His glory and power. God will not let our sins or our human problems thwart His perfect plan. But He makes all things work for the good of those who love Him.

Let us pray that Amos' words convict us to our core, rally us for a cause, teach us the deep wrongs our pride and stubbornness have caused, renew our souls in God's loving mercy so that we might renew the face of the earth. After 3000 years, the prophecy of Amos still has the ring of truth to it; it echoes loud and clear in our land. God never gets tired of revealing Himself to us! ■



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# Mary's Heart is Where She Encounters God

## A Vocation Discernment Path

By SR. EMILY BEATA MARSH, FSP

*"And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart."*

(Luke 2:19)

This month's Lectio Divina is a little bit like having Christmas in July! The second chapter of Luke details the account of the birth and early days of Jesus, and these verses in particular recall the visit that the shepherds make to the newborn Jesus. Their visit ends with an important verse: "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

This verse highlights an important attitude for vocational discernment and prayer. The Gospel tells us that Mary "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Imagine what the last several days must have been like for Mary. She had undergone a long and difficult journey in the last days of her pregnancy. With Joseph, she had borne the stress and tension of not finding an adequate place to stay. She had given birth and was now a first-time mother. On top of all of that, now a group of shepherds were coming, talking about angels and wanting to worship the newborn baby.

What is Mary's reaction to all of this? She "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Mary knows that these experiences, difficult and confusing as they are, have been gifted to her by God, her loving heavenly Father. She knows that even if she cannot understand them at the moment, the Father has her in mind and heart and is guiding every moment and every experience. Because of this, Mary keeps all of these experiences. She doesn't dismiss any of them. Neither does she worry about not being able to understand them immediately. Instead, she keeps them and trusts that they will be unfolded, unpacked, and explained in God's time.

Mary also does the work of reflecting on her experiences. The Gospel says that she reflects on them "in her heart." Mary's heart is where she encounters God. Her heart is where she said yes to God at the annunciation. It is where she found the strength and inspiration to visit Elizabeth. It was from her heart that the Magnificat flowed to praise and glorify God. Now, Mary allows these experiences into her heart and she reflects on them.

Reflecting is different than thinking. Reflecting is not necessarily about figuring things out or understanding them. That may come later, but reflecting allows the space for experiences to dwell in our hearts even before we know exactly what they mean. While thinking can be a solitary exercise, reflecting allows Another—namely, God—into our hearts to shed light on our experiences. When we reflect, we surrender a little bit of control over what we might discover in our reflection. Finally, reflecting takes time, and we have to be willing to allow the time and space that is necessary.

All of this is crucial along a journey of vocational discernment, and along the journey of the spiritual life, in general. We imagined the stress and difficulty of Mary's last several days before the birth of Jesus. What were the last several days like for you? I am sure that, among the joys and delights that may have come your way, there were also plenty of difficulties, challenges, stress, and tension. What is your reaction to the events and experiences—both exterior and interior—of the last few days of your life? Have you even taken time to think about them since they occurred? Or have you begun to let them into your heart to reflect on them?

Reflecting on our experiences is invaluable, especially for discernment. It helps us to see the path of God's action in our lives. Here are a few helpful ways to go

about building a habit of reflection.

- Ask the Holy Spirit to be with you. He is the one who will shed light on your experiences.
- Some helpful questions: what have I experienced recently (in the last day, in my vocational discernment, etc.)? Identify what you are "reflecting on in your heart."
- What stands out to me about that experience?
- Where was God in that experience? What might he be saying to me?
- What do I want to say to God about this?
- Remember that God has always been with you, is with you now, and will always be with you.

Like Mary, may we keep all these things, reflecting on them in our hearts in order to live more fully in God's presence and to surrender ourselves more fully to him.

*Mary, woman of silence, woman of reflection, teach us to keep all these things and reflect on them in our heart, so that we, like you, may live deeply and love freely. Amen. ■*



SR. EMILY BEATA MARSH, FSP

Professed her final vows in June 2018. Sister Emily is currently the National Vocation Director for the Daughters of St. Paul.



# "Not me, but God!"

## Servant of God Carlo Acutis, Patron of Computer Programmers (1991-2006)

By Fr. PETER QUINTO, RCJ

Computer programmers everywhere can now have their own patron saint in the person of Venerable Carlo Acutis whose beatification will take place in October of this current year.

"I'm happy to die because I did not spend my life wasting my time on things not pleasing to God." You might expect those words to come from a person who had already lived a long life, and not from a young man who died at the age of fifteen. Carlo Acutis, who died of leukemia in 2006, offered his suffering for the Pope and for the Church.

He was born in London on May 3, 1991 to Italian parents who moved to Milan soon after his birth. He was a pious child, receiving his First Holy Communion at the age of 7. He attended daily Mass, loved praying the Rosary daily and spending time before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, as well as going to weekly confessions.

Asked about whether she raised Carlo to say the daily Rosary and be interested in his faith, or if this came about on his own, Antonia Acutis, Carlo's mother responded saying: Carlo was given special graces. I wasn't particularly devout, but Carlo, from the time he was a young child, always wanted to go into the churches. He always wanted to go inside and visit Jesus, to say "hello" to Jesus. He was very good, very polite, and as generous as a young boy. I rarely had to say to Carlo, "Don't do this or that." He was very obedient. He was very special.

According to Antonia, Carlo was a very grounded boy. He was a child of his time. He played with his PlayStation and other toys, but he understood these things could be addictive and make you a slave. So, he imposed on himself a personal schedule, for example, a maximum of an

hour a week on his PlayStation. He always tried to improve himself. When he found that he was overindulging on food, he imposed on himself more temperance, to eat and enjoy food, but in the proper times and proper way.

Another imperfection he had was that of talking a lot which he found difficult to overcome. Carlo was a normal boy, but he had a very strong will, and with this will, he improved himself in many ways. He would say, "What does it matter if you can win a thousand battles if you cannot win against your own corrupt passions? It doesn't matter. The real battle is with ourselves."

Antonia maintains that it was Carlo who brought her closer to God. Carlo would ask her questions which she couldn't answer because of her lack of catechism, and this encouraged her to learn more about her faith. Many other people would witness this, people who converted because of Carlo's example.

He really lived what he preached. He knew when to evangelize, never forcing this on others. He always tried to help his friends, especially with their struggles with purity and experimenting with drugs.

Carlo, like many young people, had a passion for computers: everything including computer programming, film editing, website creation, editing and layout of comics. Perhaps his most significant computer venture was cataloguing all the Eucharistic miracles of the world. He started the project when he was 11 years old and wrote at the time: "The more Eucharist we receive, the more we will become like Jesus, so that on this earth we will have a foretaste of Heaven."

Carlo researched over 136 Eucharistic miracles that occurred over the centuries in different countries around the world and have been acknowledged by the Church and collected them into a virtual

museum. Besides creating a website to house this virtual museum, he helped create panel presentations that have traveled around the world.

In *Christus vivit*, the apostolic exhortation published after the 2018 Synod of Bishops on young people, Pope Francis offered Carlo Acutis as a model of holiness in a digital age (105, 106).

The beatification of Venerable Carlo Acutis will take place on October 10, 2020 in Assisi at 4 p.m. at the Basilica of Saint Francis.

Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi received the news of the beatification as a "ray of light in this period in which our country is struggling with a difficult health, social and work situation." Seeing how the pandemic had forced everyone to social distance physically, the internet had become a positive force for those who use it for the common good, just as Carlo did with his special talent for communication technology. "The love of God can turn a great crisis into a great grace," the archbishop added.

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# I Said "Yes!"

## My Personal Experience as a Lay Vocation Promoter



By RHONDA GRUENEWALD

I am an unlikely speaker and author on vocations in the Catholic Church. I am a laywoman, a convert, and I did not know what the word vocation meant just a few short years ago.

I was raised in a one stoplight town about 30 miles north of Houston, Texas, where football is king, and kindness abounds.

Unfortunately, my family did not emphasize faith. My father did not want the Bible read in the house, and my mother was Methodist. We rarely went to church, God

was never mentioned, and my parents divorced when I was 12.

Eventually, I graduated from the University of Texas in Austin before teaching English and coaching speech and debate at a large public high school. During that same time, I was baptized and attended a Methodist church, and the next year I met David, my husband now of 23 years. Thankfully, he was just Catholic enough to say, "I can't get married over there."

After we married in the Catholic Church, I went through RCIA a year and a half later, while pregnant with Abby, our daughter,

but instead of coming into the church at the Easter Vigil, I gave birth that night. I guess you could say that my Catholic journey has been unconventional!

### An Unexpected Call

It was another twelve years before I received a call that would put my life on another path. The call that started it all happened in the fall of 2011. Our brand-new parochial vicar, Fr. Victor Perez, called and asked if my husband and I could attend a meeting about priests and such. Though he was vague in his invitation, how could we say no?

As a convert to Catholicism, I walked into the gathering not knowing much, if anything, about how priests and religious were formed or even what the term “consecrated” meant. It was in hearing Father Victor’s enthusiasm for launching a vocation committee, an effort that he identified as one of the most important at any parish, that I was hooked!

I went home and scoured the internet and read anything I could about vocations. I found several websites with various activities, but nothing comprehensive about how to start or revive a parish-based committee, just bits and pieces. Our ministry had no guide to follow, so we relied on the Holy Spirit and forged our own path.

Initially, I was just volunteering as director of what we called our vocation ministry at St. Cecilia Catholic Church in Houston, TX. We prayed and encouraged our parishioners to pray for vocations, too. Our ministry worked hard, putting on activities each month after Mass, at youth events, at our parish school, anything really to bring awareness to vocations. We brought to our parish and school sisters, priests, and brothers of various religious order, some driving 5 hours to visit.

I felt a palpable joy from these encounters and consistently heard that same sentiment from many others whenever certain seminarians, priests and consecrated men and women would visit. I quickly became a vocation junkie! I know now it is because these men and women were sharing their light with me and everyone around them, and the world is in desperate need of more light, Christ’s light.

Most importantly, I felt like the work our ministry was doing made a real difference in the culture of our church. It took time, as it always does to change a culture, but our consistently successful monthly vocation activities began to take root in our parish, spawning a blossoming culture of vocations. More people would come to our events, prayers for vocations increased dramatically, and with one woman entering religious life and five priestly ordinations from St. Cecilia parishioners in a few short years, we were seeing fruit.

## "Vocation Ministry"

This eventually drew the attention of Archdiocesan leadership in Houston, who asked me to consult with them about how our model of a “Vocation Ministry” could spread to other parishes.

In December 2013, I said yes to writing a pamphlet. I envisioned a simple road map to serve as a guide for other lay leaders like me. Through a series of unanticipated Holy Spirit moments, encounters with people, ideas, and opportunities I never saw coming, I found myself authoring *Hundredfold: A Guide to Parish Vocation Ministry*. First published in 2015, the book is in its second printing, has an imprimatur, and is available in English and Spanish at my website [www.vocationministry.com](http://www.vocationministry.com), which has downloadable and editable materials for the activities found in my book.

Diocesan Vocation Directors from across North America took notice and invited me to speak in their parishes, not only to parishioners, but to their pastors, priests, and deacons, as well. No one was more shocked than I with this turn of events. I thought that my main task was to write the book, and then people would just get to work in their parishes for vocations. God had a different plan for this ministry and for me.

Since 2015, Vocation Ministry has provided workshop training on how to create a culture of vocations in English and Spanish to 8,000 people in 45 dioceses in the US and Canada, including 22 priest convocations. The goal is to spread the message that God’s people need to be actively involved in vocation awareness and prayer.

It was all about that initial “yes” to my new parochial vicar’s invitation in 2011. My plan was never to write a book, launch a website, or fly across the U.S. and Canada speaking to Catholics about vocations, but I see now that Vocation Ministry fills a gap. We can provide services that each diocese alone cannot, and I am eternally grateful for this work that keeps evolving.

Just a few months ago, the Vocations Today with Rhonda Gruenewald podcast was launched to share with a wider audience

about vocations, including interviews with sisters, seminarians, priests, and married couples. It is the first of its kind in iTunes.

Just this past April 20 - May 1, Vocation Ministry launched its inaugural Uplift Your Priest campaign. It was a response to what I had been seeing all over the country as the COVID-19 pandemic was sweeping the globe. Priests were being called into great heroic action by offering the sacraments to the sick and dying, finding creative ways to serve parishioners, in person and digitally, and maintaining empty parishes with limited staff support.

The campaign was designed to inspire the laity to support and encourage their priests who were on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic and to let clergy know that their people recognize their current sacrifices. With 15 different activities to choose from a parishioner could easily say thank you to their priest.

Ideas included offering a spiritual bouquet, drop off or have lunch/dinner delivered, text/email/write a note of encouragement, organize a parade of love where parishioners would go by in cars to show their priest how much they are missed and loved. It was wildly successful with parishes in Australia, Ireland, and all over the United States taking part.

I do not know what the Lord has in store for this ministry or me. My prayer each day is that I do not get in His way so that the Holy Spirit can easily move this ministry. ■



**RHONDA GRUENEWALD**

Is an author and founder of Vocation Ministry, a program offering activities and resources, in English and Spanish, to create a culture of vocations in local parishes.



## A Special Vocation

Serving God's People through the Gift of Music



By CHARLES SELBERT

**M**y name is Charles Selbert and I am a musician. Although I am not a member of a religious community, I have the deep conviction that God has placed me where I can use my musical gifts to serve where I am needed most. It is a blessing to share my love of music and also to receive fulfillment from the pleasure that I can bring others.

Even in my earliest memories, music had a profound effect on me. When I was two years old, my mom would play recordings of pieces by Vivaldi, Bach or Scott Joplin, my favorites, on the stereo. I would sit enthralled on our green couch for hours, just listening.

From a young age I loved to sing. I would look forward to church each week because of the hymns we would sing. To this day I

believe in the spiritual power of voices singing together: "Speaking to one another in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord. Always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God" (Ephesians 5:19-20: ).

I began studying violin at age eight and guitar at age twelve. I took violin lessons till I graduated from high school, working

with several different teachers, including a first violinist with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. I sat first chair in my high school orchestra, was chosen for the Missouri All-State orchestra, and was offered a scholarship to study violin at Oberlin College. But I'd fallen in love with the guitar, and wanted that to be my main instrument. So I took it up full time, and have worked hard at it, practicing several hours every day.

From the moment I first performed in front of an audience -- at a recital playing violin when I was eight -- I realized this was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I have played in several orchestras, small ensembles, bands, as a soloist, and most importantly, I've played and sung in church. After high school I majored in music at Webster University in St. Louis, graduating with a bachelor's degree in guitar performance. I've played professionally, taught music, even directed a contemporary worship service for three years. Although I had many wonderful experiences doing all these things, none of them compare to what I do now.

## Playing for the Elderly

I believe the Lord will put you where you need to be, if you let Him ("Thy will, not my will"). If someone had told me ten years ago that my main musical activity now would be playing for the elderly I would not have believed them.

A few years ago a friend of mine, after hearing me playing hymns and old songs, suggested I should look into performing for the residents at retirement homes. It wasn't something I'd ever thought of doing, but it sounded interesting, and possibly could be a way to serve. I developed a style of solo music, which includes finger-style guitar and vocals, and now I play and sing at more than thirty retirement communities, assisted living, memory care and independent living facilities in the St. Louis area: "My heart, O God, is steadfast. I will sing and make music" (Psalm 57:7).

I have learned a number of lessons playing for people who are reaching the end of their life's journey, among them that it's a blessing each day to be alive and healthy.

I have learned that each and every person has a story to tell, their life story. I am grateful to God that I can be there to hear them.

Many tell me that a song I played brought back memories they had long forgotten. Sometimes they tell me about special memories, often with smiles through happy tears. That I can share this with them is, I believe, God working through me. Never have I felt more connected to His love than in these rooms sharing with residents. (Colossians 3:16 "... Singing to Him with gratitude in your hearts.")



All of us witness miracles every day. Some are small, some are as vast as the universe. Many times when playing for memory care patients, I will see people who haven't spoken a cogent sentence in years singing along, somehow recalling every word of a song. That is an amazing manifestation of the power of music in people's lives.

## "Amazing Grace"

Because my music is not pre-recorded, every song is a journey and a creation. We do not know just how every journey will

end. And my audiences are part of that creation.

I always make it a point to play "Amazing Grace," since so many people know the words. When we get to the last verse, I stop playing the guitar and we sing the rest "a cappella." To see these faces, hear everyone singing a song about being lost, then being found, to see grandchildren who are there for a visit, singing along with grandma or grandpa -- there, to me, lies all the proof of our loving God.

The pandemic we are now living through has brought challenges to my performance schedule. A lot of the homes simply cannot accommodate live indoor performances due to the need for social distancing. Fortunately, I am still able to play outside at some of them. The residents are especially grateful, as they have been confined to their rooms for months now. They listen from their balconies, if the home has them; otherwise they wear masks and sit six feet apart on patios or in doorways.

Last week I played outside at a memory care facility, strolling from window to window, playing one or two songs for each resident. At my final stop, the daughter of the resident was outside, because of the rules, visiting with her mom through the window. The daughter moved behind me as I began to play, and I could see her reflection in the glass. As she watched her ninety-year old mom singing along with me, she began to cry. Afterwards, tears still streaming down her face, she thanked me, and said how much this had meant to her. "You're welcome," I said. "Thank you, too." ■

CHARLES SELBERT

Is a professional musician based in St. Louis, MO.



# Out of Touch

## Weighing the Cost of Touch Deprivation



Photo by Noah Buscher

By DR. BRUCE L. THIESSEN, PH.D.

*"Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' After he placed his hands on them, he went away."*

(Matthew 19: 13-15)

### Hands-on Experience

Laying hands on people is how Jesus prayed. It is how he taught his disciples to pray. It is how Jesus blessed the children. It

is how he performed many miracles.

Jesus was a humble king that proceeded to get on his hands and knees and wash people's feet to sit perched upon a royal throne.

Shaking hands as we welcome one another, and embracing one another, has traditionally been an integral part of the beginning of nearly all church services. In fact, hugging, and in certain cultures, "greeting one another with a holy kiss," is a part of church fellowship.

On the way out, we would shake the

hand of the priest or pastor. By the time this article comes out, church doors may be open, once again, to congregants, at least in certain communities.

### Touch and Social Bond

Now, due to the health risks associated with the pandemic, we are "out of touch." That is, we are completely "out of" a vital aspect of worship and fellowship. This may mean a slower spread of the coronavirus, but I don't think it bodes well for the psychological and spiritual health of human beings. Touch deprivation and its implications are far-reaching, extending beyond



worship and fellowship, to living, in general.

What does a touch, hug, or kiss mean? How is it experienced by the body? How about the mind or the psyche? How is touch derivation, a special, and unspeakably powerful subcategory of sensory deprivation, experienced by mind, body, psyche and spirit.

Legendary American singer/songwriter, Bruce Springsteen, expressed it rather poignant in the song, Human Touch. Here's a slice of that sentiment:

*Tell me in a world without pity  
Do you think what I'm askin's too much ?  
I just want something to hold on to  
And a little of that human touch  
Just a little of that human touch...*

Bruce Springsteen, 1992

I observe our family dog, Pepper Potts, and notice that her longing for touch seems even stronger than what is generally observed in most humans—either that, or she puts far less effort into trying to hide it.

The value of touch as a means of establishing and maintaining social bonding is clear from infancy on. That is likely why breastfeeding seems to carry with it so many physical, cognitive and emotional benefits.

## Different Meanings of Touch

A touch can be sensual, sensuous or sexual, or it can simply convey friendship, parent-child affection or camaraderie. There are congratulatory or celebratory high fives, and attaboy pats on the back.

Touch communicates something much differently on a football field or hockey rink between teammates, than it does between lovers in the midst of a romantic dinner.

Different forms of touch in one culture convey very different messages, than the same forms of touch do in other cultures. Since the pandemic is worldwide, and multiple cultures have tried to contain its spread, by drastically reducing touch and proximity, and setting marked parameters around multiple forms of touch, the effects of touch deprivation are vast and cross-

cultural.

I tried to convey the impact of touch/closeness deprivation, in Western cultures, in the title track to my newest CD, *Six Feet Apart or Six Feet Under: six feet apart/or six feet under/oh Lord, how did it come to this?/when we're apart, how can we love one another?/six feet apart, or six feet under...*

Some of my patients, including many that have been the victims of physical or sexual abuse, are averse to human touch of any kind. Others that are on the autism spectrum, or are simply introverted, are averse to human touch for different reasons.

For many of my patients with panic and social anxiety, social distance has always been preferred over close physical interaction and touch. Yet, these patients, like patients without such disorders, suffer with the same emotional consequences: feeling lonely, isolated and abandoned. Sheltering in place exacerbates the effects of touch deprivation.

## The Inadequacy of Alternative Forms

Society has been quite effective in employing workarounds. Choirs have united with technology, and shows like "American Idol" and "The Voice" go on without the judges extending congratulatory hugs.

But qualitatively, something is just not right with this picture. My drug-addicted and alcoholic patients still "attend" AA and NA meetings via the Zoom platform, but many report being on the verge of relapse, and they are attributing this to the contrast between the way meetings are currently being run, and the culture traditionally associated with prior face-to-face meetings, involving a huge emphasis and generous practice of giving great big bear hugs to one another. But adults are not the only ones hug-hungry, and kiss-craving.

The vast body of research on touch and general sensory deprivation in children, shows a clear correlation between touch and both physical and emotional development in children.

Love, by its very nature, a compact

"sport," and workarounds only go so far.

How does a quarantined senior like the character I introduced via the following song, or any elderly Covid-19 sufferer, in ICU, experience a text from a grandchild differently than a warm hug or a tender kiss? Quarantined Queen (from the CD, *Six Feet Apart or Six Feet Under*: Dr BLT <https://youtu.be/xsuwdW80hYA>)

Think about how terribly deprived and filled with anguish grandchildren and children of Covid-19 stricken, or otherwise quarantined grandparents must be, being unable to communicate their care in ways that would, under normal circumstances, involve reassuring, caring, loving touches?

Moreover, what parent wants their children to grow up experiencing the types of moderate to severe developmental issues and social skills deficits that arise in children deprived of consistent loving touches and physical displays of affection?

## Let us Lift Up our Hands

The pandemic is not going to last forever, so the effects of affection and touch deprivation may be, in some ways, mild to moderate, and temporary.

In the meantime, God created us with hands and arms that we can raise to the heavens in worship. He does not require 6 feet of distance between his spirit and ours.

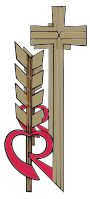
How long can we afford to hold back our affection for one another? Time will tell. Time tells all. I pray that God will allow us to use our hands, once again, to comfort and pray for the sick, and to support and greet one another in worship and in fellowship. We are, out of touch. We could all use a little more. ■



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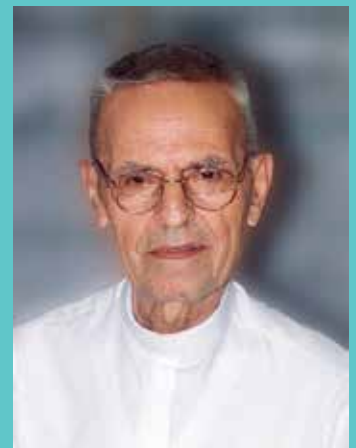
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