

How to Make Vocations a Priority in the Parish

Empower laypeople to help foster this important work



By Rhonda Gruenewald

I have a passion for vocations, but that was not always so. I am a convert to Catholicism, recently celebrating the 18th anniversary of my confirmation, but the call that started my passion for vocations happened in the fall of 2011.

Our brand new parochial vicar, Father 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? I did not know much, if anything, about how priests and religious were formed, or what the definition of consecrated was, but after hearing Father Victor's enthusiasm for the success of the committee, which he felt was one of the most important at any parish, 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 tread our own path.

After hosting different activities every month at our parish for several years, the Serra Governor's Council in Houston asked me to consult with them about how to bring our model of a vocation ministry to every parish in Houston. So, in December 2013 I said I would write a pamphlet, a short road map for how to have a success-

ful parish vocation committee or ministry. Seventeen months later, it was a professionally edited book with an imprimatur. Now, it is being used by more than 55 dioceses to promote vocations. The Holy Spirit has been working overtime!

to launch a website and a nonprofit or to speak to parishioners and priests around the country about vocation ministry. It has been a crazy ride that the Holy Spirit has had me on, but I am loving this so-called "work"!

Who knew how much fun this could be? Whether I was hanging around priests, sisters or those in formation at a church function or playing "pin the miter on the bishop" with the children at our parish festival, I was having a blast! More importantly, I felt like the work our ministry was doing made a real difference in the culture of our church.

In my own Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, we have eight Serra Clubs, which is an international lay apostolate approved by the Church to work and pray for vocations. The members of these Serra Clubs conducted a survey of the seminarians within our archdiocese to see how many came from parishes that have a ministry or committee promoting vocations, and a whopping 80 percent of them did; 80 percent of the

I have found that only 10-20 percent of parishes intentionally promote vocations. We have much work to do!

Putting a Plan in Place

My plan was never to write a book,

seminarians came from the 20 percent of parishes that have a vocation committee or ministry. This number alone should inspire all who run a parish to get to work promoting the priesthood, consecrated life and marriage ASAP!

The guiding Scripture for our ministry is, "Some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit yielding thirty, sixty and a hundredfold" (Mk 4:8). Let us enrich the environment for vocations at every parish so that parishioners are more open to God's call. If the ministry concentrates its efforts on this mission and encourages each parishioner to pray, asking God what he wants for their lives, our seminaries and convents will be full and marriages will be holier.

Reviewing Your Parish

Now, I want you to think about your own home parish and answer these questions.


If a family walked into your parish on any given Sunday, would they know that vocations is a priority?

What if that same family walked in the weekend of World Day of Prayer for Vocations, would they know that the parish, along with the universal Church, is celebrating a special day of prayer?

Some of you will answer yes, but I am afraid the majority are like most Catholic parishes and are not reaching that yield. From speaking with well over 50 diocesan vocation directors and giving workshops in more than 25 dioceses across the country, I have found that only 10-20 percent of parishes intentionally promote vocations. We have much work to do! To prepare the soil in all the parishes in the United States and around the world, we must start a movement for a new wave of vocations right now!

Where Do Vocations Begin?

The family! And a parish vocation ministry is best equipped to encourage and promote vocations to the family. We have




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Father Victor Perez arm wrestles a young parishioner while promoting vocations at a fall festival at St. Cecilia Parish in Houston. Courtesy photo

the perfect opportunity to connect in a real way with the families — especially the youth — of the parish, which is the seed-bed of vocations.

Another reason that involving the families in this mission is vital is because young men and women are thinking about their future most when they still live with their family. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, in its survey of the ordination class of 2017, found that 23 percent of young men first considered a vocation to the priesthood between 14 and 17 years of age. Furthermore, another 35 percent of those surveyed considered it first in their preteen years (ages 6-13). The

Drawing Others to the Priesthood

Five ways we as priests can foster discernment in our communities

By Father Stephen Davoren

As the director of vocations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, it can be an overwhelming and daunting task promoting vocations to the priesthood in a diocese of this size. I realized quickly that I needed to mobilize my brother priests to create a culture of vocation awareness in the parishes, schools and families. We are all vocation promoters with countless opportunities to tell the stories of heroic priests who have paved the way of faith by dedicating their lives promoting the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

While the seed of my vocation to the priesthood was nurtured by my parents, it was inspired by an amazingly holy and humble priest, Msgr. John Cremens, who was a chaplain at my high school. He embodied the priesthood of Jesus Christ by his actions, love for the Church and humanity. One holy monsignor inspired eight men to respond to God's call and be ordained to the priesthood. Like him, we can continue inspiring men by working together sharing

the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One year ago, Vin Scully, the Hall of Fame announcer for the Los Angeles Dodgers, retired after 67 years of calling Dodger baseball. His gift was to see and call the great game of baseball through the lens of faith, humanity and storytelling. As a Dodger fan since Little League, it was the honor of a lifetime to concelebrate a Mass in the Dodger press room on the Sunday of his very last broadcast. As all the cameras and attention was directed at him, Vin Scully asked us to offer the Mass for the families of Jose Fernandez, the pitcher for the Florida Marlins, and his friends who had been tragically killed in a boating accident hours before. Priesthood is telling the story of humanity, walking with people in their time of need, avoiding the lights and attention while staying focused on Jesus Christ and the Eucharist.

Five Ideas

What can priests do to help promote priestly and religious vocations? I suggest

that we call the game of life through the lens of faith in Jesus Christ, to see the humanity of the people and most importantly to tell the stories of our Catholic tradition. I would like to suggest five simple ideas to help promote vocations to the priesthood:

1. Identify: Approach promoting vocations with open eyes, identifying men who radiate a genuine love for Jesus and his Church. Identify someone who expresses a zeal and passion for living the Gospel and who possesses the qualities you deem important for priesthood.

2. Invite: Be bold in proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and your love for the priesthood. Personally invite, by name, a man who likewise expresses an authentic joy in being a disciple of Jesus.

3. Invest: Show interest in the individual's life and engage with a man discerning the priesthood by inviting him to see a glimpse into your daily life. Accompany him on the road of discernment by being honest and open in sharing your hopes

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numbers are about the same for young women entering religious life, highlighting the importance of engaging and encouraging religious vocations to young people still at home and more active in family and parish life.

A Remedy

I have written “Hundredfold: A Guide to Parish Vocation Ministry” (Vianney Vocations, \$17), which recently has been translated into Spanish as “*Sembrando Semillas*.” The aim of this book is to inspire anyone starting or reviving a vocation ministry or committee and give them tested activities to bring about a culture of vocations in their parish.

Let me make clear that this is not a ministry that you, as a priest, should administer. You are the spiritual guide of the ministry who, hopefully, will support the activities and guide your flock in under-



Seminarian Jose Alonso of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston plays soccer with schoolchildren during a visit to talk about being called to the priesthood. Courtesy photo

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Dominican Sisters of Mary Immaculate Province and the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia visit with children during National Vocation Awareness Week. Courtesy photo



standing why they should care about vocations. If they know it is important to you, they will be on board and ready to help.

Most parishioners have no idea that they can do anything about this vocation “crisis.” They only see that their priest is exhausted and needs help; they see very few (if any) consecrated sisters serving in the schools or at church; they see that the idea of marriage is in decline for our youths. Let parishioners know that they can do something to bring about more vocations.

One of the main benefits of the vocation activities outlined in “Hundredfold” is that they can be adapted to any size parish and situation, whether an urban parish that has 8,000 families or a rural parish with 250 families that share their pastor with three other churches. Besides explaining why every parish should promote vocations and how to do so in a prayerful

and organized fashion, I give all the practical advice that anyone leading a ministry would want to know, such as how to run a meeting, recruit members and implement activities.

I offer 67 activities in the book, each falling into one of these categories: prayer, awareness and education, youth and affirmation. Let’s look at a few activities under each.

Prayer

Organizing prayer for vocations is a basic and fundamental aspect of almost all ministry activities, starting with the ministry itself by consecrating every meeting and activity to Jesus through the Blessed Mother. Then a ministry should blanket their parish at all levels with prayer cards for vocations, placing prayer for vocations in the prayers of the faithful and the bulletin

each week. More complicated activities include coordinating a seminarian adoration program or adoration for vocations.

With so few parishes doing anything at all for vocations, the potential to make a great impact with prayer alone is astounding. Imagine the vocations boom we could experience if parishioners at every parish in the nation were praying for more vocations.

Let me share with you a story that should inspire all of us in our work.

In Lu, Italy, a group of Catholic mothers saw the lack of priests and religious from their small Italian village. The deepest desire of many of these mothers was for one of their sons to become a priest or for a daughter to place her life completely in God’s service. They gathered for weekly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and after Masses to pray, asking the Lord for vocations.

In about 60 years, more than one-third of the small village’s population became priests or sisters. There were 323 religious who came from its less than 1,000 inhabitants between 1881 and the 1940s. Through the powerful prayer of these mothers, an atmosphere of delight and Christian devotion developed in the families that helped the children to recognize their vocations more readily.

The prayer they prayed was simple yet profound:

“O God, grant that one of my sons may become a priest! I myself want to live as a good Christian and want to guide my children always to do what is right, so that I may receive the grace, O God, to be allowed to give you a holy priest! Amen.”

Encourage your parishioners to pray daily for vocations from their own parish. Eventually, through much prayer, you can inspire them through your joyful witness to pray for vocations from their own families.

Awareness and Education

I don’t think many of our parishioners

— cradle Catholics or converts — know what the words “vocation” and “discernment” mean; they don’t know how a priest becomes a priest or that marriage is a vocation to be discerned as much as the priesthood and consecrated life. This education can happen in traditional ways, such as bulletin inserts and bookrack materials, but it also can happen in unconventional ways, such as a parish festival vocation booth or a Lenten vocations fish fry.

Youth

We know that the preteen and teen population are the most likely to be contemplating their future, so keeping vocations in the forefront of their minds is at the heart of a vocation ministry. This can happen at the parish school, religious education classes, youth ministry, at weekend

ACTION PLAN

Here is how you can kick-start or revive a vocation ministry at your parish:

- ✓ **PRAY:** Cover all endeavors in prayer. Pray specifically that the Holy Spirit will open the hearts of those at the parish who can help in this work.
- ✓ **ACQUIRE:** Buy the book “Hundredfold” or its Spanish counterpart “*Sembrando Semillas*” and become familiar with VocationMinistry.com so that you can encourage those in the parish to use these tools for change.
- ✓ **INVITE:** Find individuals who have a heart for Jesus, Mary and the Church, and discuss ways to start or grow a ministry. Use the book as a catalyst for someone to realize a new passion. In general, the person you are looking for is 45 or older and has children or grandchildren, and they want to build up the Church for these future generations. This is a generalization, as the perfect person may be a young adult who just entered the Church at Easter or it could be three young married couples. Also, make sure the people you invite to do this work have a healthy respect for your priesthood.
- ✓ **SHARE:** When you make vocations a top priority, encourage your flock to be open to God’s promptings throughout the year. Share your vocation testimony often with teens and young adults. Let them see you not “just” as someone who interprets the Gospels, but as a man with a real past who may have been engaged before seminary, who struggled to find his path. Last, show your parishioners a joyful example of the priesthood, which will make young men and women think about giving their lives to Christ.

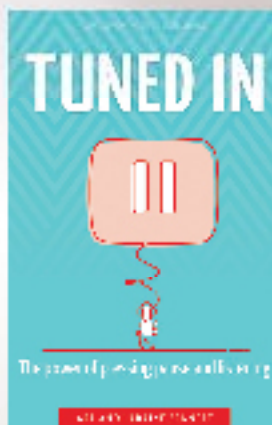
Recommended Reading



The Tech Talk: Strategies for Families in a Digital World

by Michael Home, PsyD
978-1-68192-036-8 (ID#T1789),
Paperback, 144 pp., \$14.95

Author, Catholic parent, and clinical psychologist, Michael Home knows all too well the struggles families face understanding and dealing with the impact of technology on our lives. In *The Tech Talk* he gives parents practical strategies for keeping it all in balance. Perfect for busy and “plugged in” families at your parish.



Tuned In: The Power of Pressing Pause and Listening

by Art and Laraine Bennett
978-1-68192-060-3 (ID#T1809),
Paperback, 128 pp., \$14.95

Relationship experts Art and Laraine Bennett offer profound and practical advice for improving both personal and professional relationships by strengthening our listening skills. Using real life situations and scriptural reflections, readers will begin to “tune in” to the voices around them (including God’s).

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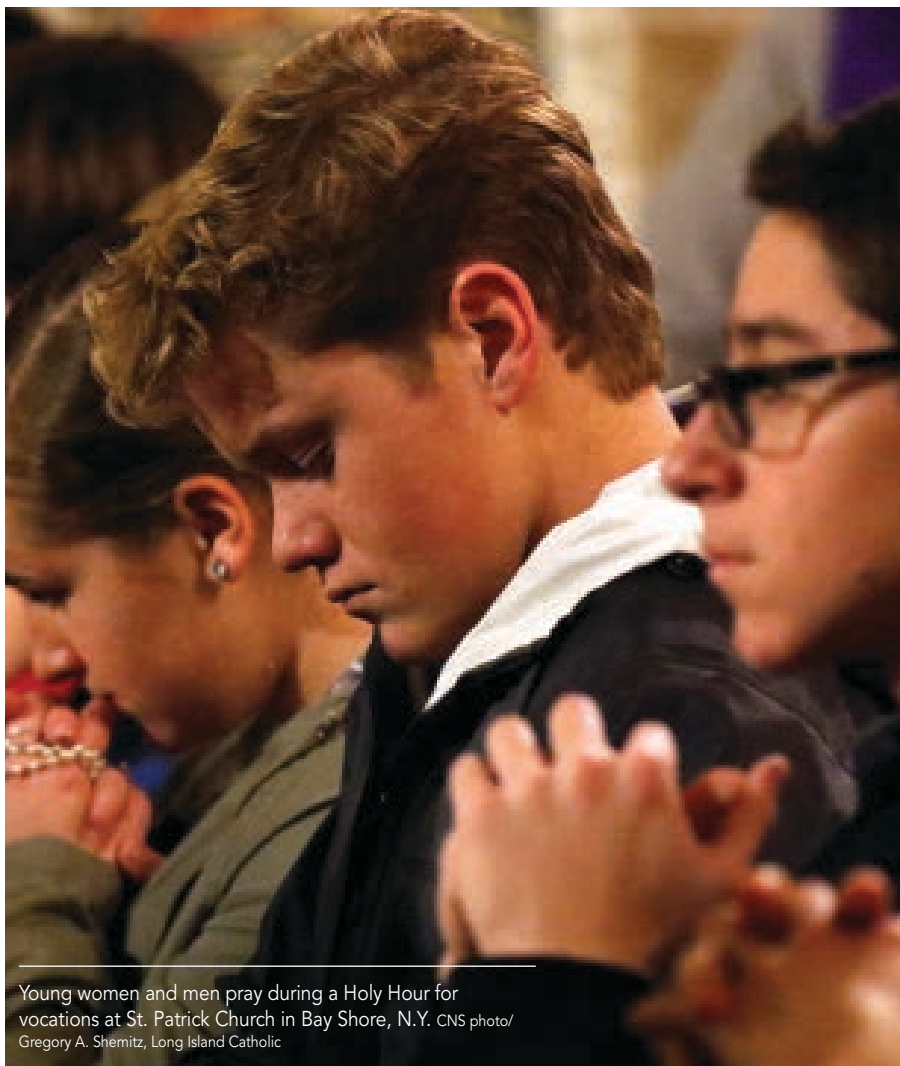
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PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

O God, Father of all mercies,
provider of a bountiful harvest,
send your graces upon those
you have called to gather
the fruits of your labor;
preserve and strengthen them
in their lifelong service of you.
Open the hearts of your children
that they may discern
your holy will;
inspire in them a love and desire
to surrender themselves
to serving others in the name
of your son, Jesus Christ.
Teach all your faithful to follow
their respective paths in life
guided by your divine word and truth.
Through the intercession
of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary,
all the angels and saints,
humbly hear our prayers
and grant your Church's needs,
through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Source: USCCB.org



Young women and men pray during a Holy Hour for vocations at St. Patrick Church in Bay Shore, N.Y. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz, Long Island Catholic

Masses or all the above. A ministry in its early stages might recognize their altar servers or bring seminarians or religious sisters to the parish school to interact with students. Later, a ministry can coordinate a panel discussion for their older youth or hold a Vocation Bible School: Discovery Mission.

Affirmation

Last, a ministry should give parishioners ample opportunities to affirm you and your ministry in the priesthood, as well as all priests, active and retired, religious sisters and brothers, and all married couples.

We want you to be joyful in your vocation, whether done simply through spiritual bouquets and cards or more elaborately through an ordination anniversary reception or a dance for couples on World Marriage Day. The more we can affirm you, the

more parishioners — young and old alike — see how important what you do is for the parish and our world.

'Laypeople who take risks'

Pope Francis recently said: "We need laypeople who take risks, who get their hands dirty, who are not afraid of making mistakes, who go forward. We need laypeople with a vision of the future, not confined to the little things of life."

My hope is that you find parishioners in your communities who are ready to go forward and get their hands dirty to see a hundredfold yield in your diocese.

St. Junipero Serra, pray for us!

RHONDA GRUENEWALD is the author of "Hundredfold: A Guide to Parish Vocation Ministry" (Vianney Vocations, \$17). She is also a speaker and the founder of Vocation Ministry (vocationministry.com).