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## NEW MOVEMENTS

# When 'little' is 'epic'

**The Community of the Lamb faces a major milestone**

By Tom Hoopes

Little Brothers and Little Sisters of the Lamb from around the world are gathering together in their motherhouse in France from now until May as they face a historic milestone.

The young religious institute, the Community of the Lamb, is electing the successor of its still-living founder, little Sister Marie (religious members of the community don't use their last names).

The community of religious sisters and brothers has made a big impact on those they have encountered for different reasons.

It's their "epic" spirituality lived out in small wooden dwellings that interests Oscar Shingledecker, a North Carolina college student. Their distinctive sung Masses, blending the liturgies of East and West, won over Cathe Sienkiewicz, a Kansas mother and catechist. And their radically Christ-centered missionary vision attracted Aaron Riches, a theologian who has known them in two countries.

The community currently has "little monasteries" in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Poland, Argentina, Chile, and Kansas, and are known for their mendicant lifestyle and their joyful demeanor, including putting on original plays and bursting into song.

Little Sister Marie-Jeanne,

36, from Paris, France, leads the sisters in Kansas City, Kansas. She told Our Sunday Visitor, "As Little Sisters of the Lamb, we have the great joy of being beggars. We go door-to-door, two-by-two, following in the footsteps of the disciples and of our fathers, St. Dominic and St. Francis, to ask for something to eat."

As for the smiles and songs, she said, "We experience a joy in our need for God, because in our poverty before him, we are met with his generosity."

The community was formed in Paris in 1968 by Dominican sisters who started to explore together the Church's response to key questions such as "Who is God?" and "What makes us human?" In 1981, Chartres Bishop Michel Kuehn officially recognized its foundation. In 1983, Perpignan Archbishop Jean Chabbert welcomed the community to his archdiocese. Dominican Master Vincent de Couesnogle recognized the order as "a new branch emerging from the trunk of the Order of Preachers." Since 1996, Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn has been the bishop responsible for the community.

Kansas City, Kansas, Archbishop Joseph Naumann welcomed them to Kansas in 2008.

"From my first encounter with the Little Sisters many years ago in Rome, I was drawn to their charism of being mendicants, beggars, depending on God's providence for everything," he said.

"Whenever I visit the Little Monastery, I always ask the Little Brothers and Sisters about their most recent missions,"



Little Sisters participate in Mass at the Little Monastery in Kansas City, Kansas. Photos courtesy of The Leaven



Every year, the brothers and sisters of the Community of the Lamb host an outdoor pilgrimage.

Archbishop Naumann added. “They encounter many who are looking for a sign that God is with them: a young woman who has been sober for many years but is being tempted to drink again that day; parents who have recently experienced the death of a child; an elderly person who is lonely and feels forgotten.

“They always invite those who have welcomed them to come, visit and pray at the monasteries. They conclude with singing a blessing for those who have opened their homes and hearts to them.”

**An ‘epic’ way of life**

Oscar Shingledecker, a sophomore at Benedictine College in nearby Atchison, Kansas, met the community during his freshman year and attended their Triduum celebration, which involves an all-night vigil and a giant bonfire.

Little Brother Joachim told him, “If you ever go to France, you should visit our monastery.” So he did. With three friends in Europe for a semester abroad program, Shingledecker visited the community twice in France — at their Lyons monastery and their Saint-Pierre motherhouse, 10 miles from Fanjeaux, where St. Dominic once lived.

“Their motherhouse is amazing,” said Shingledecker. “It has several structures scattered throughout the southern hills of France and many spots to pray. They had animals, too. It was beautiful.”

The community’s monasteries are known for their distinctive wooden architecture. The small dwellings and common buildings are often compared to Hobbiton in “The Lord of the Rings.”

He said the community’s charism is “the solution” the Church needs today.

“They offer a lifestyle that

models how people can maintain an interior life amidst a constantly changing schedule,” he said. “Unlike other orders, their life is not strict and regimented. They are still devoted to prayer, devoted to Christ, but in the midst of doing many different kinds of things with no set schedule. We visited a homeless man in Lyons and we cut up pigs for dinner in San Pierre.”

He added, “Their spirituality is an epic fusion of Dominican and Franciscan spirituality, which is just so cool.”

The community has a special devotion not just to St. Dominic and St. Francis but also to St. Catherine of Siena, St. Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) and St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

**A uniquely beautiful liturgy**

Many people come to the Community of the Lamb for their distinctive liturgy.

During their founding, the community was looking for a liturgical expression that answered what the Second Vatican Council sought. “The liturgy of the Council allowed us to live at the rhythm of the heart of God and of his love for all mankind,” says the institute’s online history. The Community’s Mass is celebrated with ele-

ments of Eastern and Western traditions.

Cathe Sienkiewicz said it is both the liturgy itself and the presence of the sisters that make it special.

“The beauty comes from the deep and authentic joy of these consecrated men and women,” she said. “This joy is both exuberant and serious, and these qualities are expressed in their liturgy, which is almost entirely sung in wonderful polyphony.”

It is an oasis of peace, she said.

“I think that what people are often seeking, and not often finding, is a liturgy that is intentional, is organically connected to the community, and engages the whole person. All of these come together at the Little Brothers and Sisters,” Sienkiewicz said.

“People find themselves drawn to it, as an experience that meets a profound need,” she said.

**Christ-centered missionaries**

Above all, though, the Community of the Lamb has a mission to share the Gospel through personal witness, service, and even by performing plays.

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The Community of the Lamb visit a Kansas farm. Their current leader in Kansas is Sister Marie-Jeanne (left).

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Theologian Dr. Aaron Riches at Benedictine College first met the Little Sisters of the Lamb at their Light of Peace monastery in Granada, Spain.

“On many Saturdays when we lived in Granada we went with our kids to the monastery for open table,” he said. “When we told Hermanita [little Sister] Fatima that we would be leaving Granada to move to Kansas she told us — with a great smile of joy — that in the providence of God we were going precisely to the one place in North America where the Community of the Lamb has a presence.”

However, “There are no Little Brothers of the Lamb in Granada,” he said. He was grateful to introduce his son to them at their “little monastery” in Kansas.

“The most moving thing I have done with the community was this winter, my son and I went on a mission overnight with two of the little brothers,” he said. “We stayed over in a homeless shelter. We lined up with everyone else. We didn’t materially help anyone. For 12 hours we were poor with the



A sister and a layperson beautify the space for the yearly outdoor pilgrimage.

poor. They were moved by our presence; we were moved even more by their welcome.”

The community’s motto, depicted with an image of the Lamb of Revelation, is “Wounded, I never cease to love.” The repetition of the word “little” in the community’s terminology—never capitalized in their us-

age—is intentional: The members want to put Christ, not themselves, front and center.

Riches described the “littleness” of the Little Brothers and Little Sisters.

“Little Sister Marie-Jeanne spoke in my class and she said something along the lines that everyone has a Bethlehem in

their heart into which Jesus is begging to enter. That Bethlehem, prepared for him, is not the place of our competence or virtue,” he said, but “the corner we dare not show the world.” It’s there that Jesus “desires most to come into our life as a the gentle, loving peace our healing.”

Archbishop Naumann said

the archdiocese is blessed by this powerful witness, but when the little sisters accepted his invitation, people asked them “Why Kansas?”

“The real reason the Community of the Lamb came to Kansas is because they prayed for the Lord to send them where they were most needed,” he said. “The Holy Spirit did not guide them to Washington, D.C., our nation’s capital; nor to New York City, our country’s economic center; nor to Los Angeles, a cultural hub — but rather to the heart of our nation.”

The community is glad they did.

“What I have discovered in the United States is the generosity sown in the heart of Americans,” said little Sister Marie-Jeanne. “It is a gift for me to witness the spontaneity and simplicity in which Americans give of themselves and their friendship.”

*Tom Hoopes, author of “The Rosary of Saint John Paul II” and “The Fatima Family Handbook,” is writer in residence at Benedictine College in Kansas and hosts “The Extraordinary Story” podcast.*



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HEALING

# Divine Mercy sisters help children heal trauma

**These Wisconsin-based sisters offer free opportunities for animal therapy**

By Katie Yoder

When Mother Mary Veronica Fitch set out to establish a new religious community, she never imagined that it would one day provide an animal therapy program.

People are “willing to extend love to [animals] that they might not extend to people when they’ve been wounded,” the founder of the Franciscan Congregation of Divine Mercy (FCDM) said of how God works through animals. “The animals themselves ... help people to feel and give love and to believe themselves lovable.”

Today, animals — 10 horses, four cats and one dog — are a large part of her new Catholic congregation’s ministry. It all began when, in 2016, Mother Mary Veronica left the Poor Clares with permission to found the



A sister and children pet a therapy horse. Courtesy photos

FCDM community now based on a farm in Marshfield, Wisconsin. Four years later, in 2020, Bishop William P. Callahan of La Crosse, Wisconsin, approved the congregation as a “private association of the Christian faithful with the intent of becoming a religious institute.”

Two sisters belong to the FCDM: Mother Mary Veronica

and Sister Maria Lucia. Another two women are applying to join later this year.

These sisters — clad in brilliant red-and-white habits — seek to live mercy in their daily lives while helping others do the same. Their community accomplishes this by providing animal therapy, particularly for children suffering from trauma, in addi-

tion to catechesis, spiritual direction, retreats, classes, talks and other activities.

All of these services, Mother Mary Veronica told Our Sunday Visitor, are free.

She drew inspiration for the congregation from the diary of St. Faustina Kowalska, a Polish religious sister and mystic who fostered devotion to God’s Divine Mercy. The congregation consists of three aspects: 1) the monastic-contemplative aspect

(contemplative religious sisters); 2) the monastic-apostolic branch (active religious sisters) and fraternity branch (individuals devoted to Divine Mercy while living in the world); and 3) the companions of the FCDM (individuals who commit to one daily act of mercy and prayer).

In addition to the two sisters, the congregation includes eight

lay members in the fraternity branch and more than 200 people belonging to the companions of the FCDM.

For her part, Mother Mary Veronica initially hesitated to enter religious life because she

*“Truth, goodness and beauty draw people to God, and the animals have that and they share that.”*

— Mother Mary Veronica Fitch

did not want to give up her past life, especially the animals in it. The Minnesota native previously worked as a horse trainer, riding instructor and barn manager on her parents’ farm, where she witnessed that animals draw people to God. Among other things, she saw marriages reconciled, conversions to the Catholic faith, and even one woman returning to confession after an abortion.

“I see that as a sign God gave me that this would be very fruitful in the future as a sister,” she

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commented. "But I didn't see that then."

**A program of comfort and healing**

Mother Mary Veronica began the animal therapy program, she said, after receiving inspiration during Mass and later moments of inspiration. Today, around 40 people, including children suffering from trauma, at-risk children and children with autism, participate in the program.

The program centers on the sisters' horses: Ignatius, Anthony, Catherine, Colette, Cecilia, Agnes, Agatha, Margaret Mary, Maria and Lucy.

"Horses are an amazing therapy animal," Mother Mary Veronica said. "They are emotionally extremely sensitive and this can be a great source of healing."

Depending on their age, the children interact with the horses in different ways. The older children learn positive reinforcement training, or training by rewarding the horses' good behavior. The younger children, she said, go on pony rides and pet the horses.

The horses also benefit from the program, she confirmed.

"Most of our horses have had some pretty significant trauma," she said of their horses, some of which once ran wild. "All but one are mustangs and these horses have had to endure significant trauma during the process of being rounded up and separated from their families."

Two of them, she added, were rescued from the kill pen.



Two girls pet a therapy horse at the Wisconsin farm.

In addition to the horses, the sisters also care for one dog (Faith) and four cats (Majesty, Mercy, Trinity and Unity) who comfort the people they encounter.

Mother Mary Veronica, an instructor and evaluator with Therapy Animals Unleashed, a therapy dog program, trains therapy dogs and has provided dog obedience therapy. The sisters' own white German Shepherd, Faith, works with children and helps people during spiritual direction as they work through trauma.

"Faith is very sensitive and loving and provides great solace, especially in touch," Mother Mary Veronica, who is also a trauma-informed life coach, described.

**A call to action**

Mother Mary Veronica shared what she most wanted people to know about her congregation and their way of life, beginning with "we need you to help us in fulfilling it."

Online, the congregation lists several ways to support the congregation, beginning with prayer. The sisters also rely on volunteers, donations of material items and financial gifts.

"We have found that we are not going to be able to obtain enough land in our current location in order to develop our apostolates properly and to have a real monastery built for us and to have enough space for sisters to live," Mother Mary Veronica said, emphasizing a need for financial support. "We are looking for something in the area of 100 to 150 acres in land along with buildings."

She also asked that people spread the word about them to women who are interested in dedicating their life to God and interested in animals.

"Truth, goodness and beauty draw people to God," she stressed, "and the animals have that and they share that."

*Katie Yoder is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*



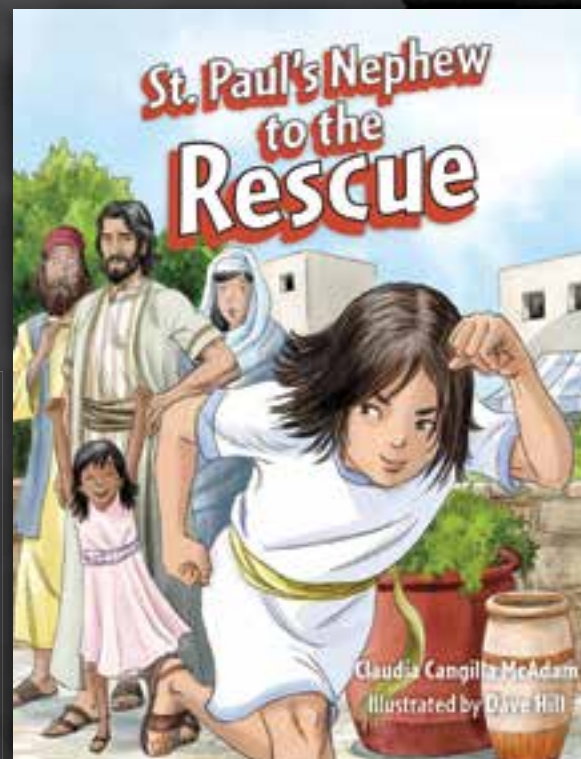
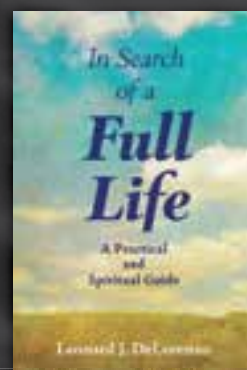
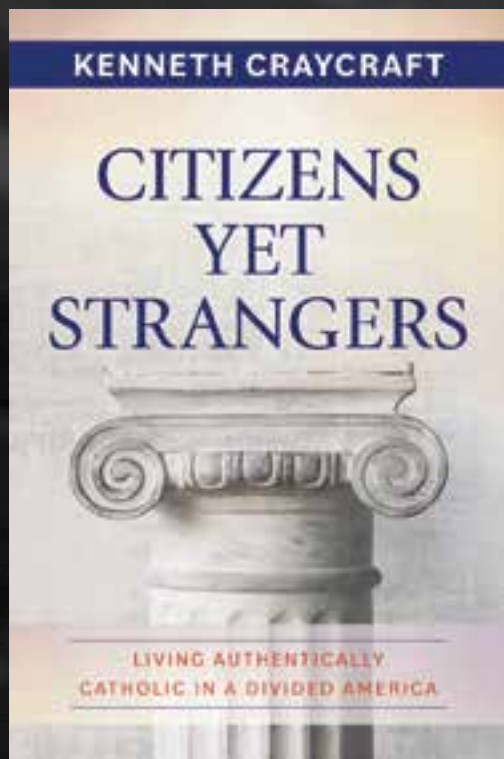
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## MIDWIFERY

# From nun to expert midwife

*Dying from cancer, this Mexican nun recounts the many lives she saved throughout her year of ministry*

By Anna Wilgenbusch

On a cold day in January of 2000, Sister Joaquína Hernández Pereira rode in the back of a truck, laden with supplies and religious habits, into a rural town in the mountainous region of Oaxaca, Mexico. She had a near-impossible mission ahead of her.

Sister Joaquína and a few other religious sisters were sent to the town by the Servants of Mary, a Spanish religious order that has had a presence in Mexico since 1896, to provide medical care for six indigenous villages and their surrounding areas.

The sisters were trained as nurses, but the needs of the villagers exceeded their training.

“We were [sent] there to be everything: doctors, nurses,



Sister Joaquína has served for 53 years. Courtesy photo

healers ... everything, everything,” Sister Joaquína said.

There was a particularly large need for midwives — a specialty in which Sister Joaquína had no previous experience. Undaunted, Sister Joaquína and another sister teamed up to deliver babies across the country-

side. Sister Joaquína learned as she went, eventually becoming an expert midwife.

During just the first two years that she spent in the countryside, she helped deliver 250 babies — often in dire circumstances.

Her memories of these births

are especially poignant now as she suffers from a terminal diagnosis of intestinal cancer and several other severe health complications. She awaits her death in her convent’s infirmary — a small white room with a single window — in the Colonia Nápoles neighborhood of Mexico City. Amid her suffering, Sister Joaquína recounted the most memorable birth stories of her ministry.

## Births despite all odds

The very first birth she attended taught her to expect the unexpected.

“The woman arrived from a village where there were no highways, so she had to come walking, but she was already more and more dilated,” Sister Joaquína said.

Eventually, villagers were able to put the woman in a truck to transport her to the clinic. But on the way to the clinic, the baby was partially born feet-first in the back of the truck.

“So the woman arrived to us

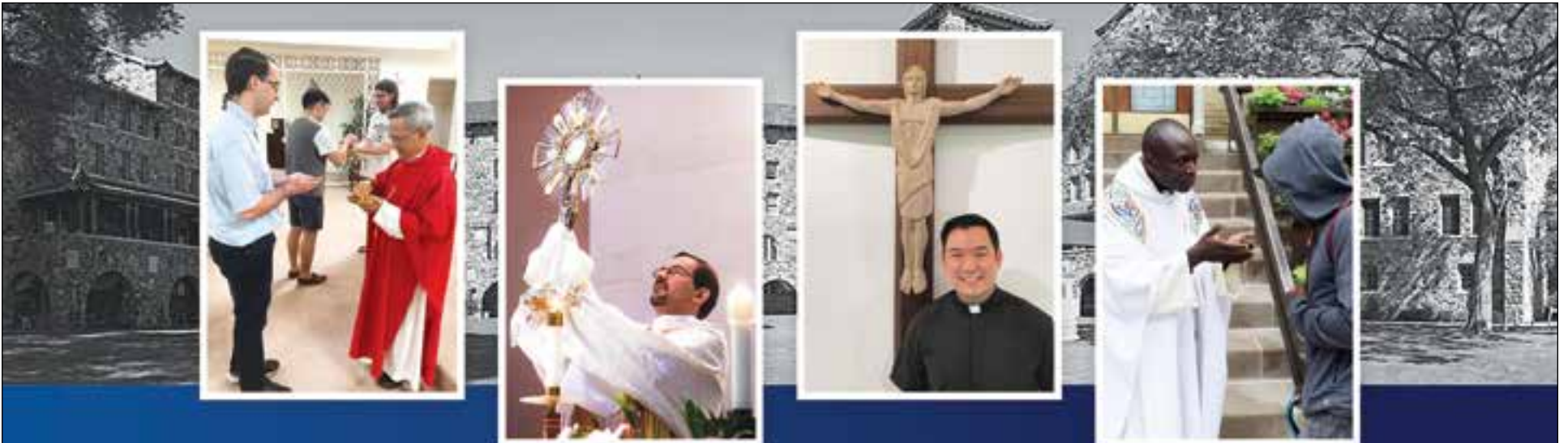
with the little body of the baby outside the woman and its head stuck inside,” Sister Joaquína said, noting the danger of this position for both mother and child.

The sister who was with Sister Joaquína immediately reached into the woman, put her finger inside the baby’s mouth, and pulled the baby out by his jaw. Both mother and baby returned to their village healthy.

Not all the women whom Sister Joaquína helped were happy to be pregnant. A state clinic arrived in the area in 2003 and began distributing contraceptives, which the villagers in the area readily used.

Sister Joaquína recounted that when she delivered one baby, its tiny hand emerged first out of the cervix, holding a plastic contraceptive [device] in its victorious fist.

“It was something that made me think a lot because even though the parents used contraceptives, they had conceived,” Sister Joaquína said.



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“The baby arrived as though saying, ‘I made it! Here I am!’”

On another occasion, Sister Joaquína helped deliver the lifeless child of a mentally ill woman.

“By the time we realized she was pregnant, the baby had already died inside her,” Sister Joaquína said.

Even though the woman did not understand what was happening, Sister Joaquína still had to help the woman deliver the body of her baby — without the help of modern equipment or a cesarean section.

“It was a lot of work to deliver the baby because the woman did not collaborate with us,” Sister Joaquína said. “Normally in this case they would do a c-section and take the body out. But we could not do that.”

Over many hours, Sister Joaquína applied manual pressure to move the baby’s body. Eventually, the body of the child was delivered, and the mentally ill woman survived.

### A seizure, a cliff-hanger, and a near tragedy

One rainy day, a woman came to the clinic “on the point of giving birth,” Sister Joaquína said.

Suddenly, the woman began to convulse with a preeclampsia attack as her blood pressure skyrocketed. According to the Mayo Clinic, preeclampsia can be fatal to both mother and baby. In the case of a seizure, a mother is usually rushed to an operating room for an emergency cesarean section, Sister Joaquína said.

The nearest hospital was an hour and a half from the clinic — along narrow, mountainous roads that were under construction in some areas — but it was the only option.

They set off through the rain in a makeshift ambulance. The driver navigated the winding roads as two sisters in the back, one of whom was Sister Joaquína, tried to keep the woman and her baby alive.

The driver did not see a mudslide on the road until it was too late. The vehicle spun,

losing traction in the mud, and the back tires of the vehicle spun over the edge of the road.

“We almost went into the chasm. The ambulance almost flipped over,” Sister Joaquína said. “The ambulance was left half in the air and half on the ground.”

Sister Joaquína and the other sister climbed out of the ambulance to try to free it from the deep mud. The woman in birth remained in the back of the ambulance as it teetered on the side of the mountain. They gathered some villagers near the site of the accident, who helped the sisters heave the vehicle back onto the road.

Nine hours after they left the clinic, the sisters and their patient arrived at a hospital, thoroughly covered with mud.

But their journey was not over yet.

They had arrived at a private hospital, which Sister Joaquína referred to as a “luxury” hospital. Encased with mud and exhausted from their journey, the sisters entered the hospital desperate for help, only to be turned away.

“Since we came all muddied, they didn’t want to receive us because we were not suitable customers (for that hospital),” Sister Joaquína said. “So we had to look for another place to attend to her.”

Finally, they were received at a general hospital where the baby was delivered by cesarean section. The mother survived despite the long journey to the hospital and nearly impossible odds.

Sister Joaquína calls the birth a “miracle.”

“For these things you say, wow, God really does want to work miracles,” she said.

The baby who was delivered that day is about 14 years old now, Sister Joaquína noted.

### A reluctant vocation

As a 17-year-old girl living in Northern Mexico, Sister Joaquína did not think she would make a good nun. She enjoyed doing her hair beautifully before she went to school

in the morning and did not want to relinquish her hairstyle to the veil. Nor did she want to be a teacher like many of the nuns she knew.

Her call to religious life came, nonetheless.

As she got ready for school one morning, Sister Joaquína heard a voice say, “And all of this — for what?”

“Who spoke to me?” Sister Joaquína recounted saying. She remained at her bedroom mirror, frozen, for so long that her mother asked her if she was going to go to school.

“All of this,” she realized, referred to her vain practices to improve her appearance. She began to pray regularly.

Soon afterward, her sister fell ill. To help care for the girl, her mother called the Servants of Mary, who lived just two blocks from their home and regularly cared for the sick in the area. Sister Joaquína passed the walls of the convent of the Servants of Mary every day on her way to school but had never considered entering.

“When I saw the sisters, [I thought], what strange people,” Sister Joaquína said.

But when the Servants of Mary came into her home to care for her sick sister, Sister Joaquína was struck by their warmth and charity. At that first encounter, one sister looked at Sister Joaquína and asked, “Listen, don’t you want to be like us?”

That very day, she visited the convent as an aspirant. Still a young girl, Sister Joaquína said that an older nun took one look at her and said, “Let’s see how long she lasts.” Sister Joaquína was not deterred at all — she knew that she was going to stay. A month later, on Jan. 9, 1970, she entered as a postulant.

After 53 years in the order, Sister Joaquína said that she is thankful for every part of her ministry, even the most difficult moments.

“[Caring for the sick] is stressful in the moment because you have anxiety, nerves, worries, but after everything is over, well, you give thanks to God because you realize that he is working through you,” Sister Joaquína said. “We smile at the good things and we accept the bad.”

Anna Wilgenbusch is on the staff of *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

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## FRATERNITY

# Community and charismatic evangelization

**These core tenets drive the Companions of the Cross in their ministry**

By Jack Figge

Bishop Scott McCaig stood across from first-year seminarian Matthew Conner. They were not meeting in an office or a classroom but were facing off on a sand volleyball court. The ball came to Connor, he leapt up and spiked it right at the feet of Bishop McCaig.

As a good pastor, Bishop McCaig gave the newest Companions of the Cross seminarian a high five and a “Good job!” during the annual sand volleyball tournament at the Companions’ yearly community days retreat.

“At our community days, almost all the bishops, priests and seminarians from our community gather together for several days of prayer and community formation,” Conner said. “While playing volleyball, I just kept thinking that I’m in my first year in this community, and this bishop is treating me like his brother; we’re hanging out playing volleyball, and that is so beautiful.”

Community is a central tenet of the life of the Companions of the Cross, a religious community founded in 1985 by Father Bob Bedard. The community is a group of priests and seminarians that minister in parishes and schools across Canada and the United States with their charism of evangelization and charismatic worship.

### Emphasis on community

This emphasis on evangelization and using charismatic gifts has been central to the Companions’ ministry over the years, said Father Alex Colautti, the community’s vocations director. He shared that Father Bob was inspired by Pope Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which explored the Church’s role in the modern world.

“Father Bob saw that there was a need for these movements of the Holy Spirit, especially in the areas of catechesis, evangelization and the parishes,” Father Colautti said. “The center for the

renewal of the Church, he saw, was the reformation of these movements, and he just had this vision for the Church to come explosively alive through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

This emphasis on community and evangelization led Conner to apply to be a seminarian. During his junior year of college, he began discerning a call to the priesthood. While attending an Encounter worship conference, he met some members of the Companions and knew that this was the community with which he wanted to discern.

“What really drew me to the Companions was the deep sense of community and emphasis on evangelization, specifically in parishes and at schools,” Conner said. “As a community, the core of our spirituality is being Eucharistic, Marian and charismatic, which aligns really well with the personal spirituality I developed in college.”

For Father Colautti, the community’s emphasis on evangelization excites him every day. In his six years as a priest, Father Colautti has found immense joy in his day-to-day ministry and the people he encounters.

“What gets me up in the morning is seeing people’s lives transformed by Jesus,” Father Colautti said. “Seeing people and walking with people as they come into a relationship with Jesus is like seeing people who’ve been asleep for a long time experience a beautiful day; it is an incredible experience.”

But in his six years as a priest, Father Colautti has learned an important lesson: He cannot do this ministry alone; he needs his brother priests.

“I am so grateful to do this ministry with my brothers,” Father Colautti said. “I don’t think I would have made it on my own; the Lord knows that I need brothers who support me, who challenge me, who call me to holiness, and who inspire me. To have brothers that work alongside me in the trenches in the churches is so life-giving.”

### Immersed in ministry

Even though Conner is only two years into his formation, he

has already experienced the life-giving effects of this ministry. From the beginning of a seminarian’s formation, the Companions immerse the young men in various ministry settings, from leading parish missions to participating in the Encounter school of ministry.

“Even as seminarians, we had the opportunity to do a lot of ministry work. I helped to lead a Lenten parish mission over spring break, which was a beautiful opportunity,” Conner said. “We depend on the Holy Spirit a lot in ministry, and so a part of our formation is partaking in the Encounter school of ministry that teaches us to really incorporate the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our ministry.”

Father Colautti shared that he often counsels young men who experience fear about the prospect of being a priest.

“Many young men that I talk to have this fear about celibacy, about giving their lives up to God, that they don’t know where it’s going to lead or what it’s going to cost,” Father Colautti said. “But the reality is, you have to surrender that to Jesus because he says that those who lose their lives will find it.”

But the remedy is simple: trust in Jesus. And every day, Father Colautti sees the transformational impact that surrender can have on a young man’s life.

“Whenever a person surrenders everything to Jesus, their desires are transformed; everything changes,” Father Colautti said. “God never calls us to do anything that he hasn’t already written on our hearts. It is beautiful helping men get in touch with the deepest desires of their hearts and see that what many of them desire is to give themselves to something greater to lay it all down in sacrifice to the greatest purpose, which is following Jesus, wherever that may lead.”

*Jack Figge has written for multiple diocesan papers, including covering World Youth Day 2023 for the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas. In addition to his local coverage, he has written for the National Catholic Register, FOCUS and Catholic Vote.*

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## DWINDLING NUMBERS

# Downsizing amid vocations crisis

**The Paulist Fathers plan to leave some historic ministries, highlighting their critical need for new vocations**

By Gina Christian

An order of priests is revamping its ministries due to a downturn in vocations — and the move highlights the Church’s need to “triple the ask” for young men to consider religious life, said the congregation’s communications director.

The Paulist Fathers, a missionary society of Catholic priests, announced on March 13 that it would wind down its presence at two universities and three parishes in the U.S., while folding three other initiatives.

At the end of the 2023-24 academic year, the order will return Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish at the University of California at Berkeley to the Diocese of Oakland, where the order had served since 1907.

The Paulist campus chaplaincy for Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, located at Christ, Sun of Justice Parish, also will conclude in June. The parish itself, which is in the Diocese of Albany, is set to remain open, a staffer told OSV News.

The Paulist presence at three parishes will be reduced as the order scales back from two full-time active priests to one full-time priest, assisted by local Paulists in senior ministry, at Immaculate Conception Church in Knoxville, Tennessee; Old St. Mary’s Cathedral in San Francisco; and the Paulist Center in Boston.

### Completion of work

The order noted in its release that the national offices of three longtime, Paulist-run ministries — Paulist Evangelization Ministries; Landings International, a reconciliation ministry for returning Catholics; and the Paulist Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations — will reach an “upcoming completion of (their) work.”

Paulist Father René Constanza, the order’s president, said three flagship media ministries — Paulist Press, Paulist Productions and Busted Halo — “will continue to be key expressions

of our mission to the United States and around the world.

“At Paulist Productions and Busted Halo, Paulist priests will remain in leadership roles,” he said, adding that Paulist Press will conduct a national search for a new president and publisher “to carry forward the vision and legacy of our founder, Servant of God Isaac Hecker, who began our publishing arm in 1865.”

### Aging congregation and decline in vocations

In February, Father Constanza had released a letter stating that the order had since June 2022 “discerned that change is coming” due to an aging congregation and a decline in new vocations to their order.

“Our number of Paulists in active ministry (ordained but not yet retired) has gone from 98 in 2004 ... to 85 in 2014 ... to 50 active Paulists in 2024,” he wrote. “The last time we had 50 active men in our community was in 1910. Of those 50 active right now, almost two thirds are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. In ten years, we project that we’ll be down to about 31 active Paulists.”

While “people live longer these days, and many of our beloved senior priests have generously and selflessly continued working well into their 70s and beyond ... it is obvious that the current situation is not sustainable,” Father Constanza wrote.

According to Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, in 2022 there were 34,344 priests (24,110 diocesan, 10,234 religious) and 451 priestly ordinations in the U.S., serving 16,429 parishes and 66.5 million “parish-connected” Catholics. Just 66% of the diocesan priests were in active ministry, with an average of one active diocesan priest per parish.

At present, there are 101 Paulist Fathers, including six seminarians and one novice, said Paul Snatchko, the order’s communications director.

### Cultivating vocations

Snatchko told OSV News the Paulists are redoubling efforts to “do better” in cultivating vocations to the order.

“We’ve hired for the first time [a] full-time lay professional recruiter in the vocations office,” said Snatchko, noting the order’s use of social media, including Google Ads, to reach a wider audience.

Speaking as an individual Catholic, Snatchko told OSV News that “the bottom line ... is that the whole Church has to do more asking” of young men to consider religious life.

“Every Catholic in the world (and every) ... Catholic in the United States ... (has) to double and triple the amount of times we say to (a young man) ... ‘I think you might be a good priest.’ That has a huge impact.”

Equally important are seminary “come and see” weekends, which offer a low-pressure opportunity to inquire firsthand about priestly formation, said Snatchko.

“We need to triple the ask (to attend such weekends),” he said, stressing that attendance at such events “does not mean you’re going to become a priest. It just means you are taking the first step of discernment.”

Catholic families should intentionally “encourage vocations,” said Snatchko.

“And we need to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit,” he added.

In the March 13 announcement, Father Constanza echoed the need to discern the Spirit’s guidance — and to remain confident of it.

“The Paulist Fathers remain committed to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with missionary zeal, especially with people beyond the Church walls and with Catholics who feel apart from the Church,” said Father Constanza. “Rooted in hopefulness, we trust that the Holy Spirit is actively breathing life into all things.”

Gina Christian is a National Reporter for OSV News.

**“Our number of Paulists in active ministry (ordained but not yet retired) has gone from 98 in 2004 ... to 85 in 2014 ... to 50 active Paulists in 2024.”**

— Father René Constanza

## RADICAL SERVICE

# Making merciful love known

*The Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George promise to be on call to serve whoever is in need*

By Jack Figge

Sister Karolyn Nunes has enjoyed every assignment she has received in her 19 years as a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George.

Not because the assignments were the most glamorous or exciting moments, but because each one gave her the opportunity to make Christ's merciful love visible to those she encountered.

Founded in 1868 by Mother Anselma Bopp in a small German village, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George (FSGM) quickly grew as women were drawn to the community's mission of making Christ's merciful love known to the world. In 1928, the community arrived in the United States and has since been serving in parishes, hospitals, schools and nursing homes across the United States.

"Our community was founded to do whatever was needed for the people, to act as spiritual mothers. We said that we would be the guys to call, and that meant taking care of children, of the elderly, the sick and the needy in every condition," Sister Karolyn said. "What emerged was this idea of making merciful love known because mercy goes wherever there's a need."

In the 19 years she has been a member of the community, each assignment has brought Sister Karolyn immense joy because she has been able to show Christ's mercy to people from all walks of life.

"I did parish work for just a year, and I loved it, and I didn't know how much I would love to teach high school, especially in Kansas, but that was a powerful experience," Sister Karolyn said. "And now I serve as the vocation director, which is all the things I loved about teaching high school, namely accompanying young people and growing in relationships without all the things I didn't enjoy about teaching in high school, such as

grading and lesson plans."

## On campus

This model of radical service and making Christ's merciful love known to the world has become attractive for many young women. Sister Peter Marie Tran joined the FSGM community in 2017, and she shared that she was drawn to the community by how real and personable the sisters are.

"For me, the biggest thing that attracted me to the community was the joy and the realness of the sisters, their authenticity, and just being able to recognize how they can make the merciful love of Christ visible," said Sister Peter Marie. "During visits to their motherhouse, I saw within the sisters this joy that came from knowing that they are loved by Christ even with all of my wounds, imperfections and failures."

During her time as a member of the community, Sister Peter Marie has experienced a wide variety of assignments, including serving at a nursing home in St. Louis, Missouri, which was especially challenging as she had never worked with the elderly before.

"Everywhere that I've gone, there's been something that the Lord's been wanting to meet and receive there," Sister Peter Marie said. "By the end of that one year of serving at the nursing home, I just recognized that all of us are children of God."

Now Sister Peter Marie is studying at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communications. Being at Benedictine has allowed her to continue her own formation, while also showing Christ's merciful love to others.

"Being at Benedictine has helped deepen my own religious consecration and what it means to be a beloved daughter of God," Sister Peter Marie said. "Being involved on campus and sharing that identity with other people is such a great opportunity. Whether it is having conversations with students or with professors, there is this unique opportunity to witness to Christ's merciful love in such an expansive way on the campus."

During her time at Benedictine, Sister Peter Marie has been able to share her vocation story with many young women and help them learn how to discern well.

"One thing that I've encountered in conversations and in my own discernment journey is that the Lord is so good in his timing," Sister Peter Marie said. "There can be pressure that you have to figure it out. And I think the most important thing is that your vocation comes from your relationship with the Lord, not from you figuring it out. When your gaze is directed toward being in union with Christ, everything flows from it, including your vocation."

## Encouraging discernment

As the vocation's director, Sister Karolyn encounters this discernment dilemma seemingly everyday. Discernment, she says, begins by spending time with Christ and building a strong prayer life.

"How do you listen to anybody? It first begins by setting aside my own noise and the noise in our worlds," Sister Karolyn said. "Then you have to spend time with Our Lord because you know the voice of the people we spend time with, so if we want to know the Lord's voice, we must spend time with him. Then, we can begin noticing what's happening inside of me during these times of prayer and offering it all to Jesus."

Young people have not been taught to listen, said Sister Karolyn. That is why we have what is perceived to be a vocational crisis. But in reality, it is just a listening crisis.

"I don't think there is a vocation crisis as much as there is a listening crisis," Sister Karolyn said. "I often go back to something that Pope Benedict XVI told the bishops of the United States when he visited in 2008. He said that if we actually teach young people how to live with and for God, we will never have to despair or worry about vocations."

*Jack Figge has written for multiple diocesan papers. In addition to his local coverage, he has written for the National Catholic Register, FOCUS and Catholic Vote.*

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## TRAVEL



Photos courtesy of the Hermits of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel

## Building a new chapel for Mary

*This community of Carmelite hermits in Minnesota is growing, creating a need for a bigger monastery*

By Katie Yoder

A community of Carmelite hermits in Lake Elmo, Minnesota, is looking to expand after running out of space to accept new vocations. The first step, they say, is a new chapel.

“We must build to accept more men into this ancient order,” Father John Mary, O.Carm., Prior of the Hermits of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, said while asking for support online. “We must build for the good of our families, our community, our country and our world. We must build so the faithful can pray with us!”

Right now, men are waiting to enter the monastery that houses nine priests and brothers. The cloistered community plans to change that: first, by raising \$3.75 million to complete their new chapel; then, by building four new hermitages (or “cells”).

The construction for the chapel — The Chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel — began in the fall of 2022, Father John Mary told Our Sunday Visitor. It should be completed in the summer of 2025.

“The favorite part of the chapel for me will be its beauty,” he revealed. “Beauty is one of the attributes of God and the way in which he created the world.”

The chapel’s design, inspired by the early Christian churches of Rome and Ravenna, comes from award-winning architect Duncan Stroik, professor of architecture at University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

“Beauty inspires us to see beyond ourself with all our contradictions and shortcomings, and to glimpse something of the eternal,” Father John Mary added. “Beauty stirs awe in us and motivates us to seek something better in our personal moral life.”

### Meeting the hermits

Father John Mary shared the history of the hermits, who consider themselves one of only two communities of Carmelite hermits in the United States that are part of the ancient order of Carmel.

Together, he said, they serve as a semi-eremical (or semi-solitary) community within the Order of Carmelites.

“Hermits and pilgrims from Western European countries settled on Mount Carmel in the Holy Land in the mid and late 12th century,” he explained. “They requested St. Albert, the archbishop of Jerusalem, to write a rule of life for them and erect them into a contemplative religious community.”

From Mount Carmel, he said, the Carmelites spread and are now present on six continents.

“Over time, the priests of the Carmelite Order adopted a more apostolic life of priestly ministry,” he added, “but certain communities retained the earlier semi-eremical life of



prayer and contemplation.”

Their life consists of three elements — prayer, work and study — with a balance between life in community and time spent in solitude, he said.

“The solemn celebration of the liturgy is important to us, as is a generous amount of time spent in contemplative meditation and the prayer of the heart,” Father John Mary said. “We engage in a number of arts and crafts for our livelihood, including gardening, woodworking, painting, carving and calligraphy.”

They also welcome visitors to share in their prayer, request confession and spiritual guidance, and visit their gift shop (also available online), which includes art from their sacred art studio.

**Building a new chapel**

The new chapel, Father John Mary said, will serve two purposes.

“Firstly, it will provide more space to our community for the celebration of the holy Mass and the Divine Office,” he said.

Currently, all nine of them

squeeze into a tiny, private chapel measuring 18 feet by 18 feet.

“It will be a more recollecting and prayerful environment for the members of our community and for future members who join our community,” he described.

As for the second purpose, the future chapel will accommodate the laity (with seating for up to 44 guests).

“Quite a few friends, benefactors and neighbors have asked to attend Mass or share in our Divine Office,” he said. “We have not been able to say yes to these requests due to lack of space.”

**Realizing beauty**

Father John Mary applauded Stroik as a leading Catholic architect and “one of the strongest advocates for a return to the traditions of Catholic Church architecture.”

For his part, Stroik told Our Sunday Visitor that he has known the Carmelites at Lake Elmo for more than 25 years.

“The chapel is the pièce de résistance of a monastery inspired by one of the greatest



shrines of Christendom, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem,” he said of the new chapel. “We have worked with Father John Mary and the brothers for over a decade to design an appropriate basilica for their community of hermits, inspired by the early basilicas of Rome and Ravenna.”

He highlighted the chapel’s features.

“It has an elegant Ravennasque patterned brick exterior with a stone and plaster basilical interior, including marble columns and arches, side aisles, clearstory, triple apses and a series of Carmelite saints processing toward the altar,” he said. “We are thrilled that it is under construction and hope it will draw many pilgrims to experience its beauty and the solemn liturgy of Carmel.”

**Asking for support**

To raise the \$3.75 million needed for the chapel, the community invites the faithful to join their “Brick Legacy Guild” by purchasing a \$50 brick for the chapel.

A few years ago, the community received a bequest of more than \$3 million. But, Father John Mary revealed, inflation after the pandemic raised the chapel’s cost by 20%. The total cost now approaches \$7 million.

For those who buy a brick (or two), the hermits promise to remember them in a monthly Mass, among other things. And, when the chapel opens, they hope supporters will join them for Mass.

*Katie Yoder is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*

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## TAPROOM

# Beer keeps this monastery afloat

*For hundreds of years, monks have provided an important role in the development of Western brewing*

By Paul Senz

St. Arnulf of Metz is credited with saying, “From man’s sweat and God’s love, beer came into the world.” The famous wordsmith G.K. Chesterton said, “In Catholicism, the pint, the pipe, and the Cross can all fit together.” In the idyllic hills of Oregon’s Willamette Valley, the Benedictine monks of Mount Angel Abbey are putting these principles into practice.

The mission of the monks at the Benedictine Brewery is printed right on the label of every bottle: “Taste and Believe.” This is not simply a brewing business, and it’s so much more than a money-making venture for the monks of Mount Angel. It is an opportunity for evangelization.

The Benedictines that grace the hilltop at Mount Angel came to the United States from Engelberg (which means “Mount Angel”) in Switzerland, and their first priory was founded in 1882. The priory was elevated to an abbey in 1904 by Pope St. Pius X. By 1889, the archbishop of Oregon City asked the monks to establish a seminary on the grounds, and they happily obliged. Today, Mount Angel Seminary serves around two dozen dioceses and religious orders.

The community at Mount Angel has faced many challenges over the years, including two catastrophic fires. But the fervor



Courtesy of Benedictine monks of Mount Angel Abbey

of their faith, their commitment to hard work and their evangelizing zeal have never been greater.

Father Martin Grassel, OSB, is general manager and head brewer at Benedictine Brewery. He entered Mount Angel Seminary in 1995, and has been there ever since. Since his priestly ordination in 2004, he has served the community in many roles, and is currently the procurator of the Abbey, a position which is the equivalent of chief financial officer. He says that the beer brewed at Mount Angel is “crafted for a higher purpose.” At every stage in the brewing process, the beer receives a priestly blessing, and the monks — in full habit — operate the Taproom at the bottom of the hill.

## A holy history

St. Benedict lived from about A.D. 480 to 547. He is the founder of western monasticism, and the Rule of St. Benedict, which he wrote to guide the lives of monastic communities, is still in use by a great number of Benedictine (and Benedictine-inspired) monasteries around the world. Benedictine life is one of hard work, study and contemplative prayer — when one pictures a Benedictine monastery, he usually envisions a fairly ascetic lifestyle. But the beer does not clash with that lifestyle. The monks themselves only partake on special occasions, and then only in moderation. This is not a place for drunkenness or debauchery but an opportunity to enjoy the artistry of brewing, to enjoy the fruits of God’s creation.

Some might object that drinking alcohol is sinful, or that it can easily lead down the path to sin. Chesterton said that we should thank God for beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them — in other words, moderation and temperance. This would be the biblical view, as well, and is articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The virtue of temperance disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine. Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others’



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safety on the road, at sea, or in the air” (No. 2290). Jesus drank wine and even turned water into wine. The consumption of alcohol is by no means sinful in and of itself; but intemperance and drinking without moderation can be sinful and can lead to other sins.

Monks and brewing have gone hand-in-hand for centuries. In fact, monks played an important role in the development of Western brewing as a whole.

In the Middle Ages, monks became the standard large-scale brewers in Europe, for two main reasons: First, they had the resources to build breweries; and second, the monastery farms provided the agricultural products necessary for brewing. At one time, there were as many as 600 monastery breweries in Europe. Monks were also responsible for standardizing cleaning and sanitization practices in brewing, were the first to practice lagering, and are the first known brewers to use hops.

In the earliest days of the Mount Angel Abbey, brewing was part of the monks’ work. It was probably not a commercial enterprise, and the beer was



most likely consumed by the monks and their guests. The founding prior, Father Adelm Oederhalm, wrote in his diary on Nov. 26, 1885: “The monastery property now consists of the dryer, the cheese house, the carpenter shop, the cider press, the grinding mill, a ‘Locomotivehall’, a fruit house, a sheep shed, horse and cow shed, hog

pens, the hay and straw sheds, a residence for workers, a big wood shed, 2 smoke houses, the bakery, the blacksmith shop, beehouse and the Guest house and the brewery.”

**Brewing in the 21st century**

The Benedictine Brewery was legally formed in 2013, and construction on the Taproom began

in 2017 at a community timber raising. The timber for the building’s frame was harvested from the monastery’s Douglas fir tree farm. The Taproom officially opened on Aug. 31, 2018.


There are not many breweries in the United States that are owned and operated by monks. St. Benedict, the founder of the Benedictines and father of

Western monasticism, thought that monasteries should be self-sufficient, farming their own food, earning money through industry. Father Grassel saw a need for a new source of revenue for the Abbey, and the monks’ commercial brewing enterprise was born.

The Benedictine Brewery offers 10 varieties, with distinctively Catholic names: Dark Night (a reference to St. John of the Cross’ famous “dark night of the soul”), Black Habit (a reference to the black robes that make up the Benedictine religious habit), St. Benedict, St. Gabriel, St. Raphael, Hairshirt and more. The beer is available by the bottle and on tap, but unfortunately they are not able to ship the beer. It is only available for purchase at the brewery itself.

Benjamin Franklin supposedly (perhaps apocryphally) said that “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” Whether or not Franklin actually uttered these words, the monks at Mount Angel would certainly agree.


*Paul Senz writes from Oregon.*




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## OLDER VOCATIONS

# A second chance at God's will

*Mid-life crisis? Not for these professionals turned mid-life Franciscans*

Kimberley Heatherington

After a certain age, any dramatic career change runs the risk of being labeled a "mid-life crisis." Those who are younger might get a well-meaning lecture on patience and paying their dues. Those who are older might be asked, "Why now?"

But what if a vocational redirection instead meant a sort of spiritual homecoming?

For three Franciscans from the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe — postulants Jimmy Beh and Thomas Pack and Father Steven Kuehn — joining the 800-plus-year-old religious order founded by St. Francis of Assisi was not just a proverbial leap of faith. It also was a change of professional path none of them first expected, but which each says has placed them just where they're now meant to be.

### A love for fraternity

"Long story short, I was in the Navy for about 12 years," Father Kuehn, 42, told OSV News. A U.S. Naval Academy graduate and helicopter pilot, the priest spent that dozen years serving on a U.S. Navy destroyer, a frigate and an aircraft carrier.

After piloting 332 helicopter missions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom — and serving as a senior officer on the USS Ronald Reagan — he eventually began to debate whether to continue his Navy career, or return to civilian life to start a family.

"And then honestly — not out of nowhere, but — I started feeling this other movement inside of me," reflected Father Kuehn. "I was raised Catholic; raised in the Catholic Church — and it had always been important to me, but I'd never really felt drawn or called to the priesthood. So it was those last few years in the Navy that I



Franciscan Father Gino Correa is pictured in an undated photo blessing tau crosses given to the postulants during the ceremony welcoming them to the Order of Friars Minor. Pictured right to left are Ryan Crain, Thomas Pack, Jimmy Beh and Samuel Allen. OSV News photo/Octavio Duran, courtesy Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe

felt something kind of stirring."

After investigating diocesan seminaries and religious orders, the Franciscan friars "just seemed like the right fit," Father Kuehn said. "I never would have predicted it, or even seen it coming."

His family was "very much" surprised, but supportive.

Currently chaplain at St. Bonaventure University near Olean, New York, Father Kuehn entered the initial stage of religious life — the postulancy — in 2015. "The program is kind of set up so it's a gradual process to kind of assimilate, to see if it is the right way of life," he shared. "So that helped me, I think, to transition."

*"It really is a different way to go about doing life. Being 30, (almost) 31 — there's some unlearning that goes into the learning. Unlearning things that I was holding on to."*

— Jimmy Beh

That's not to say it was easy, however.

"I felt like I was impatient with the process — I just want to be there already, wherever there is," said Father Kuehn. "Just the challenge of starting over again in your life journey; I felt like I was starting from square one."

Still, there were also similarities between the Navy and the friars.

"There's a rhythm, I feel, with both ways of life," Father Kuehn explained, as well as "the camaraderie with the people you're working with in the Navy, or living with the friars. There's this bond — you don't always

necessarily get along with everybody, or see eye-to-eye with everybody, but we're in this together. So it's kind of like this brotherhood ... that, for me, was very similar."

Ordained in April 2023, he has ministered in hospices, food banks, jail ministries and soup kitchens.

"With the friars, I've really appreciated the brotherhood — we stress fraternity; the community," Father Kuehn said, "and also the care for the vulnerable, the poor. Those things have really given me life in these last few years as a friar. That direct service to the poor — it's shown me God's care for all people. And I'm just grateful for this way of life."

### Learning a new way of life

It's a way of life that is repeatedly reported as in decline. A study of men and women religious making their perpetual religious vows in 2023 — released Jan. 26 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University — showed a continued decrease in the number of permanent vocations to consecrated life in the U.S. In the study, 87% of the participating religious superiors said their orders had no members profess perpetual vows in 2023, up from 82% in the 2022 report. In 2023, one in 10 institutes had one perpetual profession, while 4% reported between two to 15 members professed perpetual vows.

The Atlanta-based Province of Our Lady of Guada-

lupe, however, welcomed seven postulants to its latest class — among them Thomas Pack, a former NFL scout, and Jimmy Beh, previously a teacher and higher education administrator. The postulants represent a new era for the recently unified province, which in fall of 2023 combined six Franciscan provinces and spans the United States coast to coast.

Beh, 30, said his vocation path was less a startling epiphany and more “a curiosity that didn’t go away.

The invitation is not this grand gesture ritual or anything. It was a very kind of casual thing, just sitting in conversation,” he explained. “And yet, it kind of spoke to this longing and curiosity that I had had for a while, and posed a new path for me to follow or explore. That’s what kept me discerning, and has brought me to this point.”

For the Jesuit-educated, Washington, D.C.-raised Beh — whose career in higher education included posts at the University of San Diego, his alma mater; Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington; and Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore — friendship with the Franciscan friars, including his current postulancy director, Franciscan Father Gino Correa, strongly influenced his discernment.

“Someone finally asked if I was thinking about it — kind of off the cuff — and I remember just being like, ‘Maybe I am,’” Beh recalled. “And I had no idea where that response came from.”

From there, things quickly escalated — so much so that Beh admits he occasionally wonders, “Wait, what happened?”

“It really is a different way to go about doing life,” Beh said. “Being 30, (almost) 31 — there’s some unlearning that goes into the learning. Unlearning things that I was holding on to.”

As a Franciscan postulant, he’s “surrounded by folks that encourage me, and support me and challenge me in working through that. There’s a lot of freedom that comes within this process,” he said, “and I’ve really enjoyed that.”

**A persistent call**

Pack, 33, a member of the same postulant class as Beh,

grew up Southern Baptist in a “very religious” family outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. He admits that when he attended the University of Chicago to study linguistics, he had never

even met a Catholic. The required philosophy readings were his introduction to the Church’s tradition and he found himself hooked on the Church Fathers.

After graduation, “I was teaching in Catholic schools — so probably I was a closet Catholic.

I was more Catholic than not,” Pack reflected. “I dragged my feet on RCIA (the process of becoming Catholic) for a few years, and then I finally did it.”

Pack became a Catholic during Easter 2018. At that point, he acknowledges, “I’d kind of had religious life already on my mind, for a few years.”

Still, the competitiveness of the gridiron also played a key role in Pack’s career. Not only did he coach high school and university teams, he worked with the NFL’s Cleveland Browns as both a scouting assistant and film/charting analyst.

But a call to religious life continued to persist.

After an initial time in the postulancy — in 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic — Pack returned to teaching, the Browns and coaching. He kept in touch with the friars, however — and was eventually asked, “Would you think about coming back?”

He did, in August 2023.

“I was just deep in prayer over spring and summer, and it seemed like time to take the jump,” Pack said.

Like Father Kuehn and Beh, Pack feels his previous career skills are completely transferable.

“As a teacher and a coach, you want to mentor people. But you mentor them by putting your arm around them, and getting in the weeds with them,” Pack said. “It’s not like a top-down hierarchy, or anything like that. It’s really being right next to them — side-by-side, walking with them and letting them know, ‘I’m here and I’m with you.’”

*Kimberley Heatherington writes for OSV News from Virginia.*

**“As a teacher and a coach, you want to mentor people. But you mentor them by putting your arm around them, and getting in the weeds with them.”**

— Thomas Pack

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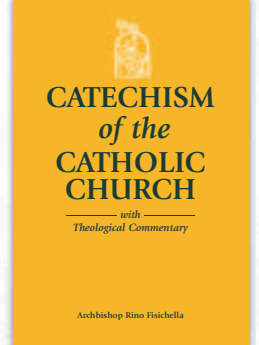
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