Ministry reaches out to inmates

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

On Friday nights, the chapel at Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson is a hub for exploring the Catholic faith for inmates. There are cradle Catholics “brushing the dust off” lessons they learned through the Catechism, sharpening their skills to defend the faith through apologetics, curious observers wanting to know more about Catholicism and those preparing to enter the church through the RCIA program. There's a small group, including a Hispanic one, discussing the upcoming Sunday readings, talking about personal faith journeys or “checking it out” by watching Bishop Robert Barron’s Catholicism series.

The ministry began with Jeanne and Ray Grenchik, of St. Aloysius Church Parish in Baton Rouge, traveling to Dixon each Friday night to meet with a handful of inmates. Through the watering and nurturing of that seed by inmates and committed volunteers, more than 60 inmates gather to learn about and share their faith. There are currently three inmates scheduled to be confirmed and seven inmates who have learned about and shared their faith.

Inmate Matthew Pineda, who is involved in many aspects of the Catholic ministry in Dixon and was instrumental in getting the Catholicism series started, said inmate ministry leaders and volunteers work together to provide resources and train facilitators for groups. They try to offer materials that are both living and historical sources of the church to show how “Catholicism is the rock and roundable of the Earth.”

Books about the saints and the church fathers are a favorite of some participants. Pineda said he is fascinated by St. Teresa, who wrote about the “interior castle,” inspired by her vision of the soul as a diamond in the shape of a castle containing seven mansions, which she interpreted as the journey of faith through seven stages, ending with union with God. She was misunderstood, misjudged, opposed in call for conversion and repression.

“It is so inspiring that someone who found herself in the situations – the persecutions – that she did and still had the faith,” said Pineda. “For such a young person to have such faith is incredible.”


‘God loves these men’

By Rachele Smith
The Catholic Commentator

When Jay Jackson was first asked by a friend to be part of prison ministry, his initial response was well, blunt.

“I told him, not just, ‘No, but hell no,’” he said. Jackson explained his response wasn’t a reflection on the prisoners, rather it was just that he felt he didn’t have anything to offer.

He reasoned, facetiously, of course, that with no medical training whatsoever, he would be better at performing surgery on someone than ministering to prisoners.

Today, however, Jackson only smiles when he thinks of that memory. As the lay Catholic minister at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Jackson has seen full circle in his view of prison ministry and is fully aware that he is living out a calling from God, one that began almost 17 years ago following a personal discernment.

“I told my friend (Bill Gibson) I would pray about joining the ministry while I was at Manresa on retreat,” said Jackson, who explained that at some point during his weekend retreat, while he was engaged in quiet prayer, he felt God telling him, “That wasn’t Bill asking you; it was me.”

“I learned God does speak to you through others,” Jackson said.

In the beginning, Jackson decided to just try it out. He planned to go to the prison two or three times and then give a final answer. But his initial experience changed everything.

“From that first day, I felt so much appreciation and gratitude (from the prisoners),” said Jackson.

“I used to teach religion classes, but I learned (through prison ministry) that academic knowledge about your faith and living your faith are sometimes miles apart,” he added.

During his visits with prisoners, people who have been convicted of crimes, which include some of the most offensive acts against others, Jackson is reminded of God’s unconditional love.

“We are commanded to love one another, and that means I am to love all people, even those who have caused so much pain and hurt in other people’s lives. I never really understood that concept before,” said Jackson, who noted the moment his academic and practical sides connected, he was able to realize the beauty of his Catholic faith.

COMFORTING EVACUEES – Bishop Robert W. Muench visited three evacuation shelters on Aug. 14 comforting evacuees. He visited the F.G. Clark Center at Southern University, the Leo S. Butler Center and the Celtic Center. Thousands of people in the Diocese of Baton Rouge have been displaced because of extreme flooding in the area caused by a tropical system that dumped record levels of rain in the area. Several rivers crested at record levels. Churches and schools also took on water. The Catholic Commentator will have a complete roundup of the flooding in the Sept. 2 issue. Photos by Father Paul Yi | Chancellor, Diocese of Baton Rouge
DID YOU KNOW

A saint for all causes

Admit it, we all have our own patron saints, our go-to heavenly inspiration when life becomes overwhelming, and we are trailing in the rat race of life.

Perhaps we turn to St. Jude, the saint of lost causes whose intercessions could fill volumes. And who travels without a St. Christopher medal in their car, since he is the patron saint of, among other things, accidents and travelers?

Can one ever really sell a house without the assistance of planting a small statue of St. Joseph in the front yard? We all know the statue must, for some unknown reason, be planted upside down, but does anyone remember if St. Joseph must be facing the house or the street?

Patron saints are deeply embedded in Catholic history, dating to the third or fourth century and rooted in the Roman practice of patronage, whereby someone of wealth and influence extended protection and support to less influential and wealthy clients. Apparently, that patronage carried over to the saints as well.

How patron saints were determined is a matter of Catholic folklore, but what is known is that at one point there were more than 40,000 religious groups in England, each with its own patron.

Guidelines for patron saints were established in 1650 by Pope Urban VIII. He mandated the individual must be a canonized saint, chosen by the clergy with the approval of the bishop, and the Sacred Congregation of Rites must confirm the choice.

Those regulations were later included in the 1917 code of Canon Law and though they have undergone some tweaking, the concept has been consistent. Under the latest guidelines, confirmation is required from the Congregation of Divine Worship.

When walking in to ... visit the dentist or a tooth is causing pain, it might be a good idea to pray to St. Appolonia.

When walking in to the dreaded annual visit with the dentist or even when a tooth is causing undue pain, it might be a good idea to pray to St. Appolonia, the patron saint of dentists and toothaches. But it’s also wise to keep her on speed-prayer, because she is also the patron saint of lightning.

Hunters can call upon St. Eustace and grooms, who should be praying anyway on their wedding day, might wish to pray to St. Louis IX of France, the patron saint of grooms.

There are even patron saints for headaches (St. Acaius), snakebites (St. Paul and St. Vitus), cooks (St. Martha) grocers (St. Monica) and comedians (St. Genesis).

And let’s not forget St. Anthony, the patron saint of things lost. Who among us has not gone to church to light a candle to St. Anthony, hoping what was lost will be returned. He seldom fails us.

In our current culture of trying to squeeze 30 hours into a 24-hour day, one of the busiest saints might be St. Walter of Portnoise, the patron of stress.

Praying to saints for intercession is a popular and long standing tradition among Catholics. It is spiritually beneficial and uplifting, but what is more important is praying in times of need, no matter to whom the prayer is directed.
A summer of financial discord in the Louisiana Legislature took a bite out of Catholic education funding, but the future is likely to be much more mercurial, according to the lobbyist for the state bishops.

Rob Tasman, executive director of the Louisiana Conference of Catholic Bishops, said Catholic schools absorbed a nearly $6-million slash in state funding for required services by the time an unprecedented three sessions adjourned in June. But Tasman admitted other funding, including the state scholarship program, may be on the financial chopping block as lawmakers continue to grapple with potentially significant fiscal shortfalls, despite a tax hike approved during the spring.

Earlier this year, freshly minted Gov. John Bel Edwards, who traded his legislative seat for the governor's mansion, called two special sessions sandwiched around the regular session.

“I was very concerned with any type of non-public assistance in general,” Tasman said. “That was the preeminent fight for us ranging from the first special session until the end.”

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St. Thomas Aquinas appoints educator as interim principal

By Richard Meek

The Catholic Commentator

A veteran educator with more than 30 years of experience on the high school and college levels has been appointed to lead St. Thomas Aquinas Regional School in Hammond for the 2016-17 school year. Ashley Chitwood, who has spent the past 16 years at Delgado Community College on the north shore in a number of roles, will serve as interim principal at STA, Dr. Melanie Verges, superintendent of Catholic schools for the Diocese of Baton Rouge, announced Aug. 4.

Chitwood is replacing Jose Becerra, who announced his resignation shortly before the beginning of the school year after serving for more than two decades at St. Thomas.

“(Chitwood) brings a breadth of understanding of organizational structure and service in education,” Verges said, adding that Chitwood also has experience in strategic planning, advisory board development, communication with stakeholders, school improvement process, grant writing and faculty development as an administrator.

“With such dedicated service and a variety of experiences, (Chitwood) enjoys connection with students and their families and appreciates the work of the staff and board members in fulfilling the mission of the school.”

Chitwood, who has lived most of her life in Covington, said she believes “God has put this opportunity in front of me.”

“I’m excited about it,” she added. “They have an excellent administrative team (at STA) and the school is one of the best kept secrets in Tangipahoa (civil) Parish. My job is to let everybody else know.”

Chitwood earned a bachelor’s degree in international trade and finance from LSU in 1995 and her master’s in finance one year later, also from LSU. Since 2002 she has served in several leadership roles at Delgado Community College’s two north shore campuses, including dean, assistant dean and program coordinator. Her responsibilities included strategic leadership and all aspects of campus management.

She also taught mathematics and physical education on the high school level in the Archdiocese of New Orleans as well as teaching personal finance and career success skills on the college level.

Chitwood said her first goal is to get to know the staff through individual meetings with teachers as well as a group. She admitted the challenge of coming into a new community and culture but said she is energized by the mission of educating young people and “giving them a strong foundation in Catholic beliefs.”

“I enjoy meeting people, getting to know people,” she said. “I think I am approachable.”

Verges said following interview meetings with members of the school’s advisory board and administration team, the recommendation for Chitwood was unanimous. Verges said the search for a permanent principal will begin in the fall, with the goal of appointing a fulltime principal in April.

Chitwood indicated she has been invited to apply and when asked if she viewed the interim position as potentially a yearlong activity, she said, “I think that is a fair thing to say. I am approaching it like that.”

“this think gives me an opportunity to learn what is going on, get to know people, give us some time to create a strategy of where the school needs to go,” Chitwood said. “And then we decide from there.”

For now, however, her focus is on the upcoming school year, familiarizing herself with the students and faculty as well as ingratiating herself into a new community.

She said there are many positive things happening at STA and her goal is to spread the message throughout the community and “remind them that St. Thomas Aquinas is here and how wonderful we are.”

Ashley Chitwood
Local events set to honor Mother Teresa

By Rachele Smith
The Catholic Commentator

As Pope Francis prepares to canonize Mother Teresa at the Vatican on Sept. 4, several events are being planned at St. Agnes Church in Baton Rouge to honor the Catholic nun and missionary most remembered for her selfless charity and acts of kindness.

Bishop Robert W. Muench will celebrate a Mass at St. Agnes Church on Sunday, Sept. 4 at 3 p.m. to commemorate Blessed Teresa of Calcutta’s canonization.

The local Mass serves as the culmination of several activities, which are set to begin three days before with prayer.

On Thursday, Sept. 1, the first day of prayer, a rosary will be recited at 5:30 p.m. at St. Agnes Church followed by Mass at 6 p.m. Msgr. Robert Berggreen, pastor at St. Mary of False River Church in New Roads, will be the homilist and discuss the life of Mother Teresa.

Msgr. Berggreen is also the spiritual director of the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity, the worldwide order founded by Mother Teresa in 1950 and established 35 years later in Baton Rouge.

Father Jeff Bayhi, pastor of St. John the Baptist Church in Zachary, will be the homilist during the second day of prayer on Friday, Sept. 2. Father Bayhi, who traveled to India and worked alongside Mother Teresa caring for the poorest of the poor, will talk about his encounter with Mother Teresa at the 6 p.m. Mass, which will be preceded by recitation of the rosary at 5:30 p.m.

The third day of prayer in honor of Mother Teresa’s canonization will begin at 3:30 p.m. with the rosary followed by Mass at 4 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 3.

As the homilist at this Mass, Msgr. Berggreen will discuss the spirituality and mission of Mother Teresa.

Sister Christa, one of four Missionaries of Charity sisters living in Baton Rouge and serving in the Queen of Peace Home and Soup Kitchen behind St. Agnes, said all of the events are open to the public.

“We’re hoping people will come and learn about the life of Mother Teresa,” Sister Christa said, adding, she and the other sisters are “very happy” about the upcoming canonization, which falls on the eve of the 95th anniversary of Mother Teresa’s death.

All 52 worldwide regional superiors of the order will be in attendance as well as one other sister from each region selected from a random drawing. A Missionaries of Charity sister living in Lafayette was selected in the drawing to represent the local region.

“We’re very happy for her,” said Sister Christa.

Kitty Blanchard, a member of the Lay Missionaries of Charity, is excited about the upcoming canonization.

Blanchard, who was in formation for two years before joining the lay order and who also works at St. Agnes as a bookkeeper, said she had the “great privilege” to see and hear Mother Teresa when the nun, who was honored with the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize, visited Baton Rouge.

“She (Mother Teresa) could look at everyone and see Jesus in them,” said Blanchard, who added that while Mother Teresa served as an example of a living saint. “She said all of us were called to be saints, too.”

Blanchard noted that Mother Teresa once said, “Do small things with great love.”

It is a message that can still be applied today.

“When we love, we bring Jesus’ love to others. It’s not our love, but his love. It can be a simple touch or words of encouragement,” she said, adding that no matter if the action is big or small, “That’s Jesus’ love.”

Several events are scheduled at St. Agnes Catholic Church to celebrate the canonization of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta:

Thursday, Sept. 1
5:30 p.m. Rosary
6 p.m. Mass – (Homilist Msgr. Berggreen)
“Life of Mother Teresa”

Friday, Sept. 2
5:30 p.m. Rosary
6 p.m. Mass – (Homilist Father Jeff Bayhi)
“My Encounter with Mother Teresa”

Saturday, Sept. 3
3:30 p.m. Rosary
4 p.m. Mass – (Homilist Msgr. Berggreen)
“Spirituality and Mission of Mother Teresa”

Sunday, Sept. 4
3 p.m. Holy Mass in honor of the canonization of Mother Teresa celebrated by Bishop Robert W. Muench
I was baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church. When I was younger, I served as an altar boy for several years. About 12 years ago, I got married in a Methodist church. I never had the marriage “convalidated” in the Catholic Church since my wife was against involving another member of the clergy.

Over the years, I found that my wife was actually an atheist; she would speak negatively about faith in general and especially about the Catholic Church. We have two children. Due to her infidelity and to her unwillingness to work on our marriage, we are now divorced.

I went to Catholic Masses throughout our marriage. My question is this: If I were to marry again, would I be able to marry now in a Catholic ceremony. What you would need to do is to meet with a priest and provide some information about that first marriage; the priest would then submit that paperwork to the diocese for what is generally called a “Declaration of Nullity Due to Lack of Canonical Form.” There is usually a fairly quick turnaround, requiring no more than a few weeks.

I do feel the need, though based on your question to make two further points. First, you say that you are now living with the woman you may marry.

I’m sure you know that this is in clear violation of Catholic moral teaching; the long-held and consistent view of the Church (actually, of many religions) is that a couple should not be living together until there has been a lifelong commitment ratified by a civil and religious ceremony.

Also, the story of your first marriage highlights the need for a couple to take time to prepare for courtship to examine each other’s deepest values; foremost among them, in my mind, are religious values since those affect greatly how a person will think and behave. Thus, the wisdom of pre-Cana programs, which can help prospective spouses do just that.

Q

Since you evidently did not receive the Catholic Church’s permission to be married in an other-than-Catholic ceremony – you could have, especially if your bride was Methodist and that was her parish – and since you did not subsequently have the marriage blessed (“convalidated”) by a Catholic priest or deacon, your first marriage was not recognized by the Catholic Church.

You would be free to marry now in a Catholic ceremony. The good news is that you do not have two children. Due to her infidelity and to her unwillingness to work on our marriage, we are now divorced.

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Q

We have a new pastor who several times already has brought up the notion of tithing. He says that, as Catholics, we are called to give 10 percent of our annual gross income to charity, and he promises us that “God will not be outdone in generosity.”

Can you explain the church’s teaching on tithing? Is it really a requirement, like Sunday Mass attendance, that Catholics be free to marry? / Catholics and tithing

A

The practice of tithing was formally established in the Torah, the Jewish law of the Old Testament. A person offered to God, by giving to the Temple, one-tenth of the harvest of grain of the fields or the produce of the trees. That practice carried over into the early centuries of the church’s history, and in the eighth century Charlemagne made tithing to the church a civil law.

Today there is no obligation for Catholics to donate a specific fraction of their income – only, as you mention, the general obligation that all Catholics should, to the extent of their abilities, contribute to the material support of the church.

In addition to the passage you cite from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the church’s Code of Canon Law says that “the Christian faithful are obliged to assist with the needs of the church so that the church has what is necessary for divine worship, for the works of the apostolate and of charity” (Canon 222.1).

Studies have shown that Catholics typically give between 1 percent and 2 percent of their income to local parishes, but to that figure must be added the considerable donations made to religious orders as well as to Catholic hospitals and Catholic charities, which make up the largest private network of health care and social service agencies in America.
 Scriptures provide peace in an increasingly violent world

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Scriptures are the “first and final word” one can confidently stand on in uncertain times, according to Dr. Timothy Gray, who spoke to the Baton Rouge Chapter of Legatus and Our Lady of Mercy Church in Baton Rouge’s “Called By Faith” Bible study group on July 28.

Gray referred to the recent police shootings in Baton Rouge and across the nation and other violence in the world, Gray told the Called by Faith group, “It’s really time for a world that’s losing its peace to turn back to Christ, the source of all peace as Scriptures tell us,” said Gray, the president of the Augustine Institute, professor of Sacred Scripture at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary and executive director of the Denver Catholic Biblical and Catechetical Schools.

He noted that in John 14:27, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.”

After leading a prayer for peace, Gray said, “I believe when you read the signs of the times, Scriptures play a key role in the way the church responds.”

He pointed out that one of the four major documents of Vatican II, one of them, Dei Verbum, is about the word of God.

Gray said the document urges Catholics to not be afraid of Scriptures.

Catholics’ fears of reading Scriptures dates to the Protestant Reformation, which 500th anniversary will be marked next year, Gray said.

“‘The church needed reform, Luther was right on that score,’” said Gray, noting however, that the fears led to overreaction.

Especially in the predominately Protestant United States, Catholics avoided reading the Bible because they feared those who read the Bible would convert to Protestantism and they saw the fracturing of Protestant denominations, said Gray. He added Catholic schools were developed out of fear public school students, who at that time read from the Bible at school, would become Protestant.

In an effort to counter these fears, Gray said the church told Catholics during Vatican II that “Protestantism is not a threat and to not be afraid of Scriptures. Gray stated that, in essence, the church said, “let’s heal” in light of the Western world becoming secular.

“Catholics revere the sacraments, what Vatican II is saying is to equally reverence the word of God,” said Gray. He said Catholics are encouraged to revere the word of God on the altar with the word made flesh.

Gray said Vatican II emphasized that without Scriptures, Catholics are deprived of a source of spiritual nourishment.

The speaker further noted how St. John Paul II called for a “new evangelization.” But that evangelization cannot effectively happen if people do not know the Scriptures. He noted that the pope loved Lector Divina or “divine reading” of Scripture and talked about “seeing the face of God in the word of God.”

Pope Benedict XVI also called for a return to Scripture, as evidenced by his apostolic exhortation “Verbum Domini” (“The Word of the Lord”), which dealt with how the Catholic Church should approach the Bible. The pope said Lector Divina would bring a “new springtime to the church.”

Scriptures were valuable to the saints, Gray said. He noted St. Ignatius urged people to deepen their spirituality by reading the Scriptures and placing themselves in the scenes portrayed in them. He stated St. Teresa of Avila believed she was a “mediocre nun” until she read the “Confessions of St. Augustine,” which quotes “thousands of Scripture passages,” said Gray.

Praying well involves two things according to Gray: listening to the word of God and responding to it.

“Just as the Samaritan woman conversed with Jesus, how are we conversing with Jesus?” asked Gray.

The book of Hebrews warns about the deceitful nature of sin that causes a hardening of the heart, said Gray.

“‘I’ll get a gun,’ someone may think when angry,” Gray said.

But reading Scriptures “threats the reality of God speaking to you” in front of people, he stated.

Getting over the fear of reading Scriptures releases people from fears, Gray said.

“It reassures us when we fear violence and evil. God’s word is where we have hope,” said Gray.

“With the decline in culture, I’m grateful that I have an unshakable faith in God. That (heaven) is where my citizenship is,” said Gray.

The fear of extremism and violence

A woman confided to me that she was terribly afraid for her grandchildren to grow up in a world like ours. I conceded that the dangers are real, but I reminded her of the words of Jesus: “In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33).

Granted there is much to worry about, but we all have to try to keep calm and avoid becoming joyless Christians. Try to overcome your fears as best you can with sound information. For instance, it’s important to understand that a monumental split exists between the vast majority of peace-loving Muslims and the radical militant minority.

People such as the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former self-proclaimed “emir” of al-Qaida in Iraq, said, “Killing the infidels is our religion ... until they convert to Islam, or pay us tribute.”

Good Muslims reject this kind of rhetoric as evil. The Quran states, “There is no compulsion in religion” (Surah 2, 256). Salam Al-Marayati, the executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council speaks of religious liberty as “an Islamic principle.” Unjust jihadi attacks that have taken place in many places in the world are not a result of authentically Islamic theology.

In my home diocese, in the city of Paterson, New Jersey, and in many other American cities, Muslim children are attending Catholic grammar schools. Their parents prefer sending them to Catholic schools rather than to the public schools, chiefly for reasons of safety. One would think that the abhorrence of any other religion would not allow such a thing.

Granted there are many concerns about the violence toward Christians in many Muslim countries, which we vigorously denounce. No one has the right to represent Allah or God as one who demands the slaughter of innocent people or commands their conversion.

In his address to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis stated that “no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism.” He went on to say that special attention must be given to fundamentalism, religious or not.

Sayyid M. Sayed, national director of the Islamic Society of North America’s Office for Interfaith and Community Alliances, writes that “all faiths are striving to promote those divine values enshrined in our sacred texts and Scriptures so that those who exploit them for reinforcing hate, extremism, violence and instability are identified as enemies of all faiths.”

He refers to a “new millennium of alliance building for common values of mutual respect and recognition.” The Second Vatican Council’s document “Nostra Aetate” calls for dialogue and collaboration with other religions, and recognizes the church’s “esteem” for Muslims.

I am hopeful that children will one day soon live in a peaceful world.

The fact that a small minority of radical Muslims have tried to hijack the religion of Islam to promote their own agenda should not make us cower in fear.

We will fight this evil every step of the way and peace will prevail.
USCCB’s task force to promote peace spiced with Louisianan flavor

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

A recently formed bishops task force whose focus will be to promote peace will have a decidedly Louisianan flavor. Bishop Robert W. Muench has accepted an invitation to serve as bishop-consultant to the Special Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities formed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) last month in the wake of racially-charged shootings in Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Dallas.

Task force members already include a pair of New Roads natives, Bishop Sheldon J. Fabre of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux and Bishop Emeritus John H. Ricard of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida. They are joined on the task force by Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami and Bishop Jamie Soto of the Diocese of Sacramento, California.

Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory of the Diocese of Atlanta will lead the task force, which was formed by USCCB president Joseph E. Kurtz, Archbishop of Louisville, as the first of two national peace-keeping initiatives.

The second initiative is a Day of Prayer for Peace in communities Sept. 9, the Feast of St. Peter Claver, a 17th-century Spanish Jesuit priest and patron of the missions to African Americans and human rights defenders.

Bishop Fabre is chairman of the USCCB’s Subcommittee for African-American Affairs; Bishop Ricard is a member of the Subcommittee for African-American Affairs, and member of the board of the National Black Catholic Congress. Bishop Wenski is chairman of the Committee on Domestic Social Development and Bishop Soto is chairman of the Subcommittee on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

Archbishop Kurtz indicated additional bishop-consultants may be added to the task force.

Ribbon-cutting, Mass celebrate debut of innovative Cristo Rey school

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

With a snip of oversized scissors and a sprinkling of holy water, a new era in education debuted in the Diocese of Baton Rouge on Aug. 5.

Under a broiling summer sun, and with Bishop Robert W. Muench sharing the honors, Cristo Rey Baton Rouge Franciscan High School was opened to freshmen. “You are the reason we are here,” said Bishop Muench as he welcomed the students. “You are the reason we are gathered here.”

Nearby, Dr. James Llorens admitted, “It’s been a long two years. But to see it come to fruition and see the young people (in student workshops) these past few weeks, it has been enjoyable.”

The day began with a Mass celebrated by Bishop Muench at nearby St. Gerard Majella Church, with local politicians and members of the business community in attendance.

“What a great sight you are,” Bishop Muench enthusiastically said as he welcomed the students. “You are the reason we are all gathered here.”

During his homily, the bishop op-ed used the heat in the church created by a malfunctioning air conditioning system to deliver a message of encouragement to the students, many of whom were using programs to fan themselves.

“You have a lot of fans,” he said with a smile. “And I am going to be one of the biggest fans of you and for you. We are so delighted that you are participating in Cristo Rey. You have a lot of people pulling for you.”

He asked the young people “to feel excited, to feel motivated, to feel inspired, to feel pride. We want you to succeed now and in the future.”

“We want you to consider (the school) your home away from home,” Bishop Muench added. “You are being asked to work hard, to do your best, give it your best.”

He encouraged the students to hold themselves accountable and “try and take the right road, not necessarily the easy road. Make the most of this opportunity.”

Baton Rouge Mayor-President Kip Holden told students that attending Cristo Rey is an “opportunity to be the best you can be. Everything is geared toward you.”

The school is unique in that students attend class four days a week and work in a professional office at a local business one day a week, thereby combining education with practical real work experience such as filing and answering phones. School officials were encouraged by the first enrollment of 79 freshmen, and the plan is to add a grade level in each of the next three years.

Even before classes began students were required to attend business etiquette training during the summer that included how to shake hands, presenting themselves professionally and how to address others. Dr. McNulty said the lessons were helpful, and she has already used what she has learned professionally and in her personal life.

“I feel like I have a great opportunity,” agreed Carlisha Shy. “It’s an introduction to the real world, and I’m really looking forward to it.”
Hi-tech awaits education future

Local Catholic school teachers and administrations participate in a commissioning ceremony while attending the 2016 Catholic Educators’ Gathering. Some 1,000 educators from throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge were on hand for the back-to-school event. Photo by Rachele Smith | The Catholic Commentator

By Rachele Smith
The Catholic Commentator

• Student opportunities for more 3D printing and the so-called “Maker World”
• Teaching plans that use augmented reality and wearables (such as smart glasses and e-textiles)
• Curriculums that stress competency-based instruction
• Classrooms that know, using the Internet of Everything (IoE), which students are absent
These are just some of the “trendier trends” Gregory Dhuyvetter, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Orange, California, told hundreds of local Catholic school teachers and administrators to expect in the near future.

As the keynote speaker for the 2016 Catholic Educators Gathering, an annual event held this year on Aug. 2, only days before the start of the new school year, Dhuyvetter also discussed other technology trends that he said will change education.

His top-10 list included a continued push for “1:1” or a technology device for each student, web-based instruction and assessment, a true paperless classroom and a move away from traditional textbooks.

“It’s a matter of economics,” Dhuyvetter said as he explained the end of traditional textbooks.

“Publishers simply can’t continue to fund two ways (print and electronic) of producing textbooks,” he noted, adding that eventually a universal reader will be designed eliminating the use of different platforms.

Dhuyvetter said electronic textbooks offer more benefits to students.

Not only do these books contain traditional words and pictures, but they also offer sounds, web-based links to other sources, and through various response tools, they can even determine what a student doesn’t understand then offer adapted readings or additional instruction for better clarity, he added.

However, Dhuyvetter was quick to maintain that educators are vital in the classroom, noting that only the tools they use to teach are changing.

In addition to Dhuyvetter’s keynote, which also included an afternoon address on using Gospel values for technology instruction and social media, teachers and administrators attending the day-long event at the Baton Rouge River Center had the opportunity to pray together, collaborate with each other and develop new professional knowledge. This year’s gathering highlighted more than two dozen workshop opportunities for educators featuring topics from best practices in early childhood education and faith formation to using Louisiana Young Readers’ choice novels in literature circles to online simulations in STEM classes.

“We come together to be inspired, encouraged and energized,” Bishop Robert W. Muench told educators following a morning prayer service.

Calling each Catholic school a “living community of faith” where students find a home away from home and ultimately a family, Bishop Muench also told teachers and administrators that they have a special calling to “share Jesus Christ” with all of their students, something he said was especially important now that our community has come “under some special stress” following police shootings last month.

In addition to the morning prayer service, Bishop Muench also led educators in a commissioning ceremony where they affirmed their commitment to fulfilling the vision of Catholic education in the diocese.

Dr. Melanie Verges, superintendent of Catholic schools, welcomed teachers and administrators to a new school year and encouraged educators to continue their commitment to the ministry of educating children and living out the event’s 2016 theme of “Growing Seeds of Mercy.”

Verges noted her attendance at the World Congress on Catholic Education, which was called by Pope Francis to discuss the state of Catholic education and its future, and said Catholic schools are part of the solution to the universal education emergency.

In particular, Verges said the efforts of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Baton Rouge are “right on track” and applauded the leadership of Bishop Muench. She also congratulated the efforts of local Catholic educators citing their hard work and pledge to professional development.

“Research is clear that teacher development directly affects student learning,” said Verges, adding that data collected by the Catholic Schools Office this summer revealed educators in the Diocese of Baton Rouge have completed 15,000 hours of professional development.

“We ask God to bless our ministry in Catholic education,” said Verges, who offered appreciation to teachers and administrators for the work they do.

“We are sowing seeds that will grow many young lives reaching far into the future,” she added.
Welcome Back

Edwinda Jackson, second-grade teacher at St. Francis Xavier School in Baton Rouge, greets her students on the first day of school.

Students at Sacred Heart of Jesus School in Baton Rouge gather for morning prayer on the first day of school.

St. Alphonsus School in Baton Rouge welcomes students with a whirlwind introduction to the STREAM model.

Pre-kindergarteners in Carrie Matassa’s class, Presley Falcon, left, and Harper Kinchen, learn how to walk quietly in the hallway at St. John Primary School in Prairieville.

Students at Most Blessed Sacrament School in Baton Rouge enjoy time on the playground during their first day back at school.

Much to the delight of parents and students, teachers at Redemptorist St. Gerard School in Baton Rouge, from left, Dr. Lisa Babin, Velma Brooks, Katrina Jefferson, Karisha Brown, Cassandra Will and Delores McClay they, show how to have some fun on the first day of school. They formed a Soul Train line and danced into the school gym as principal Lynn Carmouche introduced them during morning assembly.

Taylor Cuccia, left, and Blake Brignac are all smiles as they start their first day of seventh grade at St. Theresa Middle School in Gonzales.

Father Matthew Graham, pastor of St. Elizabeth Church in Paincourtville and St. Jules Church in Belle Rose, greets his new students.

Father Michael Makin, pastor at St. Louis King of France Church in Baton Rouge, with STEAM robotics on the first day of class.

Students at Catholic Elementary School of Pointe Coupee greet each other with a smile and a wave as principal Lynn Carter-White introduces them during morning assembly.

Father Michael Mark, pastor at St. Louis King of France Church in Baton Rouge, with STEAM robotics on the first day of class.

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Young people vocal in their support of Pope Francis at WYD

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

“We found out that Americans aren’t the loudest,” said Kathleen Lee about the vibrant joy expressed by more than 1.5 million people from around the world descending upon Krakow, Poland for International World Youth Day July 26-31.

Resembling the spirit of Pentecost, many voices spoke different languages, but there was a communal sharing of faith that didn’t need translation, according to Lee.

“arid that you were a brother or sister in Christ,” said Lee, who co-hosts “Catholic Underground” for Catholic Community Radio with Father Chris Decker, pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Maringouin, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Church in Livonia and St. Joseph Church in Grosse Tete.

There were spontaneous moments of sharing each other’s cultures. Lee talked about when the youth gathered around a landmark at Krakow.

Representatives from one nation would climb atop the landmark, sing their national anthem and invite the rest to sing with them. Representatives from other nations would follow and do the same. While it was thought Americans are “loud,” she said people from the Italian, African, Latin American and other nations sang with gusto as well.

“It was so cool to see so many people standing on the monument praying and praising,” Lee, a member of St. Thomas More Church in Baton Rouge, said.

“Erin Welther, also a member of St. Thomas More, agreed. “There was lots of joy. People were high-fiving each other as they passed each other on the street,” she said.

Since the population of Krakow, a treasure trove of history and the home of saints such as St. John Paul II and St. Faustina, essentially swelled with the influx of youth, that vibrancy carried over into the city, said Lee.

“You didn’t necessarily have to speak to the person next to you to know that you were a brother or sister in Christ,” said Lee, a member of St. Thomas More Church in Baton Rouge, said.

“It was so quiet and beautiful. We had 1.5 million candles lit up in this old rock quarry,” said Lee.

Welther and Lee said it was also inspiring to see youth from countries, such as the Middle East, where Christians are being persecuted, celebrate their faith and the support they received from other WYD attendees. Welther for example, saw a group of youth from Portugal who had “Peace is possible in Syria” written on their T-shirts.

Lee and Welther acknowledged the challenges of the event. They had to walk miles in the heat to go to eucharistic adoration.

Young people from the Diocese of Baton Rouge joined in with the more than 1.5 million youth who attended World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland July 26-31. Photo provided by Kathleen Lee

The youth also showed their commitment to quiet, contemplative prayer, however, at eucharistic adoration on Saturday night.

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Young person vocal in their support of Pope Francis at WYD

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Even such challenges were a reminder of the difficulties that refugees face, said Donna Bryant, a board member of the young adult group at St. George Church in Baton Rouge.

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“We currently have been hearing a lot about refugees in the news and political debates. We hear so much about them and why they are leaving their homeland, but do we really get to hear about them as individuals and the experiences they have trying to find a better place to live?” asked Bryant. “At World Youth Day, Pope Francis specifically talked about Syrian refugees and how we as Christians should treat and think about them. It really hit home when we participated in the vigil Saturday. All World Youth Day participants had to walk 6-plus miles to a large field area to gather Saturday afternoon, sleep there that night, and then have Mass Sunday morning. We had to carry all of our belongings that we needed to have for the evening and journey together to the final destination. While it sounds very easy, it was not.

“The journey that should have taken three hours ended up taking close to seven due to multiple bottlenecks caused by many people trying to move through small spaces, people on the road needed to squeeze together to make room for ambulances to pick up others who suffered from dehydration along the journey, and just from the sheer amount of people traveling together. We were experiencing a snapshot of what being a refugee entails.”

She continued, “The experience continued through the night as we all slept in close quarters on tarps and into the morning as we shielded each other with umbrellas to keep people from getting too hot through morning Mass. I am an avid backpacker and have done many strenuous hikes around the United States. That hike to the vigil was one of the hardest walks I have ever done, mostly due to the sheer number of people trying to make their way to one place. I now have a small perspective on what a refugee must go through and have gained a large amount of respect for them.”

The pilgrims accepted the difficulties through prayer and God’s grace.

“As hot as it got, people were inspired to celebrate the faith,” Lee said.

Helping them were messages from Pope Francis, who challenged them to put their faith in action and not “look for the comfortable couch.”

Now that the celebration is over, the young people are challenged to incorporate the many divine moments of WYD into their daily lives.

“Some of my best memories have been talking with some of the other pilgrims about their faith journeys. I am so glad that I went on this pilgrimage; the experiences I had and people that I met have changed me and will bring me further down my own faith journey,” said Bryant.

“I’m going back into my everyday life and unwrapping the treasures of the experiences,” said Welther.

“You have to go back and that be part of your concrete plan,” Lee said. “What are you going to resolve to do?”

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Jason Bourne
Universal
Matt Damon returns in the fifth big-screen outing for the memory-damaged and monosyllabic government agent who first appeared in the novels of Robert Ludlum. Director Robert Greengrass, who co-scripted with Christopher Rouse, bookends the story with extended car and motorcycle chases, with the result that vehicle casualties considerably outnumber the body count from weapons. Although the number of shootings does necessitate an adult rating, the film's lack of gore and relatively mild language makes this possible acceptable for older adolescents especially those who understand that the longer the car chase, the thinner the plot. Frequent gun and physical violence, fleeting irreverence, a couple of coarse expressions. A-III; PG-13

Indignation
Summit
Challenging drama, set in the early 1950s, in which a young Jewish man (Logan Lerman) wins a scholarship to an elite college where he forms an unusual bond with an emotionally troubled fellow student (Sarah Gadon) and butts heads with the school's traditionally minded dean (Tracy Letts). While writer-director James Schamus' adaptation of Philip Roth's 2008 novel is not for the casual moviewer, neither the promiscuity engaged in by the unbalanced coed nor the philosophical atheism professed by the excessively intense protagonist are to be taken at face value. Grown and well-grounded viewers will recognize the subtleties calibrating the story and its message. Mature themes, including suicide and an ambivalent treatment of religion, brief violence with slight gore, discreetly portrayed but aberrant premarital sexual activity, fleeting irreverence, a couple of uses of profanity, at least one rough term, several crude expressions. L; R

Suicide Squad
Warner Bros.
A lurid atmosphere marks this initially stylish but ultimately ridiculous and chaotic DC comics-based adventure. A hard-bitten intelligence agent (Viola Davis) assembles a team of violent villains (most prominently Will Smith and Margot Robbie), places them under the command of the military's leading special ops warrior (Joel Kinnaman), and compels them to take on an evil specter whose campaign of destruction has forced the evacuation of an entire city. As if to complicate a murky plot still further, Batman's (Ben Affleck) long-standing adversary, the Joker (Jared Leto), gets added to the mix, pursuing an agenda of his own. Writer-director David Ayer film is barely passable while the action is chugging along, but scenes attempting to give moral shading to the characters Smith's career hitman loves his young daughter (Shailyn Pierre-Dixon), for instance -- and bonding them as a pseudo-family misfire completely. Pervasive action violence but with minimal gore, scenes of debased sensuality, a couple of uses of profanity, much crude and crass language. L; PG-13

Sausage Party
Columbia
Animated food items push an atheistic agenda and glorify the basest forms of carnality in this disgusting spitting of a comedy from directors Conrad Vernon and Greg Tiernan. The inhabitants of a suburban supermarket -- most prominently a sausage (voice of Seth Rogen) and his girlfriend, a bun (voice of Kristen Wiig) -- believe that a joyful existence in the Great Beyond once human shoppers, whom they worship as gods, choose them from the shelves and take them home. But when a returned jar of honey mustard (voiced by Danny McBride) reveals how people actually treat their edibles, it launches the sausage on a quest for the truth. An insult to believers of every stripe, this libidinous idolizing film, whose cast also includes Michael Cera, Jonah Hill and Salma Hayek, portrays all religion as a con job that leads to violent divisiveness and sexual repression. Thus the eventual overthrow of the store's prevailing mythology is celebrated by a mass of graphic obscene images, benignly viewed drug use, about a half-dozen instances of profanity, relentless crude and crass language. O; R

For more Movie Reviews, visit thecatholiccommentator.org and look under ENTERTAINMENT.
No need for Neverland

Ruth B’s “Lost Boy” seems to be a retelling of the Peter Pan story. However, her comments show that the song has a much broader and important point:

“I am a lost boy from Neverland... No place to belong. Forever a Lost Boy at last...”

Her pain is magically transformed when Peter Pan appears, “sprinkled me in pixie dust and told me to believe.” She discovers that “Neverland” can be her true home, and she meets the fairy tale’s whole cast of individuals.

This was my own story as I tried to navigate my teen years. I didn’t know how to tell my peers the truth, even those who were my friends.

This is when you need to develop keen observation. Another’s feelings of loneliness and hurt cannot be totally hidden. If you find that you have concern about a peer’s well-being, care enough to tell the other what you are noticing.

Let him or her know that you want to understand. If your peer doesn’t want to share, respect that boundary but gently try again another time. Trust grows slowly and it may take some time before another can share more of what is going on.

As disciples of Jesus, we are charged with actualizing what Jesus taught, namely, that we all belong to God and we all belong to each other. The bridge to whomever God brings before us is our friendship and caring.

Many times, we can’t change the circumstances around why someone feels lost and alone, but we can offer him or her a new beginning. Your heart is a much bigger place than any “Neverland” and your caring is more magical than “pixie dust.” Make sure that others know they belong in the home of your friendship.

As sung by Ruth B

Lost Boy

There was a time when I was alone
Nowhere to go and no place to call home
My only friend was the man in the moon
And even sometimes he would go away too

Then one night as I close my eyes
I saw a shadow flying high
He came to me with the sweetest smile
He promised that you’ll never be lonely
And ever since that day
Refrain:
I am a lost boy from Neverland
As we soared above the town that never loved me
I realized I finally had a family
Soon enough we reached Neverland
Peacefully my feet hit the sand and ever since that day

Run, run Lost Boy, they say to me
Away from all of reality
Neverland is home to lost boys like me
And lost boys like me are free

He sprinkled me in pixie dust and told me to believe
Believe in him and believe in me
Together we will fly away in a cloud of green
to your beautiful destiny

Neverland is home to lost boys like me
And lost boys like me are free

No place to belong.

Sung by Ruth B | Copyright © 2016, Columbia Records

ACROSS

1. Baptismal basin
5. Picture holder
10. “How will it end for those who disobey the gospel of God?” (1 Pet 4:17)
14. Peek— (anagram)
15. Long and short grain
16. Roundish projection
17. Vein-like deposit
18. __-garde
19. Scottish Gaelic
20. Diminished
22. Most solemn Christian feast
24. Old TV movie player
25. Biblical city
26. Scottish sheep dog
30. Soprano Gluck
31. Penske rival
32. __ gin fizzle
33. Run
37. Cozy
38. Genesis event
39. Limburger feature
40. Scuttle
41. One of God’s promises to Abra-ham (Gen 12:7)
42. Symbol on the papal flag
43. David or Solomon
44. The Good Thief
45. Sign on Peter’s door, “Gone for men.”
49. Craze
50. Empty the truck
51. Apes
56. June 6, 1944
57. Grandson of Adam
59. Leave out
60. Lolobrigida of films
61. Rite in the Catholic Church
62. Roused
63. “Whoever __ this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:51)
64. Fine fur
65. Glide on surface

DOWN
1. Story of original sin (with “The”)
2. Musical instrument
3. Visual assets
4. Digs
5. St. Joan of Arc is a patron of this country
6. Jesus was baptized in one
7. Preparatory sch.
8. “For us ___ and for our salvation...”
9. Prestigious
10. “…bone of my bones and flesh of ___” (Gen 2:23)
11. Main story
12. Norwegian dramatist
13. Wary
21. “Enough for a day is its own ___” (Mt 6:34)
22. loss for words
25. This wine, after the consecration
26. Moses married a woman from here
27. “Mercy!”
28. Extol
29. Drags
30. Beside
32. Jargon
33. French wood
34. Genesis man
35. Screenwriter Ephron
36. Periods of history
37. Fragments
42. Ovary
43. Rio automaker
44. Nymph of Greek myth
45. Soft candy
46. Our Lady of the Assumption is this country’s patron
47. Stop
48. Nickname for a Catholic university
49. Certain point
50. Decorative hair accessory
51. Amos compared the women of Bashan to these animals (Am 6:1)
52. A way to run
53. Polynesian carved image
54. Soft candy
55. Stalk
58. “…_ thousand times…”

Solution on page 18

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Only good religion can defeat bad

The title of this column is taken from a headline, “Facing Islamic terror, only good religion can defeat bad,” in a long reflection by Father Damian Howard SJ published online in Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse. It rang true to me and may be applied analogously to the recent violence in our city and elsewhere in our nation.

Father Howard’s point is that in the wake of the latest terrorist attack in Nice, it’s tempting once again to blame Islam, and the fact is that Islam is being coroded from within. The answer however, is neither military force nor political isolation, but a revival of the best religious instincts among Muslims themselves.

The reflection is too long for this column, so I will do my best to summarize it. (Any quotes are Father Howard’s exact wording.) When we suffer violence, we feel powerless and demand quick and simple solutions. We are tempted to scapegoat Muslims. Indeed, some politicians seeking popularity call for their expulsion. Isn’t the purpose of ISIS to create a radical Islamic state based on Shia law and expand that as far as they can by whatever violence necessary? The words and the actions of ISIS prove this true. It doesn’t help to pretend that this extremism has nothing to do with Islam and mosques. “When, following Nice, the vice-president of the Conference of Imams of France resigned out of exasperation at the denial of French mosques about extremism in their ranks, Hocine Drouiche nailed a failure among Muslim leaders that is repeated across Europe.”

Yes, religion can be used for evil as well as good. It just depends on which texts in your Scriptures you choose to use. Pope Francis has often pointed out that Islam most of the time has been “a religion of values and of peace.” And while we blame Islam, we can so easily forget that Christians in our southern states once used the Bible to prove that slavery was good. And Catholic Spain used Jesus’ command to go and make disciples of all nations to justify the forced conversions of natives in the new world.

The problem is not, as modern atheists claim, with religion itself. The horrors of Nazism and Stalinism were committed by atheists who first did away with religion and replaced it with the god of their own power and ideology. “On all evidence, religion is the greatest force for peace available to humanity.”

ISIS provides the ideology of hate and violence. The question is why young Muslims, well educated in the West, are so susceptible to it. The suicide bombers, shooters and drivers in the U.S., Belgium and France are not like Nazi thugs. They are well educated, radicalized young men and women. There actions tell us very little about true Islam but much about young Muslims’ vulnerability to “what (Pope) Francis in Laudato Si calls the technocratic paradigm. The technocratic paradigm sees other people (and nature itself) as instruments and objects, rather than deserving of our veneration and respect.” They think that with advances in technology they can bend nature and human society to whatever abstractions they worship.

This is just the opposite of true religion, Christian or Muslim, that believes in a God who is sovereign and has given us life as a gift to be thankfully cherished and respected in ourselves and in all others. We are not called to dominate others but to serve them by imitating God’s mercy. “Despite its medieval ideology, (ISIS) is a product of western technocracy; it is run by engineers and jurists (lawyers) … It is wholly at home with social media and contemporary technology, and its adherents are frustrated higher-middle-class youth people college-educated in technical subjects.” But many are unemployed, angry and adrift. The killer in Nice boasted that people would talk about him. For him, ISIS represented an Islam of power. It inspired him to help ISIS provoke a war.

Father Howard says that we need intelligence, sound security measures and good defenses. In the end, ISIS will die of its own internal contradictions. “There doesn’t seem that we can defeat it by power alone. “That doesn’t mean helplessness; but it does mean understanding the temptations that come with refusing to be helpless.” We have to remember the path indicated by Pope Francis in this Year of Mercy. Only good religion can defeat bad religion. “The only ultimate response is to mourn the dead, forgive the perpetrators and to dissolve the divisions in humanity through concrete acts of mercy.”

What appealed to me most in this reflection was the French Imam’s resignation because his own Muslim leaders would not refute calls for violence in their mosques. That has to be done in France, here and everywhere. Without leadership, the people go astray especially young people. It was impressive that the family of Alton Sterling, killed by one of our policemen, called for non-violent protest.

The analogy to our own problems of violence in Baton Rouge is also found in leadership. Precisely because our law enforcement officers risk their lives every day to protect us, there must be rigorous training in the proper use of force. Our police chief, our sheriff and our head of state police have to demand of their officers proper use of force. I am sure that is their goal, but the death of Alton Sterling highlights the need of such training and oversight. And maybe more black officers should be recruited and trained to answer calls of violence in zip codes where there is mistrust of law enforcement. Providing understanding of the people we serve is an act of mercy.

There is also need for political and legislative leadership when it comes to the question of gun laws. In our state, like many others, there is no legal prohibition of the open carrying of weapons. But Alton Sterling and three of our law enforcement officers would (possibly) be alive today if he had never carried that gun. An arms-carrying society is not by that fact a peaceful and safe society.

FATHER CARVILLE is a retired priest in the Diocese of Baton Rouge and writes on current topics for The Catholic Commentator. He can be reached at johnnycarville@gmail.com.

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Father John Carville

Another Perspective

Father John Carville
Moving beyond our fear of God

Until you are already a full saint or a mystic, you will always live in some fear of death and the afterlife. That’s simply part of being human. But we can, and must, move beyond our fear of God.

As a child, I lived with a lot of fear. I had a very active imagination and too-frequently imagined murderers under my bed, poisonous snakes slithering up my leg, deadly germs in my food, playground bullies looking for a victim, a hundred ways in which I could meet an accidental death and threats of every kind lurking in the dark. As a child, I was often afraid: afraid of the dark, afraid of death, afraid of the afterlife and afraid of God.

As I matured, so too did my imagination; it no longer pictured snakes hiding everywhere or murderers under my bed. I began to feel strong, in control, imagining the unknown, with its dark corners, more as opportunity for growth than as threat to life. But it was one thing to block out fear of snakes, murderers and the dark. Not so easily did I overcome my fear of death, fear of the afterlife and fear of God. These fears are the last demons to be exorcised, and that exorcism is never final, never completely done with. Jesus, himself, trembled in fear before death, before the unknown that faces us in death. But he didn’t tremble in fear before God, the opposite in fact. As he faced death and the unknown, he was able to give himself over to God, in childlike trust, like a child clinging to a loving parent, and that gave him the strength and courage to undergo an anonymous, lonely and misunderstood death with dignity, grace and forgiveness.

We need never be afraid of God. God can be trusted. But trust in God does include a healthy fear of God, because one particular fear is part of the anatomy of love itself. Scripture says: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But that fear, healthy fear, must be understood as a reverence, a loving awe, a love that fears disappoint ing. Healthy fear is love’s fear, a fear of betraying, of not being faithful to what love asks of us in return for its gratuity. We aren’t afraid of someone we trust, fearing that he or she will suddenly turn arbitrary, unfair, cruel, incomprehensible, vicious, unloving. Rather we are afraid about our own being worthy of the trust that’s given us, not least from God.

But we must trust that God understands our humanity: God doesn’t demand that we give him our conscious attention all the time. God accepts the natural wanderings of his hearts. God accepts our tiredness and fatigue. God accepts our need for distraction and escape. God accepts that we usually find it easier to immerse ourselves in entertainment than to pray. And God even accepts our resistances to him and our need to assert, with pride, our own independence. Like a loving mother embracing a child that’s kicking and screaming but needs to be picked up and held, God can handle our anger, self-pity and resistance. God understands our humanity, but we struggle to understand what it means to be human before God.

For many years, I feared that I was too immersed in life challenges. But this alone can’t explain the power of faith, but some times we might be at a loss for words to explain the benefits of our faith to others. VanderWeele says, “I don’t think we know exactly what it is about the content of the service that has this effect. I do think that probably the social support one has at religious services has some role,” says VanderWeele. “But there is also the moral belief that suicide is wrong, which could be another mechanism. Also, the feeling of being close to God and in communion with God. With regard to Catholicism in particular, the belief in respect for life from the moment of conception to natural death has an effect on the perception of what suicide is and that it is wrong. This is not an abstract belief, but it’s reinforced on a weekly basis.”

VanderWeele hopes his work finds a use in clinical settings, such as psychological counseling.

“It’s understood that one’s decisions are based on values, evidence, upbringing, relationships and so on. But for a patient who already identifies as religious, it’s reasonable to suggest: ‘Have you thought about attending a service that is reflective of your beliefs?’”

Our lives are witnesses to the power of faith, but sometimes we might be at a loss for words to explain the benefits of our faith to others. VanderWeele also hopes his work might help individuals and church communities make the case for religious attendance.

“There are increasing trends for people self-identifying as spiritual but not religious,” he says. “This kind of study suggests they might be missing out on a very important spiritual experience. Churches could make use of this study to encourage people to come back to church.”

PRATT is a playwright, journalist and author, as well as a speaker and patient advocate.
Reflection on Mercy – Father Jeffrey A. Mentz, professor of spirituality at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, will present an afternoon of reflection, “Mercy,” on Saturday, Aug. 20, noon – 3:30 p.m., at the St. Margaret Room of the Hall of Saints at St. Margaret Queen of Scot-land Church, Hwy. 43 South at Interstate 1-12, Albany. For more information, call 225-567-3573.

Quilt Raffle – St. John Primary School in Prairieville and St. Theresa Middle School in Gonzales will raffle a quilt at its annual Festival of Friends Friday, Sept. 30 – Oct. 2. The quilt will be on display and tickets will be sold after the weekend Masses at the following churches: Aug. 20 – 21, St. Joseph Church, 15750 Hwy. 16, French Settlement and St. Stephen the Martyr Church, 23502 Highway 22, Maurepas; Aug. 27 – 28, St. Gabriel Church, 3625 Hwy. 75, St. Gabriel; Sept. 3 – 4, St. Anthony Church, 37311 Hwy. 22 Darrow and St. Anne Church, 7348 Main Street, Sorrento; and St. Theresa of Avila Church, 1022 N. Burnside Ave., Gonzales. The quilt will also be on display at the Festival of Friends.

40 Days for Life Meeting – Baton Rouge’s sixth 40 Days for Life Campaign will run from Wednesday, Sept. 28 – Sunday, Nov. 6. There will be an informational meeting on Wednesday, Aug. 23, 7 p.m., in Room 104 of the Bishop Robert E. Tracy Center, 1800 S. Acadian Thwy., Baton Rouge. Help is needed with event planning, communications, outreach and site coordination. For more information, email 40daysforlifebr@gmail.com or call Danielle Van Haute at 225-242-1064.

Financial Education With Biblical Principles – Two churches in the diocese will present financial education based on biblical principle. St. Thomas More Church, 11441 Goodwood Blvd., Baton Rouge, will offer the course on Thursdays, 6:30 p.m., beginning Sept. 15 in the parish activity center. There will be an informational meeting on Tuesday, Aug. 23, 7 p.m. To register and for more information, call 225-275-3940 or visit stmsgch.org. Immaculate Conception Church, 865 Hatchell Lane, Denham Springs, will have the course starting Tuesday, Sept. 13, 7 p.m. For information or to register, visit icc-msh.org or daveramsay.com/fpu/classes/1021402.

Women in Spirit Meeting – Tina Holland, president, Our Lady of the Lake College, will speak about her faith journey to the Catholic Church at the Women in Spirit Meeting on Thursday, Aug. 25, noon, at St. Joseph Cathedral, Fourth and Main streets, Baton Rouge. Women in Spirit is an interfaith program for women of various ethnic and religious affiliations to network. To RSVP email sjwomeninspirit@aol.com or call the cathedral office at 225-387-5928.

Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites – The Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites welcomes all who are interested in developing their prayer life according to the Carmelite saints. The next meeting will be Sunday, Sept. 11, 1:30 p.m., at Our Lady of Mercy Parish Activity Center in St. Gabriel’s Room, 444 Marquette Ave., Baton Rouge. For more information, call 225-343-3181 or 225-803-3391, or email robertwhite456@att.net.

Metairie Retreat Center Events – The Archdiocese of New Orleans Retreat Center, 5500 St. Mary St., Metairie, has several upcoming events. It will host a spiritual legacy letter series, Wednesdays, 5:30 p.m. – 7 p.m., August 31, Sept. 7 and Sept. 14. On Tuesday, Sept. 13, 7 p.m., Archbishop Albert Hughes will present “Local Holy Men and Women of Mercy.” A formation series on the intercession will be held Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m., starting Sept. 14. Father David Caron OP will lead a day of prayer, “Mercy Me: Living the Year of Mercy,” on Tuesday, Sept. 27 at the Archdiocese of New Orleans Retreat Center, 5500 St. Mary St., Metairie. To register and for more information, visit retreats.arch-no.org, call 886-937-9470, or email retreats@arch-no.org.

Day of Prayer – Sister Rose Bowen OP will present a day of prayer, “The Francis Effect,” on Wednesday, Sept. 21 at Rosaryville Spirit Life Center, 39003 Rosaryville Road, Ponchatoula. The cost of the day is $35. To RSVP and for more information, call 225-294-5039.

Advertisements will not be published without full payment in advance.

Parenting Seminar – Family psychologist John Rosemond will speak on “Parenting With Love and Leadership,” on Monday, Sept. 12, 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m., at St. Aloysius Church, 2025 Stuart Ave., Baton Rouge. For more information, call 225-931-8982.

Blue Mass – St. John the Baptist Church, 402 S. Kirkland Dr., Brusly, will celebrate a Blue Mass honoring law enforcement personnel on Sunday, Sept. 25, 9 a.m. For more information, call 225-749-2180.

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MINISTRY ▲
From page 1

“When I look through those bars (at the prisoners), I realize that our God loves these men just as much as he loves me,” he added.

As the full-time lay minister at Angola, a post he has held since January when Father Bernard Pappania was called back to his home diocese in Biloxi, Mississippi, Jackson visits with the prisoners on a regular basis, offering words of faith, hope and sometimes just friendship. “I have experienced tremendous growth (through prison ministry work),” said Jackson. “I often tell the men (in prison) that God is sending me here to speak to me as much as I’m here to speak to you.”

But Jackson’s faith is not the only change he has witnessed through prison ministry. His family has also noticed how, through the years, his experiences have made him a better husband and father, even sparking a desire for the ministry in his youngest son.

“He is now a prison minister, too. He said he wanted to have what it (prison ministry) gave me,” said Jackson.

Joan Chapman, a parishioner at St. Gabriel Church in St. Gabriel, also understands the desire to minister to prisoners.

Like Jackson, Chapman never seriously considered it, even though she was repeatedly asked. “I just thought I would pray for them (the prisoners); that was going to be my ministry,” said Chapman.

“The prisoners share their thoughts, she was able to see her own issues in another light. Chapman noted, adding discussions that needed to hear. As she listened to the prisoners share their thoughts, she was able to come back the following week. “He said, ‘If y’all come back, I’ll have people here,” she said. “And he did.”

Since that time, the Thursday night group has flourished, with 20 to 30, sometimes more, prisoners coming together with volunteers to share their faith. The volunteers also plan special events outside of weekly group meetings, including retreat days and a special home-cooked dinner at Christmas.

“It (the faith group) is inspirational. We get as much out of it as the men,” said Lynn Blanchard, who, in addition to serving as a Eucharist minister at Hunt prison, ministers on Thursday nights along with her husband, Brenda.

“I love going,” said Brenda Blanchard, a parishioner at St. Gabriel Church, who noted that they are committed to the program. “Our kids say, ‘It’s Thursday night. We can’t go to Mamá’s,’” she laughed.

During the two-hour group meeting, Chapman explained, prisoners read the Sunday Scriptures for the upcoming week and discuss various questions. And, she added, it’s this time that can be especially faith enriching.

“I remember when I was going through some things with a family member,” Chapman noted, adding discussions that night, while planned around another theme, just happened to turn to what she needed to hear. As she listened to the prisoners share their thoughts, she was able to forgive over and over again.” She said forgiving over and over again.”

“We started talking about forgiveness, and they said forgiveness is not a one-time thing; sometimes you have to forgive over and over and over again,” she said.

For Curt Soilleau, another regular volunteer on Thursday nights and someone who has spent decades as a prison minister serving at Angola as well as at Hunt prisons, faith sharing is just one part of the bigger picture.

“Christ calls us to live the corporal works of mercy. To me there is no difference from going to St. Vincent de Paul and feeding the homeless to going to a prison,” the St. Gabriel Church parishioner said, adding that by helping someone else, you are also helping yourself. “You get repaid back one hundred fold what you put in,” he said.

Minos Ponville, a deacon candidate in the Diocese of Baton Rouge, is new to prison ministry, having just completed the required training as mandated for all prison volunteers by the state Department of Corrections.

“My challenge when I went for the first time was to see Christ in each person. You have to realize this is a child of God, and Christ resides in that person. I wasn’t sure if I could see that, but it soon became clear, that yes, there is that spark of Christ, and when you reach out to that spark, good things happen,” he said.

Father Charlie Landry, pastor of St. Gabriel, sees good things happening through prison ministry all of the time.

He first began ministering to inmates when he was pastor at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in St. Francisville, which is near Angola, years ago. Now, as the pastor of a church parish where both Hunt and Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW) are located, Father Landry visits the prisoners and, along with at least six other priests in the diocese, rotates celebrating the weekly Mass at Hunt every Friday.

“When you do, you realize these prisoners are fellow human beings who made mistakes being human, just like I make mistakes being human,” said Father Landry, emphasizing that by showing mercy to others, we are able to fully live out and grow within our own faith.

The Catholic Commentator will continue its focus on prison ministry in future issues.

If interested in volunteering as a prison minister or would like more information about prison ministry, contact Linda Bjeldsjo, coordinator of the prison ministry office and Joseph Homes through Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge at bjeldsjo@cediobr.org.

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in a Lenten reflection for study groups, families and individuals, to the prayers of the diocese. Mark Carpenter entered the Catholic faith with Pineda through the RCIA program.

“I didn’t choose RCIA, RCIA chose me,” Carpenter said, stating he had studied the Protestant, Greek Orthodox and many other traditions before “coming to the truths of the Catholic faith.”

He now teaches a class on apologetics.

“I try to open their eyes from all the misinformation (about the Catholic faith) they may have,” said Carpenter. “We have facts and we also provide documentation.”

Apologetics is also a favorite subject of inmate Anthony Scarmardo, who helped facilitate groups in the RCIA program, and has played a big part in getting books and teaching materials for the Catholic ministry.

Scarmardo pointed out that Catholicism strives to be a “faith in action.”

“You can study as much as you want, but if you don’t put it into action, you’ve got nothing,” said Scarmardo, pointing to the statement from James 2:14-17 that “faith without works is dead.” He highlighted the works done by Dorothy Day and others who work for social justice.

“Working is putting others before yourself,” said Scarmardo.

He, Pineda and Carpenter said the work they do, however, is not theirs alone, but the efforts of other inmates and volunteers as well. One of the highlights of the year is when volunteers take food to DCI to celebrate Mass and dinner with the inmates.

Inmates expressed their appreciation for the volunteers.

“They give us a sense that we’re not ignored,” said inmate Gail Scarmardo, pointing to the state- ment of Matthew 25, when Jesus said, “Inasmuch as you did it for one of the least of these my brothers, you did it for me.”

But when the inmates told him, “I cannot believe you are coming out here on a Friday night when you could be going to dinner or out after work,” he knew he was in the right place.

He said the way the inmates and volunteers respond to each other shows that the essential difference between them is “they are incarcerated and we are not … the solidarity of humanity.”

“Although I came to this ministry with certain biases and pre-conceived ideas, I now know that those can be set aside temporarily and that powerful blessings can be both given and received by anyone who chooses to volunteer for this ministry,” said inmate David Bondy, also of St. Aloysius, who is in the ministry with his wife, Jeanie. “Before committing to this ministry I can remember wondering whether the time I put in would yield results.

“That question has been powerfully answered numerous times: We know of one inmate who was released and has a full time ministry of his own. Another has taught himself to paint and through encouragement of our volunteers has become an excellent artist. In addition to these tangible results, we believe that there are many more seeds sown that will bear fruit we may never know about.”

Michelle Carrier, who coordinates the ministry along with the Bondys, said she had a “You did the crime, you do the time,” mentality and struggled when the prison ministry heading “jumped off the page” when she looked over ministry options at St. Aloysius. She said, fortunately, the Holy Spirit’s “Yes” overrode her “No.”

“It didn’t take long for me to see that (locking them up and throwing away the key) mentality wasn’t right,” said Carrier. “I saw there was so much talent wasted in that prison. God showed me that people make mistakes and that we need to do a better job of rehabilitation.”

Noting that this is the Year of Mercy, Carrier said the passage from Matthew 25, comes to mind, in which Jesus said, “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

“We really need to listen to God’s call,” said Carrier. “In this case, being obedient has been such a huge blessing to me. If I had been disobedient and followed my own selfish desires, I would have missed out on experiences I cherish.”

**OLOL College awarded Lilly Endowment grant**

Our Lady of the Lake College, the only Catholic Franciscan institution of higher education in the southeastern United States, recently received a $446,692 award from Lilly Endowment Inc. to develop a summer program for youth centered on Franciscan theology, ethics and vocational discernment.

Young people often have a good sense of what Christians believe. But many do not know how those beliefs took shape and why and how they endure. This new summer program, entitled “The Franciscan Experience” (T.F.E.), will meet a need felt by high school-aged students seeking deeper engagement in the Christian tradition.

Young people often find St. Francis of Assisi because of his radical love of God and emphasis on service appealing, but few of them have studied the deeper reasons behind his love of the poor.

“We find that when students engage in the why questions, especially when posed in relation to their own experiences, they engage with their faith in a more substantive and permanent way,” said David Whidden PhD, the lead investigator on the grant.

As part of the week-long program, instructors will draw upon the college’s nationally-recognized program in service-learning to challenge students to more actively address the ethical and theological questions posed in the classroom through service in the community.

Participants in the program will have the opportunity to serve in a soup kitchen and a shelter for women and children. TFE will challenge students to reflect on questions related to service, being obedient, and how each of us is called to care for the poorest in our community.

Designed for students looking for more intellectual, spiritual, experiential and ethical formation, TFE will encourage high school students to think about their own calling in life.