‘RESILIENT GROUP’

Cristo Rey graduates first class

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

Where flood waters once threatened to wash away dreams, hope emerged under a brilliant sun seemingly beaming its approval.

Bookended by a catastrophic flood, 18 months in windowless classrooms and finally, the coronavirus pandemic, the inaugural graduating class of Cristo Rey Baton Rouge Franciscan High School celebrated in an emotional outdoor ceremony. Family members and friends, all in their automobiles, parked in front of the stage, the blaring sounds of horns expressing their congratulations and pride.

“We are the resilient group; we persevered, did not quit and overcame,” salutatorian Bria Coleman said. “We started late (because of the flood of 2016) and ended early (caused by the pandemic) but God always has a plan. “The difficult times shaped us for who we are today.”

Cristo Rey initially welcomed students to the site of the old Redemptorist High School in August 2016, offering a Catholic education with the unique opportunity of working in the corporate world for one day a week, an idea enthusiastically embraced by the business community.

‘Virus devastates families’

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

As families grapple with the death of one or more loved ones because of the coronavirus pandemic, church parishes in the Diocese of Baton Rouge are putting their arms around them in a way that transcends social distancing by meeting them at the foot of the cross.

Among the parishes hit hard by the virus include St. Paul the Apostle Church in Baton Rouge, whose congregation is primarily African American, a high-risk population for the virus. St. Paul lost three of its members, with at least one family experiencing multiple deaths caused by COVID-19.

On March 15, St. Paul member James Rodney, 92, told his sister and fellow parishioner Sylvia Trahan he wasn’t feeling well but that it was “just a cold.” As his health deteriorated, he insisted he was “feeling okay.”

After Rodney fell twice, his wife, Barbara, called 911 and Rodney was admitted to a local hospital diagnosed with the coronavirus.

Shortly afterwards, the Rodney’s son, Keith Rodney of Opelousas, checked on his mother and noticed she looked ill. He brought her to the doctor, and she was admitted to the same hospital as her husband.

James Rodney died April 9. Soon after, Keith exhibited coronavirus symptoms but did not want to be admitted to the hospital. Keith died at home April 14, leaving behind a wife, son and numerous relatives.

With her husband of 62 years and her son both succumbing to the virus dead, Barbara asked the nurses to help her call St. Paul pastor Father Rick Andrus SVD.

“She needed someone to talk with and was crying and so was I. It was so hard because I could not be with her.

From the Bishop
Bishop Michael G. Duca

Change through listening

This week, we as a nation, watched the horrific and heart breaking death of Mr. George Floyd while being subdued by police in Minneapolis. (Before you read on, remember now what your first feelings were when you read this first sentence.)

We can view this as an isolated event, but even then, it is by any measure of human common decency a profound disregard of the human dignity of Mr. George Floyd.

See Graduation Page 8

See Families Page 15
Our Lady of the Lake Hospital, School of Nursing Graduates 1975: OLOL Graduate Nurses – Thirty-six students graduated from Our Lady of the Lake School of Nursing Sunday, Nov. 30, at St. Joseph Cathedral. The graduation address was delivered by Bishop Stanley J. Ott, who was pastor of St. Joseph Cathedral at the time. Bertha Mae Anders, director of Our Lady of the Lake School of Nursing, awarded the diplomas and Maureen Daniels, associate director, presented the school pins. Photo provided by Archives Department of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

DID YOU KNOW

Creed vs creed

During Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, Catholics have a choice of creeds following the homily. One is the Nicene Creed and the other is the Apostles’ Creed. While the latter is a shorter version of the former, both cover the same territory.

According to catholicastraightanswers.com, the word “creed” is derived from the Latin word “credo” which means, “I believe.” The creeds are a “statement of faith” which includes the belief in the Trinity and the path of salvation: “Initiated by the father, the history of salvation culminates in Jesus and through the work of the Holy Spirit, the redemptive mission and paschal mystery of our Lord is operative in the age of the church.”

The Apostles’ Creed is based on the teaching of the Twelve Apostles and was used as a recitation by a mostly illiterate population to proclaim their faith. The website alateia.org explains the origin of the Apostles’ Creed this way: “The Apostles’ Creed grew out of that ancient tradition and according to legend, the apostles themselves each wrote a portion of that creed on Pentecost. While scholars have debated for centuries the authenticity of such a claim, many believe that at the very least, a form of the Apostles’ Creed was written during the second century and was based on an outline from the apostolic age.”

However, a number of scholars maintain the Apostles’ Creed is instead an expansion of a Roman baptismal creed known as “The Roman Symbol,” and is still used in that function to this day, according to media.ascensionpress.com. It was also during this time St. Ambrose and St. Augustine encouraged the faithful to recite “The Symbol of Faith” daily, leading to its inclusion in the rosary.

The Nicene Creed was created in 325 by the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council of the Christian church, “because some heretics were confusing people,” according to “Why Do Catholics Do That?” by Dr. Kevin Orlin Johnson. Two claims made in the Apostles’ Creed, that Jesus “descended into hell” and “the communion of saints,” are not found in the Nicene Creed.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him,” (CCC 633). “The communion of saints,” as explained by media.ascensionpress.com, refers to God’s view of us as his children and “he intends for us to be connected not to just him but to each other.”

The most important assertion from the Council of Nicaea, and included in the Nicene Creed, was to define Jesus as both man and God, present in the Holy Trinity; thus, the words “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the father.” In other words, made of the same substance of God.

As encouraged by our saintly leaders long ago to say “The Symbol of Faith” daily, so should we find encouragement and strength in those words, regardless of the creed, only focusing on the belief and the faith.
St. Faustina feast day Oct. 5

By Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

A beacon of hope shone for a world straining under the effects of the coronavirus when Pope Francis marked St. John Paul II’s 100th birthday May 18 by celebrating Mass at the altar where the Polish pope is buried in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

The liturgy put the focus on “the great mercy pope” and fellow Polish St. Faustina Kowalska, whom Jesus directed to share a message of divine mercy with the world.

The liturgy was the first Mass open to the public after almost two months of restrictions because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In his homily, Pope Francis said, “speaking of the man of justice and mercy, we think what St. John Paul II did to make people understand the mercy of God. We think how he carried out his desire that all humanity come to know his mercy. At the age of 20, St. Faustina entered the convent in Warsaw and was later transferred to Poland and then moved to Vilnius. There she met her confessor, Father Michal Sopoćko, who supported her devotion to the Divine Mercy. St. Faustina and Father Sopoćko directed an artist to paint the first Divine Mercy image, based on St. Faustina’s visions of Jesus. The familiar image is of Jesus stepping forward, two rays of red and white extending from his heart and his hand extended in forgiveness.

During World War II the Nazis made a strong effort to suppress the Divine Mercy message by arresting those who spread it. Father Miles Walsh, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Baton Rouge and who has a strong devotion to the Divine Mercy, played an instrumental part in spreading the devotion to the Diocese of Baton Rouge. He pointed to an intriguing story about how Father Joseph Jarzembowski MIC, a young Marian priest living in Poland, smuggled the message of Divine Mercy given to him by Father Sopoćko across Poland, through Lithuania, the Soviet Union and Japan before arriving by ship in the United States in May 1941. The devotion then spread nationally. In 1944 Father Walter Pelszynski MIC established the “Mercy of God Apostolate” on Eden Hill in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, home of the National Shrine of The Divine Mercy and the Marian Helpers Center.

Along with the Divine Mercy image, Jesus established through St. Faustina a nine-day novena that can be prayed on Good Friday through the Second Sunday of Easter, known as Divine Mercy Sunday.

Many church parishes in the diocese celebrate a nine-week novena that begins the week before Mardi Gras and ends on Divine Mercy Sunday. Father Walsh said each “day” of the novena contains specific intentions Jesus wants people to pray for.

“Sometimes people will dismiss the novena as a pious practice of simple people – well that is true, we are called to be simple and humble,” said Father Walsh. “But the Lord Jesus gave us the traditions of the novena himself.”

Father Walsh further said St. Faustina’s diary requires prayerful “lectio divina” (divine reading). He said the revelations in the diary are about “scaling the heights of sanctity.”

Father Todd Lloyd, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Lakeland, said the novena is about trusting Jesus. He and Father Walsh noted that below the feet of Jesus in the image are the words, “Jesus I Trust in You.”

“People have to be mindful of the importance of their relationship with Jesus and this devotion is a personal devotion to Jesus,” said Father Lloyd.

The Divine Mercy devotion

SEE MERCY PAGE 11
Chris Landry first recognized the yearning in his heart for the religious life while attending Ascension Catholic Diocesan Regional High School in Donaldsonville.

At the time he thought that yearning might be a calling to the priesthood. After discernment and attending a five-day retreat, Landry realized God “was not calling me” to be ordained. But the longing in his heart to serve God never wavered, and on Aug. 8, he will be one of six men scheduled to be ordained permanent deacons by Bishop Michael G. Duca at St. Joseph Cathedral.

“T’ve already started praying that I will be able to keep it together (during the ordination Mass),” said Landry, who added he was “bitterly disappointed” when the original June 20 ordination date was postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“I just want to be ordained, to be indulgently marked for the Lord,” he said.

After realizing the call to priesthood was not for him, Landry went on to marry his high school sweetheart, raise three sons and is now the sole owner of a thriving food manufacturing company. But with the desire to serve the Lord never silenced in 2001 he enrolled in the former Religious Studies Institute with the goal of becoming a deacon.

However, with three young boys and the pressing needs of his job as one of Chef John Folse’s executives at the time, “the advice was overarching to postpone this for a little while.”

In 2015, with two sons living away from home and the other graduating from high school, Landry became part of the first class of the revamped diaconate program, which involves attending classes at Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University.

He admitted the challenge was daunting, especially after being so long removed from a classroom.

That’s a different scenario to have to get back to writing papers, studying and being diligent about it,” he joked. “That was a bit of a shock for all of us to start.

“It was more like graduate school than undergrad but I’m thankful for it.”

Because of the commitment of his professors, who Landry called “great Catholic men,” he said he is as well-formed in Catholic doctrine as he ever thought he could be.

“That’s what I wanted, wanted that education my whole life,” he said. “They got some good information through this thick skull.”

Landry said the long nights studying, the twice-weekly three-hour classes and commuting to Baton Rouge from his Gonzales home will all be forgotten when he kneels before Bishop Duca to be ordained.

“It’s the most committed thing I could do,” he said. “Once I felt called to be a priest and then correctly figured that is not what God had planned for me.

“God had this plan for me, and he put something in me that drew me toward it. I can’t think of any other way to serve my Lord or any better and to serve my fellow Catholic Christians. That is the draw; to do his work.”

Landry said he believes the nationwide growth of the diaconate is part of God’s bigger plan to help mitigate the shortage of priests. He said deacons can assume some administrative duties so priests can focus more on their pastoral roles.

Landry has spent more than a quarter of a century in administration, first with the Folse company and then owning his own company. In addition to assisting in other liturgical functions, he believes his business background will be an asset in helping manage a church parish that could free up the pastor to perform other ministerial duties.

Evangelization is Landry’s passion, his main focus is men’s ministry. Several years ago he started a men’s group at the cluster parishes St. Elizabeth Church in Paincourtville and St. Jules Church in Belle Rose at the encouragement of then pastor Father Andrew Merrick.

Landry credited the Holy Spirit in growing the “King’s Men” ministry from three to four men to a rather large group, one that eventually spilled over into nearby St. Joseph Church in Pierre Part.

“I have a special love for working with men,” Landry said. “I am definitely drawn to helping bring men closer to God because I think it’s sorely lacking in our diocese, and across the United States and the world.”

As ordination day approaches, Landry admitted his emotions have already kicked into overdrive. He was candid when he said he might not be able to stop from weeping with joy when he is ordained.

He admitted even now he tears up a “little bit” when he thinks about the fact he will be ordained by Bishop Duca, whom Landry says is “in the direct line of Jesus.”

“I know the Holy Spirit will give me the strength to get through it and not sob and ruin it for everybody,” he said. “The actual ordination is what I want to happen.”
Mass attendance encouraging

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

As many churches in the Diocese of Baton Rouge reopened the weekend of May 16-17, pastors were not sure what to expect.

Sure, safety measures were in place, several parishes had established a reservation protocol and pews were distinctly marked for social distancing.

But the underlying question was how many people would actually attend.

Using the first two weeks of reopening as a small sample size, the results have been encouraging.

Father Michael Miceli, pastor at St. Patrick Church in Baton Rouge, said he has been pleasantly surprised. Initially, his expectation was about 30 people per Mass but overall attendance has averaged around 70, with some Masses having crowds of 80 to 100.

“For me, it has exceeded expectations,” Father Miceli said. “We are looking forward to the day when everybody can be back but we are definitely pleased.”

Father Paul Counge, pastor at St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge, admitted he had “no clue as to what to expect” and during that first weekend attendance was about 5% to 7% of the 25% capacity permitted under the state’s reopening guidelines. But the numbers doubled this past weekend, a sign of encouragement for Father Counge.

“If they continue to double we’ll be up to our maximum 25% capacity for Phase 1 in two or three weeks,” he said.

St. Jean Vianney Church in Baton Rouge also experienced an increase from the first weekend to the second, albeit a small one, pastor Father Tom Ranzino said. He believes the numbers are “about right for the times.”

“We have emphasized that folks should be careful and take their time coming back to the physical building,” Father Ranzino said. “I am pleased to see that the community is taking the virus seriously and our precautions to help them come back as well.”

Away from the metropolitan Baton Rouge area, the results were equally encouraging. At St. Margaret Queen of Scotland Church in Albany, pastor Father Jamin David reported that a combined 350 people attended weekend Masses at St. Margaret and St. Thomas Chapel in Springfield on May 16-17. Father David said the number dipped by about 50 on the second weekend, which was also Memorial Day weekend.

“Parishioners are excited to simply be back home and are looking forward to more opportunities to resume ministry gatherings and community life around the parish,” Father David said.

The pastors said those attending Mass are complying with the mask and social distancing requirements. In some parishes, volunteers or staff members are in front of the church checking in those who had made reservations online.

St. Patrick has even taken it a step further, dividing the church into alphabetized sections and pews numbered by row. Additionally, each person is given a specific seating assignment and escorted to the assigned pew.

“It seems like being at a nice restaurant, people coming in at the valet line,” Father Miceli mused.

“I am struck by what a difference the wearing of the masks makes in that I cannot see smiles and that affects my sense of community response,” Father Ranzino said. “It’s more difficult to hear the praying and singing community. But, even with that, I’m happy folks are beginning to return home.”

St. Margaret has also employed an online reservation format with Father David reporting the “lion’s share” of the weekend schedule has been filled to capacity under the reduced occupancy rate.

“In essence if we could accommodate more people on the weekend we would have more people,” he said.

“The parish has added weekend and weekday Masses and is adjusting according to attendance.

“We knew that there would be some experimentation to find the schedule that fits us,” Father David said. “We’ve since reduced the weekend schedule by one Mass to five, and the (combined) daily schedule from 10 to eight.”

Moving forward, Father Counge said those considering attending Mass must first, feel safe getting out in public and second, feel that they are getting something out of “live” worship that they were not getting from television or private prayer.

“I worry that the second may result in a marked decline in church attendance moving forward even after the risk of contagion is practically over,” he said.

Father Miceli said he is hopeful that perhaps after a month or so and if there is no noticeable outbreak of the coronavirus, people might be more encouraged to attend.

“I think when they feel comfortable to be here and safe is see MASS PAGE 10

GOSPEL ▼

From page 2

Jesus Christ, who “for us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven,” offered as sacrifice his flesh and blood in order to release us from the bondage of sin, to reconcile us with God, to open the gates of heaven, to be united as one in faith as we kneel in adoration of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the living bread of life. We respond to this in faith as we kneel in adoration of our heavenly father, invoke his holy name, surrender to his will, strive for holiness, ask for physical and spiritual food, ask for mercy and for the ability to be merciful, pray for the path of virtue and away from evil. All of this before we receive him in the Blessed Sacrament. We stand on holy ground as the real presence of God is with us!

The Eucharist unites all believers to the paschal mystery of Jesus: “His passion, death and resurrection. Eucharist increases our union with Christ and in turn, draws us closer to others united with him, nourishes our spiritual life, separates us from sin, strengthens our charity and wipes away venial sin, preserves us from future mortal sin, and dedicats us more openly to the poor” (CCC 1391-1398). This is the source and summit of our faith. “By the eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all” (CCC 1326).

By faithfully receiving the body and blood of Christ, we are fully united to God and each other. Thus, we grow in love through this ultimate sacrifice that is rich with mercy, joy, peace, goodness and care. St. Augustine writes, “Believe what you see, see what you believe and become what you are: the body of Christ.” When we say “amen,” we are saying “Yes! I believe this is the body and blood of Christ and that I will be the body of Christ” (St. Augustine, Sermon 272).

So we close as we began, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Dou is the director of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge.
The Catholic Commentator  June 5, 2020

Rules on receiving Communion/ Strange wording in ‘Hail, Holy Queen’

Q My cousin was married 40 years ago in a civil ceremony when she was only 17. After eight years, that marriage ended in divorce. She has now been remarried for some 25 years once again, not in the Catholic Church. All these years later, she still attends Mass regularly but never receives holy Communion. Is this right? (I feel terrible for her.) What are the rules of the Catholic Church on this? (City and state withheld)

A Your cousin is correct in not receiving holy Communion when she attends Mass. In the church’s view, those eligible to take the Eucharist are those who are living “in communion with” Catholic teaching. For a married person, this would mean having been married in a ceremony with the church’s approval.

I, too, feel badly for your cousin, and I admire her honesty in choosing not to take Communion. The solution, though, might be a fairly easy one. Because her first marriage was a civil ceremony (and presumably without church approval), and since your cousin (I’m assuming) was a Catholic at the time, that marriage “did not count” in the church’s eyes and could be dismissed with some simple paperwork. It’s called, technically, a “declaration of nullity for absence of canonical form.” That would leave her present marriage (which seems to be a stable one, since it has lasted 25 years!). And assuming that her present husband had not been married before, this marriage could then be “convalidated” or “blessed” in the Catholic Church by having the couple repeat their vows in the presence of a Catholic priest or deacon. Following that, of course, your cousin would be eligible to receive the Eucharist and probably thrilled to do so.

Q The prayer “Hail, Holy Queen” has three phrases in it that trouble me. They are: “to thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve;” “mourning and weeping in this valley of tears;” and “after this, our exile.” The author of this prayer makes life on earth appear to be a punishment. What is the history of this prayer, and was the author troubled? (Suffolk, Virginia)

A The origin of the prayer “Hail, Holy Queen” (its Latin title is “Salve Regina”) is uncertain, but many historians ascribe it to an 11th-century German monk and scholar, Hermann of Reichenau and your question and the wording of the hymn incline me to think this may be true.

This monk is sometimes referred to as Hermann the Lame, or Hermann the cripple. He was born with a cleft palate, cerebral palsy and spina bifida; he had great difficulty moving and could hardly speak. When Hermann was 7 years old, his parents placed him in the care of the Benedictine monks of the abbey of Reichenau.

Despite his physical disabilities, Hermann was a brilliant student and wrote several works on mathematics, astronomy, history and theology. Later in his life, his sight beginning to fail, Hermann is thought to have composed religious poetry and music, including the “Hail, Holy Queen.” It is one of the church’s best-known Marian prayers and is commonly recited or sung in monastic communities at the close of day; it is also frequently used by Catholics as the concluding prayer when reciting the rosary. (Often, too, the “Salve Regina” is sung at the end of a priest’s funeral by his fellow clerics.)

The “Hail, Holy Queen” strikes me as a prayer of love and devotion coming from the heart of an author who may have suffered greatly during his life. Different prayers, of course, speak to the life experiences and preferences of different people, and there is no obligation to pray with wording you might find troublesome. (Some historians note that in 1492, on his voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus would gather his crew on the deck each evening and sing the “Salve Regina,” signaling their confidence in Our Lady’s protection.)

**FATHER DOYLE is a retired priest in the Diocese of Albany**, New York. Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, NY 12203.

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**Question Corner**

**Father Kenneth Doyle**

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Spiritual renewal coming out of isolation

Debbie Shelley
The Catholic Commentator

Emerging into the sunshine from “cocoon-style” lives forced by the coronavirus-related restrictions, people are resuming favorite activities – dining in their favorite restaurant, going to the ballpark – leaping for joy like calves let out to pasture.

The virus has made us wiser in a physical sense – don’t forget to wash those hands and cover that cough – but what have we learned spiritually during the pandemic? How do we apply those nuggets of wisdom we’ve gained?

“Our lives have changed. The foundation lessons learned as a result of the quarantine can be positive building blocks for a fresh outlook on our calling as disciples,” said Dina Dow, director of the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge. “It would be easy to slip into old habits, or ways of living life, but is this what God is asking?”

Dow said this transitionary period is a unique time to set post-quarantine priorities, pray more consistently and have an “attitude of gratitude.”

“I see this as time to leave the upper room of our homes to continue the mission of evangelizing with fervent faith, while being aware of the physical and spiritual well-being of others,” Dow said. “Even with social distancing we can still share the love and mercy of God in all we do. It is a time to support the corporal works of mercy, supporting those who have suffered terrible economic hardships. It is also a good time to wear the badge of patience as we ease back into our churches, work spaces and other public venues.”

Now is also a good time to do an examination of conscience and reflect on thoughts, words and deeds during the crisis, said Becky Eldredge, spiritual director and author of “The Inner Chapel: Embracing the Promises of God.”

Eldredge urged people to be honest with God when they pray. She said be specific about struggles being faced, such as “I’m frustrated,” “I’m angry” or “I’m afraid.”

She said the pandemic is a good time to look at “where you are,” where “you’ve come from” and “where you’re going.”

The reopening of the community further invites people to be a “contemplative in action,” say spiritual directors with the Marian Servants of the Eucharist.

“Since mid-March much of my life has been contemplative – in prayer, in pondering God’s word, in the garden, in perusing old photos, in reading old letters. There have been action times in yard visits with children and grandchildren, walks with neighbors, long phone calls with old friends, but these are definitely outnumbered by the times of solitude and silence,” said Lisette Borné.

“As the time of quarantine ends, I think I will be called to resume my life as a contemplative in action,” she said. “Is God, however, calling me to live this chosen life in a new way, maybe with more contemplative times and less activity? I think that may be the case, but what that will look like is still unknown, and I’m at peace in the not knowing. I am certain that where the unknown will take me is yet another part of the adventure, the great gift of God that is my life.”

The quarantine also teaches people to set priorities, said Andrea Blanchard.

“We as individuals and as a community must move forward in faith and persevere, live in gratitude for the blessings of the moment, and trust God to the bigger picture,” said Blanchard. “This requires an awareness of our inner feelings, where we are being pulled, what is bringing us peace, what is bringing stress or anxiety to our lives.”

“We need to understand how these feelings are affecting our decisions and actions. What do I need to do to get back to the peaceful quiet rhythm of life and still do my work, family activities and community activities? I believe an inner quiet place in the mist of life is needed to allow ourselves time to ask the questions … do I really need this, do I really need to go there, do the things I really need to do?”

Susan Gros agreed.

“This has been a time for the most part of peacefulness and a realization that too many things I was doing were ‘of the world’ and not the things I could be doing.”

Dina Dow
Director of the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Diocese of Baton Rouge

Lisette Borné
Marian Servants of the Eucharist

Blanchard
Office of Evangelization and Catechesis, Diocese of Baton Rouge

Faith Journey: The Catholic Commentator, June 5, 2020

See Lessons Page 11
Celebrating area graduates

(A) Francisca Moomaw of Ouachita Lady University held a drive-through diploma celebration May 16 for its graduating classes. Nursing and respiratory therapist seniors had a drive-through celebration on April 27 when students graduated early to help with the pandemic. Photo by Rachel Street

(B) Faith Woods walks with her parents, Jewell and Victor Woods, after she picks up her diploma from St. Joseph’s Academy in Baton Rouge. SJA held an outdoor graduation ceremony for students and their parents, staged at intervals in order to meet social distance guidelines.

(C) Jaylon Wood, center, celebrates his eighth-grade graduation from St. Francis Xavier School in Baton Rouge with his parents, Carla and Jeremy Wood. Photo provided by Paula Muench

(D) Noah Bahlinger, a graduate of Catholic High School in Baton Rouge, celebrates receiving his diploma at home with family, including his grandfather Harold Bahlinger, CHS Class of 1953. Photo provided by Beth Baughn/Catholic High School

"I am so proud of each and every one of you; we are destined for greatness," she told her classmates. "After all that we’ve been through I was happy that finally did it." Myliyah Jefferson said, “I learned you have to work with what you got, to stay positive and persevered.”

Jefferson, who plans to pursue a nursing degree at Southeastern Louisiana University in Humenn, said her Cristo Rey education has armed her with a confidence to succeed that she previously did not have.

"Cristo Rey offered me a bright future and (the ability) to make a difference," she said. "They taught me how to be mature. Our teachers and principal (Claire Willis) were amazing."

Willis told the graduates they were "making history. You are laying the foundation for the future, for others to follow."

"We experienced it all; just to see them graduate today, all my hard work and fussing with them was worth it," she said.

"It’s worth it, it’s worth it," she repeatedly emphasized. "We have definitely given them hope. We have grown beautiful women and beautiful men to become outstanding leaders for our community."

"We did it. It paid off."
**Principals ready for a new**
**school year**

**By Benny Van**
The Catholic Commentator

Leadership at a number of Catholic schools in the Diocese of Baton Rouge will feature some new faces and some familiar ones when the 2020-21 school year kicks off in August. Superintendent Dr. Melanie Palmisano released a list of the new administrators at the end of May. Among them is Jason Chauvin, currently principal of Catholic Elementary School of Pointe Coupee in New Roads, who will also take over the top job at Catholic High School of Pointe Coupee.

In her statement, Palmisano noted that the appointment would bring “the campus under one principal, consistent with other schools our diocese.” Chauvin will be working with an administration team that includes assistant principal Angele Fontenot and high assistant principal at Brother Martin High School in New Orleans.

Other appointments include Kristy Fontenot has been selected as the new principal for St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Hammond. The Louisiana native is returning home after living in Jacksonville, Florida for the past 18 years where her husband was stationed with the U.S. Navy.

Woods, who attended Catholic schools in New Orleans, has been a school administrator since 2008. Other appointments include Kristy Monsour as administrator of the special education program for Catholic schools and Jack Nelson as the first assistant principal at Mater Dolorosa School in Independence.

All appointments are effective July 1.

**Blue Cross grant aids**
**St. Vincent de Paul Society**

**By Richard Meek**
The Catholic Commentator

Funding from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation is a welcome contribution that will allow the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to continue to be one of the area’s leaders in providing assistance to the homeless and needy during the coronavirus pandemic, executive director Michael Acaldo said.

Along with the $50,000 grant from Blue Cross and Blue Shield, Acaldo also announced fast food chain Chick-fil-A donated 10,000 sandwiches to help supplement the agency’s Grab n Go meal program. The fast food company began donating 400 sandwiches daily beginning May 1 and continued into early June. Acaldo said the agency distributed 30,000 meals in the first two months of the pandemic.

“The (grant and food donations) are critical dollars needed to keep things moving along,” Acaldo said. “It’s a lot of (meals), making a lot of impact.

“It’s been wonderful getting meals to needy families.”

Acaldo said the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Foundation grant funds will assist in funding the meal programs but will also be used to help pay a staff that has been putting in extraordinarily long hours and also fund the pharmacy that provides medication to those in need, including the homeless population.

Coronavirus concerns forced St. Vincent de Paul to temporarily suspend its volunteer force, resulting in staff working overtime, especially at the agency’s two shelters for men. Typically, those shelters are available 14 hours a day, with volunteers working along staff members, but the two shelters are now staffed 24 hours a day during the pandemic with no volunteer assistance.

“It’s a marvelous grant, made available through the generosity of Blue Cross, Blue Shield of Louisiana,” Acaldo said. “We are so appreciative of it. It’s a super award and helping keep the doors open.”

He said the donations are critical because he fears July and August will be challenging, as funds from the federal government payroll protection program and increased unemployment checks begin to run out. He said many people facing potential financial challenges could experience difficulty paying the rent and potentially face eviction.

“They are in a tough spot,” Acaldo said. “If businesses do not reopen, it could be difficult.”
Video rosary honors Mary

By Richard Meek
The Catholic Commentator

Priests, deacons, men and women religious and even lay staff members of the Diocese of Baton Rouge recently participated in a video rosary honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary. Nicole Jones, coordinator of Youth and Young Adult Ministry Programs for the diocese, said Sarah Fox, the youth minister at St. Joseph Church in Ponchatoula, shared her idea of making a video of St. Joseph parishioners praying the rosary to post on social media during a video meeting of diocesan youth ministers.

“Just imagined how amazing it would be to have our diocesan priests and religious take part in a video similar to this one for the whole diocese to enjoy,” Jones said. “In addition to May being the month of Our Lady, I just thought something like this could bring so much joy to those dealing with not being able to attend Mass and (are) distanced from the sacraments.”

Jones contacted the Office of Vocations, and after calling several clergy members, as well as Bishop Michael G. Duca, the plan was approved. Jones said all diocesan priests, religious, deacons and seminarians were sent an email detailing how to submit a video praying an Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be and Fatima Prayer.

However, around the time the email was sent, Bishop Duca announced the reopening of churches, and Jones recognized schedules would be much tighter for priests. It was then the project was opened to lay diocesan staff members.

“The videos submitted by religious and lay people are spliced together to make one beautiful rosary,” Jones said.

The video is split into several segments: An Introduction by Bishop Duca, the first decade presented by seminarians and deacons, the second decade presented by priests, the third decade presented by lay people from diocesan staff, the fourth decade presented by religious sisters and brothers and the fifth decade presented in foreign languages (Spanish, Latin, Vietnamese).

The video is available on the diocesan website at diobr.org.

ACROSS
1 Angelus call
2 “I desire _____, not sacrifice!” (Mt 9:13)
3 Pertaining to a particular place
4 Bagel accompaniment
5 Holy Thursday that begins the Triduum
6 Sports buff’s TV station
7 Ascend
8 Alphabet string
9 Nevertheless
10 Site of World Youth Day 2002
11 _____, plural
12 Fly
13 Poker stake
14 Brother of Cain
15 Cleanser or Gr
16 Cleanser or Greek here
17 As it was in the beginning, is _____...
18 Notre Dame nickname; “The Fighting
19 Guarded portable bed
20 _____, talent, and treasure
21 sufficient for a day is its own _____” (Mt 6:24)
22 Brother of Cain
23 Yield
24 Rich soil
25 Number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert
26 According to 1 Thessalonians, we will meet the Lord in this (with “the”)
27 Trajectory
28 Cover
29 Calais monastic
30 “For us”
31 According to the Thessalonians, we will meet the Lord in this (with “the”)
32 After uno
33 Field
34 Rich soil
35 “Sufficient for a day is its own _____” (Mt 6:24)
36 Royal house of Italy
37 Italian city of St. Clare
38 ____ of Christ
39 Jeanne Gough, “The Fighting
40 Commt to the audience
41 Olympic host city in 2012
42 Olympic host city in 2012
43 Olympic host city in 2012
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57 Olympic host city in 2012
58 Olympic host city in 2012

DOWN
1 To, in, into, toward
2 In, to, tine, to, the
3 Louvre Pyramid architect
4 Louvre Pyramid architect
5 Mustard seed
6 Sails
7 Loaves and fishes
8 “I desire _____, not sacrifice!” (Mt 9:13)
9 “I desire ____ , not sacrifice!” (Mt 9:13)
10 “I desire _____, not sacrifice!” (Mt 9:13)
11 Sails
12 Bagel accompaniment
13 Calais monastic
14 “For us”
15 Olympic host city in 2012
16 Olympic host city in 2012
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Solution on page 14

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Many of us in high school or college have read John Dunne’s poetic line, “No man is an island.”

He was telling us that we are all connected one to another. We do not live for ourselves alone, but only flourish or even survive with the support and loving help of others. The Gospels for the weeks after Easter used St. John’s Last Supper discourse to show us how true this is, and how God intended this in the incarnation and life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God loved us, his creation, so much that his plan for our salvation was to absorb us into his own eternal life of love as father, son and Holy Spirit.

In his commentaries on the Fifth and Sixth Sundays of Easter, Bishop Robert E. Barron of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles explains how Jesus, after identifying himself as the visible way, truth and life of God his father, tells his apostles that he will not be with them much longer because he must go back to his father who is in him as he is in his father. However, they should not be afraid, because he “will ask the father, and he will give you another advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth...” (Jn 14:16). Bishop Barron comments, “Thus we find in this first reference to the ‘advocate’, the parakletos, a fairly clear proto-Trinitarian formula. As Jesus reflects on the father’s being, this third (person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit) seems to reflect the mutuality (love) of Jesus and father’s being, this third (person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit).”

As Jesus reflects on the reference to the ‘advocate,’ the parakletos, a fairly clear Bishop Barron comments, “Thus we find in this first proto-Trinitarian formula. As Jesus reflects on the father’s being, this third (person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit) seems to reflect the mutuality (love) of Jesus and father’s being, this third (person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit).”

Jesus himself said, before his passion, as his enemies were gathering, “I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? Father, save me from this hour?” But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it and will glorify it again” (Jn 12:27-28). Indeed, God would, through the resurrection, thus bring life out of death, not only for Jesus, but also for us. Jesus had just promised his disciples and us that “whoever hates his life in this world (spends it for the good of others) will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.” The father will honor whoever serves me” (Jn 12:25-26).

To be with God is what being in heaven means. If we follow Jesus’ great commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves, that life with God begins here on Earth. The eternal love between the father and the son is the Holy Spirit that Jesus had from all eternity as the son, or the word, the perfect expression of God, that became flesh in Jesus the human being born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. This is the same Spirit that he and the father sent upon his disciples on Pentecost after the risen Jesus ascended into heaven returning to be with his father.

If we believe in the truth of Jesus, and live his way of life, then we live here on Earth as one with Christ and therefore one with the father because we live by their same Spirit. Didn’t St. Paul tell us that we are “temples of the Holy Spirit?” Bishop Barron calls this a relationship of “coincidence.” It is the connectedness, the living “in Christ,” St. Paul’s favorite expression throughout his epistles, or the “one-in-the-otherness” as Bishop Barron calls it, that we actually share with God who is Trinity and in whose image we are created (“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26). On Pentecost we celebrated, the gift of the Spirit of God that Jesus won for us on the cross. In dying Jesus shared our death, in rising he invited us into his eternal life of love, sharing the Spirit of himself and the father. It inspires us to follow Jesus and live with his Spirit.

Why, then, is our world in such a mess? Love isn’t love unless it is an invitation to freely accept a relationship with another. As Bishop Barron reminds us, we identify ourselves “almost exclusively through the naming of relationships.” The invitation to share God’s life of love is an invitation to commit our life to God and others. It always costs. It is the opposite of selfishness. Come, Holy Spirit, come!

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 johnny_carville@ gmail.com.

Facing our tough hours

Discernment isn’t an easy thing. Take this dilemma: When we find ourselves in a situation that’s causing us deep interior anguish, do we walk away, assuming that the presence of such pain is an indication that this isn’t the right place for us, that something’s terminally wrong here? Or, like Jesus, do we accept to stay, saying to ourselves, our loved ones, and our God: “What shall I say, save me from this hour?”

At the very moment that Jesus was facing a humiliating death by crucifixion, the Gospel of John hints that he was offered an opportunity to escape. A delegation of Greeks, through the apostle Philip, offers Jesus an invitation to leave with them, to go to a group that would receive him and his message. So Jesus has a choice: Endure anguish, humiliation and death inside his own community or abandon that community for one that will accept him. What does he do? He asks himself this question: “What shall I say, save me from this hour?”

Although this is phrased as a question, it’s an answer. He is choosing to stay, to face the anguish, humiliation and pain because he sees it as the precise fidelity he is called to within the very dynamic of the love he is preaching. He came to Earth to incarnate and teach what real love is and now, when the cost of that is humiliation and interior anguish, he knows and accepts that this is what’s now being asked of him. The pain is not telling him that he’s doing something wrong, is at the wrong place or that this community is not worth this suffering. To the contrary: The pain is understood to be calling him to a deeper fidelity at the very heart of his mission and vocation. Until this moment, only words were asked of him, now he is being asked to back them up in reality; he needs to swallow hard to do it.

What shall I say, save me from this hour? Do we have the wisdom and the generosity to say those words when, inside our own commitments, we are challenged to endure searing interior anguish? When Jesus asks himself this question, what he is facing is a near-perfect mirror for situations we will all find ourselves in sometimes. In most every commitment we make, if we are faithful, an hour will come when we are suffering interior anguish (and often times exterior misunderstanding as well) and are faced with a tough decision: Is this pain and misunderstanding (and even my own immaturity as I stand inside it) an indication that I’m in the wrong place, should leave and find someone or some other community that wants me? Or, inside this interior anguish, exterior misunderstanding and personal immaturity, am I called to say: What shall I say, save me from this hour? This is what I’m called to! I was born for this!

I think the question is critical because often anguishing pain can shake our commitments and tempt us to walk away from them. Marriages, consecrated religious vocations, commitments to work for justice, commitments to our church communities and commitments to family and friends, can be abandoned on the belief that nobody is called to live inside such anguish, desolation and misunderstanding. Indeed, today the presence of pain, desolation and misunderstanding is generally taken as a sign to abandon a commitment and find someone else or some other group that will affirm us rather than as an indication that now, just now, in this hour, inside this particular pain and misunderstanding, we have a chance to bring a life-giving grace into this commitment.

I have seen people leave marriages, leave family, leave priesthood, leave religious life, leave their church community, leave long-cherished friendships and leave commitments to work for justice and peace because, at a point, they experienced a lot of pain and misunderstanding. And, in many of those cases, I also saw that it was in fact a good thing. The situation they were in was not life-giving for them or for others. They needed to be saved from that “hour.” In some cases
who when he cried out for help, his cries were ignored.

But our brothers and sisters in Christ of the African American community know this is not an isolated event but just another confirmation of the bias and unjust discrimination they endure in so many ways everyday of their lives, still in these United States. They understand that racism is not only interpersonal relationships. Racial harmony is not only that we become friends and grow in mutual understanding. It is also confronting the way in which racism is embedded in the institutions of our country: criminal justice, education, health care, finance, real estate, etc. This is systemic or institutional racism. Change will only come when we confront this reality as a nation.

So after countless other killings have been witnessed, painful moments that we as a city and diocese have already just a few years ago suffered through, the frustration is WHY is this still happening ...

The angry outburst we see is out of frustration and wondering what does it take to get others to listen and make real change. This is a human response that we all have when we feel we have been treated unjustly.

The heart of this matter for us as Christians is to seek the radical answer. By “radical” I mean the original meaning of the word from the Latin “radix” (meaning root), so the radical answer is the foundational cause that allows these injustices to continue in our nation. I am unable to lay out a full answer but I think I can point to the necessary foundational change that must take place. We need to REALLY LISTEN!!!

What do I mean? All of us have a fundamental view of the world. It has been shaped in many ways by experience, faith, influence of others, the way we were raised and the values we still endure in so many ways everyday of their lives, still in these United States. This is part of who we are and how we interpret the world. Think about my first statement in this article, or think about your own first opinion/feeling when you saw the video of Mr. Floyds death. That raw emotional response, your first reaction, is all about your world view. Consider how you have interpreted the events of the past weeks. We may very well have chosen to “pick and choose” those moments/events that prove our own biases, we will listen to commentators that share our world view and will interpret it for us and when we see what we want to see that proves our point. Then we are convinced that our world view is unchallenged. Or it is summed up in the confidence that “I am right.” But the minute we do that we stop listening and nothing changes.

The only beginning to real change will be when we don’t let ourselves be distracted by the violent protests, the intricacies of law, the life story of Mr. Floyds mistakes in life, the biased reporting and clear our minds so we can listen to what our Catholic (put in your own faith) African American brothers and sisters are experiencing and believe what they tell us as true. This is hard because it may mean that our understanding of how the world works will be fundamentally challenged, at its root. This is radical listening that moves the heart to open up to a real conversation and to change our way of thinking and acting. This kind of listening is prompted by the Holy Spirit because it seeks the real truth, a truth that transforms the heart. But until we listen in this radical way ... nothing will change.

And when nothing changes the racism embedded in our hearts, even if we don’t see it, will endure.

When I first arrived in Baton Rouge I connected with a group process called “Dialogue on Race Louisiana” that gave me a chance to listen, and it was a profound help in seeing with new eyes. I pray that before we repeat the same way of processing the current crisis where we all end up feeling comfortable in our old way of seeing or feeling even more deeply frustrated, we will take the risk to really listen to one another and in the pain and healing within that moment we will begin to change the world we live in together.

Rollehiser ▼

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though the opposite was true. They were in excruciating pain, but that pain was an invitation to a deeper, more life-giving place inside their commitment. They left, just when they should have stayed.

Granted, discernment is difficult. It’s not always for lack of generosity that people walk away from a commitment. Some of the most generous and unselfish people I know have left a marriage or the priesthood or religious life or their churches. But I write this because, today, so much trusted psychological and spiritual literature does not sufficiently highlight the challenge to, like Jesus, stand inside excruciating pain and humiliating misunderstanding and instead of walking away to someone or some group that offers us the acceptance and understanding we crave, we instead accept that it is more life-giving to say: What shall I say, save me from this hour?

Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser, theologian, teacher and award-winning author, is president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. He can be contacted through his website ronrolheiser.com and facebook.com/ronrolheiser.
FOOD DISTRIBUTION – St. Margaret Queen of Scotland Church in Albany partnered with the Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank to distribute food for 800 families. The food includes cold and dry goods. Photo provided by Father Brad Doyle | St. Margaret Queen Scotland Church

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James Rodney

Parish. But she provided Rodney's legacy. He served in the Army and received a Purple Heart with one cluster, four Bronze Stars and a Combat Infantry Badge. He participated in the Berlin Airlift that supplied goods to West Berliners.

Rodney was saluted for his military service by the playing of Taps at his funeral.

At St. Paul, Rodney was a member of the Knights of Peter Claver and the St. Vincent de Paul Society. He served his community as executive director of Capitol Park Development Corporation.

“I don’t know how he was able to do all the things he did,” said Trahan, who believed Rodney's energy came from his generous heart.

A memorial Mass for Rodney will be celebrated at St. Paul at a later date.

The death of parishioner Byron Buggage Sr. underscores the importance of cherishing time with loved ones because “you never know” what tomorrow brings, according to Buggage's wife, Yvonne.

On March 14, Byron was coughing and said he was “going to take a nap.”

The next day Byron appeared to feel “somewhat better” and he and his son, Byron Buggage Jr., a real estate appraiser like his dad, looked over documents.

When Byron woke on March 15 with a fever, Yvonne took him to a coronavirus testing site. Byron had taken pain and fever-reducing medication, so he did not register a fever.

On the way home Byron said he felt better. Yvonne knew something was wrong when she looked at him sitting in a recliner later.

“I’m a retired nurse. I looked at his (heaving) chest and said, ‘I’ll tell you what, I’m calling 911.’ He had a totally different look, ‘I’ll tell you what, I’m calling 911.’

Yvonne said. “Once things settle down all week.” He was sedated, but the nurses used FaceTime so she could see him.

Byron died March 22.

The heartache for the Buggage family continued when Byron’s mother, Marine “Maw Maw” Buggage, died from the coronavirus in New Orleans on April 7.

Byron and Yvonne would have celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary this month.

“I love the way we loved each other,” Yvonne said. “With all the little ups and downs of marriage we made it through.”

Yvonne has “teary moments” when she straightens up and rearranges the house.

“I didn’t see this coming,” Yvonne said. “The most difficult time I had with losing Byron was not being able to be by his side. That has really been very hard to deal with.”

Britney misses drinking coffee with her dad in the morning and talking to him at night.

A nurse like her mom, Britney is taking time off from work to grieve but said she will return with a new mindset.

She and her mother stressed it’s important to appreciate your loved ones and tell them, “I love you.”

They also appreciate their St. Paul family.

“We are so blessed to have St. Paul in our family,” said Yvonne. “I had church members reach out and call, it’s meant so much to me.”

She said “once things settle down” the family plans to have a memorial service at St. Paul.

St. Paul has also mourned the passing of April Dunn, who was a champion for people with disabilities in her short 33 years of life.

Dunn, who was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and cerebral palsy, struggled to find meaningful employment and became a strong advocate for more inclusive educational and employment rights for the disabled.

She was instrumental in the passage of Act 893 of 2014 which provides an alternative pathway to a diploma for individuals with disabilities. In 2018 Gov. John Bel Edwards is scheduled to speak at the Memorial service at St. Paul.

St. Paul will celebrate a memorial Mass for Dunn on July 31. Edwards is scheduled to speak at the Mass.

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Responsibilities:
- Supports and upholds the philosophy of Catholic education and the mission of St. George
- Acts as a witness to Gospel values by modeling the teachings of the Catholic Church
- Knowledge of curriculum, instructional methods/strategies and curriculum differentiation
- Assist the principal in supervision of employees including serving as an instructor, leader assigning and directing work, interviewing, evaluating performance, discipline and resolving issues
- Provide leadership for students by overseeing daily building operations, identifying instructional needs and solutions and coordinating programs.
- Monitor professional development in classrooms and grade level/content meetings
- Skill in job appropriate technology, critical thinking and planning and able to multi-task
- Maintains confidentiality regarding school matters
- Supports and assists with the responsibilities of the principal
- Interprets and enforces school policies and carries out the disciplinary policies of the school
- Available for meetings and activities outside of the regular work day

Qualifications:
- Master's degree, preferably in Educational Leadership
- Strong written and verbal skills to communicate effectively with parents, teachers, students and peers
- Excellent interpersonal and problem-solving skills
- Ability to develop and maintain a collegial environment among staff
- Ability to multi-task, Knowledge and ability to use technology, preferably Google certified.

Interested candidates should submit a cover letter and resume with three references to:
Mrs. Angelle Fontenot at angelle.fontenot@sgschoolbr.org

St. George Catholic School invites applicants for a Technology Coordinator

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Interested candidates should email a cover letter and resume to: Jack.nelson@sgschoolbr.org

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St. George Catholic School invites applicants for a Technology Coordinator

St. George Catholic School is an educational community of faith, guided by Catholic tradition and teachings, where students in grades PK-8 learn to integrate their thinking and believing in ways that encourage intellectual excellence, nurture relationships and inspire a life of leadership and service to others.

Example of Duties Include:
- Troubleshoot all technology issues, including computers, Promethean boards, SmartBoards, Apple TVs, document cameras, laptops, desktops, email systems, printers, student Chromebooks, iPads
- Manage online textbooks and student engagement tools, including McGrawhill, Pearson, Think Central, IXL and Shurley English
- Manage ACT Aspire portal, including uploading the student data file at the beginning of the year, creating test sessions, managing test sessions and troubleshooting errors, distributing testing materials.
- Update student and teacher devices as needed. Download new software/apps to computers/iPads
- Research, quote, purchase, and install replacement parts, new equipment, and software for teacher and student use
- Assess need, develop, and present professional development for teachers and/or students
- Teach robotics activity class and moderate FLL competition robotics team

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Help Wanted

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HELP WANTED

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Mississippi group spreading pro-life message to diocese

By Bonny Van
The Catholic Commentator

In a world where messaging has taken over smartphones, computers and other electronic devices to remind us to stay safe, wash our hands and keep our distance, one ministry at a small Catholic church in Gulfport, Mississippi is joining the crowd, albeit by billboards on a busy stretch of Interstate 10.

Visible near the Acadian Thruway exit on westbound I-10 in Baton Rouge, a billboard shows the Blessed Mother holding the infant Jesus with the words: “Choose Life – PRAY PRAY PRAY.”

The billboard campaign is the brainchild of Penny Sullivan, owner of a Catholic gift shop in Gulfport and a parishioner at St. James Catholic Church, also in Gulfport. Among the various items in her store was one particularly moving statuette of the Virgin Mary.

Sullivan’s energy and love of the Blessed Mother was evident in her voice during a recent telephone interview. She said she had previously attempted to get involved in the pro-life movement, but her efforts did not gain traction. A year ago, after her husband had passed away and she had dealt with a family crisis, Sullivan was inspired to try again, this time with a powerful image to spread the word.

“It’s really beautiful,” said Sullivan, referring to the statuette. “I have a wonderful collection of the Blessed Mother and baby Jesus and the Holy Family, but everybody loves this particular one. So we decided, the way the governors are treating pro-life, we had to do something. So I thought we’d let the Blessed Mother work for us, let her intercede because people love the statuette.”

She shared her idea with St. James pastor Father Charles Nutter who suggested she change her slogan from “Life is beautiful” to “Choose Life.” Several fellow parishioners felt the same way about the pro-life movement, with some pointing out the pro-choice messages, including late-term abortion options of up to 9 months, advertised on billboards.

“We thought, ‘Now is not the time to be silent. We need to speak out,’” said committee member Karen Rhodes. “But how do you do that? And so we talked to (Father Nutter) about going into the churches and asking for a second collection, and we did this with (Bishop Louis F. Kihneman III)’s approval. The outpouring was unbelievable.”

After sharing the idea at two local churches, the billboard ministry raised enough money to put up two billboards in Gulfport for one year. Visits to 16 churches across the Gulf Coast brought in enough donations to pay for 10 additional billboards along the I-10 corridor, including the one in Baton Rouge.

The message also adorned some New Orleans city buses during Mardi Gras this year.

Social media has also attracted new groups to join the cause, including the Knights of Columbus in Meridian, Mississippi, who paid for their own billboard to share the “Choose Life” message.

Sullivan also spreads the message with her customers, asking if they have contacts who would be interested in putting up a billboard in other cities. Such an encounter led to a billboard paid for by a group in Lafayette. And now the billboard ministry is making plans to head to Texas and Florida.

“We believe the ministry of the pro-life billboards is so important because we never know the personal circumstances, or emotions someone is going through,” said Father Nutter. “We believe something as simple as a billboard may be able to allow God to reach a specific person at exactly when and where they need it. If the billboard ministry saves just one infant life, it is worth it.”

Rhodes explained the billboards are making a difference in ways that cannot always be known. After one speech at a church, the group was approached by a worker from an adoption agency who said, “I want y’all to know there was a lady headed to Mobile (Alabama) to get an abortion pill, and she said she saw your billboard and she turned right around and came to the adoption center and said, ‘I want to put my baby up for adoption.’”

“So a lot of times we don’t know how many times it happens unless we hear the story but to us that was a sign that we are saving babies’ lives by putting this billboard up,” Rhodes said.

The movement is also attracting volunteers from all walks and all stations of life, according to Sullivan. She said a 92-year-old man who makes a birdhouse per day from recycled materials plans to donate the money he earns to the ministry.

“I just want to say to everybody, they don’t realize how enjoyable it is to work with pro-life and the response on the billboards has been incredible,” said Sullivan, who is busy running her shop and spending time with her three children and eight grandchildren. “Anyone who is depressed and is not serving in their church, they need to chitchat with us.”

Sullivan, who grew up in Cottonport and lived in New Orleans before moving to Mississippi, said she is encouraged by the response since the billboard ministry began. She said the goal is to put up “Choose Life” billboards across the country and beyond, “in the areas the Blessed Mother is opening the doors.”

“It’s just a matter of we have to do what we have to do, we can be silent no longer because so many babies are being aborted,” said Sullivan. “And all these babies have beautiful missions, we have to do something or we’re going to be accountable. (St.) Mother Teresa said if we don’t stop abortion, God is not going to bless America – that’s enough for me.

“And we’re in the millions and all these beautiful little children are being aborted because we’re not doing enough.”

For more information on the pro-life billboard ministry, contact St. James Catholic Church at 228-896-6059.