

REFLECTIONS

SPRING 2021

Recognizing our gifts of time, talent and treasure

Reflecting Upon God's Will by Rev. Greg Gerhart

Being the vocation director has given me plenty of opportunity to reflect upon God's will. After all, I spend most of my days helping young men and women discern God's will, helping them to hear God's voice and follow where he leads. One particularly beautiful, albeit paradoxical, way that God makes his will known to us is through what one theologian calls, "the law of the gift."

God created us in such a way that our beings, ourselves, our very lives increase in the measure that we give them away.



Yes, the law of the gift. God created us in such a way that our beings, ourselves, our very lives **increase** in the measure that we give them away. This law has been expressed in various beautiful ways throughout the centuries of our faith:

St. John Paul II: "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."

St. Francis: "It is in giving that we receive."

Our Lord in the Gospel of Matthew: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

The law of the gift is particularly relevant to all discerning their vocation because a vocation is simply the way that God calls us to **give ourselves away** in love. While most people are called to the vocation of marriage, it is not the case that marriage is the default vocation. Every young (or not so young!) Catholic needs to ask him or herself, "How is God calling me to embrace the law of the gift?" Men, is God calling you to be a priest? Ladies, is God calling you to be his bride, to be a religious?

Now, it's somewhat common for the immediate response to these

questions to be a quick, "No!" After all, it's natural to want a spouse, to want a family, and being celibate means renouncing these great goods. That quick "no" is understandable, but I believe it is mistaken. In my experience, celibacy has not been a matter of wanting less than spouse and children. It has been a matter of wanting more.

When I was in the third year of seminary, I was walking back from class when out of nowhere, the most beautiful woman I've ever seen passed me by. I was floored! When I eventually made it back to seminary, I may have performed the most intelligent act in my life: I prayed.

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“Lord, what does this mean? Can I live without her? Can I live without the joy of a wife and children?”

In response, the Lord did not decrease my desire so that somehow I would be content with less than her. He increased it. I kid you not - my heart surged with a burning desire that made it so apparent that not even she

would be enough. I knew in my bones that I was made to give myself wholly to God. Nothing less would satisfy.

That grace has remained with me, and my experience over the last four years as a priest has confirmed and made it so clear that God created me for nothing less. He created me to give mercy in the confessional and life to

the full in the Eucharist. He created me to give the gift of God himself. *This is my body; this is my blood, which is for you.* When I as a priest say those words, God fulfills his promise to each of us: “I came that they might have life and have it to the full.” God created me to embrace the law of gift as a priest, and I am so glad that he did.

COMMUNITY

Pen pal is a ‘spunky grandma for seminarians’

Shirley Bell has proven to be a prolific pen pal to the Diocese of Austin’s seminarians, sending hundreds of notes and cards to our future shepherds each year.

“I let them know God needs them as priests and we need them,” said Shirley, 88. “They are truly faithful young men.”

She first learned of the ministry more than a decade ago at St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Austin and values the many friendships she has made over the years. She saves and treasures the letters she receives from seminarians, who write back regularly to update her on their studies and thank her for her prayers.

Shirley has been a constant support and companion on Sam Bass’ journey through seminary.

“I especially like the drawings she makes on her cards, often of a little bird, and her simple, heartfelt reminders about what is truly important: the love of God for us, and the importance of having faith,” said Sam, who entered the seminary



from St. Louis Parish in Austin. “Her faithfulness in writing to each of us humbles me, and her handmade cards — ‘made from the heart’ — teach me that we always have something to give to bless the lives of others.”

He said the support he receives from Shirley and others, such as the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women (DCCW) and altar society members as well as schoolchildren, remind him of who he is called to love and serve as a future priest, and that he is never alone as he discerns his vocation and prepares for ordination.

Because of her efforts, Shirley received the Lumen Gentium Award from the diocese in 2019. The honor shocked her because her only goal in writing to seminarians — and encouraging others to follow suit — is to ensure vocations to the church are plentiful.

“The whole time I was writing, I never thought about anything like that,” Shirley said. “I knew we needed new priests, and we will always need new priests.”

According to Father Chris Smith, associate pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Center in College Station, Shirley “is like a spunky grandma for seminarians.”

“She tells us how much she prays for us and also can put us in our place if we have not written her back,” Father Smith said.

When he was a seminarian, her correspondence was a “sign of hope” for what parish life would be like. “I believe Ms. Shirley’s prayers, as well as the countless other ‘hidden prayers’ for seminarians, are why I am a priest today,” he said. “God hears the cry of his people and he generously showers his grace upon them and his priests.”

Rending our hearts allows them to be filled with God's love

By Allison Streett | Columnist

For the last year or so I have been preoccupied with the Japanese tradition of kintsugi. The kintsugi master joins the pieces of broken pottery, filling the spaces between with gold enamel. This practice is an act of love that refuses to let the vessel be discarded, instead making it more beautiful and valuable than it was in its original wholeness.

The season of Lent calls followers of Jesus to tarry with him in the desert. Here we allow ourselves to be confronted by our brokenness and the ways our lives have become disordered, daring to know ourselves for who we truly are. We remind ourselves once again to rely on God for healing and strength. We look forward to Easter, when we will celebrate his extravagant forgiveness, which fills our wounds and failings like precious gold, binding us together again for God's purposes.

This year many of us may find our Lenten practice tender and raw. Many are weary under the weight of the pandemic, economic strain and political

unrest. My relief sculpture, "Kintsugi Self-Portrait," is a meditation on my own brokenness, and on the brokenness that has come into sharp focus in the U.S. over the past year. By joining the pieces of my shattered self-portrait with gold, I am drawing attention to the fissures rather than disguising them, allowing them to become part of the beauty of the portrait.

In Joel 2:12-13, the prophet declares, "Yet even now ... return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the LORD, your God, For he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment."

On Ash Wednesday 2013, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, wrote in his Lenten Letter to the Archdiocese of Buenos Aires: "Rend the heart so that through that crevice we will be able to really see. Rend the heart, open your hearts, because only in a torn and open heart can the



Photo of "Kintsugi Self-Portrait," courtesy Allison Streett

merciful love of the Father enter, He who loves us and heals us.

This Lent, may we rend our hearts and truly empty ourselves in order that we may be filled with the love of God, which flows through our cracks, making us whole with his gracious love. And may we humbly embrace the scars that remain, which, like the wounds in the resurrected Jesus' hands, feet and side, are evidence not only of brokenness but of healing and of witness to God's grace in our lives.

Allison Streett's art is often influenced by her faith, and much of her work is drawn directly from biblical narratives. Streett and her husband have six children; they live in the Fort Worth area. More information on her work can be found online at allisonstreettstudios.com.

DISCERNMENT



Listening for God in the Real World

By Brother David Henley, Glenmary Home Missioners

"Samuel, Samuel!" the Lord calls, in one of the more famous stories of discernment in the Bible. After bothering his teacher, Eli, three times, the wise man realizes it is the Lord who is calling. "If you are called," said Eli, "reply; 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'"

The story reveals a lot about listening for God. When Samuel finally listens, the Lord begins a lifetime of revelation for Samuel.

Don't we each wish for the same? How do we discern what God is asking of us? In real estate, we hear that location, location, location is key. For discernment, it's prayer, prayer, prayer. But that prayer needs to be informed by experience, both in doing new things and by listening to those around us.

Our friends and family can see things that we can't see in ourselves! We listen to our experience, then we pray, listening for God's calling.

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Answering the Call to be His Servant

By Deacon Mike Aaronson

Discernment can be an everyday practice about how we handle relationships and small, daily choices. Do I go to church this Sunday? Is it a good choice to fudge it on this test or on that business decision? Is this the day to go easy on my children? These decisions add up as we go. And God is in them, in some easy ways (Don't cheat or steal!) and some harder ones.

There are bigger stakes in discernment, too, as we all know. What job or profession is best for me? Does my inner disposition suggest I get married - to this person, or another? Am I called to be a religious sister or brother, a priest? Am I open to having children? When? Will I be happy to settle in this part of the country, or another?

In these big questions of lifestyle, one choice is not better than another, generally speaking. But some choices are definitely better for me and others for you. "Where am I called?" is the question. In a life well lived, it's a question we keep asking.

In discernment, the first and most important thing we need to do is set aside time for prayer: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening," as Samuel said. Find silence. We need to turn our questions over to God and tell God what our fears and desires are.

Spending quiet time with Scripture is also important. Reflecting on Scripture and listening closely during the liturgy can help orient our lives.

Prayer and action go hand in hand for discerning God's will. Consider how the quiet, though active, times in our day -- doing dishes, gardening, exercise routines -- can be times of listening for God.

God doesn't want you to suffer. Try things out, then pray about them. If the choice you see before you isn't right for you, don't do it!

But when you feel peace, when you hear that inner voice telling you that something is right, trust that you're on the right path. That's the fruit of discernment.

I came across this quote many years ago: "Faith is that mysterious place where we submit, and open ourselves to our God...who longs to be a servant. God longs to do something magnificent for the world through us." In today's world, the word "submit" could be considered a sign of weakness. To a Christian, submitting to our God is where we find strength. When I was 35 years old, God began nudging me to consider the Diaconate. With 4 young children, owning a business and many years being out of school, the road to ordination seemed impassable. One day in the middle of December, I was looking at a construction site. There was a power outage due to ice on the powerlines. A woman came out of her house pleading with me to help her. She led me to her husband who laid motionless in his bed. His name was Jack. She told me he had ALS and due to the outage, the medical equipment wasn't working and he could die. I wanted to go home because the roads were icing over and remembered the words..."God longs to do something magnificent for the world through us." I went to the shop and picked



Yes, God so longs to be a servant that he sent his Son to serve. We too should long to be a servant.

up a generator. I connected the medical equipment for Jack. Although he couldn't speak, he thanked me with his eyes. At that very moment I realized, "Yes, we are our brother's keeper." I visited Jack 2 or 3 times a week until he died on the following Easter Monday. I am grateful to Jack for assisting me to submit and open myself to God. About 5 years later, I was ordained a deacon with 15 of my classmates.

Looking back at the 17 years of diaconal ministry, I see God has formed me into becoming the Minister to Retired Priests. God has drawn me throughout my journey to minister to the elderly in nursing homes and parish life. I insure that our retired priests' physical, emotional, medical, financial and spiritual needs are met. Our retired priests do not have children to care for them in their old age. I drive many of them to doctor's appointments, take them shopping or just sit and listen to their stories. When they are in the hospital for surgery or an illness, I can be with them to calm their fears or to explain the outcome of a test the doctor ordered.

One of the most challenging facets of being the Minister to Retired Priests is that I also prepare the retired priests' funerals. Becoming close friends with our retired priests at the end of this life's journey is a gift. Yes, God so longs to be a servant that he sent his Son to serve. We too should long to be a servant.

Pope Francis proclaims “Year of St Joseph”

Adapted from vaticannews.com



The feast day of St. Joseph (St. Joseph's Day) is **March 19**

The feast day of St. Joseph the Worker is celebrated on **May 1**

◀ *Saint Joseph and the Christ Child*
Bartolomé Estéban Murillo
ca. 1655-60

At the conclusion of his Letter, he adds another prayer to St. Joseph, which he encourages all of us to pray together:

*Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.*

*Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy, and courage,
and defend us from every evil. Amen.*

In a new Apostolic Letter entitled *Patris corde* (“With a Father’s Heart”), Pope Francis describes Saint Joseph as a beloved father; a tender and loving father; an obedient father; an accepting father; a father who is creatively courageous, a working father; a father in the shadows.

The Letter marks the 150th anniversary of Blessed Pope Pius IX’s declaration of St Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church. To celebrate the anniversary, Pope Francis has proclaimed a special “Year of St Joseph,” beginning on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception 2020 and extending to the same feast in 2021.

In his letter, Pope Francis notes how, “Every day, for over forty years, following Lauds [Morning Prayer]” he has “recited a prayer to Saint Joseph taken from a nineteenth-century French prayer book of the Congregation of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary.” This prayer, he says, expresses devotion and trust, and even poses a certain challenge to Saint Joseph,” on account of its closing words: “My beloved father, all my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power.”

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