



SUMMER 2020

REFLECTIONS

...recognizing our gifts of time, talent and treasure

ORDINATION DAY FOR FIVE DIOCESE OF AUSTIN SEMINARIANS

by Mary P. Walker

With great joy and thanksgiving, Bishop Joe Vásquez will ordain Deacons Miguel Flores-Perez, Kyle Nesrsta, Zack Rodriguez, Will Rooney and Chris Smith to the priesthood on June 27. Four of the men grew up within the Diocese of Austin, while another forged his connection on military leave. All are grateful to their families and to the priests whose example and witness inspired their discernment.

Deacon Miguel Flores-Perez, 42, is the son of Andres and Shirley Flores. He is the second oldest of three boys. Born in Puerto Rico, Deacon Flores attended Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia for three years, and was considering the priesthood. His education was cut short after the terror attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, motivated him to enlist in the Army. As an active duty soldier for more than eight years, he was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan. During his time in Special Forces, Deacon Miguel felt God's call to the priesthood in a more compelling way. He wanted to be a

Catholic priest and a military chaplain. He considers St. Mary Cathedral his home parish.

Deacon Kyle Nesrsta, 32, is the son of Edward and Julie Nesrsta. Baptized at St. Louis Parish in Waco, he grew up in Hewett and considers St. Jerome in Waco his home parish. His uncle, Father Stephen Nesrsta, is pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Corn Hill. Deacon Kyle believes he first heard God calling him to the priesthood after his confirmation. After college, he moved back home to work. He spent more time at church and began to read the books that his uncle, Father Stephen, gave him. Although he was attracted to the priesthood, he also wanted to be a husband and father. However, through his reading and prayer, his perspective changed. He became more open to God's call in his life. Through Father Stephen, he saw that priests come from and are "real people." Now he talks to his uncle more than ever and feels blessed to join him in ministry through the sacrament of holy orders.

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Upcoming DIOCESAN EVENTS

AUGUST 29

**Christ Our Hope: Life, Charity
and Justice Gathering**
Austin

SEPTEMBER 2

**Assembly of
Catholic Professionals**
Austin

OCTOBER 1

Red Mass and Reception
St. Mary Cathedral, Austin

For event information, visit www.austindiocese.org



Deacon Zack Rodriguez, 33, is the son of Ricky and Doris Rodriguez of Elgin. Along with Sacred Heart Parish in Elgin, Deacon Zack considers St. John Vianney Parish in Round Rock to be his home parish. Although he was baptized Catholic, his family attended different Protestant churches while he was growing up. While a student at the University of Texas in Austin, he and his brothers began discussing the Catholic faith. One day he stopped by the University Catholic Center and met with Father Ed Koharchik, who patiently listened, and invited him back to talk again and to help other students paint the rectory kitchen. Deacon Zack joined the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adult (RCIA) process at the University Catholic Center and received the sacrament of confirmation and his first Communion. Soon after, he began hearing the call to the priesthood. "The vocation is more than yourself or your understanding. You have to allow God to show you his tremendous love. It's about the relationship, not an end goal," Deacon Zack said.

Deacon Will Rooney, 28, is the son of Megan and Bill Rooney, active parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in College Station. Deacon Will first considered becoming a priest around the time he made his first Communion. He had a powerful experience of receiving the Lord's forgiveness through the ministry of a priest during the sacrament of reconciliation that changed the course of his life. He attended Texas A&M University, earning a degree in biological and agricultural engineering. While at A&M, he was active at St. Mary Catholic Center and served as the middle school youth coordinator at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish. During this time, he got to know the late Father Wade Russell (who died in 2018). "He had a great impact on me. Because we worked together, he allowed me to see a priest's life up close. This influenced me to consider the priesthood in a whole new light," Deacon Will said. Deacon Will is also grateful for the encouragement he received from his family and home parish as well as St. Louis King of France Parish in Austin, where he served during his pastoral year. When he has time, he enjoys cooking, hiking, reading and playing Ultimate Frisbee.

Deacon Chris Smith, 32, is the son of Brien and Kathy Smith. His home parish is also St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in College Station. Through scouting, he learned to appreciate God's creation and attained the rank of Eagle Scout. After high school, he attended Texas A&M University, where he was a leader in campus ministry at St. Mary Catholic Center. He served on the youth retreat team and as a campus ministry intern. He graduated in 2010 with a degree in business marketing. After college, he joined the National Evangelization Team (NET), where he served for three years. Deacon Chris said he first heard God's call to the priesthood when he was in eighth grade at a Steubenville Youth Conference during Eucharistic Adoration. During his time with NET, the call to the priesthood intensified. Deacon Chris expressed his appreciation for the many priests who have influenced him through the years. He is most thankful for the support of his family, his parish youth group when growing up and his core of Christian friends, who encouraged his faith and vocation.

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is published quarterly by the Diocese of Austin
Stewardship and Development Office



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THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF AUSTIN



We are called

TO ENCOURAGE VOCATIONS TO PRIESTHOOD, RELIGIOUS LIFE

by Rev. Jonathan Raia



All of the faithful have the responsibility of encouraging those who are being called, helping them to hear the call and to respond.

After six years as Vocation Director of the Diocese of Austin, Father Jonathan Raia will be handing over the reins to Father Greg Gerhart on July 1 as he takes a new assignment as Chaplain/Director of the University Catholic Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Over the last six years, as I introduced myself to others, I explained to them that my job title, “Vocation Director,” is a misnomer in at least a couple of ways.

First of all, a vocation is a call from God. I don’t give that call; I help those who are being called to hear God’s voice, discern it from the other voices they hear, and take steps to respond to it. But the second way that I feel the title is misleading is that I’m not the only one who does those things!

In fact, in some ways I’m not even the most important person who does those things to help those who are being called. Truly all of us are vocation directors in a way. All of the faithful have the responsibility of encouraging those who are being called, helping them to hear the call and to respond. Part of my job as Vocation Director is to empower others to take up that task.

In our church, God often doesn’t call people simply in their own prayer — he calls with a human voice. And that should not surprise us! After all, we profess faith in the Incarnation — the mystery that God became man, took on human flesh, to save us. And Jesus continues to save us by means of the sacraments — physical signs administered by men he empowers to act in his name.

So when it comes to calling men and women to the vocation of priesthood or religious life, the Lord continues this “incarnational” way of acting. Did you know, for example, that a large majority of priests and religious first thought of their vocation when someone invited them to consider it? And honestly, that invitation (for example, to a young man to consider the priesthood) is often far more effective coming from his pastor, his youth minister, one of his friends, or a trusted mentor than it is from me, the Vocation Director.

So, I challenge you to think of a young man or woman in your parish who is a person of prayer, who has a generous heart and desires to serve others, who is a person of joy who desires to spread the love of Christ. Or perhaps there is someone not so young — God sometimes calls later in life (religious communities have different policies, but our diocese will generally take men as candidates for priesthood up to age 50). Ask them if they have ever considered being a priest or a religious sister. You don’t have to pressure them — just offer a simple invitation to be open to God’s will for their life. You would be surprised how often that simple question can be a seed that God plants in that person’s heart.

Finally, I extend an invitation to parents: you are the vocation directors in your family! When I was growing up, one of the greatest gifts my parents gave me was their openness to my vocation. As soon as I started expressing interest in the priesthood, they made it clear they wanted me to follow God’s will, whatever that was. That openness and support continued throughout my whole time in seminary preparing for the priesthood.

So, moms and dads, I invite you to consider three things — that God knows your children better than you do; he loves them more than you do; and he knows better than you do what will make them happy. If you want your children to be truly happy, show them there is no greater happiness than in following God’s will.



Parishes meet spiritual needs during pandemic

After years of encouraging his parishioners to attend Mass, Father Uche Andeh struggled to ask them to suddenly stay home due to the coronavirus pandemic.



“That was hard, but it was for their own good,” said Father Uche, pastor of St. Anthony Marie de Claret Parish in Kyle, of the time when public Masses were suspended in the Diocese of Austin. Parishes have worked hard during the pandemic to meet the spiritual needs of their communities. Many livestreamed daily and Sunday Masses through Facebook and used other online services for ministries like faith formation and religious education. St. Anthony Marie de Claret livestreamed Mass daily and twice on Sundays, in English and Spanish. Now that parishioners are back in the pews, “there’s a lot of joy,” said Father Uche, but he plans to keep online Masses for the substantial number of people who still want to tune in at home.

Staff has also continued virtual meetings and “hangouts,” which they initially launched to be in contact with the parish’s youngest members. “We had a Facebook Live event where we answered questions the kids were asking us,” Father Uche said. “And then I got a couple of emails from the parishioners saying, ‘Hey father, the adults need something like this, too.’”

The parish hosted Catholic Charities of Central Texas to help adults talk through the many stresses associated with the pandemic, like health issues and job losses, and the effect they’re having on children. They also began focusing on the family as a whole, especially for faith formation, with video content available through FORMED followed with online discussions.

“It has moved faith formation to something that the kids just do on their own or the adults do on their own or the teens did on their own,” Father Uche said. “It’s something that the entire family is doing now, and our parishioners have really, really enjoyed it.”

When he was exposed to COVID-19, Father Paul Hudson posted a video to Facebook to share with parishioners at St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Lampasas that he was self-quarantining in the rectory. “I thought it’d be best to let them know,” he said. Their responses were “really heart touching and moving,” he added. “When I posted that the test results came back negative, it was even more heartwarming to see how many people were responding. It was really a blessing.”

Facebook was a lifeline to parishioners while during social distancing, with as many as 40 parishioners a day tuning into daily Mass and many more communicating with Father Paul through the platform’s messaging program. “Having that Facebook page already there was a blessing,” Father Paul said.

Even though the parish’s county saw few cases of COVID-19, parishioners understood the seriousness of the situation and how vulnerable many in the community are. He is continuing to keep in touch with high-risk parishioners not yet comfortable returning to Mass and has teams in place to ensure the parish is obedient to the bishop’s protocols and able to adapt to necessary changes.

“I think everybody, including myself, are anxious to get back together and to celebrate the Eucharist as a family,” Father Hudson said. “Not only have I seen how God has blessed us through this, I think many of my parishioners have seen that as well.”



SUPPORT PARISH OFFERTORY

While we navigate this new normal, please support your parish through online giving. To donate to your parish go to <https://www.austindiocese.org/donate>

thank you for your generosity!



When the coronavirus pandemic made social distancing the new normal in central Texas, and across the globe, the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis decided to give people somewhere to connect — virtually.

“If people were going to be financially burdened already and stuck in their homes, we figured, let’s try to provide something for them,” said Gustavo Rodriguez, director of evangelization and catechesis. “We felt that it would be good for us to offer some of the courses that we typically offer through the year or in the summer for the months of April and May.”

In April, the office offered its leadership series classes for free in English and Spanish. The response was so overwhelming, especially from the Spanish-speaking community, that registration closed within 48 hours. May’s offering — Basic Teachings of the Catholic Faith — was equally popular, with many of April’s attendees signing up again.

In an abundance of caution, summer classes for catechist and DRE certification will be held online as well. Typically students travel to the Pastoral Center in Austin, but Gustavo said the decision was made with their safety in mind as well as concerns for those who work in the building each day.

“We decided that we’re just going to be on the safe side,” Gustavo said. “We don’t know what to expect, or how long we’re going to be in this circumstance.”

He anticipates that the summer classes, which will be offered at a discount, will also have high registration numbers. The change to online will be especially beneficial for students in rural areas who often travel great distances to take the summer courses.

“The reality is that this COVID-19 situation has almost forced us to create a different way of providing these courses,” Gustavo said. “We were hoping to be very successful in these courses, and we’re able to reach so many more people this way. We try to find a blessing in everything.”

Although the Office of Evangelization and Catechesis has offered Zoom access classes in the past, they initially considered the move to classes being offered entirely online to be short-lived. But Gustavo noted that although some people prefer the interaction that an in-person setting offers, others have relayed how much they enjoy the convenience of joining the class from their own home.

“There’s no travel time, and no babysitting necessary,” he said.

Adjustments have been made to the methodology and strategies he and his staff members have used to make the classes work better online for adult learners. Group projects and tasks are an important part of the learning process, so they’re making sure to still create opportunities for engagement and dialogue virtually.

Gustavo and his associate director, Maryrae Stein, have also been encouraged by the relationships their students built during the April and May classes.

“I told them that I’d love to have a nice potluck or similar gathering for everybody to come together in the future when everything’s safe, just to interact and get to know each other and celebrate the ability to overcome this — and do it well,” he said.





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Celebrating Saints



BLESSED JUNIPERO SERRA

(1713-1784), PRIEST, OPTIONAL MEMORIAL

Father Serra was born in Spain and chose the name of one of the companions of St. Francis, Junipero, when he entered the Franciscan order. He was a distinguished preacher and scholar, but, inspired by the mission work of St. Francis Solanus in South America, he longed to be a missionary instead. In 1749, he traveled to Mexico and worked in the Baja Peninsula for 18 years. Then, when the Spaniards took over Upper California in 1767, Father Serra accompanied the Spanish forces to San Diego, and established his first mission. He founded nine missions up and down the length of California before he dies, and 12 more were founded after his death. Father Serra's zeal for the faith "brought the gospel of Christ to the peoples of Mexico and California and firmly established the Church among them," says today's Opening Prayer. His zealous stewardship of the faith also makes him the ideal namesake for Serra International, an organization dedicated to fostering vocations to the priesthood. May we, too, always be eager to share the gift of faith with those who have not yet heard the Gospel.

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