

Promoting and Sustaining Vocations: Thinking Outside the Box

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This is an address that was presented at the Serra Convention October 20, 2007, at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I want to thank you for the invitation to address you today on the topic of "Promoting Church Vocations: Thinking Outside the Box!" Lend me your imagination for a moment as I enter the subject with a news story. This headline in the Delaware State News of April 27, 2007, caught my attention.

North Dakota student picks up prom date in tractor.

Forget taking a limousine to the prom. One high school senior drove his date in a 1992 green John Deere 8760 tractor. "A few people made bets with me that I wouldn't do it," said Levi Rue, a senior at New Rockford-Sheyenne High School. "I guess I won them."

Rue suggested the idea to his date, Alissa Bachmeier, last Thursday, two days before the prom. She wasn't sure, worried about her dress getting dirty.

But after Rue showed her pictures of the tractor and promised to make sure it was immaculate, Bachmeier agreed. "I cleaned it up pretty good," he said.

Bachmeier wore a lime green prom dress that nearly matched the tractor. Rue said they drove around town and to his grandmother's house to show her the unusual chariot.

"We got quite a few people who stopped and looked and stared and waved," he said.

Are you laughing because you can't imagine yourself doing something that unconventional, or are you laughing because his imagination enabled him to think outside the box when it came to transportation for a prom date? Guess what! His idea became a national news story. Not all those "inside-the-box" prom dates went by limo, but the one who thought "outside the box." For the next 45 minutes I need you to take a risk

and acquire some of Levi Rue's imagination as I challenge and stretch you to think outside the box about church vocations.

My talk will focus on four components of vocation that are integral to thinking outside the box on this subject. The four components are: (1) A Christology of vocations, (2) an ecclesiology of vocations, (3) a spirituality of vocations, and (4) technology of vocations.

On each table is a box. Inside are ideas typed on cards about the four components. At the end of my talk I will ask you to remove the cards. Then I will lead you in an exercise of how to think outside the box about that particular component. Allow me to warn you beforehand that this activity will require you to unlock your imaginations and strategize collectively about ideas "outside the box" that you can translate into action in your parishes later.

Let's begin where all priestly and religious and church vocations begin, namely, with Jesus Christ. A Christology of vocation is rooted in the New Testament. Let's access this Christology by looking at the person of Jesus and his style as a vocation director. Through your imagination click on John 1:39 and let a window open.

Two disciples of John the Baptist are lured to follow Jesus the Rabbi. John the Baptist has said something about Jesus being the Lamb of God. It has captivated them. They follow him. Jesus asks, "What are you looking for? They answer, "Where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see."

The focus of Jesus' question is internal. What he's not asking is more an issue than what he does ask. "What are you looking for?" is a question that can't be answered with a telephone book. It's a question of the

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heart and the answer won't be found by Google.

“What are you looking for?” implies their true motivations for following him. It implies an unnamed hunger to be with him. It implies an inner searching that MapQuest can't satisfy. It implies an attraction to him that is the basis of their following him like spies in a Robert Ludlum novel. The way Jesus phrased the question is meant to lure them so he can be the answer to those un-asked questions. At this point in their formation for ministry the two disciples are at a pre-conversion stage.

That is expressed with an inside the box question: “Where are you staying?” What they're not asking is what is your address? What is the street and house number? We would like to visit sometime or have a courier deliver you a basket of cheer.

The invitation of Jesus to “come and see” is the bait for a conversion experience. They accept and stay with him the rest of the day.

This passage highlights the gesture of “invitation” as an important piece of a Christology of vocation. Come and see becomes staying with Jesus and then making him known to their family and friends. In verse 41, “come and see” converts Andrew from a disciple of John the Baptist into an evangelist as he brings his brother Simon bar Jonah to Jesus. In verse 42 when Andrew uses the invitation style of Jesus with his own brother, Simon gets a new name, Peter. In verse 43, Jesus once again uses the invitational style and says to Philip in Galilee, “Follow me.” In verse 45, Philip finds Nathaniel. When Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip uses the invitational words of Jesus and says, “Come and see.”

Do you see a rhythm here? A Christology of vocation begins with Jesus enticing. That means a vocation begins with Jesus and not with us.

- Being seduced by Jesus leads to a desire to be with him.
- Staying with him through prayer and direction

leads to discernment to follow him.

- Following him leads to the call to serve him in a way that leads others to Jesus.

This rhythm of seducing, inviting, staying, following, serving, and evangelizing underscores a Christology of vocation that is cyclical, not linear. The style of Jesus as vocation director in John 1:39-43 is to lure others into thinking outside the box by asking questions of the heart, spending time with Jesus, following him to new and exciting places of inner awareness, and then sharing all this adventure of conversion and call with others in a way that invites them to think outside the box about life changes.

This Christology of vocations implies formation and not information. It is about being formed for a life of ministry and not a new profession. Formation for ministry implies ongoing conversion of life. Once the process of formation for priesthood, religious life, diaconate, D.R.E., youth minister, begins it is ongoing. It doesn't end with ordination or final vows or getting a degree or signing a contract. It is ongoing because the call to a church vocation is fundamentally about intimacy with Jesus Christ and nurturing that intimacy through the daily dyings and risings of the stuff of life. A Christology of vocations has a redemptive dimension to it because the Christ in the Christology is the redeemer of the human race. The final physical dying and rising of Jesus in Jerusalem was preceded by smaller spiritual dyings and risings along the way. They were part of his formation for his call to be savior of the world.

This model of Christology, rooted in a Christ who enters into the messes of our lives and desires to redeem us there and not after we clean life up, is pivotal to anyone who says “yes” to a call to bring this Christ as the good news to those who think they are unredeemable. These spiritual dyings and risings began in earnest in the three years of Jesus' public ministry.

- There was a spiritual dying (Mt 3:14) in not allowing John the Baptist to have his own way at the Jordan River. In rising above the urge to let John's ego prevail, the Spirit of God rested on Jesus and the Father let the Son know how favored he was. And being liked and supported by his Father is what would propel Jesus to Jerusalem, Calvary, the tomb, Easter glory, and the commissioning of the apostles.
- There was a spiritual dying to the false voice of

being manipulated by angry disciples (Lk 9:54) to call down fire upon Samaritans who would not welcome him. In rising above the temptation to be contaminated by the virus of their unfiltered anger Jesus kept hold of his heart and kept them focused on the mission of letting go of emotions that become cancerous for the soul, freeing them to move on to other towns. The mission was about the conversion needed to acquire a free heart from the old law of retaliation, which would not fit into a new law of love. This is a New Testament example of Pope John Paul's promotion of a gospel of life as a spiritual antidote to a culture of death.

- There was a spiritual dying in Jesus to the urge to practice avoidance (Mt 9:20) and say nothing to the woman who reached out in a crowd, touched his clothes, was healed by his power, and then became anonymous.

“No memorials have ever been carved or erected in memory of people who leave well enough alone.”

In rising above that temptation to say nothing, he was free inside to choose engagement with a person over playing an avoidance game. The fruit of that choice is that he affirms that faith as risk taking healed her, but Jesus restored her self-worth as a woman in the midst of a crowd who marginalized her. In doing so he taught a radical “outside the box” lesson about inclusivity as a new piece of the new law of love. This kind of gospel behavior reminds me of a wisdom saying: “No memorials have ever been carved or erected in memory of people who leave well enough alone.”

There was a spiritual dying in Jesus to the pressure of shame by the Pharisees (Luke 14:3) for healing a man on the Sabbath. In rising above their voices of intimidation he stayed centered in the loving voice “my favor rests on you” and role modeled true humility as the spiritual antidote to false piety.

The Christian Scriptures are full of these stories of the ongoing conversion of Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. They were the curriculum for his formation of his call to be the savior of the world.

This is a good starting place, indeed, a necessary starting place in the way you promote vocations as Serrans. If you begin with a Christology of vocation you begin by asking people to share their stories of ongoing conversions. In those stories is hidden the Christ who is conforming that man or woman's heart to the sacred heart. Remember, it was formed into a sacred heart by confrontation, negotiation, temptation, rejection, blood, sweat, and tears and filtering all that mess through the dominant voice of “my favor rests on you.” Your work is to listen for Christ in the conversion stories of others and encourage those people to listen with what St. Benedict calls “the inner ear of the heart,” to how ongoing conversions are the appetizers that precede the main entrée of discerning a vocational call to priesthood, religious life, and lay ministry. I believe that the more conversion stories people tell the greater the appetite to share the fruits of the conversions in a process of discernment that will lead to a vocational call and commitment.

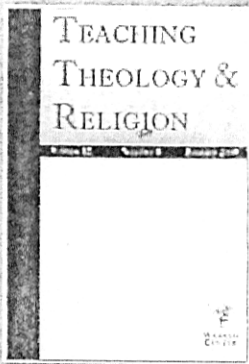
An Ecclesiology of Vocation

Ecclesiology is a highly academic and sophisticated word. Basically, it defines a systematic process for theologizing about the church. With that much being said, let me get off my head, come down from the theology zone and back to the fundamental principles of Vocations 101 here at Holy Cross College. For the purpose of this gathering, maybe the focus of this section should be called “The Parochiality of Vocations.” What do I mean by that? Tip O’Neill use to say, “*All politics is local.*” I would like to adapt his wisdom by saying, “*All vocations are local.*” They begin in the domestic church, namely, the home, and are nurtured in the local church of the parish.

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If that is true, and it certainly was in my case, then an ecclesiology of vocation begins with the question of what kind of parishes nurture the seeds of vocations to the priesthood and religious life sown in the family. That question implies that some parishes are better at it than others. If that is true, then your mission as Serrans is not only to promote and sustain vocations, but also to imagine how you can facilitate dialogues between parishes that are vocation conscious and pro-

active with those who want to know how to do it.

The issue about the ecclesiology of vocation is not what dominant model of church is operative in parishes, but how that model of church empowers a parish to discernment of gifts in its people and provides a climate of ecclesial freedom for everyone to call forth those gifts for the service of the local church and the diocesan church.

Parishes are important. They are the place where church happens. Not a mythical structure from some novelist's imagination, but faith communities that are works in progress. More than just real estate defined by acres and boundaries, parishes are Christian communities formed in all different shapes and sizes. There are rural parishes, old urban parishes that birthed large suburban parishes. There are bilingual and trilingual parishes, mission parishes, campus parishes, prison parishes, military parishes, and virtual communities created by the common desire to reach out and in the name of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to change hearts and make a difference.

On the subject of parishes and vocations, think outside the box and begin to imagine that the future clergy and religious and lay ministers in your dioceses are in all those parishes. They are in the countryside. They are immigrants from other countries. They are in the cities. They are in the suburbs.

They are on campuses. They are in the prisons. They are on military bases and, yes, even on the battlefields today of Iraq and Afghanistan. How many of you are thinking "outside the box" about how to call soldiers to be "wounded healers" as priests, religious, and laity when they return home?

The "inside the box" ecclesiological question is how do you as Serrans seek and find them? The "outside the box" ecclesiological question might be framed,

how do they seek and find you? When you get to that question, then you begin to imagine new and exciting ways for creating vocation ministries in parishes. I believe they must take the form of a small Christian community because size matters.

Plato recognized that community ceases where personal relationships become impossible. Just by stretching your imagination, a parish Serra Club is a small Christian community. A Knights of Columbus Council also is a small Christian community. A Rosary/prayer group is a small Christian community. A Bible study group is a small Christian community. A liturgy committee is a small Christian community. A teen choir is a small Christian community. So I challenge you to take that model of church and ask yourselves how you would take a small group of people in faith sharing, prayer, and discernment for a vocation and form them into a small Christian community? As a small Christian community, you Serrans are bonded together by the desire to promote and nurture church vocations. Take that to another level, think outside the head, and ask yourselves how you can help bond together those who need you to help them in the discerning process.

“By all means do not set limits on membership in a vocations ministry to only those who are discerning vocations to priesthood or religious life.”

When and if you get to that stage you are not only Serrans, but you are Serrans who evangelize. You awaken in others the kind of renewed and contagious faith that Jesus will use and may turn into a call of gospel service as a priest or religious, a lay missionary, a campus minister, a catechist, a youth mentor, a spiritual director. By all means do not set limits on membership in a vocations ministry to only those who are discerning vocations to priesthood or religious life. That kind of “inside-the-box” thinking might shut doors on those who will hear a call to be a lay campus minister first and several years later hear a new call to priesthood or religious life.

Put no conditions on those interested in being part of a small faith community in discernment for

church vocations. Look to the role model of the divine Master, Jesus Christ. His small community in formation for discipleship were not CEO’s or men from a think tank. They consisted of several fishermen; a tax collector, a.k.a., a member of the IRS; a Zealot Party member; an educator; Philip whose name means a “lover of horses”; two brothers, James and John, whom Jesus named “sons of thunder”; Thomas who would become a “doubter”; and Judas a “betraye.” Their relationships with each other and the group dynamics between them were messy. They were dysfunctional. Part of the painful process of their formation from individual entrepreneurs in their own trades to a group of disciples who would market Jesus as God’s new way of doing things was learning how to be human together.

The breakthroughs happened in the post-resurrection appearances. Huddled together on Easter morning as a frightened small community in a suffocating upper room they were freed by the risen Christ from the mess they created by their denials, abandonment, shame, and fear. Freed from all their inner emotional trauma with the new inner programs—“Peace be with you” and “Be not afraid,”—they learned how to live with their differences, transcend their idiosyncrasies, and began looking at the new mission of kingdom building with hearts readjusted by forgiveness, peace, and hope. There is a great deal of wisdom in the Sufi saying, “We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.” After Easter the converted apostles saw things with the healing heart of the risen Christ in them. Then the call to discipleship became a call to form small faith communities. Even St. Paul, the first terrorist of Christians, experienced a radical conversion and accepted a new call to apostleship.

He engaged it not by writing a job description, but by preaching, witnessing, and forming small Christian communities. In the words of the radio commentator Paul Harvey, you know the rest of the story.

An ecclesiology of vocations should explore pieces of the “gospel preaching–faith witnessing–church forming” story and use the early church model of small faith communities as a way to invite and walk with pilgrims on a path from being an eclectic group of disciples to a unique and gifted group of church ministers.

A Spirituality of Vocation

A spirituality of vocation does not begin with someone asking the question “Are you Orthodox?” That question politicizes the vocational call, reducing it to human categories of naming oneself either liberal or conservative, centrist, left wing or right wing. There is

a certain spiritual bankruptcy to this question, because God is left out of it. It implies mental coercion over spiritual conversion, hardness of heart over a change of heart. It is a false question hidden behind a false piety. The objective is to gather information that may be used to sabotage vocations. This devious behavior frightens me. It obfuscates the mission of forming people into priests and religious by a hidden agenda focusing on cloning them. Uniformity is the antithesis of St. Paul's vision of ministerial gifts as the basis for church unity in I Corinthians 12:3-13.

A true spirituality of vocation begins with asking someone discerning a vocation the same question Jesus asked Peter over a post-resurrection meal, "Do you love me?" This question is about Jesus Christ. In his 1992 Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds)*", Pope John Paul II stated in paragraph 5, "The priest of tomorrow, no less than the priest of today, must resemble Christ." Not some cult figure or human icon. So the question "Do you love me?" is the true vocational question. It opens doors for anyone to share stories of how their life has been changed by the journey of awakening faith becoming searching faith becoming deepening faith in Jesus Christ. For anyone discerning any kind of church vocation, falling in love with Jesus Christ is the fundamental story that God will use to get out of them and lead to a call to serve others as priest, religious, or lay minister. How they share their love affair with Jesus Christ will make all the difference in how they embrace their vocation in ways that it becomes infectious in others.

A number of years ago I was administrator in a suburban parish. I had an opportunity to collaborate with the pastoral staff in hiring a new youth minister. The interview team toiled over the questions they wanted to ask. This was the short list they presented to me:

- What would you consider your best idea for youth ministry?
- What kinds of success have you had with a youth Confirmation program?
- How have you gone about getting youth more involved in liturgies?
- What do you consider your strongest asset in working with youth?

My response to the team was: The most fundamental question was missing. Tell us about your relationship with Jesus Christ. Open a window on your soul and let us see a little bit of your prayer life and your love affair with Jesus and how these pieces of your

faith life helped you discern a call to youth ministry. Share with us some significant moments in deepening your faith life in Jesus Christ. By extension these are the first questions to be asked of anyone discerning a vocational call.

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I believe the interview team was looking for something *prescriptive*, namely, what she would do to stem the hemorrhage of teens walking away from faith development after Confirmation. I was more concerned with a *descriptive* approach to youth ministry. I firmly believed that if we saw significant pieces of "how she has coped with life as an ongoing conversation with Jesus" she could inspire the youth of the parish to do the same. I was more concerned with her "spirituality" as a twenty-something woman of faith than I was with her ideas for "entertaining" youth.

My definition of spirituality is "what I do with life experiences that color how I cope with life." There is a rhythm to the two components in this definition. When they work in sync with each other, then the way I view life continually changes. Our Roman Catholic ascetical heritage defines this rhythm as contemplation and action. I believe the modern-day mystics would call them attitude and behavior. What I do with my experience shapes and colors my values and vision.

This holy way of being and living in the world underscores the hallmark of Christian spirituality, namely, the dying and rising of Jesus. That is fundamentally what I wanted to hear from the youth minister candidate, the paschal dimension of her faith journey. Her openness and vulnerability in sharing it would reveal the operative model of Christology at the center of her life. Her inner passages, her life transitions, her spiritual movements, her paschal dyings from one way of being in the world and rising to another way would tell us how she has emptied herself and learned a piece of wisdom about dying and rising that would enrich the youth. She volunteered a piece of information pivotal to

this process, namely, she sees a spiritual director regularly. She got high marks from me on that disclosure. What she really shared was the value she places upon her relationship with God and how processing that with a mentor impacts her relationship with youth.

A spiritual director is a good listener to one's soul. A good spiritual director listens to the stirrings, the movements, and the action of God in whatever piece of human experience is being shared, so that the directee can attend to them too and reverence his or her own experience as the holy ground to meet God. My own spiritual director was crucial to the way I processed the tragedy of the clergy sex abuse scandal and what I did with that experience. I was stuck in the contemplation stage longer than I wanted to be. But, thanks to the way she listened and tended to my wounded soul, I finally got unstuck and moved to the stage of action. I learned to heal my heart of hurt and anger and give it to the victims. And I did that as a spiritual director to several of them.

These dying and rising moments make a difference in the ongoing discernment of a vocational call. It awakened me to a new understanding about my own vocation, namely, I am now not only a priest, but a wounded healer. These kinds of ongoing redemptive stories are where any vocational call begins and is sustained.

This brings me to a challenge for you Serrans. The Knights of Columbus focus much of their activities on helping seminarians and novices in their academic formation. I challenge you to work in tandem with the Knights by focusing your activities on providing the spiritual directors the laity need to discern a vocational call.

Find a Catholic college or ministry institute in your area that trains people for the ministry of spiritual direction. With the blessing of your bishop and in collaboration with the vocations director, form a group of clergy, religious, and certified lay spiritual directors who can write guidelines and policies and interview the applicants of those who feel called to this ministry. Once their training is completed make them available to individuals, first, then to the small faith sharing groups.

When I was director of the diocesan Office of the Permanent Diaconate we began a new four-year formation program in 1997 with 30 candidates and spouses and only eight spiritual directors. When I left the office in 2001 we had 18. Thanks to the bishop who awarded a grant for the training of others through the Certificate Program in Spiritual Direction at Neumann College, two years later we had 10 more. The diocese now has a group of more than 30 certified spiritual directors

who assist people to discern calls to multiple ministries. These spiritual directors are an integral piece of ongoing faith development for ministry in our diocese.

Technology and Vocations

I am a Baby Boomer. For me that means I was born and raised when television radically reconstituted American life and leisure. This new piece of technology changed the ecology of the home. The arrangement of the furniture was reoriented toward the television. That changed the social structure of the family from interacting with each other to focusing on an object of entertainment.

Add to the TV the advent of satellites, the telephone, and supersonic travel. These have radically transformed our sense of time. As a commodity, "time" has now become something that must be managed and not wasted. Add to that the invention of the cell phone, the iPod, the iPhone, the Blackberry, etc. All of these technological devices keep us so obsessed with "banking" our time that we replace being in the present moment for some unrealized future "time."

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Computer technology has created "multitasking." While we may have become better "jugglers," we may be missing a piece of wisdom. Control of our lives is giving way to increased fragmentation. There is no doubt that Internet technologies have made remarkable advances in helping us to acquire, manage, and exchange information.

I challenge you to take some time and just reflect on the technological shape of your daily life. It may begin with a digital alarm clock. As you move to the bathroom add an electric razor, an electric toothbrush, an electric hair blower. Move to the kitchen for your Mr. Coffemaker; a microwave; a computer for morning emails; a TV for news, weather, and traffic reports; and perhaps a garage door opener when you leave the house. You finish this list and it's only 7 AM. What about the rest of the day?

The connection between technology and vocations is for you to think outside the box and realize that future priests, religious, and lay ministers are members of the dot-com generation. They are technological geniuses. In fact, a new word refers to some of them as “geeks.”

Those of you baby boomers who remember the TV show “Mission Impossible” also will remember the familiar line, “Your mission Mr. Phelps, if you should decide to accept it, is...” For the purposes of this gathering I would like to adapt that line by saying, “Your challenge, Mr. and Mrs. Serra, if you should decide to accept it, is to enable the dot-comers to link their technological gifts with the gift of a vocational call.”

The present and future generations of ordained and non-ordained ministers are familiar with YouTube, MyFace, Google, Yahoo, and other popular Web sites. They frequent chat rooms, and probably many of them are bloggers. To enter this world you have to ask “outside the box questions” like why not tap into their technological imaginations and get them to create links to parish Web sites about religious vocations? Why not get them to create “spirituality zones” where they can chat with one another about a personal experience that became redemptive? Why not encourage them to set up “faith blogs” where they can share enriching moments of their ongoing spiritual journey? What is a blog other than a diary of one’s life? Why not excite the dot-comers to do a parish blog equivalent to Blessed John XXIII’s book *Journal of a Soul*?

If the medium is the message, then why not use these technologies to market and raise awareness about vocations? In the time of Jesus the medium was the spoken word. And the oral tradition about spreading the Gospel was born. With the invention of the printing press in 1440 by the German inventor Johannes Gutenberg (an outside the box thinker), the written tradition was born. And the use of the moveable word through books and manuscripts opened new doors for human learning and communication.

With the computer, the technology tradition was born and the use of wireless communication and instant information is still exploding. This means the days of using highway billboards and parish bulletins to market priestly and religious vocations is over. Those who may disagree, and many will, need a radical conversion of imagination. What we suffer from today is leadership with a Vatican II vision, but with a Vatican I imagination.

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“Diocesan and parish Web sites are now the places where the dot-comers and Millennials will make connections between spirituality and the technological rhythm of their daily lives.”

tions between spirituality and the technological rhythm of their daily lives. If you don’t believe me then ask them. After you do, be ready to ask them to use their computer skills in helping you promote and sustain vocations through the medium of modern technology. Then stand back and be ready to be surprised by God how a vocation link on a parish Web site, a chat room among parishioners about vocational discernment, and a blog about the sharing of a heart searching to serve God and the People of God will reframe the vocational call from the individual to a network of people. Who knows, this may be the first step in turning a crisis of vocations into a new adventure of vocations. I believe this is what Pope John Paul II envisioned in paragraph 18 of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “Today in particular, the pressing pastoral tasks of the new evangelization calls for the involvement of the entire People of God and requires a new fervor, new methods, and a new expression for the announcing and witnessing of the Gospel.” In other words, if I may take editorial license with His Holiness, “Think outside the box.” There is a wisdom saying: “What we focus on determines what we miss.”

Here is an example of what I mean by connecting that piece of wisdom to the issue of technology and vocations. In our diocese, the Serra Club sponsors a yearly contest in the parochial schools about vocations. Students write essays about vocational questions then submit them. A review team evaluates them and the best essay writers are given awards. Now think outside the box about adapting that activity for the computer-literate generation. School students who are technology friendly could write the essays as a Word document then email them to family and friends. They in turn can send them to other family and friends. So the circle of vocational awareness is widening. Pastors with Vatican II imaginations could have webmasters post the essays on

a parish Web site link so many parishioners could read them.

Let's take this imagination-stretching a step further. Think outside the box about challenging youth ministry groups to design a 45-second commercial on vocations to priesthood and religious life that would air during a Super Bowl game. How would you as Serrans inspire them to combine their technologically refined imaginations and their Catholic faith experience with priests and religious to market church vocations to every living room in America on Super Bowl Sunday?

Thinking outside the box this way might be an invitation from God to think about vocations through the imagination of people with future vocations. I dare you to trust in that perspective. God can teach us wonderful new things with a converted imagination. That is the point of this closing story.

Once upon a time a wise Master, meditating in his hermitage, opened his eyes to discover an unexpected visitor standing before him—the abbot of a well-known monastery.

“What is it you seek?” asked the Master. The abbot recounted a tale of woe. At one time his monastery had been famous throughout the western world. Its cells were filled with young aspirants and its church resounded to the chant of its monks. But hard times had befallen the monastery. People no longer flocked there to nourish their spirits, the stream of young aspirants had dried up, and the monastery church was silent. There were only a handful of monks left and these went about their duties with heavy hearts and sad faces.

Now this is what the abbot wanted to know. “Is it because of some sin of ours that the monastery has been reduced to this state?” “Yes,” said the Master, “a sin of ignorance.” “And what sin might that be?” “One of your monks is the Messiah in disguise and you are ignorant of this.”

Having said this, the Master closed his eyes and returned to his meditation. Throughout the arduous journey back to his monastery the abbot's heart beat fast as the thought that the Messiah—the Messiah himself—had returned to earth and was right there in the monastery. How was it he had failed to recognize him? And who could it be? Brother Cook? Brother Sacristan? Brother Treasurer? Brother Prior? No, not any of them; they all had too many defects. But, then, the Master had said he was in disguise. Could those defects be one of his disguises? Come to think of it, everyone in the monastery had defects. And one of them had to be the Messiah.

Back in the monastery he assembled the monks and told them what he had discovered. They looked at one

another in disbelief. The Messiah? Here? Incredible! But he was supposed to be in disguise. So, maybe, just maybe. What if it were so-and-so? Or the other one over there? Or.....?

One thing was certain. If the Messiah was there in disguise, it was not likely that they would recognize him. So they took to treating everyone with renewed respect. “You never know,” they said to themselves when they dealt with one another, “maybe this is the one.”

The result of this change in behavior was that the atmosphere in the monastery became vibrant with joy. Soon dozens of aspirants were seeking admission to the order. And once again the monastery church echoed with the holy and joyful chant of monks aglow with the spirit of love.

Adopt that story for your mission and revisit it at your Serra meetings. Let it transform your hearts and minds so that the power of divine joy, hope, and love hidden in the story can be released in you.

By freeing your imagination to think outside the box may you learn new ways to spread those graces and make them contagious in those God calls to think outside the box about lives of service as priests, religious, and laity.

If your faith makes you ready to accept this new mission, then may God continue to use your imagination to think outside the box when it come to writing new and exciting chapters in the ongoing story of promoting and sustaining church vocations.



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