



Here I Am Lord Discipleship and Vocation Weekends Blossom from Initial Seed Planted

BY MR. MIKE ZAK

In 2002, a young girl from my parish made an off-handed remark that many would have just filed away as youthful cynicism. But her comment struck a chord with me because it spoke of the realities that so many of our young people face: The reality of divorce. The young woman's comment was "when I graduate from high school, I am going to go to college, get a job, get married and divorced..."

"It's All about Vocations..."

It was the spring of 2002 and I had just booked Fr. Stan Fortuna, C.F.R., to present a concert in February of 2003. A series of conversations with people planted the seed to transform a simple concert into something more. The idea was to contact the many youth ministers I work with on other projects, to see what we could offer their teens who were peer ministers.

How could we feed them? What could we offer that would provide direction to their lives? How could we reach out to these young people who commit a year or two of their lives to assist us with ministry?

Mark Herwaldt, a veteran youth minister whose opinions





I value, reminded me that youth ministry is all about vocations.

“How true,” I thought to myself. “Somebody should be doing something about that! Somebody, *but not me*, should be doing something about that.”

Well the next thing I knew, Mark and I were meeting with Fr. Aaron Brodeski, vocations director for the Diocese of Rockford, planning a vocations conference. Father Aaron supported the idea and suggested religious communities to contact and asked to be kept “in the loop” as things progressed.

A teen’s comment planted a seed... Mark’s comment tilled the soil, Father Aaron provided a little fertilizer and then the rain poured forth from a conversation with Sr. Margaret Michael Gillis, F.S.P. Initially I called this member of the Daughters of St. Paul because a close friend suggested her to speak on religious vocations.

Something Special’s Happening

So there I was in the fall of 2002 talking to a sister I never met, about vocations. Not strictly the priesthood and religious life but about all vocations. What is a vocation? How does the Church identify vocations? How can we present this to teens, young adults and parents? Our phone conversation lasted 45 minutes and when I hung up, I knew that something special was about to take place.

A simple concert is now on its way to becoming a full-blown weekend conference on discipleship and vocations!

Growing up in the 1970s, I knew a lot of priests and sisters. My grade school was staffed by the Dominicans. Unfortunately, when they left my association with the sisters ended. Yet I was blessed to get to know the local

diocesan priests who were stationed nearby, as well as the Benedictine Fathers at Marmion Abbey. In fact I knew two priests who could be booked to speak and whom I was confident would hold the attention of the teens.

So in 2002, when all of this was starting to come together, I had not had any real contact with religious sisters for over thirty-five years. That was about to change over the next six months and in a *huge way* in the years since!

Armed with the list of religious communities that Father Aaron gave me, I sent off invitations. Father Aaron had also suggested contacting the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE to see how they might be able to assist our effort. When I spoke with Michael Wick at the IRL office, it was clear that he understood the *Here I Am Lord* concept. He was quite instrumental in helping us contact the communities affiliated with the IRL.

Like the names that Father Aaron had given me, the religious communities who were IRL Affiliates were on fire for vocations. Mike put the information on the IRL’s website, sent out a special mailing and provided a lot of vocational materials to distribute at the conference.

Suddenly my phone was ringing off the hook. Priests, brothers, and sisters from across the country were wanting to find out more about the *Here I Am Lord* conference. Were we going to charge them to come? What was their booth space going to cost them? Where could they stay? Practical questions that I would never have considered.

As I spoke with more and more of them, two things became clear. First, they understood the critical need to address vocations, *all vocations*. Second, there was excitement in their voices and in their hearts, they were truly happy in their vocation and wanted to share that with others.

What about Marriage?

I met Chris Padgett when I booked his Christian rock band, “Scarecrow and Tinmen,” to do a concert in 2000 shortly after arriving at St. Patrick’s Parish. I was introduced to him by Eric Groth who was in charge of the effective, disciple-making Catholic youth ministry rallies that Cultivation Ministries was doing at the time. So I asked Chris and Linda Padgett along with Eric and Becky Groth if they would speak about marriage as a vocation.

Both couples agreed and they helped set the tone for conferences to come with their talks and the prayer experience that has become an integral part of the *Here*

I Am Lord conferences. Chris and Eric have since teamed up with *Outside Da Box*, a new company seeking to spread the Word to teens through the modern media.

So now we have the vocations of priesthood and religious life covered. Marriage is being taken care of by two awesome couples who make God a part of their everyday lives. What's missing? *Discipleship...Evangelization...*

Well Father Stan can cover discipleship and evangelization... and he has done so three times since the inaugural conference. If you build it, will they come? *Yes!!!*

As the conference grew, we soon found that the *Here I Am Lord* conferences brought the parish together as hundreds of people helped with the logistics of housing and feeding the priests, brothers, sisters and our many guests who attended the conference. Parishioners did not view it as an imposition but a privilege. Everyone was happy to do whatever they could to support vocations in whatever way they could.

An Annual Event Expands

And so, the small seed began to yield a blossom. The *Here I Am Lord* weekend are now an annual event at St. Patrick's Parish. The religious who attend spend a considerable amount of time and effort on getting to the conference. With so many parishioners willing to assist with the behind the scenes work, we wanted to add opportunities so that the priests and religious coming from

afar would have ample opportunity to meet as many youth as possible while they were in town.

In 2007 we decided to expand the weekend event by offering a series of workshops for grade-and high school students so the religious attending the conference could reach many more young people.

The response was so great that in 2008 we are expanding the workshops at the schools and will add Thursday evening workshops at two parishes as well. When I went looking for another parish to expand our Thursday evening program, Mark Herwaldt was the first to volunteer his parish (Mark's pastor "got it" in a less than fifteen minute meeting I had with him). So, too, with the pastors of the two grade schools we added and the principals at our two high schools who will act as workshop host sites next year.

In 2008, over 2,200 teens are expected to participate in the Friday daytime workshops at two high schools and three grade schools (at the time of this publication 200 high school and 400 grade school spots remain with two sites already closed to new registrations.) Our newly added Thursday evening workshops are also nearing capacity at both locations with over 1,000 of the 1,500 available spots filled.

Regional Conferences Now Scheduled

The *Here I Am Lord* conference that takes place at St.

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The Invaluable Support of a Faith-Filled Pastor

Since its inception, the *Here I Am Lord* program has taken on a life of its own, guided by the Holy Spirit and the pastor of St. Patrick's Church, Msgr. Joseph Linster. Shortly after the first conference, Monsignor called and said he wanted to meet with me. Driving to the parish, I wondered what he wanted to discuss. The conference had cost our parish a lot of money, and we didn't even come close to covering those costs despite the help of volunteers and our local Knights of Columbus council.

What Monsignor wanted was to ask if I would continue the event. I reminded him about the money we "lost" and his response was something I will always remember: He considered the money spent "an investment."

During the summer of 2002, Monsignor Linster witnessed first hand what our teens experienced at World

Youth Day upon their return. He saw what was taking place on retreats and in other things we were doing and simply "got it."

Msgr. Joseph



Monsignor Linster with Cardinal George.

Linster is a very faith-filled man for whom I feel honored to work. Over the years his support has been invaluable as we introduced Eucharistic Adoration into our retreats, as well as frequent opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is fortunate because without a supportive pastor, such a conference simply doesn't happen. The Church needs more faith-filled pastors who are willing to support apostolic initiatives such as the *Here I Am Lord* weekends!



Patrick Parish in St. Charles has been renamed the *Here I Am Lord* National Vocations Conference as we begin to add regional conferences. The national conference will continue to offer a variety of different ways to reach out to as many young people as possible and serve as a test site for various activities as we add smaller regional gatherings across the country. The regional conferences will allow religious communities to attend close to home and take advantage of our national advertising and contacts.

The first regional conference was established in the Archdiocese of Denver in 2006. With the support of Archbishop Charles Chaput, Sacred Heart of Mary Parish will host the 3rd Annual Regional *Here I Am Lord* Conference on December 1, 2007, in Boulder, Colorado.

In early June of this year I met with Most Rev. Thomas Paprocki, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago and Fr. Joe Noonan, Vocations Director for the Archdiocese. They and Fr. Chris Doering have agreed to host the first Chicago Regional Conference on October 10-12, 2008 at Our Lady of Victory parish on the city's northwest side. Plans are also underway to add a second one in 2009 in the south suburban area.

As we look to the future we are seeking other parishes and dioceses across the country to partner with us to launch other regional conferences. As the conferences expand there is also a need for financial support at

both the national and regional levels. (*Individuals and organizations who are interested in establishing and/or providing funding for the Here I Am Lord conferences in their area, see contact information on next page.*)

From the beginning, the *Here I Am Lord* conferences sought to catechize, evangelize and open the eyes of young people and their parents (as well as the entire Body of Christ) so that they are empowered to be disciples with Christ by answering God's vocation call to them.

Experiences We Could Have Never Imagined

One of the fruits of the conference was meeting Sr. Mary Michael Fox, O.P., of the Nashville Dominicans. She approached me after the Holy Hour in 2003 and asked if I would consider bringing my teens to her parish in Chicago to lead a retreat at their grade school. While we did retreats at our parish, I had never considered the need to do so

Surprised by Joy!

Joy is defined as the feeling of happiness or extreme cheerfulness. C.S. Lewis wrote a book in 1955 titled, *Surprised by Joy*. His aim was to identify and describe the events surrounding his accidental discovery of and consequent search for the phenomenon he labeled "joy." He recounts his journey from atheism to theism to Christianity.

Diane and I were experiencing what joy was all about. Through the teens we came in contact with, we were experiencing what is what like to have authentic joy.

The Steubenville Summer Youth Conferences, summer camp, retreats with teens and the weekly FORUM group meeting at our home were ways we began to see the effect of joy in the lives of the teens we worked with. By 2000, we had closed down a family run real estate business to devote ourselves full time to youth ministry and I accepted a full time position as a Director of Youth Ministry.

If one word best describes the *Here I Am Lord* conferences, "joy" is. The joy that married couples and singles have sharing their lives. The

joy that priests, brothers, and sisters have sharing with all they come in contact with. It is that joy that will put an end to the "vocations crisis" we are experiencing in the Church.

Married couples, singles, priests and religious need to share their joy! If everyone were to "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15) with that joy, our seminaries and convents would be full, divorce rates would plummet and single people could be confident in their choice to serve God in the secular world.



take our retreat team “on the road.”

In addition we have established a “sister parish” relationship with Our Lady of Victory in Chicago, returning each year to facilitate a *Rocked By God* retreat. Teens from our parishes work together on the retreat team, train together at our Peer Ministry Retreat and attend our CAMP WOW (our summer camp) together. As a result of that involvement, they were the parish

chosen to host the first Chicago Regional *Here I Am Lord* Conference.

outside of the parish, figuring that was someone else’s job. I agreed to do the retreat and in doing so, opened a door that has provided the young people from my parish (and myself) with experiences that we could have never imagined. That first retreat in 2003 has led to the establishment of the *Rocked By God Retreat Ministry* program that each year presents retreats to over 2,000 teens in Northern Illinois. We have also traveled to Denver and other areas outside of Chicago to present *Rocked By God* where we

My involvement with the *Here I Am Lord* Conference would not be possible without three people. My wife Diane’s support has been an inspiration and validation of what it takes to live out our vocation as a married couple. My pastor, Msgr. Joseph Linster, not only supports me from the financial perspective but, more important, inspires me as he lives out his vocation as a

priest. Most important, everything has occurred as result of being open to listening to what God has to say. Through His Word—Jesus in the Eucharist—and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, anything is possible. 🙏

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