



Friars greet guests after an ordination. A hallmark of the Vocation Culture Project has been its effort to animate lay employees, students, parents, and others who know the Augustinians. They were part of the vocation prayer network and served as informal ambassadors to invite young men to consider life as an Augustinian.

Our “Vocation Culture Project”

IT ALL STARTED AS A RELAXING EVENING sitting in the courtyard of the St. Rita Monastery in Chicago in the spring of 2008. I was visiting with two friars, Brother Gary and Father Bernie, and the three of us, ages 40, 43 and 43, were in the group of the youngest five friars in the province of Our Mother of Good Counsel (Chicago) of the Order of St. Augustine. We were discussing the fact that we were not getting vocations to the province and were coming up with reasons why we thought this was happening. These three hours in the courtyard were the beginning of a transformation in our province that none of us ever dreamed imaginable. Here is our story.

We love our life as Augustinian friars. We are fulfilled in our religious lives and ministries. The people we serve love us and support us. Why then, is nobody joining us? This was the question we pondered that night in the courtyard. We had two men in formation. One man was in the process of discerning out of the community and the other man, if he persevered with us, would be the first ordination in our province in 16 years. The three of us decided we had two choices: do nothing and ultimately die

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as a province or do something. We decided to do something. We requested a meeting with the prior provincial and told him we were willing to work as a team and try something different. He agreed, and the transformational journey had begun.

The three of us knew we did not want to leave our present ministries to focus solely on vocation work.

In our province, the norm was that a friar, usually not willingly, was moved from a ministry he loved to vocation ministry which he dreaded. We decided that we would stay in our ministries and hire a full-time person who would run the vocation office and do all that was needed behind the scenes while we became the public face of the office. It was also decided that I would become the official vocation director of the province while maintaining my ministry as president of St. Rita of Cascia High School in Chicago because

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somebody must be in charge. If everyone is in charge, no one is in charge. We hired a good friend of ours, Sister Ardis Cloutier, O.S.F., as office manager of the vocation office. Hiring Sister Ardis was the smartest decision we made in this journey!

We were not looking for or expecting to change the vocation situation in our province overnight. We understood that nationally, about half who enter seminary or religious life end up discerning out of formation. Our goal was two men a year, understanding that one would leave, but in five years we could see five new members – an unbelievable change of thinking! It was our hope and dream. We had no idea if it would work or not, but we moved ahead with faith and trust. We decided to brand our experiment as the “Vocation Culture Project.” We needed to change the culture of the province, and so off we went!

Prayer, invitation, journeying-with

What did we concretely do to begin this journey? We shared our ideas, dreams, and plans with all the friars of the province. We asked that each local community and individual friar make praying for vocations a priority.

We asked that they encourage, invite, and challenge the people to whom they minister to also pray. I see now that none of this would have been successful if we did not root our efforts in prayer. Having our foundation in prayer, we now needed to act upon that prayer and invite young men into our communities so they could get to know us, our communal life and our ministries. This was easier for some friars than others. But ultimately it did bear much fruit.

We were invited by our Eastern province of St. Thomas of Villanova to join them in the Discernment Weekends they hosted twice a year. We decided to accept their invitation, and it was one of the best decisions we made. We have had 18 Discernment Weekends and they continue to attract anywhere from 3-14 participants per weekend. Our weekends are not retreats but have a lot of retreat elements. We strive to give a discerner a realistic look into our lifestyle and to meet as many friars as possible. We also visit several of our ministry sites to show what works we do as Augustinians and let them see our heritage.

These three elements of prayer, invitation, and journeying-with became the cornerstone of our vocation efforts. We started visiting our communities and ministries to invite friars and our lay friends to do the same. We asked communities to open their doors and invite young men in for prayer and dinner. We asked, and people came! We had some very “interesting” visitors, but we also were getting some solid young men who were very serious about discernment and discovering what the Augustinian way of life was all about.

An absolute key ingredient was the establishment of a vocation office with a full-time office assistant who was responsible for all the behind-the-scenes work of the office and the who was the keeper of the contacts we received via email and phone calls. Office manager Sister Ardis developed a plan of communicating with every single person who contacted us—viable and not viable candidates alike. Sister Ardis prepared form letters for every imaginable inquirer from the serious and desirable to the mentally ill and non-U.S. citizen inquirers whom we were not able to accept and everyone in between. She personalized each email response and treated each inquirer with great dignity and respect. People we said no to were thanking us for responding and being so nice about it.

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must meet young people where they are and enter their world-view. Patience is a virtue here, but believe me, we were frustrated at times too—especially with people who just stopped communicating with us. We are supposed to understand that if they stop communicating, they are no longer interested. A plain text or email “not interested anymore” would be nice but was not always the case. I used to joke that if they could break up with their girlfriend over a text, they can break up with me over a text too!

Major attention to web communication

A very important aspect of this transformation for us was the total overhaul of our website and social media outlets. I was not social media savvy, but I knew we needed someone who was. We hired, on a part-time basis, a young man who served as our social media person. Our website was redesigned and updated regularly. Our presence on Facebook, Twitter and other venues was initiated and maintained. We also started advertising through such venues as Google and Twitter. These ads have brought increased traffic to our vocation website. This is where people, young and old, are getting their information. As one of our young friars told me, “we know how get our information, and we get it when we want it.” The Internet and social media are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and we need to be on it consistently and with up to date and relevant information. Nothing turns off young people more than dated, irrelevant and unattractive websites. One young man who is discerning with us right now said he chose ten communities who he was interested in and started looking at their websites. If he liked a website, the community stayed on his list. If he did not, the community was taken off the list. “Fr. Tom, you guys have a great website! That’s why I’m here.” We must use the resources God gives us to reach this generation.

When we started the Vocation Culture Project, we had nine men in formation for the three provinces of the United States. Four years into the project, we had 32, so we decided to create a poster with their pictures, names, age, city of birth, and level of formation. When the friars received the poster, they were dumbfounded because they were filled with pride and hope that we had that many men in formation. Seeing their pictures enabled us to concretely see the fruits of our work and ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. We distributed them far and wide to our communities and ministries in a very unique way. We produced a CD with a homily in

COURTESY OF THE AUGUSTINIAN FRIARS



Augustinian friars celebrate an ordination.

English and Spanish, which we asked all our Augustinian parishes to use on a particular Sunday. We asked each person present to take home a poster. We asked them to put the poster up on their refrigerators or bulletin boards at home for all to see and do three things: pray for the 32 men in formation, pray for themselves and pray for all young people in their family and parish. This poster became a prayer tool for the Vocation Culture Project. We had bigger posters made for church vestibules and foyers but to be honest, who looks at them? By making them a size suitable to be brought home and maybe posted on a refrigerator, the poster took on a whole new life of its own. We did the same in our high schools and colleges. We printed 25,000 and they were all distributed. We have done this annually for six years now.

Looking back on the Vocation Culture Project, I think the most important thing we did was to acknowledge that we had a problem, and then choose to tackle the problem. We did not turn things around overnight. It took time, and it is proving to be fruitful, but the important thing was that we started on the journey.

The journey continues! I have, after nine years, stepped down as vocation director and have proudly been succeeded by Father Richie Mercado, the first young man I worked with who was ordained through our Vocation Culture Project.

God is the center of our Vocation Culture Project. Jesus is our inspiration and the Holy Spirit moves us to get it done. My final thought is simple: If we could address our problems with new membership head on, anyone can! ■