

Homily
St. Anne Novena – Day 2
Tuesday of the 16th Week in OT
My Vocation & Who Was Influential

Fr. Mick asked us to share our vocation story and who was influential. That's like asking which color stands out the most in Monet's Garden at Giverny. It isn't one color, but many. And it's hard to say which ones stand out the most.

In today's Gospel, Jesus points to all His disciples and says, "whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother." The sad reality is that not all do God's Will. Likewise, whoever interacted with me influenced me. Some more than others and some in good and bad ways. Before I go down that path, I'd like to share a few definitions.

What is a deacon? A deacon is an ordained minister, set apart by God, for service to the Body of Christ. Likewise, a priest is an ordained minister, set apart by God, for the sacramental support of the Body of Christ. And a bishop is an ordained minister, set apart by God, to shepherd God's people in a particular church. And a husband and a wife are two, set apart by God through the Sacrament of Matrimony, to become one and grow the family of God. There is a lot that goes into each of these descriptions.

A deacon assists the priest at Mass, responsible for proclaiming the Gospel and preparing the altar. There are many other ways deacons serve the Body of Christ. Some focus on taking communion to those unable to come to Mass; some focus on ministry to the incarcerated; some as Chaplains; some serve the diocese administratively; some in parish ministries. For me, my ministry takes on many facets, some more intentional and timely than others. For example, I will soon begin helping with the RCIA program of our parish. I write a monthly article for our parish newsletter. I'm a supervising deacon for Cathedral weddings. I take communion to the Catholic residents of Colonial Gardens assisted living. I work with Pro Catholic Tours helping set up pilgrimages with our priests. But I also live out my role as a deacon in everyday life. I may not wear my clerics, but the imprint of ordination is always present. I bring my ministry to work. I share my ministry when out and about, shopping, eating, working. I may not be preaching the Good News by word, but I try to by example, by spreading kindness and joy, by helping when my help is needed.

But first and most importantly, I am a child of God. I was born in God's image and likeness. In baptism, I became a member of the Body of Christ. In marriage, I became one with my wife, Donna. Together, we have two sons who are both married, and we have, to date, one granddaughter. In school, I earned degrees in Engineering and Business. After formation, I was ordained a deacon of this diocese.

But these are titles I earned through an intentional decision. What happened before led to what I am now. And what I have done since can be attributed to the choices I've made, both good and bad, leading up to now.

So who influenced me? Far and away, I have been guided by the Holy Spirit. When I went through the process of selection to be a deacon candidate, the psychiatrist said to me, based on his experience and my life growing up, that it is amazing to him that I'm not in jail. Most people he works with are in the penitentiary system. He is an expert witness at trials for accused criminals. And he evaluates clergy candidates for many denominations. He tells me my experience growing up was similar to those who are incarcerated. He says that I chose to work hard at changing my circumstances. I attribute this to the Holy Spirit.

All of us are on a journey. Whether we call it a spiritual journey, a faith journey, a life journey, we are all on a path that, each day, pushes us forward. We are always learning and growing until the day we meet our Lord and Savior face to face.

I have encountered many people throughout my life who influenced me, both for the better and worse. For the better were two teachers in my high school – Mr. Leo Schultheis and Brother Eugene Philip. I was very immature, and they met me where I was at. When I left high school and didn't have to go to church, I didn't. For about five years, I was an EC catholic. Then a college friend of mine was dating a catholic girl. To this day I don't know why, but I asked her if I could go to church with her. Slowly, I started coming home. A classmate I didn't know at all and I were forced to be lab partners. His name is Jeff. We've been friends ever since. Over the years, we've had every conversation imaginable. Shortly after I started my first job out of college, a friend introduced me to his coworker, Donna. She had only been in town for two weeks before we met. A year and a half later, we were married.

Each of these people had a significant impact on my life at a time when I needed it most. I truly fear what I would have become if it wasn't for these people. And I know it was the Holy Spirit with some help from my guardian angel who guided these important encounters.

Jeff, a proud deist and agnostic, made me stronger by forcing me to defend my faith. And he is the most knowledgeable non-Catholic about the Catholic faith you could ever know.

My wife was most instrumental in keeping my faith going in the right direction. Imagine a country girl with no church upbringing begging her mother to let her get on the church bus to take her to whichever church it was going to. Imagine an unbaptized and uncatechized person, knowing Mary was her spiritual mother. Imagine this same person as a young adult encouraging her wayward boyfriend to take her to church, every Sunday.

When we got married, I told her she was under no pressure to join the church, but nothing would make me happier. She said, "Yes," faster than she said, "Yes," when I proposed. Her childlike faith is inspiring and beautiful. I, on the other hand, as her sponsor, drove our RCIA instructor crazy with my endless string of questions. I learned more about my faith during those few sessions than I ever did in 18 years of Catholic upbringing. I became an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion and Lector and continued searching for and seeking answers to questions about my faith.

Things got really exciting when I moved my family here in 1998. We settled in Florence, joined St. Paul Catholic Church and I began a focused journey towards the diaconate, although I didn't

realize it at the time. Deacons Nick Schwartz and Jerry Franzen were recently ordained and assigned to St. Paul. Something about seeing them in the sanctuary, proclaiming the Gospel, occasionally preaching and setting the altar, drew me closer to the Mass. I wanted to learn more. My focus wasn't to become a deacon, it was to understand my faith more fully and more completely.

Finally in 2008, there was a deacon information meeting. I asked my wife if she would support me if I pursued this path. In her childlike faith, she said, "absolutely, as long as I don't have to do anything."

There were about twelve of us at the time. This list finally settled at seven and they were ordained in 2013. I was not one of them. I promised myself that if I wasn't chosen, that I would pursue an MBA at Thomas More, which I did. And that has served me well in my professional career. Then I was finally admitted to the deacon class of 2016. I've been a deacon now for six years.

I've asked many of my brother deacons if they were asked to be a deacon. All of them said, "Yes." I was never asked. But when I told people I was entering the deacon formation program, many said, "what took you so long?" Please, if you know someone who would make a good deacon or priest or married person or whatever, let them know that you see something in them. It may be the one thing that pushes them in that direction.

My faith journey hasn't ended. I still seek answers to my questions about our faith. I still find myself amazed at the beauty of God's creation and the depth of His love and mercy for His children. I am especially astounded at His Salvation History, how cleverly and lovingly it weaves and builds amid the chaos of human existence.

As for me, I still see myself searching for new and better ways to serve my brothers and sisters in the Diocese of Covington as a member of the Body of Christ. We are all members, with different talents and desires, yet all one body. And my passionate desire is still to understand my faith more fully and more completely, an effort that will never end until I'm face to face with my Lord and Savior.

And I owe it all to the many people who influenced me in good ways, but no one better than my wife, who has always loved, supported and encouraged me, no matter how badly I acted, no matter how undeserving I was. Along with the Holy Spirit, she is the one who has influenced me the most. I jokingly say that I am her purgatory. I know I'm hard to live with, but she never wavers in her love, support and care for me. When she goes to confession, her confessor says he's only polishing her halo before sending her on her way.

It has been said that the primary responsibility for a spouse is to get the other to heaven. I often describe my wife as the Proverbs 31 woman. Donna has done and is still doing her job, showing us all how to be a good wife and mother just as Mary was the perfect wife and mother. As Jesus pointed to those around Him, I point to my wife and say, "This one does the will of our heavenly Father." I guess it wasn't so difficult after all to determine who influenced me the most.