2000 Annual Conference
Sipple Award Winner

First Place

Mary Beth McCauley
The Philadelphia Inquirer
Incense and Gregorian chant this is not.
The lights are fluorescent. The coffee is plentiful. The phones ring nearly nonstop. The conversations overlap with an urgency more suggestive of commerce than of church.

But for the 6,000-plus who have called the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's 1-877-BLESS-ME line since November, the hotline has served as an ersatz confessional where they can tell their stories anonymously and confidentially to a priest.

Equipped with church resource book, Bible and desktop crucifix, the men in black work their ministry: '... that's a very common misconception' ... 'that's not sin' ... 'you say you're married?' ... 'it depends on the circumstances' ... 'I'll pray for you' ... 'no, no, no, God doesn't work that way.'

And always 'God bless you' ... 'God bless you' ... 'God bless you.'

The offbeat toll-free line is only part of the archdiocese's premillennium push to bring inactive or disaffected members back to the fold.

The archdiocese estimates that about two-thirds of its approximately 1.4 million baptized Catholics are not weekly churchgoers. The clergy liken their evangelization efforts to those of the father who reached out to welcome home his prodigal son.

Yesterday at the Villanova University Pavilion, Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua was to commission about 11,000 of the faithful who will call on each registered Catholic household in the archdiocese during the coming two months with a personal invitation to reconciliation with the church. Inactive Catholics who want to revisit the sacrament of penance will be invited to do so in one of 80 specially staffed churches that will host continuous confessions and special penance services on the March 20 weekend.

For Cardinal Bevilacqua, not just a few returnees will do. 'During World War II, five in my family were in the service. The goal of my mother was to have all of them come back,' he said.

Often, inactive Catholics want to reexamine the church in private and are reluctant to simply show up at the rectory door. For many of them, the
Bless Me line - accessible and anonymous - seems a godsend. In one hour recently, calls came from as far away as Pittsburgh and Illinois, which is not unusual, according to church officials.

Typically, the calls last 10 to 15 minutes. Although callers can't actually receive the sacrament of penance over the phone, those who need to unburden themselves get a good listen. As soon as callers ascertain that they are, in fact, talking to a priest, 'the floodgates open,' said the Rev. Michael Spitzer, one of three priests recently serving a second tour of Bless Me duty.

Many who call go away with the name and phone number of a sympathetic priest for spiritual counsel or confession. Others may be referred to a church program. Others receive clarification of church teaching or guidance in prayer.

In keeping with their promise to callers, the priests carefully guard the content of the calls. Msgr. Charles V. Devlin, archdiocesan vicar for renewal and evangelization, did say that they covered the spectrum of human concern: troubled relationships, sexuality, alcohol and drug addiction, abortion, illness, difficulty with prayer, parental exhaustion and so forth. Some have called simply for a priest's blessing. About 30 percent seek technical information about church policy on marriage, divorce and annulment.

The Rev. Jack Wintz, editor of Catholic Update and St. Anthony's Messenger, two Cincinnati-based Franciscan publications, called the hotline imaginative. A compassionate listener is key to bringing back nonpracticing Catholics, some of whom have been mistreated by the church, he said.

Still, for some inactive Catholics, a member of the clergy is the last person they want to talk to about religion. For them, the church has designed the lay-run Landings program, now offered in some 45 parishes in the archdiocese.

Landings lets people revisit the church anonymously, without feeling pressure to rejoin or 'stymied' by the presence of a priest or religious, said Sister Alice Elizabeth Grey. Though she oversees the Landings program at St. Dorothy's Parish in Drexel Hill, laypersons do the hands-on work.

For eight to 10 evenings in a parishioner's home, a handful of practicing Catholics share their stories with seekers drawn there, often, by ads in the local secular papers. They grapple with their notions of God and Jesus, of the church and the sacraments, of sin, forgiveness and suffering.

Some 90 percent who enroll in the St. Dorothy's program become regular churchgoers, she said. The rate is typical of Landings programs.

When they do return, it's often with a passion - but rarely with the zeal of Chuck Pizagno, a 55-year-old father of four and a chemist at Rohm & Haas for more than 30 years.

Pizagno heads the Landings program at St. Ignatius Church in Yardley. He also is among the volunteer evangelists being commissioned this weekend; is active in Promise Keepers and other groups; and makes regular, middle-of-the-night visits to his church for Eucharistic adoration.

'Despite the best Catholic education money could buy,' by the time he was in his early 30s, he said, 'I couldn't remember the last time I had been inside a church.' He had never taken issue with the church - had not, in fact, ever consciously left. He had simply drifted away to wrestle with life's issues privately and, he said, not very effectively.

A Protestant minister canvassing the neighborhood saw Pizagno outside painting his house one day and posed that favorite question of evangelizers: 'If you were to die today, would you go to heaven or hell?'

Pizagno invited the minister inside where, he said, the visitor 'opened my eyes to the scriptures that I had memorized in Catholic school but never understood.' So terrorized by a fear of death had he become at this point that Pizagno even skipped the funeral of a dear friend. He paid particular attention when the minister pointed him to John 3:36: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. . . .''

He joined the minister's congregation but later returned to Catholicism. Why? 'I really believe that Jesus is present in the Eucharist,' he said simply.
That feeling is not unusual.

"People, when they've been away, frequently say 'How I've missed the Eucharist. How I've missed the Mass,'" said Cardinal Bevilacqua. Even though much of church life has changed in recent decades, the sacraments have not, and they continue to exert a strong pull.

"The 'gentle face of the church' is also attracting people back," said the Rev. Arthur Chappell, chairman of the theology department at Villanova University. "It's a much more human face,'" not only in the church community, but also in the confessional, where, he said, the "judgmental Jesus" familiar to penitents past has given way to a theology of "Jesus as friend.'"

The Bless Me priests will generally steer callers to the local, "territorial" parishes where most Catholics worship. In contrast to the special-interest model, the territorial parish serves a specific geographic area and is intended to promote a sense of church as family in all facets of life, said the Rev. John Gabin, parochial vicar at St. Vincent de Paul Church, Richboro.

But there is no requirement that people worship locally, and many do not. Said the Rev. Daniel Mackle, director of the archdiocesan office for worship, "People will go where they are nourished, where they feel that their faith is supported.'"

For instance, St. Malachy's in North Philadelphia and St. Vincent's in Germantown are known for their social justice and community outreach programs. Presentation B.V.M. Church in Penn Wynne holds monthly Masses for charismatic Catholics. At other churches, worshipers will find Latin liturgy and strong Marian devotion.

Non-parish special-interest groups also celebrate Mass together, at least periodically. Among them are the Margaret Roper Forum in Gladwyne, originally established for the religious education of children, and the Catholic Worker members, who have Mass monthly at their House of Grace in North Philadelphia.

Some who consider themselves Catholic but who are at odds with the church over a specific Catholic teaching gather outside of the formal church to worship in what they sometimes term "the Roman Catholic tradition.'" Among these are Dignity, a group of homosexuals who worship Sunday evenings at St. Luke and the Epiphany Episcopal Church in Center City, as well as small groups whose worship is presided over by women.

Is it possible for former Catholics to reconcile with a church that they may feel is too rich, too harsh, tainted by scandal or chained to moral positions the rest of society abandoned decades ago?

"I've heard them all," Cardinal Bevilacqua said of the criticisms. But he said personal disagreements or bad experiences were shown not to be of great consequence in archdiocesan studies of why people stay away from the church. Of some 15 reasons cited, he said, the major cause reported has been, in essence, "I like to sleep in on Sunday mornings." The dropoff began after World War II, and as people became more affluent, morality less absolute and a sense of sin diminished, "they felt they did not need God as much,'" he said.

Since then, with the exception of the pedophilia scandals that have rocked the church, he said that many of the church's celebrated shortcomings have been due to simple human frailty. Grumpy and imperfect clergy have certainly damaged the church, he acknowledged. But he said he hoped that the faith of the laity could be stronger than the failings of individual priests, religious or laypersons.

"Jesus gave us the faith," he said. "The faith is in Him.'"

What if it's the church's teachings that trouble a potential returnee?

Can a person be Catholic if not convinced that abortion and contraception and euthanasia and capital punishment are wrong? The church does hold members responsible for following its teachings; people, when they receive holy communion, are supposed to be acknowledging their embrace of the whole faith.

Some teachings, like those on abortion, are considered absolute truth. Others are more like guidelines. Sometimes, the teachings are misunderstood, particularly those on remarriage and annulment.
To someone staying away from the church because of its position on a particular issue, the church would say, "Let's talk," said the cardinal. There may be more common ground than anticipated, he said.

"I think we have to be very, very understanding" of such seekers, he said, particularly during a time when popular culture — often at odds with church teaching — exerts such a strong force on people.

Many individual Catholics make a private peace with these differences. What is sin to the church may not be sin to the individual and thus may never reach the confessional. A believer may feel that the benefits of church membership outweigh doctrinal disagreements. Some even come to embrace the doctrines that troubled them initially.

On the Bless Me line, the conversation continues apace. By last month, the number of calls had so strained the supply of priests that Msgr. Devlin called for reinforcements. The archdiocese had planned to end the hotline after the March reconciliation weekend but now expects to run it indefinitely in some form.

The aim, he said, is not so much to get callers into the pews or to boost church coffers but "to bring the good news of Christ to their lives." When inactive Catholics call, his priests do ask if they are willing to "come home" to the church.

"Many are," he said.
Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin didn't know how to eulogize the lingerie clerk, but her coworkers did. As they described her friend's tenderness with mastectomy customers, he sensed that, even though he'd never met her, at the deepest level she had worked for God.

And then there was the rabbi's own angel of mercy, a friendly moving man who eased his departure from Doylestown. The man, a devout Christian, told the rabbi that ministering to the temporal needs of customers at a time when they were vulnerable and nervous was his quiet way of serving the Lord.


At Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Eugene Bay phrased things a bit differently in a recent sermon. He took up Paul's question in Acts 22:10: ''What am I to do, Lord?''

The pastor and the rabbi were talking about vocation, which, according to Mr. Bay, ''is far more important than the choice of occupation.'' It is, he said, not ''What do I want to do?'' but ''What is God calling me to do?''

While the classic Christian understanding of vocation is a calling to a life in the ministry, many lay people of different faiths apply the concept to sanctify their secular work as well. The intent is to use their talents to serve others and to be a witness for God's care, whether they speak openly of religion or not.

Gordon Gallup, cochairman of the Gallup polling organization and founder of the Princeton Religion Research Center, said the topic is timely. His center has found a marked increase since the mid-'80s in the amount of time people say they spend thinking about the purpose of their lives, he said, and he plans to survey them further about vocation and whether they think that God has a plan for them.

''It's an exploding movement,'' said Lake Lambert, a religion professor at Wartburg College, a Lutheran school in Iowa. Lambert is writing a book about spirituality and work and found 55 other books written on the topic
between 1994 and 1997. Some of them muddle the teaching, he said.

'Some say a calling is work that makes you feel good about yourself, a
self-improvement kind of thing. But the tradition is this is not about you;
it's about using your gifts and talents to serve others.'

But selling bras? Hauling bedroom suites?

Actually, the nature of such work makes it all the more a spiritual
vocation for some. In the Bible, God provides his people with such basics
as clothing and shelter, and the serious Jew would do well to follow that
example in his own life, Rabbi Salkin said.

So, too, the Christian. Said Mr. Bay, one's vocation "is likely to have
something to do with service, something to do with losing your life so as
to find it.'

The Bible brims with vocation stories, about God's calling an assortment
of everyday people - Moses, the woman at the well, Jesus' disciples - to
lives of service. The key aspect of the call is what Ignatius described as
"the Creator acting directly on the heart. . . . It is always God who
called first,'" said Sister Catherine Quinn, a Catholic nun who is a
longtime spiritual director.

The same dialogue takes place today, she said, with God often using life
experience as an attention-getter. One may feel called to a radical
response, to 'sell everything and give to the poor,'" for instance. But
more typically, the call is to holiness manifested 'within the structure
of our lives,'" she said.

One will enter social work or teaching or medicine or another
"helping" profession. Another will work long hours at something less
obvious, slowly positioning himself to help others.

But how does the religious believer know a call is from God and not from
his own ego or imagination? And how is he supposed to respond?

"You don't just go away and pray and come back and say 'I'm at peace
with a decision.' The interior call has to be tested," said Sister
Catherine. "If you're considering taking a major step in your life, and
especially if (it is) something in the name of God, talk to your friends.
Listen to what good people have to say to you.'"

For example, selling everything and giving to the poor may on its face
seem a Godly thing to do. On the other hand, it may simply be an abandoning
of responsibility - a response to the ego, not the divine, the nun said. A
critical part of discernment is asking 'Is this decision likely to have
positive effects not only on my life but on the lives of those it would
affect?'

Sometimes, vocation is a matter of simple and inexplicable attraction,
'like the apple that shines brighter than any other for that person,'" said the Rev. Msgr. Stephen McHenry, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Roman
Catholic Church, Ambler. Such work "feels right," even though the person
"may not realize that it is the spiritual dynamic at work," he said.

There may be a special 'call within a larger call,' as when a
clergyman develops a ministry to the hearing-impaired, for example, or when
a mother routinely bakes for bereaved families, or when a man works
enthusiastically to raise money for the Little League.

A 'calling' is not a Jewish term, but neither is it at odds with the
faith. 'All of our work can become ways to make God's voice heard in the
world,' said Rabbi Salkin.

Rabbi Howard Addison of Temple Sinai in Dresher concurred and offered a
story:

'Three men are working on a construction project.
'One of them is asked, 'What are you doing?' 'Schlepping bricks,' he
answers.
'The next is asked, 'What are you doing?' 'Making $3.50 an hour,' he
says.
'The third is asked, 'What are you doing?' 'Building a shrine to the
presence of God,' he replies.'
The idea of cloaking his life's work in the theological concept of vocation makes lawyer Gerard St. John wince. He puts it more plainly: "If you believe something, you ought to act as if you believe it."

St. John, 62, a Catholic and the father of six, has for decades used the opportunities presented by his profession to express the ethical principles of his faith. And even as he mulls early retirement, he does so within a classic framework of call and discernment.

The Drexel Hill lawyer grew up in Mayfair, the son of a mail carrier, and was graduated from La Salle High School and St. Joseph's College. He spent four years as a Marine Corps officer before returning home to marry his wife, Catherine, work for the city redevelopment authority by day, and attend Temple law school by night.

It was the threat of the draft, not the voice of God, that called him to the Marines, he said. But he came out of the experience grounded in an adult faith that was born of the constant prospect of battle and of his assignment of seeing to the religious needs of his company.

St. John also emerged with an interest in law, piqued by his work in court-martial cases. He spent his career with Schnader, Harrison, Segal and Lewis, where he is a retired partner.

In the 1970s, when knee-deep in parenthood and work, he read Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning. It awakened him to the idea that his faith could require something more and set him on a course of spiritual reading and applied religion that continues today.

He had no "road to Damascus" epiphany, just a growing "sense of the importance of the spiritual world as well as the 'real' world (and that) where they could be blended, they ought to be." The worlds intersected for him in the St. Thomas More Society, a professional organization of Catholic lawyers and judges. He is an active member and a past president.

The society, he said, "serves as a kind of Jiminy Cricket to remind people that there were moral issues inextricably tied to legal issues," he said. The group makes its views known on euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, education and similar topics, and sponsors retreats and other spiritual activities.

The law is his livelihood but not his destiny, he said. He hopes his religious values play out not only in what he does but in how he does it, in things like "demeanor, manner, choice of words," in shunning "'hardball tactics.'" To him, all this is "part and parcel of doing unto
Edward Chacker, chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, has worked with St. John for years and remarks on his consistent "inner peace." He listens without interrupting, even when he disagrees, said Chacker, and when he finally comments, it is "always in a positive fashion." And while obviously a man of strong faith, he never "pushes" it, Chacker said.

St. John said he was not sure it means "a hill of beans" to God whether his retirement is spent in the law or not, at his former breakneck speed or at a slower pace, teaching, writing, mediating or doing more pro bono work. Nevertheless, he will pray for insight about it, and draw on this Ignatian exercise:

"What decision do you believe God wants you to make? What advice would you give a trusting friend facing a situation like this? If you were looking back on your own life after your death, what would you wish you had done?"

_end Sidebar # 1_

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Sidebar # 2

When God calls one-half of a married couple, both may need to answer. Such was the case for Damaris Cortes, 46, of Olney, mother of two, member of the First Spanish Baptist Church and Philadelphia public school teacher.

Cortes grew up during the 1960s and '70s in a high-rise housing project in New York City's Spanish Harlem, one of three children of a single mother. After graduating from NYU's Lehman College, she married Luis, whom she had met at her church.

Her husband was accepted at Columbia University Law School soon after their marriage, and the new bride had visions of prestige and economic comfort. Never mind that Luis had always felt called to the ministry, that
until the offer from Columbia, both had planned for him to attend seminary. Damaris Cortes pushed and pulled for the Ivy League, argued and cajoled, trying to get Luis to see things her way.

Finally one evening, he retreated to the closet-like space in their apartment where he went to study and pray, and emerged an hour later, eyes "beet red" from crying. He asked her, she recalled, to "go back and search my heart."

"I will never forget his words: 'You cannot allow Satan to get in the way' of his vocation to the ministry, she recalled.

"I always knew in the back of my mind: 'You're messing with something you shouldn't be messing with.' " She went for a walk, and returned to ask forgiveness of her husband and of God "for being such a stumbling block."

It was the only time in their marriage, said Cortes, that the couple strongly disagreed about where God was calling either. In the following years, the Corteses have come to view marital harmony as perhaps the single greatest way of distinguishing a "temptation" from a true call from God.

The harmony was there when she decided to stay home to raise her children, even when the rest of the world disagreed. "People said, 'You have your degree. Are you crazy?' But (full-time motherhood) became my mission. I knew the teaching was going to come back, and the time and place was going to be shown to me."

So while her husband ministered to the outside world, she made the family's life her priority, turning dinnertime into "a sacred time," she said, of prayer, rejuvenation and conversation. The mission of full-time motherhood lasted 10 years. It was tested by flattering job offers. But not until her youngest was in school full-time was she finally sure it was time to teach - work she had felt since grade school would be her way of serving God.

Talk of God is banned in the public schools, Cortes said, but it's the desire to serve Him that brings her and some of the other teachers to Kensington's Taylor School, where she teaches a split third and fourth grade.

Karen Kolsky, Taylor's acting principal, said Cortes "believes so much in her kids. She takes them under her wing and flies with them."

Every morning, after dropping off her son at high school, Cortes begins her prayers. "Lord, here I am," she'll say, asking Him to return her son and his friends and her family safely home. "I pray for this person... I give thanks... I hold up that friend. I don't move until I've commended everyone to Him." She continues her prayer all the way to the schoolhouse door, where she asks that God "help me give these children what they need today."

And then? "And then I go in and teach."
As Capt. Willie Williams sees it, the fire department's world of big boots, loud sirens and flashy trucks is as much ministry as macho. It isn't just pulling children from flames or stabilizing old folks with chest pains. It's also bringing compassion and hope to people facing chaos.

For him, effectiveness comes from prayer.

A fire begun by one woman's suicide attempt was typical, he said. Coming upon her body while groping his way to her smoky basement, Williams knew that procedure allowed him a choice: Go get someone to assist with CPR, or shout for help and begin the job by himself.

The woman had no pulse. Her face was covered with vomit, which she had aspirated. She reeked of pine oil, which she had swallowed.

"I was scared. Do you stay or do you run?" he recalled. "I'm asking myself, 'Am I really going to make a difference? Do I really want to put my mouth on her face?'"

As Williams cleared the woman's airway and tilted her head back, he began almost automatically to pray. "I was saying, 'Heavenly Father, thank You for this opportunity to come into Your divine presence. I want to offer You this prayer for this lady, who needs Your assistance. I pray that You use me as an instrument of Your will, so that I can provide her with the definitive care that she needs.'"

In this case, the victim lived, he said, and his hope was that she "had the opportunity to think that someone cared about her -- to give her hope, that she may pass it along to someone else."

"God's grace" allowed him to focus and think clearly in the face of an overwhelming temptation to panic, he said. Any healing that resulted was not a reflection of his own abilities but "a testimony to God's grace and His mercy."

Williams has done it all -- firefighter, paramedic, even PR -- during his 25 years with the department. At present, he's in a desk job, his responsibilities ranging from discipline problems to charity endeavors. He is on the department's death-notification team, which steps in when a member is killed on the job. And he is known in the department as one who will lend a sympathetic ear on a bad day.

Williams sees the department's role as one of servant. En route to a scene, he has routinely prayed, asking God to "to get me in the right frame of mind, to put my fears aside so I could do what I needed to be doing." He helps those who seek him out to do the same thing.

He said that even in routine calls, much agony occurs after a fire is out, and such suffering can be eased by a firefighter whose prayer leads
him to be compassionate — to take extra time explaining damage, for instance, or to respect the belongings of even the very poor, to announce their deaths carefully, not as just one more "smoking-in-bed."

When he has sensed that a victim was a person of faith, Williams has tentatively offered to read Scripture or pray together.

And sometimes victims ask for prayer. He recalled one man with congestive heart failure who pleaded, "Please pray for me." So as he worked, Williams prayed. Again, he started by giving thanks. He asked that "You would help comfort and calm him, and help him not focus on the physical realm but focus on You, Lord."

He asked that the patient stop struggling and accept the care the paramedics administered, until "we can get him safe into the hospital and get him stabilized."

Williams sees a higher purpose in every encounter, regardless of its outcome. He recalled the calm acceptance of one woman, in particular, who was riding to the hospital with her dying husband. With paramedics all around her working the "code," she prayed.

"She said, 'Lord, You placed him in my life. He belongs to You. I know You miss him.' That acceptance she had stayed with me, until it's my time to go home," Williams said.

Sometimes, when the offer of prayer is clearly inappropriate or when a family declines it, Williams prays for healing in silence, asking that something in the situation will touch those involved.

In truly tragic cases, when even the strongest believer questions his faith, Williams said he turns to Paul's words in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God. . . ." He remembered one child so badly crushed by a car that he could hear the boy's bones crunch when he tried CPR. He knew no way to comfort the parents that day. But he believes that "God can use any instance for His glory, to draw people back together . . . to help heal a family. . . . Even the most devastating situation (may be) someone's road to Damascus."

The Rev. Maurice Hughes, pastor of New Bethel A.M.E. Church in Germantown, is informal chaplain of the Philadelphia police and coordinator of the department's police-clergy program. He said he has no doubt that intercessory prayer such as Williams' can "cause a situation to completely change." He has repeatedly witnessed such results, he said, although the "how" remains a mystery. At the intersection of heaven and earth "there is an unknown," he said, accessed "only through faith."

Williams, 48, is married and the father of five daughters. Raised Baptist, he went to church regularly until age 12. Though always a believer, he resisted churchgoing through much of his adult life, not wanting to seem "like a yokey-dokey guy walking around in a plaid shirt with a Bible."

He returned when he was on the verge of a divorce. He began reading the Bible and attending Bible study at the large Christian Stronghold Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. Still married, he has worshiped there ever since.

Other believers in the department proved his "yokey-dokey" stereotype false long ago, he said, and showed that brawn and prayerfulness could coexist.

Williams doesn't believe the more overtly religious members of his department are all that different from the rest.

"To a man and to a lady," he said, "when they roll up someplace and see people trapped, they're all praying for the strength and the courage to get those people out alive."

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Caption:
PHOTO

PHOTO
The Rev. Joseph Laenen is perhaps the most unlikely member of Fitzgerald-Mercy Hospital's dozen-person code team.

At 74, the hospital chaplain usually visits the sick at his own pace. But when a patient is in distress, the team comes running, day or night. On some on-call nights, he may be summoned two or three times. Other nights he gets to sleep through.

The team members work side by side. While the medical people swab the patient with antiseptics, the priest anoints him with holy oils. While they order testing, he prays for healing.

Father Laenen's prayer is part of the Anointing of the Sick, the Roman Catholic sacrament intended to heal soul or body or both. He prays, "Through this holy anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. . . . May the Lord who forgives you from sin save you and raise you up."

In emergencies, the sacrament doesn't always go by the book but melds into an odd mix of intonation and intubation, chest compressions and signs of the cross.

"Sometimes, if I can't get to the head, I need to anoint maybe an arm," he said.

The sacrament follows the directive of Scripture: "Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil . . . and the prayer of faith will save the sick person" (James 5:14-15).

The anointings flow as freely as the intravenous fluids at the Catholic hospital in Darby, and they usually take place under nonemergency conditions.

"As a rule," said Father Laenen, "we offer the sacrament to every Catholic here. I tell the patient it is 'medicine from heaven.' It helps always."

Sometimes, he said, it helps a patient accept his illness. Sometimes it
helps calm him. Some patients balk at the offer, remembering the "last rites" of another age, given only when death was imminent.

That rite was replaced by the current sacrament 25 years ago, the priest said. Its curative powers make this one "first rites," not last, he tells patients. Thus, he likes to anoint them early in their stay.

Catherine Rafa, a 24-year-old being treated for kidney troubles, said her recent anointing left her with "a comforting feeling. I don't know how to describe it. I feel I know that the doctors are doing the right thing."

Father Laenen, a native of Belgium, is a Norbertine priest who spent much of his life as a missionary in Africa. He has been at Fitzgerald-Mercy for 15 years, part of a five-member pastoral care team.

Some 75 percent of those at the 434-bed hospital are Catholic, and the priest estimated that about 90 percent of them will be anointed. The sacrament can be given to any seriously ill Catholic, so patients who are readmitted or suffering a setback may receive it again. The church considers it especially important for people in imminent danger of death.

The priest begins the sacrament by laying his hands on the patient's head to invoke the protection of the Lord. He then dips his thumb in oil that has been blessed at a special Holy Thursday Mass, and makes the sign of the cross on the patient's forehead and on the palms of the hands. He may also anoint other parts of the body - a painful or injured area, for example.

The church believes that through the anointing, the Holy Spirit graces a patient with strength and peace, and with the courage to overcome the self-absorption and discouragement that can tempt the sick. The sacrament affords forgiveness if the patient has sinned. It also joins the patient's suffering with that of Jesus and gives it meaning despite its apparent purposelessness.

When the sacramental anointing is finished, those present say the Lord's Prayer, and then the rite continues with any of a number of blessings. The priest may ask for comfort, for example, praying, "When he is afraid, give him courage; when afflicted, give him patience; when dejected, afford him hope; and when alone, assure him of the support of Your holy people."

For the elderly, he may pray, "God of mercy, look kindly on your servant, who has grown weak under the burden of years." For a child, he prays that God "caress him, shelter him, and keep him in Your tender care."

For one entering surgery, he asks that "through the skills of surgeons and nurses, Your healing gifts may be granted."

For those not baptized Catholic, the chaplain says the blessings, but skips the sacramental anointing.

The small green prayerbook Father Laenen carries is a virtual apothecary of blessings. Marked with the priest's scribbled adaptations of the formal prayers, it serves as a repository for bits and pieces of paper, each bearing a prayer he wants to have at the ready. There are prayers for mothers, for their children, for hospital staff, even for student nurses.

The chaplain's prayer frames the day for the entire hospital. There's morning prayer over the public address system at 9, Mass in the chapel at noon, blessing of the new babies and their mothers at 6 p.m., evening prayer at 9 p.m. In between, the chaplain moves lightly through his rounds, cajoling and eliciting smiles as he anoints, gives communion and hears confessions.

Even at death, family members take solace in knowing that the patient was either anointed before he died or commended to God in prayer after death, Father Laenen said.

He often sits with patients' waiting or grieving families in the emergency room, sometimes to pray with them, sometimes as a "silent presence."

Especially when a young person dies suddenly, he allows the family to leave reality behind briefly by asking about the person's job or parish: "normal talking, not yet talking about death."

There in the emergency room, the priest's "medicine from heaven" often comes with a simple human balm: "When they are looking for Kleenex, it's a silly thing but I rush around for Kleenex. And it's a consolation for them that, when they need it, they have that Kleenex in their hand."
In the Vineyards of Prayer

Text:

The Rev. Francis Meehan has taken his share of cold showers since promising to live as a celibate priest 37 years ago. He has mourned the children he never had and the joy he never experienced making those children. He has ached for a wife, wrestled in prayer, and questioned and requestioned his own calling when good friends left the priesthood to marry.

All the while, he has watched as esteem for the Roman collar plummeted.

Still, the 62-year-old Catholic priest is convinced - on most days, anyway - that he'd do the same thing all over again.

Pastor for the last decade of the bustling SS. Simon and Jude Parish in the boom 'burbs of Chester County, he has learned to savor parish life.

"I guess I have come to appreciate the word Father. It's an affectionate term," one that aptly characterizes the spiritual care and feeding he presides over at Simon and Jude.

He has also come to revel in the time he allows himself each day to "soak up the Lord" in prayer, in a relationship he credits largely to friends who pushed and prodded his prayer life along over the years.

Up in Doylestown, meanwhile, the Rev. Philip Bochanski, 25, is all earnest and green, having been ordained just in May. At Our Lady of Mount Carmel, another huge and growing parish, he keeps busy burying and baptizing and presiding over youth ministry.

October is Clergy Appreciation Month, a time when people are being asked to reflect on the contributions and daily stresses of ministers, priests and rabbis. For Catholic clergy, one of the most immediate challenges can be celibacy.

Father Bochanski, though, said that celibacy makes his work easier and that he would choose it even if it were optional.

"If I were married, my first responsibility would have to be to my wife.
and children," he said. In giving up marriage, celibates take on a
different kind of relationship, one that encompasses the larger church:
"That person in front of me is the church, and I'm called to be totally
available to that person for the time I am with him."

At this point, the profusion of life in the parish satisfies Father
Bochanski's parental inclinations. A quick visit to the kindergarten is all
he needs to boost his spirits.

He finds great satisfaction in being the kind of happy, out-and-around
priest he remembers from his own childhood. Not that he doesn't sometimes
wish for marriage - certainly for the sexual part, but even more for the
intimacy of coming home to a wife and soulmate at the end of a draining
day. "It is lonely sometimes."

Is it possible to sustain such a life?
By turning often to God, both priests said, it is.
"I think a lot of people don't think we live up to our promises, but the
vast majority do," said Father Bochanski.

For the rookie, hormones fully engaged, the battle is day-to-day, and he
tries to recognize and avoid situations that might torpedo his good
intentions. A penitent suddenly free from her sin, for example, can make
him feel quite the hero, until he reminds himself that the forgiveness came
from God.

"I've been attracted many times" since entering St. Charles Borromeo
Seminary, where dating is prohibited, Father Bochanski said. "But you don't
get through it by avoiding it. It's not done on sheer willpower. You need
to be open and honest with God and say, 'This is what happened to me, and
this is how I feel, and what I believe is pulling me in opposite
directions.'"

Though he presents such situations briefly to God throughout the day, he
reviews them more thoroughly at night, when he examines his conscience in
light of the day's events. Sometimes a peace comes, while at other times
there's a knowledge of "you're not there yet."

The relationship itself, not just the act of praying, seems to be the
key: He made a promise to God to live this way. His relationship with God
sustains that commitment. He trusts and expects that God will give him what
he needs to live up to his end of the bargain.

Father Meehan, from his vantage point, believes that a kind of honeymoon
shelters younger men from the realities of celibacy, even though their
hormonal struggles may be fiercer.

"In the late 30s and 40s, the rose-colored glasses come off and you
suddenly realize you're alone, single, and flying against the ordinary
lifestyle. You begin to have doubts and wonderings. It takes a while to
kind of settle your heart and say, 'I'm here and I'm glad to be here.'"

There were times he "longed for forms of intimacy I was not allowed."

But trying to avoid women in order to protect himself would be adopting a
"clericalism" that Father Meehan, a former professor at St. Charles
Borromeo Seminary, and his colleagues taught their students to avoid, he
said.

"I was blessed with wonderful friendships with women - married, single
and religious. . . . It's been a tremendous gift to me, and a help to my
celibacy," he said. His friends have respected his vows and he theirs, and
he believes the friendships have helped him grow into "almost a serenity of
heart."

Father Meehan also said a priest's obligation is to be open and
vulnerable to those who need him, thus ruling out the self-contained,
"bachelor priest" lifestyle. Savoring life's "little givings and
receiving" helps celibates avoid becoming obsessed with the "orgasmic
moment," be it literal or figurative, he said.

So the pastor strives to drink in the ordinary flow of life. He basks in
a compliment about a homily, for instance, rather than tossing it off. He
is truly grateful for an evening spent with a friend having dinner. He
appreciates the structure and discipline of parish life that gives form to
his own.

Father Meehan also appreciates the day-to-day structure of the
priesthood, which calls for prayer that is meaningful, for enjoying the
Eucharist, and for participating several times daily in the formal prayer of the church, when he said he often commiserates with the psalmists, wondering "Where are You, God? The water is up to my neck!"

"In a sense," he said, "there is an emptiness in the celibate life" that, when acute, signals the need to be showered with more than cold water, a feeling of "Geez, I've got to soak up some of the gifts of the Lord or I'm going to be really bereft."

Take and Receive

(This prayer by St. Ignatius is one of Father Meehan's favorites.)

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will - all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To You, Lord, I return it.

Everything is Yours; do with it what You will. Give me only Your love and Your grace. That is enough for me.
Rivka Danzig teaches graduate students at Penn. She has a thriving psychotherapy practice. She has been known to search the world over for a way out of a medical quagmire.

The 47-year-old Ph.D. from Wynnewood knows how to operate in this world. But though she has no trouble making her own voice heard, some of her most important speech makes use of the words of others.

When she gets up or goes to bed, when she starts a meal and ends it, when she sees a rainbow, reunites with a long-lost friend, even goes to the bathroom, Danzig recites the prescribed Jewish blessing, or berakhah. The blessings are taken from the Talmudic tractate Berakhot, considered the most useful of the ancient rabbis' writings on prayer.

"Everything we do is preceded by, and often ended by, prayers that evoke God's name," said Danzig, a lifelong Orthodox Jew.

There are blessings for food, drink and other things that are enjoyed, for good health and other cause to thank and praise, and for required religious activities such as the lighting of the Sabbath candles. At times, the blessings are hugely practical, said Danzig, the mother of three. When hearing thunder, for instance, she prays, "Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the universe, for His strength and His power fill the world."

"Isn't that better than (telling a fearful child), 'God is bowling'?"

Danzig recites her berakhot aloud, but quietly, in Hebrew. If someone overhears the entire prayer of another, he may respond "amen." In so doing, he fulfills his own requirement for the prayer.

The ancient rabbis dictated that the blessings not be made by rote but with kavana - "with a full heart and with full intentionality," explained Danzig. The heart is to be directed to heaven, the mind fixed on God.

"In some senses, it's a very behavioralistic model" in which the familiarity of a beloved prayer can lead an otherwise barren heart to fill, she said. Conversely, an overflowing heart can trigger the desire to pray just as effectively as a religious requirement can.
Danzig said she agreed with the ancient rabbis' belief that individuals should not be the ones who decide when or whether to pray: "Let's say you're not in the mood. Well, whether you're in the mood or not, this is what you need to do." Of what motivates her, she said simply, "After 47 years, either you buy into this or not."

The blessings are not just for the Orthodox but "are relatively commonly made" by Jews of all traditions who seek to "be engaging of God" in everyday life, said Rabbi Saul Berman, who teaches at Stern College of Yeshiva University and Columbia University School of Law. He said the better-known berakhot are said so often they are committed to memory, while the more obscure ones can be looked up in the Jewish prayerbook called the Siddur.

How they are handled in public depends on the situation, Rabbi Berman said. If people nearby would understand them and join in, they'd likely be said out loud. Not so among strangers, where the prayer would be said in an undertone that could go unnoticed.

For Danzig, the berakhot are just part of what she called "a 24-hour religion."

She and her family dress modestly. She keeps her head covered except when alone or with her husband. They use no phone, TV, car, electricity or pagers on the Sabbath, and do not work on the Sabbath or on holidays. She follows the Jewish dietary laws and keeps a kosher kitchen. "I never ate a McDonald's hamburger," she said.

"The goal is God-awareness throughout life," and the blessings foster that, she said. "They transform the mundane and the commonplace — eating and drinking — into the more spiritual."

Danzig doesn't use only the words of her ancestors when she prays; she also improvises.

"I always talk to God," she said. "I believe very much in intercessory prayer."

She prays in her own words and believes that God hears and responds. She believes that her 13-year-old daughter, who developed cancer at age 5, is alive today because of the outpouring of such prayer, not just her own but that of family, friends and the Congregation Beth Hamedrosh in Overbrook Park, where the Danzigs are members.

Especially on the Sabbath, Danzig tries to make 100 blessings a day, as Jewish tradition recommends. She has said millions of the berakhot over the years.

Although the words are always the same, the events that elicit them can be unforgettable.

Such was the case the day before her older son became bar mitzvah. Anticipation high and plans ready, Danzig got a sudden phone call saying that her mother had been killed in a car accident en route to Pennsylvania for the event.

"Blessed art Thou God, true judge," she said immediately in Hebrew.

Her religion dictated that those words be said upon hearing of tragedy. But this was not a knee-jerk exclamation of shock. "It's not an 'oh my God' kind of thing," she said. It was an acknowledgment "that God is running the show," a time-honored affirmation of belief and resolve, at once a proclamation of faith and a fresh discovery of it.

The integrity of the words carried her. "That's why I'm convinced that the rabbis and sages really laid out the formulas for the benedictions and we're not supposed to change them," she said.

The next day, the now-inappropriate synagogue celebration canceled, the congregation put together a makeshift sanctuary in the family's home and the boy made his rite of passage quietly, at a suddenly bittersweet service.

"It was the most schizophrenic thing," she recalled. "I had no idea what God had in mind there. It's one thing to celebrate rainbows," she said, quite another to declare God in control of tragedy.

Things were different, though, when her daughter's turn came. That the girl would even live to become bat mitzvah had seemed impossible seven years earlier, when she was thought unlikely to survive a brain tumor. So
this time the clan celebrated with abandon. The revelers choked back tears of happiness.

The mother - who knew well that God was the judge - now prayed the standard berakah for joy: "Blessed is God, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this point." The guests, hearing the praise, cried "amen."

Said Danzig, "It was a glorious moment."
If joy has a face, it must look like Virginia Pollard's.

Making music with her choir, the conductor with the radiant countenance points, prompts, sculpt and contours until finally, head back, palms up and arms outstretched, she lifts an invisible masterpiece, and offers it to God like an oblation.

"There's something about music," Pollard said of her offering. "The medium of music helps you to leave the cares of this world behind - to leave where you are emotionally and to take you to a higher realm."

At times this power so overwhelms the soprano that she can't even sing. "Sometimes I become so moved that I begin to cry, because the words touch my inner being."

That emotion, to her, is what lifts sacred song above ordinary prayer. "Many times when I pray, it's simply talking to God," she said. But with song, "He feels the emotion that's coming from the heart, even those things we may not be able to say."

This full heart is a central part of a continuing give-and-take between the musician and her Lord as together they create music. God fills her heart up, she said, and she empties herself out to Him in song.

At 50, Pollard is minister in charge of music at the 500-member Zion Baptist Church in Ardmore. She is the pastor's wife and is herself a licensed minister studying for ordination at Lutheran Theological Seminary. And she is a member, soloist and frequent director of her church's senior choir.

At a recent Tuesday evening rehearsal, she helped the senior choir director, Claratti Boggs, teach a new Christmas piece, "Call Him Messiah."

The dozen singers present, many of them senior citizens, braved the painstakingly repetitive process with varying degrees of confidence and skill, some bashful, some hesitant. Patiently, Pollard helped to deliver them of the song, encouraging them to stretch and push.

Finally, after a long evening, and despite competition from the drums
and cymbals of the gospel choir rehearsal next door, the little band of seniors had wrapped up a magnificent Christmas present for their fellow congregants.

However pleasing it may be, said director Boggs, sacred music "is not entertainment. It's ministry," which should bring worshipers understanding so they somehow "leave different than they walked in that day." When, like Pollard, the musician aims to stay close to God, then her ministry is enhanced by the Holy Spirit, Boggs said.

Pollard's vocal gifts and classical training earned her a full music scholarship to Temple University. But she cut short her performing career after graduation in 1972, to the consternation of her voice teacher, who had her pegged for great things in opera.

She chose marriage and motherhood over life on the road, but she never stopped singing - not at home, in the family's makeshift productions and jazz sessions, not even at work as the admissions secretary at Bryn Mawr Hospital, where she demonstrates daily how song can boost the spirits.

For Christians struggling in the world today, she said, "the songs we sing give us hope: There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus." Even the Old Testament Scriptures recount the calming effects of music on the tormented King Saul, she said, citing 1 Samuel 16:23: "Whenever the spirit from God seizes Saul, David would take the harp and play, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, for the evil spirit would leave him."

Sometimes, songs give hope because of their Scripture-based lyrics, as when a "sweet, sweet melody" draws the heart to part of the Word, said Pollard. And often, a person who feels silly repeating words over and over is entirely comfortable repeating or humming a song that carries the same religious meaning, she said.

"Even though you are in the world, you don't have to get bogged down by it," she said. "I have a choice. I can say, 'Oh God, I don't know if I can make it through another day.' Or I have the ability to turn that around."

She recalled a stressed-out coworker who first balked, but later couldn't resist a smile, as Pollard sang encouragement to her "...I don't believe You brought me this far to leave me... " When Pollard became too busy to sing her usual daily rendition of the nursery school favorite "Good Morning to You," coworkers asked what was wrong.

Sometimes, she hears the voice of God anew in a familiar hymn, and as a result, resolves a nagging question or senses an answer to prayer. When her oldest son was considering an expensive college, but she and her husband were worried about affording the same thing for younger siblings, she heard in a particularly pointed way at one Wednesday night service a hymn verse that said "whatever you need, He will provide. God will take care of you."

"I got a perfect peace," she recalled, and her younger sons wound up not only with college, but with professional and graduate education as well.

Secular music can be sacred also, Pollard believes. "I believe that all music is inspired by God... In a sense, music is an outward reflection of God's love for us. It pours out as the essence of Him. If we have a relationship with Him, we want to give back."

Zion Baptist might be Carnegie Hall for the patience Pollard brings to the "giving back": Not even the seemingly minor choir housekeeping details were rushed. There were illegible lyrics to be fixed, calendars to be cleared, subscriptions to be ordered and tape recording to be done.

For Pollard, the sound of the music is just one aspect of the whole. Music and fellowship are both essential for the "coming together of the total ministry," she said.

Late into the evening, and long after finishing her day job, her face still shone for the many at Zion Baptist who needed a word or two with her as they headed home.

The pastor's wife said her music changes her. "It helps me to be more patient, more loving, more insightful into the needs of others, more pleasant. It gives you a joy."

"Anyone can sing. But the relationship with the Lord is what lifts you up."