



# A Teacher's Inspiration

*The framed quote*  
 on the bathroom counter tucked between the hair curler and toothbrushes had picked up a few soap stains and globs of toothpaste over the years, but its message was still very clear:

**“A hundred years from now  
 it will not matter  
 what my bank account was,  
 the sort of house I lived in,  
 or the kind of car I drove.  
 But the world may be different,  
 because I was important  
 in the life of a child.”**

I learned later it was a quote of Forest Whitaker, who spent his time making a difference in the life of young people through the Boy Scouts of America, but it spoke to the heart of my mother, who worked as a school speech pathologist, and served as answer to a wonderful muse of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., which you also may have come across:

Nothing is more practical  
 Than finding God,  
 Than falling in Love  
 in a quite absolute, final way.  
 What you are in love with,  
 what seizes your imagination,  
 will affect everything.  
 It will decide what will  
 get you out of bed in the morning,  
 what you do with your evenings,  
 how you spend your weekends,  
 what you read, whom you know,  
 what breaks your heart,  
 and what amazes you  
 with joy and gratitude.  
 Fall in Love, stay in love,  
 and it will decide everything.

## How to REAP vocations in the classroom

I believe that my mother was in love with the children she worked with. It got her out of bed in the mornings. And on the mornings when she was a bit more tired due to the late night shenanigans of her own children (it was always my brothers), she had a reminder framed to help her get the day started.

Her story is no different than yours. You are a teacher because you love children. You get out of bed in the morning with a desire to help your students discover more about themselves and the world they live in.

Speech therapists don't provide thoughts for their students, rather they help their students learn and use words to communicate what they already hold within. This is a great way of understanding the inner workings of the Holy Spirit in the life of a young person. God is at work in their lives

and they count on teachers to help them give voice to that activity. These are two fundamental truths to be remembered and reinforced:

**First: God has a plan for each and every student.** Vocation is defined as "a calling." God reassures young Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. A prophet to the nations I appointed you" (Jer 1:5). It is important for those who are entrusted with shaping and molding young lives to truly receive this truth, so I invite you to prayerfully read again this assurance from the Lord, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." Let that truth sink way in to your minds so that it affects the way you look at each and every student. God has had a plan for the life of your students before they were born, and for some of them that will be life as a religious sister, brother, or priest. Not every young person is called to a

religious vocation, but all of them should consider it and this guide is meant to help you help them with that consideration.

*We need only to go  
and reap what God  
has already sown.*

### **Second: Students will need help making sense of that calling.**

Treat yourself to a few minutes with the story of young Samuel. It can be found in the First Book of Samuel, Chapter Three. Notice how Samuel turns to Eli, his mentor and teacher, to make sense of the calling he is experiencing. Note, too, how easy Eli's job is. He reassures his student that it is God calling, and then he teaches Samuel what words to use when he hears that voice again. Today's teachers will find it is still easy to help a student make sense of God's calling.

And why shouldn't it be? Jesus gave us simple instructions regarding vocations: "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Luke 10:2). We need only to go and reap what God has already sown. That's it. REAP. So, we will use that acronym to explain four steps, which will assist you as a mentor and guide for young people. What can be more fulfilling than knowing you guided a student along their God-given path in life?

## *Recognize*

To recognize something requires us to be in a good space so we might be able to take note of the "other" in our presence. If we are too caught up with our own stuff, we will not notice others around us. Teachers must find an inner

peace in their classroom routine. It can be a challenge amidst busy schedules to be more than knowledge transmitters, however, it is eternally rewarding. As a teacher, you often spend more waking hours with students than their own parents do. That puts you in a unique position to pick up on the signs of a religious vocation in your students, who send out these signals as they tackle tough academic and life issues.

There will be many qualities present from an early age. However, this guide will assist you in recognizing the signs of a possible Religious Vocation in middle and high school classrooms.

Look for these qualities, which can begin to emerge in younger students...

- ✧ Interacting and relating well with others
- ✧ Openness and interest in serving others
- ✧ Compassion
- ✧ Ability to forgive
- ✧ Generosity
- ✧ Prayerfulness
- ✧ Willingness to take a stand for the truth

Additional qualities are noticeable in older students ...

- ✧ Leadership
- ✧ Critical thinking
- ✧ Energy and stamina
- ✧ Comfort in relationship with Christ and His Church
- ✧ Care for others as well as self
- ✧ Cooperative in teamwork
- ✧ Self-Starter; takes initiative
- ✧ Humility
- ✧ Healthy sense of humor
- ✧ Trustworthiness

This list is not exhaustive, nor must every box be checked. In the end, you really have to trust your gut, the hair on the back of your neck, that movement of the Holy Spirit. Also note that these characteristics are not exclusive to a religious vocation. Indeed, you would want anyone who was dating your own child to possess this kind of character. And that's the point. Look for the

qualities you would want in a person entrusted with caring and providing for those closest to you. Who would you want to minister at the bedside of a dying family member? ...to prepare your best friends for marriage? ...to meet you in your most vulnerable moments and provide you with mercy, love, and strength? That is the person you want to consider a religious vocation.

But students will never know you recognize those gifts in them if you don't say something, so our second step is...

## *Encourage*

This must be done with careful intentionality and specificity. It is not enough to make a throw away comment about "looking good in black" or "Hey, Sister Mary Elizabeth." What we offer lightly is taken lightly. A teacher who realizes the pearl of great price in front of them will create the time and space for a conversation that communicates the seriousness of the subject. Your student, your faith, and the future of your Church all deserve your very best. Be intentional.

What do I mean about being specific? The one who notices must share the fruit of their observations. Your encouragement is a huge gift for a young person whose confidence is under attack. You are extending a buoy of hope amidst the storms of self-doubt. Take the time to prepare a list of the qualities you noticed in your student and the times you saw them in action. No doubt, "You are a generous person" is wonderful to hear, but consider instead, "I was impressed by your generosity when you took time to explain the homework exercises rather than just letting your friend copy your work." The specific detail creates a much more significant impact. Since we are discussing the unfolding plan of God for a young person, a teacher must go even further with the discussion.

It is not uncommon for teachers to discuss the future with their students. In fact, teachers are second only to grandparents in asking, "What do you

want to be when you grow up?" That question often becomes a burden, which God did not intend that young person to carry alone. They do not have to "figure out" the future on their own. Remember, their vocation is already given to them before they were born. They only need to turn to God for the answer. To remind them of that and to ease the pressure, we must



intentionally bring God into the discussion. A student is better served when asked, "Have you ever thought about what God created you for?" The question turns them away from naval-gazing and towards the persons of the Trinity: their loving Father, the friend and brother Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are not done yet. Remember, we are considering a teacher's role in promoting religious vocations specifically, so we have to explicitly mention vocations to the student. It is not enough to hope they infer our intent and pick up what we are hinting at. I understand that at this point there are internal objections beginning to arise. I will discuss those objections at a later point. What I want to suggest is that a teacher intentionally discussing a religious vocation with a young person put all these ideas together.

The best ask, then, goes something like: "I was impressed by your generosity when you took time to explain the homework exercises rather than just letting your friend copy your work. You demonstrate great care for your friend and God's law. God has given you many wonderful gifts and talents. I think you would make a wonderful priest/brother/sister. Have you ever considered what His plan is for you?"

When you encourage with specificity, a journey begins.

## Accompany

Don't be fooled by the headphones and hoodies. It may look like they want to be left alone, but students are crying out to be recognized, encouraged, and accompanied. The virtual connections are not enough. They are dying to be invited into a real relationship. Their reaction may be as impressive as the responses of students 2,000 years ago.

Give yourself another treat. Pray with the Story of Jesus calling the Fishermen found in Matthew 4:18-22.

"They left *everything... immediately.*" That is amazing! How could they do that? Read the brief passage again. The fishermen were noticed and spoken to and it touched something deep inside. It allowed them to be who they were always meant to be. So, it was actually easy to leave everything...immediately. And we know where the story goes from there: Jesus, the one they called *Rabbi*, teacher, spends the next three years teaching them, accompanying them.

When you recognize gifts and talents in a student that are indicators of a possible religious vocation and create a special opportunity to encourage your student, you create a foundation of

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trust that prepares you to walk *with* them towards that future. That possibility may seem overwhelming - again, here arise the internal objections. I promise, we are getting to that. When you are asked a question you do not know the answer to, admit that fact and

then sit with them and research the answer. That may mean searching the internet or calling in a sister, brother, or priest. Offer to be present for that conversation. Find out when there are vocation events in the area and join the students for those large group events. I assure you that the time spent helping a student discover and become who they were meant to be, called to be, by almighty God is a journey you will never regret.

## Pray

You are not alone walking with your student. You are in great company, with all of heaven conspiring to assist you on your way. So, be sure to pray for your students and with them. Note that there are two invitations: praying *for* them and *with* them. Again, the internal objections are starting up...but the truth is, you are extremely well qualified to lead a student in prayer.

One sadness a teacher faces is not knowing the end of the story. You play a key role in the lives of your students for a short time only to lose track of them as their journey carries them beyond your classroom and school walls. Prayer is a powerful tool to stay in touch with them.

We are more connected to former students by our prayer than by any social media. Look again at how Jesus instructs us to handle the situation

before us: "Ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." In place of "ask" some translations use "beg" or "pray." So there it is. Our last step is our most important step. Our work is finally a work of prayer.

# Obstacles and Objections

Alright, I promised to address them. Every journey has its obstacles. If we are confident that this spiritual journey is being assisted by the powers of heaven then we must also be aware that there are powers working against us. Cartoons often depict an angel and devil on the shoulder whispering different messages. St. Ignatius of Loyola named this dynamic the “Spirit for Christ” and the “Spirit against Christ.” As you and your students move together towards the freedom and joy of living out God’s calling, there will be challenges. Most often they are internal objections – fears that arise and threaten to stop us in our tracks or direct us take a different road other than the one God has marked out for us. The best way to handle these fears is to expose them to the light. What is legitimately of Christ will become clear, while what was just a lie and tactic of the Spirit against Christ will disappear. In the work of promoting vocations, I can imagine quite a few obstacles arise in the hearts of teachers. I want to list a few here and shine the light of truth on them. I invite you to do the same when you notice an internal objection rising up in you.

<u>Internal Objection</u>	<u>The Light of Truth</u>
✦ Who am I to ask about religious vocations?	✦ Who are you not to? (for more, look up the quote that begins “Our deepest fear...” often attributed to Nelson Mandela, but actually written by Marianne Williamson)
✦ The student may think I’m crazy.	✦ You probably are. No, really, what’s happening here is your own discomfort at handling a deeply personal topic. Although the temptation is to joke about it, the student will receive the depth of your concern when you handle the conversation with care.
✦ I don’t know enough about the student.	✦ While God knows every hair on their head, you know every bad hair day. Between classes and extracurricular activities, students spend more waking hours at school than at home. You are extremely well qualified!
✦ I don’t want to make the student feel uncomfortable.	✦ Look back at the section on sharing what you see in your student. If you do this carefully, you will be sharing a great blessing not a burden.
✦ I don’t think priesthood and religious life are healthy or happy lifestyles.	✦ Then take seriously who you want to minister to you and your loved ones. A happy and well-balanced young person is the one you want to ask to consider religious life.
✦ I don’t know enough about vocations.	✦ True. And neither God nor the student expect you to. Admit that in humility and begin the journey. It will be fun to discover together.

# Outcome Assessment

Teachers are trained to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. Tests and evaluations are a standard part of your experiences. So, how do we measure the efficacy of this pamphlet? I assure you, there will not be a test. My hopes (and outcome goals) for the reader number four:

- ✦ That they **Recognize** the signs of a religious vocation in students.
- ✦ That they **Encourage** their students in an intentional and specific conversation.
- ✦ That they **Accompany** their students on the journey.
- ✦ That they **Pray** for and with their students.

If teachers learn and utilize these skills, then the Church will reap the fruit of their labors, and this pamphlet gets a gold star sticker.

And how do we measure our efforts to promote religious vocations? I do not think that it is the number of priests, brothers, and sisters that are numbered among our school’s alumni. Rather, teachers can count themselves successful when students have moved from asking “What am I going to do with my life?” to “What have I been created to do and who is Jesus calling me to be?” If students internalize and utilize that lesson, then their teachers get a gold star in heaven.

## *A Note to Readers...*

*As I gathered this information, I could imagine the joy and freedom that students will feel when a teacher helps them to discover their true calling – the plan that God had for them before they were born. I am confident that same focus and hope will inspire you to act. In all my time working in vocations, I have never found a candidate who could trace the calling to one single moment or person in their life. The truth is, it takes a Church to raise a vocation. One of the internal obstacles I face in vocation work is the lie that I am alone in this effort. The truth is that I am not doing it alone. Neither are you. We work together and all of heaven is conspiring to assist us. I look forward to journeying with you.*

*Gratefully, Fr. Joe O’Connor*