

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

School of Theology and Seminary Graduate
Papers/Theses

School of Theology and Seminary

5-2007

How the Parish and School of St. Agnes Creates Vocations

Andy Witchger

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers



Part of the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Witchger, Andy, "How the Parish and School of St. Agnes Creates Vocations" (2007). *School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses*. 23.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/sot_papers/23

This Graduate Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology and Seminary at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Theology and Seminary Graduate Papers/Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

How the Parish and School of St. Agnes Creates Vocations

By

Andy Witchger
4754 Hibiscus Ave
Edina, MN 55435

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Church History.

School of Theology
St. John's University
Collegeville, MN
May 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

Dan McKanan

May 2007

How the Parish and School of St. Agnes Produces Vocations

Project Description: Using parish and diocesan records, as well as interviews and observation, this paper investigates the history of St. Agnes parish and school, and attempts to discover why it has produced vocations to the priesthood and religious life at an incredibly high rate throughout its history.

This paper may not be duplicated

Signature

May 2007

How St. Agnes Parish and School Creates Vocations

In many respects St. Agnes Parish is similar to the other communities in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Yet unlike other parishes in the Archdiocese, vocations to the priesthood and religious life have flourished among its parishioners throughout its 100 years of history. The community has always considered the high levels of vocations a blessing, but the ability to maintain their rate of vocations while others have dropped, in addition to an increase in rates during the last decade, has caused many to wonder what is behind this phenomenon.

According to the last 8 years of diocesan records, 11 of 61 priests ordained list St. Agnes as their home parish. In an Archdiocese of over 200 parishes one community producing over 1\6 of priestly vocations seems inconceivable. With nine students currently enrolled in the Diocesan Seminary this trend does not seem likely to slow in the near future. St. Agnes's propensity for producing vocations throughout its history has not been limited to the priesthood. "Nearly one hundred young women have embraced the consecrated life of poverty, chastity and obedience in several communities," according to long-time pastor Monsignor Richard J. Schuler.

Founded as a parish to serve German immigrants in 1897, St. Agnes grew steadily into the largest German parish in the state. To accommodate the burgeoning population a new building was commissioned in 1909 and completed in 1912. Like every other aspect of St. Agnes, this new building was constructed with specific attention paid to its German roots. Designed in popular baroque architecture characteristic of southern Germany, the Church itself served as a reminder of the parishioners' cultural origins in much the same

way as the community life inside the building. St. Agnes served as a center of German-American cultural life during this period. But, because of the outbreak of war and growing anti-German sentiment, the parish was forced to sacrifice much of its culture and language in order to avoid accusations of being un-American. Even the beloved St. Boniface Day celebration was lost.

While many German influences began to fade away, the community continued to blossom as a center of Catholicism in St. Paul. Reflecting the thriving parish life of St. Agnes, the parish school continued to grow and vocations to the priesthood and religious life remained steady. Even when vocation rates around the country dropped dramatically St. Agnes continued to produce a steady stream of priestly vocations. Between the years of 1981 and 1987 eleven men from St. Agnes were ordained, with three men celebrating their first solemn Masses on consecutive Sundays in May and June of 1987. While Pastor Monsignor Richard J. Schuler attributes the almost yearly ordination of men from St. Agnes to a “Concern for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life that has found its expression in prayer,” it seems that other factors may have contributed.

An overwhelming respect and reverence for the priesthood and religious life that permeates every aspect of the parish, and most importantly the school of St. Agnes, cultivates the production of vocations. Because almost every vocation to come out of St. Agnes has attended the parish school, and because it is one of only two parochial high schools in the Archdiocese, it is important to consider the school’s relationship to the parish, as well as the environment within the school.

The parish and school of St. Agnes have been intimately related since their formation in 1897. That relationship is demonstrated not only by the amount of time and

money given to the school by parishioners, but also by the continuous participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church by all the students of St. Agnes.

Starting in kindergarten the students of St. Agnes are immersed in an environment that encourages reverence for, and the special calling of, the ordained. Students are surrounded at all times by the ordained; nuns and priests fill many faculty positions and seem to be ever-present as special guests and speakers. All students, regardless of religious affiliation¹, attend Mass at least once a week and religious education class every day. The student Mass alternates between English and Latin every week, and even the younger students confidently participate in both languages. The sacrament of reconciliation, the Stations of the Cross and benediction are available to students each week, and the overwhelming majority participate enthusiastically. These are just a few of the ways in which all of St. Agnes's students are engaged in the sacramental life of the Church. However, as any parent will tell you, having a child participate in the liturgical life of the Church does not assure that they will enjoy that experience or continue it once they make their own decisions. Joan Decker, who teaches religious education at St. Agnes, believes that students participate so passionately and continue in their participation because the school, "Fosters an appreciation for Mass and the sacraments through knowledge of what they are participating in." A large portion of this effort to foster appreciation and knowledge takes place in St. Agnes's religious education class.

Because the faculty believes it "is the backbone" of each student's experience at St. Agnes, students attend religious education every day. According to teachers, there are many explicit and implicit objectives to the religious education classes. First and

¹ It is important to note that over 1\3 of St. Agnes School is not Catholic, and in many cases not Christian. While these students are not required to undergo preparation for the sacraments, they are required to attend Mass and religious education with their classmates.

foremost the program is meant to educate Catholic students on the history and beliefs of their tradition. It is also meant to provide non-Catholic students with a knowledge of and respect for the tradition.

Examination of the 8th grade syllabus reveals a course surprisingly similar to collegiate theological study, with topics ranging from the Trinity and Jesus as priest, prophet and king, to the evolution of the liturgical calendar and the theology behind Church architecture. There is in depth treatment of the order of Mass and each sacrament, which teachers stress in order to help students develop a knowledge of and appreciation for what they are participating in. Instruction is not limited to what is being said or done at Mass, but covers the history and theology behind selecting scripture passages and feast days and even why certain colors are used for vestments and decoration throughout the year. Also present in the St. Agnes religious education curriculum are sections on vocation. Joan Decker makes sure to clarify that “vocation” is not limited to a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, but refers to any calling in life. While their discussion of vocation is not limited to ordained life, it definitely emphasizes it.

In fact, one of the implicit objectives of religious education at St. Agnes seems to be the introduction to and generation of respect for religious life. Almost every topic and activity in the syllabus relates to the priesthood or religious life in some way. Coupled with the constant presence of the ordained at the school, students are confronted continuously with the idea of a vocational life. Joan Decker explains. “The concern of vocations has always been important at to us. The prayer for vocations has been said at every Mass here for the last thirty years. We like to provide our students with as many opportunities to interact with clergy and observe their lifestyle as possible. We don’t

always straight out tell our students that we are arranging activities in venues where they will interact with priests or monks or nuns for the purpose of experiencing their various callings and lifestyles. But they come away from every one of those experiences with a newfound respect and appreciation for how they live.”

A look at the activities students participate in during their time at St. Agnes confirms this. Students take part in yearly “mission experiences” where they travel to different locations and serve a community for a short period of time². Each year the students stay with a different religious order, such as the Carmelites, Dominicans or Franciscans, and work and pray along with that community. Spiritual direction and aid in developing a prayer life are common occurrences on these trips. Many 8th graders also are provided the opportunity to attend the Religious Institute in Mundelein, Illinois. This is a three day trip to stay at a monastery and seminary where students attend speakers, have opportunities for prayer and confession³, and are introduced to the many differing religious orders in attendance.

The students come face to face with priests and religious inside the classroom as well. Teachers in a variety of subjects often invite priests, sisters or brothers into their classrooms to lecture on a variety of related topics. Along with the parish as a whole, classes also “adopt” seminarians. Students at St. John Vianney and St. Paul Seminary exchange letters and often visit the classrooms that have adopted them. “It is a great experience for our students to meet seminarians who are only a few years older than

² These mission experiences are not required, but the majority of students choose to attend. This could possibly be because many students come from low income families that would not be able to afford trips to New York or Rome under other circumstances, and these trips are funded by generous donations and fundraisers. However, it is also possible that students are motivated by their desire to serve others and experience different religious orders.

³ This confession experience outdoors in the rolling hills near Libertyville is attended by hundreds of priests and youth. Many students claim this experience as the highlight of their trip.

them, and to get to hear their life stories and their experience of being called to the priesthood,” said one faculty member. When asked whether Junior High School was a good age to begin the heavy promotion of religious life Joan Decker smiled and said, “We underestimate our children.”

In support of St. Agnes’s early start encouraging vocations she explained another project which brought interaction with religious life into the classroom. One year students were instructed to write to a Bishop or Cardinal in an “Adopt-a-Bishop” program much like “Adopt-a-Seminarian.” Over the course of the year, every single Bishop and Cardinal in the country opened a dialogue with one of the students at St. Agnes. Exchanging life stories, pictures and mutual promises to pray for each other, many Bishops shared stories about their calling to the priesthood. “Many of them expressed an overwhelming desire to become a priest as early as the 5th or 6th grade,” said Decker, “and some told stories about dressing up and playing “Mass” even earlier.”

Conversations like this with members of St. Agnes reveal another difference from many other parishes in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Students, faculty and parishioners are not just willing, but are excited to talk openly about vocations or a specific individuals’ “call” to the priesthood or religious life. According to the faculty, students are often encouraged to look for their “call” to a vocation, whether it is to priesthood or married life. However, it could be possible that students develop a view that elevates the role of the priesthood and religious life above the vocation to married life or the life of a lay person. Immersed in an environment where priests and religious hold many positions of authority and are treated with the utmost respect and reverence, it would be easy for a student to place priests on a pedestal. Accompanied by the

conservative theology of the parish and school, as well as the view that priests are “part of us, but called and set aside,” according to Decker, it would be reasonable for the special treatment of priests to encourage students to entertain thoughts of joining the priesthood. The elevation of the call to priesthood above the call to married or lay life could also be occurring more explicitly as well.

Considering the outspokenness of students and faculty about discernment, it is also possible that the small size of the school, creating an environment where high school students and grade school students are in close proximity, contributes to vocation rates. Grade school and junior high school students are not only surrounded by priests and nuns who have already discerned a vocation, but also by older students who are seriously considering the priesthood or religious life. As role models to the younger students, the high school students discerning a vocation provide another presence in the school that makes the youth of St. Agnes even more aware of considering a vocation for themselves. In fact, these high school students might create an even closer connection with religious life when they return for the adopt-a-seminarian program and share their experiences with those very same students who looked up to them during their time at St. Agnes.

St. Agnes’s tendency towards conservative theology seems to have elevated the role of religious life, and most specifically the priesthood, above the calling to married life. That same theology has also left women in the parish with a smaller role. For the students at St. Agnes serving Mass is a tradition and an honor. The parish and students take great pride with the order and concern in which Mass happens. According to Monsignor Schuler, “The care and reverence with which the liturgy is carried out at Saint Agnes is historic. The Sunday solemn Masses have been broadcast across the country,

and descriptions of the liturgy have appeared in many journals. The altar boys are trained and are knowledgeable of their duties.”

However, St. Agnes is one of very few parishes that restrict the role of altar servers to boys. Girls do not have the opportunity to participate in Mass to the same degree that boys do. Also, the adopt-a-programs described by faculty of St. Agnes, none included women’s vocations. While this discrepancy would anger countless Catholics outside of the parish, none of the women interviewed seemed anything less than ecstatic about the process and success for the development of vocations within the parish. While women’s vocations are still strongly encouraged and praised at St. Agnes, the inability to participate in the Mass to the same extent, as well as the absence of any adopt-a-nun programs does not seem to have affected women’s vocations over the life of the parish, with almost one hundred women joining religious communities. Although, the rate of female vocations coming out of St. Agnes today is, “Lower than our vocations to the priesthood, but still better than anywhere else,” according to Joan Decker.

When compared to other communities, it does not seem that the presence of a school alone increases vocations. According to the Archdiocesan office of vocations, while many of the seminarians who grew up in the area did attend Catholic schools, none of those schools seem to have produced seminarians in numbers significantly greater than the others, aside from St. Agnes. In fact, other than St. Agnes, the only affiliation claimed by diocesan seminarians that produced a similar number of vocations was the “Companions of Christ.” Formed as a fraternal organization for priests and seminarians, Companions of Christ is a community that attracts many men from around the Archdiocese that are seriously considering a vocation to the priesthood. The fact that St.

Agnes produces seminarians who reach ordination at a similar rate as this group, which draws many men from the Archdiocese who have already displayed a serious commitment to pursuing the priesthood, is another credit to the effectiveness of St. Agnes's promotion of vocations.

Comparisons to other Catholic schools in the Archdiocese and the State illustrate further distinctions between St. Agnes and other communities. Students from schools such as Our Lady of Grace describe an environment almost completely devoid of conversation about their own particular vocation. Many schools like Our Lady of Grace contain only kindergarten to eighth grade, so it may be possible that the schools believe their students are too young to begin serious contemplation of religious life. However, considering the stories coming from many of the Bishops around the country, it is possible that they are mistaken. This lack of open discussion and promotion of vocation does not seem to be limited to the elementary schools. A current Benedictine novice in St. Louis, Missouri describes his religious education experience at Benilde-St. Margaret's: "There were many aspects of the school that were very Catholic, and many faculty members I really enjoyed, but it really wasn't much different than my experience in public school. We did attend mass, and we had religious education classes, but the atmospheres in general were pretty similar."

Creating a Catholic atmosphere seems to be a high priority at St. Agnes. Classrooms are peppered with portraits of Mary, crucifixes and signs reading "Pray the Rosary." The sixth grade art class even spent the most recent semester undertaking individual reconstructions of Basilicas and Cathedrals from around the country.

The relationship between school and parish at St. Agnes also seems unusual when compared to many schools throughout the state. While many schools are considered a problem by their parishes, mainly because of the financial problems they inevitably undertake, St. Agnes's school seems to be the pride of the Parish. The "adoption" of St. Agnes's seminarians seems to extend to the student body as a whole. On many occasions during the school's history countless parishioners have contributed money to the school not only for construction, but also for student scholarships. This generous support from the congregation has allowed the school to blossom into a respected institution that provides an education not just for the children of parishioners, but also for many underprivileged youth from the area.⁴ You can also see the interconnection between the school and the parish simply by looking in the parish bulletin. Every month parishioners enthusiastically participate in bake sales, wreath sales and rosary drives to raise money for the school. When a large portion of the school is made up of children who do not attend the parish, and many of these students depend on financial aid, it is easy to see the dedication to and pride that the parishioners take in their school.

It is not just the ability to produce seminarians that St. Agnes prides itself on, but the rate with which those seminarians make it to ordination and remain in the priesthood. It is not uncommon for a class at St. John Vianney Seminary to lose a good percentage of their seminarians before they complete the years of study required for ordination. However, students from St. Agnes join the seminary at a greater rate, and drop out of the seminary at a significantly lower rate, than students from any other parish in the Archdiocese. This could also be a result from the view of the priesthood that these men

⁴ 1\3 of St. Agnes's students are not Catholic or parishioners and 2\3 of the student body receive some degree of financial aid.

developed while at St. Agnes. With widespread discussion and consideration of vocations beginning as early as 7th grade, and the idea surrounding them long before that, many seminarians from St. Agnes could have been committed to their decision for years before they enter the seminary. This would give them far more time than many other seminarians to participate in discernment groups, spiritual guidance and prayer, and would aid them in their preparation for this important decision. Participation in the adopt-a seminarian program at St. Agnes would also provide these men with a valuable support system. The encouragement and adoration of an entire community would undoubtedly provide the motivation and support that is vital to success. “We don’t have a group to aid and encourage seminarians like lots of places. Our entire parish and school adopt those men,” said Decker.

Once again it is important to consider the environment of St. Agnes School. These seminarians were raised in a diverse community. Not only is the area that surrounds the parish diverse, but the school itself contains a remarkable amount of ethnicities and religions. With a student body composed of over 1\3 non-Catholics these men grew up surrounded by different types of people and different faith traditions. Just as the Apostle Paul’s life in the diverse Cilician city of Tarsus provided him with the knowledge and experience that allowed him to be an effective missionary and evangelist throughout the world, this diverse environment may also make St. Agnes’s seminarians more comfortable and grounded in their faith among people of different faiths and backgrounds.

St. Agnes Parish and School is undoubtedly a conservative community, both theologically and liturgically. It is interesting to consider whether or not this community

attracts like-minded conservative Catholics because of the Church's theology and liturgy, or whether St. Agnes transforms the average Catholic who joins the parish into liturgical and theological conservatives. A quick scan of St. Agnes during any mass will reveal a diverse group, from elderly members to young couples with large families and everything in between. Conversations with parishioners reveal older members who admit that "Some of the Vatican II reforms didn't sit well with me. Now I drive 20 minutes every Sunday so I can still attend a Latin Mass." There are also young couples who were raised at St. Agnes and want their children to experience the same things they did. "Our parish has had a remarkable amount of families that have been here for successive generations, including the Matt's⁵," says Father George A. Welzbacher. While the Matt family is unique in that it operates a widely read Catholic weekly news journal, it is not unique among the parish in maintaining "a fiercely loyal adherence to Catholic doctrine and discipline."

According to the Pastor of the parish, St. Agnes has always thrived because of loyal Catholic families in the community, as well as new families in the community who join the parish "and love every aspect of it." However, it is becoming more and more common that conservative Catholics, searching for a community that fits their theological and liturgical tastes, leave a parish to join St. Agnes. "Our Latin Masses are very well attended, and everyone there isn't a member. We have found more and more young Catholics who are drawn to our liturgical style. It really isn't something you find anywhere else," says Joan Decker. With the presence of oddities such as a communion rail and Latin Mass, St. Agnes will continue to draw curious and nostalgic Catholics to

⁵ The Matt's, beginning with Joseph Matt at the beginning of the century and continuing with Alphonse Matt in the present day, have been members of St. Agnes Parish.

their services for years to come. However the very active base of the parish is made up of families who have long-standing connections to the parish and school, as well as a deep devotion to the promotion of religious life.

Pastor Emeritus Richard J Schuler attributes St. Agnes's outstanding rate of vocations to a, "Concern for vocations to the priesthood and the religious life that has found expression in prayer." He continued to say, "For the past thirty years, at every Mass, a prayer for vocations has been said. God has heard that prayer and blessed this parish." This dedication and devotion to fostering vocations at St. Agnes is clearly visible throughout the parish and school. Characterized by an open dialogue between adults and children, teachers and students, ordained and laity, about vocations to the religious life, as well as a deep respect and reverence for those who chose religious life, it seems St. Agnes will continue to produce vocations at a high rate for years to come.