

WORKERS FOR THE HARVEST

Experiences from the Thriving in Rural Ministry Retreat

In November of 2019, Catholic Rural Life held its inaugural *Thriving in Rural Ministry* retreat for the rejuvenation and camaraderie of rural priests. The goal of the retreat is for the attending priest to leave spiritually refreshed, with the experience of fellowship and fraternity with other rural priests, with new ideas and best practices in rural ministry, with insights into personal leadership development and insights into Integral Ecology and how it may be incorporated into their ministry. Three participants share their insights on their rural vocations and their experience at the retreat.

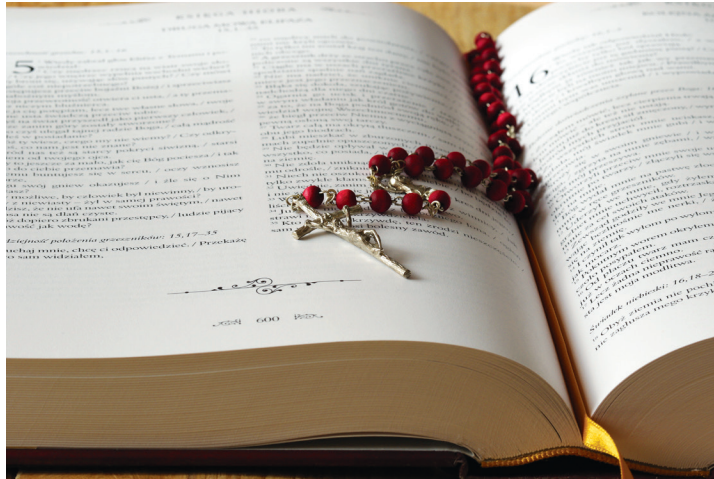
Fr. Richard Kusugh, V. C.
WESTERN ARIZONA

A rural life is (proudly), not for the faint of heart—and dare I say, that priestly ministry in a rural community is not for the faint of heart either. Out here, we become flexible because we need to go with what the day gives us and what resources—human and financial—we have at any given time. Things may not always work how they should, but they eventually work somehow, just as it was meant to. Pastoral life and approaches are different out here: while people talk about being “street-wise,” we like to

be “rural-wise” in pastoral approaches. We become eclectic so as to navigate the rigors of life out here: patience is required.

Everyone has a sense of what they want to do and where they should be going. I was one of those, and then the Lord sent me to Sacred Heart Parish Parker in La Paz County, Arizona. I am originally from Nigeria and have served in the Diocese of Tucson since August of 2004, soon after ordination. I am the second of three boys and three girls. My dad served in the army for many

years, so we moved quite a bit. Perhaps, it now works to my favor as a missionary, called to be far away from family, friends and the familiarities of home. While sometimes challenging, the zeal and passion for ministry spurs me on, and I rely on the grace of God and the overflowing good will and support of the parish family I serve. I also rely upon the many spiritual opportunities for retreats and conferences provided by the diocese as a vital lifeline for personal spiritual renewal in ministry.



While Parker is not my first assignment in the Diocese of Tucson, it has its own unique challenges, like long distance driving, isolation and the large number of

Masses required so that all the communities can be covered on Sunday. Out here, I quickly realized that (some) rules do bend in ministry. My parish is in the town of Parker on the banks of the majestic Colorado River in La Paz County, which is approximately 4,514 square miles of mostly farming communities—made up of a mix of both large corporate operations and some small family owned farms and dairies. A large swath of Tribal Reservation made up of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) is nestled within this vastness. The overall population is approximately 22,000. This number heavily fluctuates depending on how high or low the needle rises and falls on the thermometer in the winter or summer months. So, being the only priest in an entire county, a lot of travelling is required to bring the sacraments and Sunday Masses to the faithful in Parker and the other rural communities spread over the county. This often requires about 200 miles round trip each weekend for Masses both at the parish church and the four mission churches of the parish, spread across the county. Exhausting? Yes! However, absolutely fulfilling!

Thanks to the recent *Thriving in Rural Ministry* retreat in Buf-

falo, Minnesota, so much about rural life and rural ministry has fallen into place: I have a much better perspective of what ministry in rural life truly is. It is not just living out in the middle of “nowhere,” it is a lifestyle. The question at hand, was how to integrate rural lifestyle into pastoral ministry. It gave me an awareness of how I can better minister among the farmers, ranchers, ranch hands, field workers, dairy workers and many other residents of the vast area that I cover.

Prior to the retreat, I did not know about Catholic Rural Life as an organization, inasmuch as it has been in existence and promoting rural life for over 96 years. The retreat was for priests serving in rural areas of our respective dioceses. At this inaugural retreat, there were 19 priests from 10 dioceses. It was designed to provide spiritual refreshment, insights into the relationships between rural living and pastoral care, mission support for priests ministering in isolated places, individual leadership development, and fraternity with other priests serving rural communities. We prayed together, shared our common challenges, strengthened and encouraged each other, and learned other best practices we could apply to our own unique

environment. I am already looking into a “Farmers’ Mass” and also beginning a bi-weekly men’s Rosary prayer group.

One message at the retreat was recurrent: *discipleship*.

I came away with the reminder that the priest—as a disciple of Christ—is also tasked with creating other disciples within the parish to empower and inspire the faithful to ministry in their communities. It was refreshing to see that there are others in the same situation, and that we are not all alone in isolated assignments. Despite the Minnesota cold, I felt renewed and re-energized.

An unfortunate reality is that the trend of priests finding themselves in isolation and feeling stretched as they cover multiple communities is here to stay, as more and more dioceses are suffering from lack of seminary enrolment for priesthood. It is imperative therefore, to build community among the fellow priests who share the unique experience of rural life. The men I met at the retreat all understand what it takes to be a rural priest in a rural area, because it is not for the faint of heart. Just like farmers and farming, ministry out here has its tough days and challenges. Yet, we have hope, because our faith in God is strong! We know that with prayer, mutual support and the grace of God, we still thrive because thriving in rural ministry and life is not just what we do: rural life is who we are!



Fr. Aaron Junge
EASTERN IOWA

One of the great freedoms of priestly promises is that I can have certainty that my assignment is God's will for me: I am able to know the vocation within my vocation. However, the beautiful challenge is learning to love God's will in the assignment and learning to love as God wills.

I am very open to my parishioners that I grew up "thoroughly suburban" and so have had to ask some silly questions and learn a whole new rhythm of life, topics of conversation, areas of concern, etc. I also had to face the fear that I was not good for my people because I did not come with the knowledge of "rural life" built in.

Thankfully, God always provides, and my people are patient—and God has spent the last couple of years showing me where my gifts are useful and needed and how He wants to love these people through me and no one else, as priest, at this moment. It gives remarkable life and joy to the certainty I mentioned above.

All of the above being said, I have come to realize that being a "rural priest" means simply being a priest: letting Jesus Christ the Head, minister through me.

Pope Saint John Paul II said that the humanity

of the priest is to be a bridge, not a stumbling block to an encounter with Christ, and so being a rural priest has struck me as enabling Christ to speak through my humanity into the lives of people who have grown up in the rural world—in a world that is, in some ways, not terribly different from ancient Nazareth.

I attended the first *Thriving in Rural Ministry* retreat in the fall. The most meaningful part of the retreat to me was its structure. That might sound odd, because the content was top notch, but it was structured in such a way to allow us time to take it in, process it and pray with it. It also was structured to touch on those main areas of priestly life and formation: spiritual, intellectual, human and pastoral. Most conferences only focus on one or two, but this was so well balanced, and I walked away refreshed.

The *Thriving in Rural Ministry* retreat gave me the space and the language to reflect on my almost-two years as a rural pastor and pray about what the Lord wanted me to do to bring people closer to Him. It gave me the space to listen to Him for His plan of how to love the people He entrusted to me concretely.

Fr. Matthew J Flattery

CENTRAL MISSOURI

I was fly-fishing in the foothills of the Missouri Ozarks. I was standing chest deep in a stream of rushing, crystal clear, cool water, while rays of warm sunshine were filtering through the sycamore, cottonwood and birch trees, and it was paradise. It was everything I love about living in rural Missouri. Living close to the land. Living in the garden.

I was reminding myself of many things that early afternoon, all of which I had been learning so as to catch a trout. “Remember to keep your line out of the trees, Matthew.” “Remember to let the line fully roll out on the back-cast and to pause.” “Remember not to force the front-cast.” And then I heard a gentle, quiet little voice in my heart say, “Remember to enjoy it, Matthew.” I believe that little voice was the Holy Spirit.

I am a cradle Catholic, a life-long practitioner of my faith tradition who found his vocation later in life. In my early thirties and after a healing immersion into Twelve Step spirituality, I began an earnest search to find a deeper experience of prayer and meditation. This led me to the Trappist monks and to a quiet, contemplative life for about ten years, living in and out of monasteries. All of which, I now understand, prepared me for the role of diocesan priest. God always has a plan.

It was a tremendous shift from living as a Trappist monk to serving as pastor of four parishes in central Missouri. However,

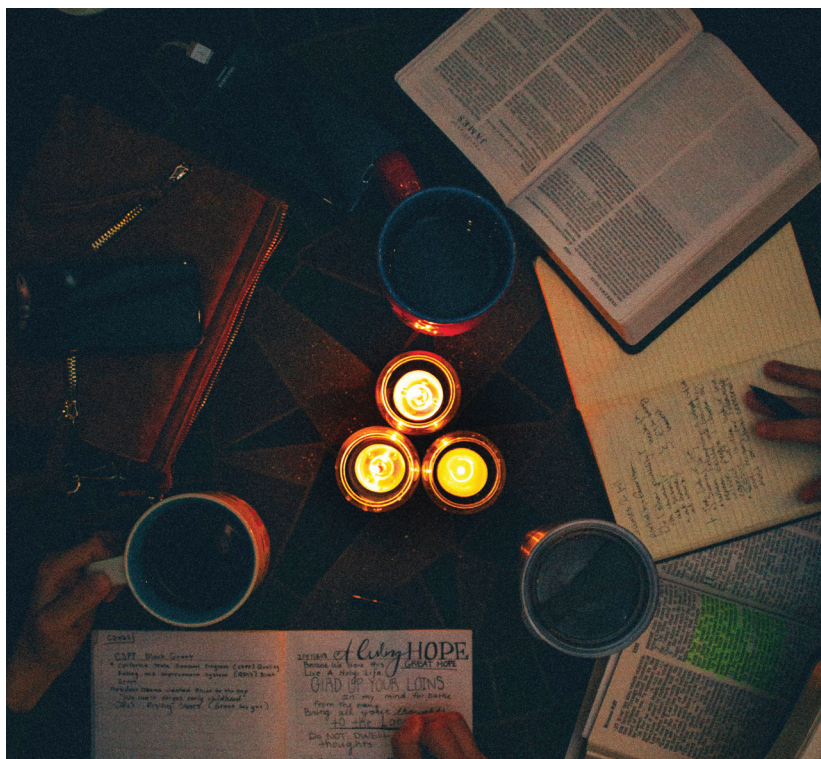
with a disciplined practice of daily contemplative prayer, and by grace, I am open to contemplation and action, while in the midst of endless activity. And I love it. But still, that little voice in my heart reminds me to enjoy it too.

I love serving as a priest and pastor in what are rural, and largely, farming communities. The faith tradition of the farm families I serve inspires me daily. Yet, I am troubled when I read that in our postmodern world, often times younger parents feel anxious and guilty much of the time. They believe they are not giving their children enough of

their time, because both mom and dad are working, and everyone is so busy. It breaks my heart to know this.

Never did I dream that I would someday be having a similar experience: I spend tremendous amounts of time “administering to my parishes,” but I sometimes feel anxious, because I fear that I do not spend enough time “pastoring” them. To make matters worse, there are now far fewer priests than ever before.

In the midst of so much business, I recently had the wonderful privilege of attending a retreat entitled, *Thriving*



in *Rural Ministry*, presented by Catholic Rural Life. I was absolutely delighted to learn about CRL and its founder, Fr. Edwin O'Hara. I left the retreat feeling refreshed, rejuvenated and most of all, inspired and hopeful that together, we, that is priests and laity alike, can find the best path forward by working together in these rural parishes we love so much.

I came away with a renewed vision and passion of the vocation of rural ministry, both for priests and for those faithful Catholics who live in these communities alike. It was very exciting.

I learned that Fr. O'Hara founded CRL in 1923 after having been inspired by his ministry to those who lived in sparsely populated areas. At that time, Fr. O'Hara came to believe that the Church was the biggest single factor in building up rural communities. I believe that our culture and Church are very different today than they were in 1923, yet I am convinced that Fr. O'Hara's beliefs still hold merit.

Today, rather than simply embracing this idea of the Church building up rural communities, perhaps now is the time for the lay members of Catholic rural communities to participate in the work of rebuilding our Church.

While attending the seminary in preparation for the priesthood, I learned that at the Second Vatican Council, our Church produced four Major Constitutions, three Declarations and nine Decrees. It could be argued that all of these extraordinary and sweeping

documents could be summed up in one declarative sentence: Vatican II was the universal call to holiness and the call to full participation in the Church for one and all, religious and laity alike.

What then does this mean? I wonder with my contemplative background if I can help these busy parents to focus on what is most important and to remind them (and myself) to be still sometimes, to know God? Can we remember to turn and thank God for our blessings? Can we remember to keep the Sabbath day holy and to spend more time in rest, enjoying leisure with those we love best?

And, what can the wonderful lay folks whom I minister to, teach me? How can they help me to administer to the parishes so as to allow me the exquisite privilege of pastoring to them? Can we learn to be partners who help to build up each other and our Church? Perhaps we can remind each other to remember to enjoy it.

I loved learning about this larger community, this larger Body of Christ in the USA that is this wonderful organization called Catholic Rural Life. I pray that all together, we can learn to celebrate our Catholic faith and be proud of our incomparable faith traditions and heritage in the rural life. Let us place these precious gems high on the lamp-stand and let them shine brightly on our world today. Let us join together and head out as workers to harvest in the fields.

