

Awakening vocations in the Called and Gifted parish

by Mary Sharon Moore

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One Called and Gifted teacher discerns her charisms and discovers a whole new ministry.

Called and Gifted teacher Mary Sharon Moore, after extensive discernment of charisms in her own life, is now prepared to help dioceses and parishes to awaken vocations to ministry in the Church and mission in the world.

“Teaching the Called and Gifted workshop over the past four years,” says Mary Sharon, “has led me to ponder the vital role of baptism in the mystery of God’s calling.” Equipped with a master’s degree in theological studies and experience in liturgical spirituality and adult faith formation, Mary Sharon recognized the important piece that the Called and Gifted workshop brings to parish renewal. She notes, though, that “one more piece had to fall into place before the baptism-vocation link could emerge.”

One vocational charism becomes key.

Upon turning fifty, Mary Sharon recalls noticing “a lifetime pattern of not being married.” Shaken but not discouraged, she knew it was time to see what God was up to, “since my vision for my life obviously was not bearing fruit.”

Another two years passed before she experienced a pivotal moment in her own vocational awakening. “When I attended my first Called and Gifted workshop, I finally could name my experience of not being married in a positive way, as the lifestyle charism of celibacy. This was a tremendously liberating moment for me.”

Over the next few years her discernment of this charism and others brought about a profound vocational awakening to celibate life as a lay person, “available to God’s purposes, no strings attached.”

While Mary Sharon was embracing her lay celibate calling, one of her brothers, a priest of ten years, was in the painful process of acknowledging that he was not called to celibate life, despite his promise and intention to honor that lifestyle for the sake of his priestly ministry. “Sorting out and patiently discerning the celibate vocational lifestyle is so important, yet so difficult to do in a couples-oriented culture,” Mary Sharon reflects. “And discerning a celibate calling, in the celibate environment of seminary or novitiate, when your heart is already oriented toward ministry in the Church, can equally obscure God’s calling to Christian married life.”

Reflecting on the challenges of discovering God’s calling to the vocational lifestyle of Christian marriage, celibacy, or single life, Mary Sharon realized that a solid foundation for such discernment is often missing at the diocese and parish level.

Parish-based vocational discernment.

Inspired by the insightful writings on vocational discernment of Francis Kelly Nemeck, OMI, and Marie Theresa Coombs, canonical hermit (www.lebhshomea.org), Mary Sharon developed Awakening Vocations (www.awakeningvocations.com),

a ministry to identify, shape, animate, and sustain the vocational culture of parishes.

“Vocational discernment is the necessary work of every baptized person,” says Mary Sharon. “We are, every one of us, co-laborers with Christ. Living our baptismal life with competence and conviction is not an option but an imperative. People in the pews need good vocational tools to do good work.”

Awakening Vocations touches every generation and every aspect of faith formation in the parish. Leery of programs whose effects fade when the program ends, Mary Sharon aims to go to the roots of how a parish expresses itself and forms its people vocationally. “There’s something of a vocational renaissance among young people whose hearts are on fire to serve God,” she notes. “It’s the rest of us who hunger for vocational clarity, direction, guidance, a process we can get our arms around, something we can really respond to.” The profile of recently ordained men nationwide is telling: “Many of these men have been in the pews, living a life of faith into their middle years, searching for God’s fingerprints in the course of their careers. Many are looking for something more enduring than a career. They are looking for God’s calling.”

Four phases of awakening vocational culture.

“There is no quick fix or simple solution to increasing the number of men called to priestly life, or women and men called to vowed religious life,” says Mary Sharon. “Nor is there a shortcut to discern God’s calling to Christian married life. We are talking about a profound awakening of the people of God for service in the Church and in the world. So our approach must penetrate right down to the hidden crevices

of parish culture, so that for every baptized man, woman, and youth, orientation toward God’s calling is as natural—and life-sustaining—as breathing.”

The first step in the parish process is what Mary Sharon names “The Culture Café,” a half-day gathering, in an inviting “café” environment, of the parish’s leaders and visionaries, to ponder the meaning, implications, and process of developing an effective, whole-cloth vocational culture within the parish.

The second step is the anchor workshop titled “Awakening Vocations.” This weekend PowerPoint workshop for the entire parish provides a theology of vocation that links baptism, the Church’s mission, and God’s unique calling and the individual’s free and gifted response. The workshop also includes a vocational discernment process.

The third step, the “Parish Core Team Immersion,” is, in Mary Sharon’s terms, “the unique piece that turns the ship around.” This weekend PowerPoint workshop, based on the U.S. Bishops’ pastoral plan, “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us,” is designed for all those in the parish who shape or touch the spiritual formation of adults and youth in any way, with a particular focus on lifelong vocational catechesis and formation. “This pastoral plan is one of the undiscovered treasures of the U.S. Bishops for the Catholic Church in the United States,” notes Mary Sharon. “If their vision were implemented in every diocese and every parish, our world would look different. This is a powerful document, but powerful only when it is implemented at the diocese and parish level.”

The fourth step is the “Formation Workshop for Vocational Guides,” a one-day

PowerPoint formation workshop for those men and women in the parish who are especially skilled in listening, and gifted in wisdom and encouragement, to serve as in-house guides for fellow parishioners in lifelong vocational discernment.

A vocational process for campus ministries and young adults.

“The Next Step Café,” designed for young adults in campus ministry or parish settings, is a weekend gathering offered in a relaxed “café” environment. The Next Step Café provides a theology of vocation and discernment process in a way that frees them to hear and discern God’s calling.

While not focused on promoting any one particular ministry or way of life, The Next Step Café offers a solid basis for distinguishing the three vocational lifestyles

of Christian marriage, celibacy, and single life, and practical, achievable steps to discern God’s calling. The weekend includes teaching, individual and small-group time, interaction with local priests, religious, and lay people who are discerning or living their calling, plus time for personal prayer, adoration, Reconciliation, and a closing Mass.

There is no shortage of vocations in the Church today, Mary Sharon firmly believes, but rather, a shortage of discernment readily available to Catholic men, women, and youth. “From here on out I am dedicating my best energies to awakening and sustaining a theologically and spiritually robust vocational culture in every diocese and every parish in the U.S.,” says Mary Sharon. “It’s a big goal, I know, but I am not working alone.”