



God equips the called, He doesn't call the equipped

Marie Corrigan, Founder of Sophia Academy, led a very personal discussion on “God equips the called, He doesn't call the equipped” earlier this month on Tuesday, May 12th at BELIEVES.



“My active faith life actually started as a convert,” she said. “I was raised Lutheran, and my husband, Vic, was raised Catholic. I hadn't been a very active Christian. Once we met at the University of Georgia and I got to know him and he'd ask me to go to mass with him, I would watch the expression on his face, and just saw how much he loved God and loved his faith. I wanted what he had.”

Though Corrigan was dating her future husband and knew he was Catholic, her decision to further her faith journey was personal. She decided to learn more about the Catholic faith, independent of him.

“After going to St. Joseph Church on Prince Ave. in Athens for a while, I contacted Father Hugh Marren. He said to come over on Mondays evenings and we could talk, but I told him I couldn't because it conflicted with sorority events on Monday evenings,” recalled Corrigan. “He said, ‘Well, come over on Sunday nights.’”

So Corrigan did just that. On the first Sunday evening she noticed that she was the only one there, and asked Father Marren where everyone else was.

“He said, ‘Everyone else is on Mondays,’” Corrigan said with laughter.

From that Sunday until Easter, Corrigan and Father Marren would meet each Sunday evening to discuss the Catholic faith. As Easter drew near, Corrigan spoke with her parents to tell them of her desire to join the Catholic Church.

“My dad was a faithful Christian man but not entirely supportive of her becoming Catholic. My mom asked, ‘Does this have anything to do with Vic?’” she remembered.

Corrigan told her mother she was doing this without Vic knowing anything. In fact, on the Easter Sunday when she joined the Catholic Church, Vic was there, but when he realized what was going on, he was blown away.

Four years later, Marie and Vic got married, and soon thereafter their careers took off. Marie was a nurse at Crawford Long in the open heart surgery ICU. She found the work to be exhilarating because of the impact she felt she was able to have on the lives of others.

With respect to her faith life, Corrigan said that she and her husband shared a wonderful faith life together.

“We were outside Christ the King's zip code, but Vic said, ‘Christ the King is my parish and that's where I'd like to go.’” Christ the King has been their church for over 30 years.

Before long, the Corrigan's found out Marie was pregnant with twins. As the pregnancy progressed, Vic's cardiology career just kept taking off.

“Vic had been selected to go to Utah for a month when I was about five months pregnant. When he got home from Utah, within 12 hours, the babies decided to arrive – 3 months early,” Corrigan said. “If not for Vic, the babies and I wouldn’t have lived.”

The twins, Claire Marie and Caroline Elizabeth, were both very premature due to the early delivery. Thirty days after they were born, Claire Marie “flew to heaven.” With Vic’s connections, Caroline Elizabeth was brought to Egleston and received premiere care.

Despite Caroline’s improved condition and care, anger was starting to build within Marie. It took a long time to deal with.

“Every cough, every cold, every bug that Caroline would get, I would find myself telling God, ‘You’ve taken one from me (Claire), now fix this!’” Corrigan retold. “God was really humbling me and getting me to where He wanted me.”

Corrigan said that she and her husband remained faithful, but they both were really hurting.

“And then He (God) had me – all angry!” she said. “I was so miserable, spending all of those long days in the hospital (9 months). I loved the days when it rained because I would think that no one else could do anything either. Sunny days were tougher because I was reminded that life was going on for everyone except us. We were at a standstill just hoping Caroline would get better”.

During the time at Egleston, Corrigan’s daughter, Caroline, who was born weighing 1.9 pounds, was constantly on a ventilator, until finally she was taken off and she was allowed to go home weighing just 5 pounds.

“Even though we could take her home, she was still continuously receiving 5 liters of oxygen – which is like having a fire hose of oxygen stuck to her nose. We were told that Caroline was the smallest infant and on the most oxygen of anyone that had ever been allowed to leave Egleston,” said Corrigan.

The doctors cautioned the Corrigans that children the size of Caroline, who were receiving as much oxygen as she was getting, should be expected to have to go back to the hospital about ten times in the first year – Caroline went back once.

Corrigan recalled that during these times when she would go to church she would hear the names of her kids among the ‘Prayers of the Faithful’ but rather than bringing peace, she felt it was like another dagger to her heart. It was a continuous confirmation that Caroline, and all of the Corrigan’s, still relied on the collective prayers of the church; Caroline was fragile for so long.



A few years later, when it was time for Caroline to go to kindergarten, the Corrigans wanted her to go to Christ the King and felt that, as parishioners and supportive of the church, for sure that she’d get in. However, Father Kenny called and said Caroline wouldn’t be getting into Christ the King school. She could try again the following year, but not that year.

“When I was at Egleston with Caroline, I bargained with God, ‘If You get me out of this situation God, I will do whatever You want.’ Be careful of saying those words because if you do, you’ll never fully know what they’ll mean,” Corrigan told everyone.

After the kindergarten situation at Christ the King, Corrigan, who now had four kids, said she heard the Holy Spirit tell her, “Now you’re ready. You’re going to start a school.”

“The Holy Spirit can speak to you in so many ways. Sometimes it’s clearly audible, other times it’s through things you see or feel. You have to be open to ‘listening’ although sometimes you don’t want to be receptive,” Corrigan stated.

Corrigan’s husband, Vic, told her, “Sweetie you’ve had five kids. You’re a nurse. You don’t have a teaching background. What kind of kids will the school be for?”

Corrigan told her husband, kids like Caroline.

So Corrigan put an ad in Parent Magazine to have a meeting at their house. She laughed at the memory of using ClipArt to construct the ad.

Turnout for the initial meeting was low. After the first two months, Corrigan heard God tell her to “wait a month then put the ad out again.’ So she waited and then put the ad again. This time 12 couples came to the meeting at their home.

“They would ask questions and I many times I had to say, ‘I’m not sure yet.’”

At one point, Corrigan also had a meeting arranged with the Archbishop.

“My husband, who has only taken off two days in his entire career, took that day off to go with me on the visit to see the Archbishop. He was scared for the Archbishop to meet with me alone because I was so on fire and adamant about this idea. The Archbishop listened and was kind. After the meeting, I asked my husband if what the Archbishop said was a ‘yes.’ He told me, “The Archbishop said ‘It’s a great idea,’ but it was a ‘no.’”

Ironically, around this time is when Corrigan landed on the name for the school.

“I was anxious to get this idea started. I was doing a lot of grass cutting and vacuuming back in the early days just to expend energy and have time to organize my thoughts. Someone from the Archdiocese had heard about my conversation with the Archbishop. They called and wanted to know what I planned to do. The plan was to start as a non-denominational Christian school. They asked if a name for the school had been chosen. During the conversation I said, ‘I want this school to be a gift of the Holy Spirit.’ As I spoke I used the word ‘wisdom’ and the caller from the Archdiocese said, ‘That’s what Sophia means – wisdom.’”

Despite the ‘no’ answer, Corrigan came back to Msgr. Kenny and asked him what she should do. He told her that downstairs at Christ the King there was a little room that he could give her to use, but it was later determined that a classroom for Sophia Academy could not be on the Christ the King school campus.

“It just wasn’t working. However, the Holy Spirit was working while I didn’t know it,” she shared.



A little while later, Corrigan connected with a Baptist church in Sandy Springs. They were provided space there and started in their first year with 11 kids.

“We were teaching these kids in a specific way, dealing with all kinds of learning disabilities. Throughout it all, what we wanted was for faith formation to be a part of the experience, and as we grew we wanted the school to be a place where kids could stay a little bit longer if they needed.”

After 8 years at the First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs, Sophia Academy was able to purchase its own place on Dresden Drive. Sophia Academy, with its multi-sensory learning approach, was Georgia’s first faith-based school for children with learning differences in 1999, and its style of teaching was unique.

“As we served more and more students, my anger was leaving. I was beginning to understand God’s plan.”

But then in 2008, the school, like just about everyone, had it tough with the economic collapse.

“We tried to do a lot for parents in terms of supporting them financially but some students still had to leave.”

Then Corrigan noticed something was happening to her physically. She went to Piedmont Hospital because the pain she felt was getting worse.

Her pain worsened, as did her walking. She then went to Emory and the doctor reviewed her medical record. She needed to get a bone marrow biopsy immediately.

“Even though I felt terrible, Vic and I went to Georgetown for Parent’s Weekend. While there, we got a call from the doctor. He told me I had a rare cancer and needed to get a bone marrow transplant right away because the cancer was damaging the nerves in my feet and hands. I thought of the school... we were struggling because of the economy, and now there was this.”

Corrigan says she has been getting better ever since, but still hopes and prays for a complete recovery. “It would be wonderful for the neuropathy to go away!”

Sophia Academy was now due for its re-accreditation visit. During the time of preparing for the visit Marist School reached out and said that bringing Sophia Academy under Marist would help them fulfill their mission of serving all kinds of students. Never once had Corrigan prayed that Sophia Academy would become a Catholic school. The Holy Spirit had been at work again!

Making the transition to becoming a Catholic school has had its challenges as many non-Catholic families chose to move to secular schools.

“And then we had the development of the pastoral plan for the Archdiocese. One of the first things it says is ‘to go out and make disciples of men.’ That is at the crux of what we do.”

Corrigan says the pastoral plan also calls everyone to increase the knowledge of their faith and live their faith.

“To me, this plan says there’s supposed to be a school for kids like those that Sophia Academy serves. God made these kids just as they should be. If we don’t educate them like we should, we’re not Catholics like we say we are.”

Corrigan closed by saying she wanted to leave everyone with one more comment.

“Jesus embraced and loved all whom He encountered. I now announce you have been knighted as advocates for Sophia Academy!”

Corrigan did not feel equipped to answer God’s call but He has always equipped her to implement His plan.