



Helping me to say 'Yes' Lord – Learning to serve God with the gifts He has given us

When Nancy Coveny, Executive Director at The Catholic Foundation of North Georgia, began her discussion at BELIEVES on Tuesday, October 13th entitled “Helping me to say ‘Yes’ Lord – Learning to serve God with the gifts He has given us,” she did so with a prayer.”



“Say it and see if you can really mean it,” Coveny told the attendees before everyone said the Prayer of Abandonment by Father Charles de Foucauld together out loud.

*Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.*

*Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures -
I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul:
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.*

Coveny, who has been involved in non-profits for 30+ years, including leading Buckhead Community Ministry, and now in her current role with the Catholic Foundation of North Georgia, said that her gift of faith was fostered early on thanks to her parents’ commitment.

“They sent me to Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia when I was 15, as well as retreats and Catholic school for some of my education,” she recalled. “When I went to college I stayed with the church and studied psychology because I knew I wanted to help people – but I had many interests without a definite path. I thought I had a great relationship with God.”

Then one day in her college years, Coveny said she went home and while there attended a Mass given by Father Tom Deasy, a priest her family had grown close with over the years. He was dying of a brain tumor.

“During the Mass, he read ‘The Prayer of Abandonment’ and asked us to follow along. I wasn’t able to say it and really mean it.”

Some months later, Coveny’s heart was broken by the heart of her college boyfriend whom she thought she would marry. She didn’t know exactly what to do in that moment so called her mother, who suggested to pray the rosary to be able to go to sleep.

“So I chose to pray the sorrowful mysteries, and when I did it was the first time I understood what Jesus meant in the garden of Gethsemane when he said ‘take this cup, but not my will but yours.’ This helped me to understand that maybe this boyfriend wasn’t what God wanted.”

Not long after as Coveny continued in her faith journey, she rediscovered ‘The Prayer of Abandonment.’

“This time, I could say it and mean it,” she said.

She went on to say it every day – multiple times a day – and it changed her spiritual life.

“It led me to try to follow God’s will in my choices – no matter if they dealt with career, relationships, or other things. I began going more to retreats, journaling to God, seeking spiritual direction, reading books, joining prayer groups – just constantly striving to follow God’s will.”

Coveny was clear to point out that striving to follow God’s will in no way means that pain is avoided all the time.



“Later on in life, I went through a faith crisis where I learned that trying to follow God’s will in our lives doesn’t mean that we will not suffer. I always had this idea that everything would be fine if I tried to follow God’s will and when it wasn’t I was hurt and angry at God. Faith is a gift – because that was taken away for a while. I now understand that God did not promise that we would not suffer, but He did say He would be walking besides us on the path of suffering.”

Now, Coveny said she still tries to follow God’s will – to live a holy, purposeful life – but recognizes that there are many paths we can follow.

“This takes us back to our gifts,” she commented. “We’re to use whatever gifts we’ve received to serve God. When we use our gifts to glorify Him, we are a part of His Body of Christ, and there will be more joy and peace in the paths we take.”

Coveny has had a lifetime search to find and use His gifts in her life and helping others discover their own gifts also. She has found joy in doing so.

“In the Bible, there are multiple references to our gifts from God, such as in 1 Corinthians 12, where the scripture says ‘there are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit.’”

At age 18 when she was in college at the University of Florida, Coveny was first introduced to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which is based on the theory that we all have natural preferences for how we perceive and relate to the world.

“All personality types are good and can be used,” she told the audience.

In fact, she quoted Isabel Myers-Briggs, the creator of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, who once said “Whatever the circumstances of your life, the understanding of type can make your perceptions clearer, your judgment sounder, and your life closer to your heart’s desire.”

Coveny later worked at the Center for Applications of Psychological Type and taught workshops, which formed her framework for viewing gifts.

“When using gifts we are more joyful and operating out of love. When not using our gifts, we get further from the Lord.”

In Khalil Gilbran’s ‘The Prophet,’ Coveny shared that Gilbran wrote:

Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy. For if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds half of a man’s hunger.

“But earlier in the poem, Gilbran describes work when one is using his or her gifts, when he wrote ‘And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God.’”

When we work with our gifts, we share God’s love with others, Coveny said.

“He said in Jeremiah that ‘before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.’”

Coveny clearly saw the working of God’s body of Christ when she led Buckhead Community Ministries.

“As an organization we were called to serve the poor, but I believe at BCM it was equally meaningful for us to serve the upper and middle income people to help them find out how to serve. The mission of BCM included being a place for members of the sponsoring churches and others to live out their call to Christian service.”

Sometimes Coveny said when working with people from business who wanted to volunteer, they would apologize for not working in a non-profit or ministry. Those who work in the business world are vital to nonprofits when they share their skills and financial gifts.

“The fact is we need people in all aspects of society and life. Not all people have to find all of their meaning in their work.”



Another assumption that Coveny and her team also had to debunk was that just because someone came in to volunteer with a background from an area like accounting didn’t mean they should be directed to help out with things related to finance.

“Maybe they wanted to just sit and talk with or listen to people who came in needing help,” she said.

After speaking a bit about her time leading BCM, Coveny transitioned back to reflect on another source of prayer that she drew from earlier in life.

“My mother gave me a book titled ‘Prayers’ from Abbe Michel Quoist which was written in the 1940s. One of the prayers is called ‘Lord help me to say yes.’ In it he describes the fear of what God might ask us to do.”

*I am afraid of saying "yes," Lord.
Where will you take me?
I am afraid of drawing the longer straw,
I am afraid of signing my name to an unread agreement.
I am afraid of the "yes" that will entail other "yeses."*

This prayer resonated with Coveny in a similar manner to a poem entitled "The Hound of Heaven."

*Yet I am not in peace.
For you pursue me, besiege me.
I seek out the din for fear of hearing you,
but in a moment of silence,
you slip through.*

"At the time I discovered this poem I was in my 20s seeking God, but was scared to death God would call me to be a nun," Coveny told the crowd to a bit of a chuckle. "Thankfully, Father Neil Jarreau, my spiritual director at the time told me that it was obvious God was not calling me to be a nun and I was free to be myself."

Throughout her faith journey, Coveny has learned that it is not the type of work we do that matters most, it's that we have God work through us in all we are and all we do.

One of the retreats she attended at Ignatius House in my 20s was run by Father Ed Salazar. He was talking about our search for meaning and purpose, and quoted Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian theologian, sharing one of the most helpful statements I have ever heard:

"By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do, and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Another book Coveny has found to be very impactful in her times at Ignatius House and on retreats is "Healing the Purpose of Your Life." In the book, the authors quote Agnes Sanford who described our 'sealed orders' as the call to discover our talents and use them for the Lord.

"Our sealed orders are not a task, but a way of being is what it's all about. If we have meaninglessness it makes us sick, but if we have meaning it makes us well. Some people's sealed orders are more obvious. I have long wondered about mine but I believe they have to do with having a vision for what could be whether in an organization or a person and serving as a facilitator to share and help that vision come to reality."

As it neared time for Coveny to conclude her remarks and invite discussion at the tables, she shared one more story.



“Before joining the Catholic Foundation, I interviewed for a job that I was perfectly qualified for and had everyone I knew praying for me. I thought it would be perfect for my family. It turned out to be a big surprise when I didn’t get the job. My friends thought I would be mad at God, but I figured if so many people were praying and I didn’t get the job, the God must know better.”

Two years later, someone on the search team from the role two years earlier reached out and asked Coveny to apply for the job she currently has with the Catholic Foundation role.

“God’s plan was even better than mine,” she said. I was able to share my gifts, my sealed orders, in a new way to serve God and the Church.” Ironically, her new position gives her the opportunity to help Catholics figure out how to literally share their gifts with God and his people. Most people want to give back to God in gratefulness for all he has given them and many times it matches how they shared their gifts in their lifetimes. She told the story of someone who volunteered with the homeless whose estate gift will continue to provide for that homeless ministry after they are gone.

As the discussion transitioned to the tables, those present had lively dialogue as they talked about discerning God’s will and seeking to use the gifts He provides.

At one table, a regular CTK parishioner commented that he is often reminded that if we want to hear God laugh, we just have to tell Him our plans.

He added, “I feel I have talents, but I feel I can do more. Every time I deviate from where I am, I get sent back to where I was.”

At another table Nikola Djuric, partner at Sutherland Asbill & Brennan LLP, commented that he has been a part of two CEO searches and been amazed at how much weight is put into things like Myers-Briggs to determine people’s talents.

“I don’t think I have personally been purposeful in finding gifts out,” Djuric said. “I have just been going where I feel led, like teaching Sunday school for example. It’s just been a matter of constantly saying ‘yes’ but not in a purposeful way. But you do have to be present.

Later in the conversation, Djuric also added, “I think a lot of folks think there’s just one perfect job, but I don’t think that’s the case.”



Before the BELIEVES session concluded, Coveny stood back up and invited the table discussion to conclude so there could be some open question and answer with the entire audience.

CTK Parishioner Maureen Becker, asked, “Having a psychology background, have you ever felt conflicted with your faith?”

Coveny responded, “I learned in a secular program and we were taught to never talk about faith. Then I got involved in a crisis center in Hall County, and in one encounter I wound up asking, ‘Do you even believe in God?’ The person said, ‘No. See I don’t even have that.’ If you open the door, it gives people a chance to talk about it.”

Natalie Grasso, Board Relations & Development Manager at The Robert W. Woodruff Arts Center, then asked Coveny about the endowments she gets to fund in her current role, including what the most eccentric or unique one she’s ever been involved with, if one stands out.

“We now have about 200 endowments,” Coveny said. “Our recent grant deadline was Sept. 30th. We had 51 applications requesting a total of \$400K, with \$100K to give away. Thanks to the Joseph Mitchell Fund we have funds set up throughout the entire Archdiocese for many ministries and churches. A man set one up last year for St. Francis’ table (feeding the homeless) at the Shrine. It’s one of the most recent. I would like to see funds begin going towards parish religion within parishes.”

And with that, the time came to an end, but not before Coveny was able to leave everyone with one last question to ponder.

“So just like the parable of the tenants, we too have been given talents. Are we burying them, or using them? Will we hear Him Say well done good and faithful servant?”

Help us to say yes, Lord.