

Serra Spirituality Requires Discipleship
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All of you here know my parents', and especially my mother's great love for Serra. I often say that I wish I had half of her energy. A priest friend of mine who is a vocation director told me he met my mom at the National Convention of Diocesan Vocation Directors and she was quite a force. She was apparently telling him how important the vocation resources of Serra Spark were and he was apologizing for not being completely familiar with them. He said that he told her he was my friend, but she still showed him no mercy.

My mother likes to tell the story that when she was retiring, she asked where she should get involved and I told her Serra. I was already a Serra Club chaplain in my first parish. I knew my mother would love Serra because it was always my experience that Serrans are some of the best people in the Church. This is because they have a deep love for the mission of the Church. They understand the role of priests, deacons and religious in our Church. The role of consecrated life in our Church is essential, just as it was in the life of Jesus, and Serrans understand this.

It is important for us to ask ourselves, "What is a Serran? What separates Serra from other "service clubs"? Are we just a Catholic service club? There are a lot of service clubs in the world, and most of them are not Catholic. They are wonderful ways for people to come together to serve and do good, but Serra is more than this. I really want to thank Greg Schwietz for inviting me to reflect more deeply on this question. Greg gave me some talks from Serra's history, most importantly one that Cardinal Stritch gave at the Serra International Convention in 1956. Cardinal Stritch was very strong on a central aspect of Serra. He pointed out that a Serran is more than just someone who is serving. He said, "The Serran must not only be a good Catholic, but he must be a Catholic who is striving for perfection. He must be a Catholic who is trying to live what St Francis de Sales called 'the devout life.'"

This was of course prophetic, because you are well aware that one of the primary emphases of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council was the universal call to holiness. This was the idea that not just priests and religious are called to be holy, to live lives that are first and foremost focused on God, but that everyone in the Church is called to be holy. The Council expressed this in Chapter 5 of its

document on the Church (Lumen Gentium): “Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification.’ However, this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others.” By the way, this is exactly the language that Serra uses to describe its third objective: “To assist its members to recognize and respond in their own lives to God’s call to holiness in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.”

In more recent years in the Catholic Church, when we speak about this call to holiness, we speak about the call to be a true disciple. This is the biblical way to speak about the call to holiness. It also helps to get very practical about what the word holiness means. Sometimes when you say everyone is called to be holy, people think that means that they have to learn to pray the rosary kneeling on glass and never watch TV or a movie again. But what it really means is something quite practical. It means that I seek to follow Jesus in my daily life. This is what a disciple does. I want Jesus to be the lord of my life. It is not that I have to pray kneeling... it is that I have to pray every day. It is not that I can never have fun, it is that I must submit even my recreation and the TV shows I watch to the lordship of Jesus.

To be holy is to live as one who has been called into a relationship with Jesus, where he seeks to follow the Lord daily. It is to recognize that conversion is a daily process that comes from my attempting to follow Christ today. It is to recognize that my following of Jesus involves every aspect of my life. My relationship with Jesus doesn’t just mean that I pray every day, but it affects how I treat others, the way I speak, the way I spend my money and the way I spend my free time. Basically, a disciple has decided to put Jesus Christ at the center of their life and they want him to affect everything else. They seek to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength and love their neighbor as themselves.

This was the central point of another talk given at Serra’s International Convention just last year, by the past International President, Chainarong Monthienvichienchai. He said, “The mission to assist our members to recognize and respond in their own lives to God’s call to holiness is all about ‘discipleship.’” He warns us about the sad truth, that there are many Catholics who are sitting in the pews every Sunday who are not really disciples. He says, “A disciple is one who encounters Jesus, repents, experiences conversion and

then follows Jesus. All too often those of us in positions of Church leadership assume that all the folks in the pews on Sundays are already disciples. Unfortunately many are not." The question is, are they seeking daily conversion? Are they seeking holiness? Have they decided to put Jesus Christ at the center of their whole lives?

Chianarong makes clear the important point that this call to holiness in Serra, the call to discipleship, which is the third objective, is not accidental to Serra's first two objectives, her mission to build up vocations for the Church. Sometimes we approach the third objective this way. We see it as the "icing" on the cake for Serrans, an added extra. If you volunteer and work for vocations, then as a bonus we will give you a few nice talks for your spiritual life and even a retreat now and then. But the truth is that these objectives are intimately connected. Discipleship, holiness, Serra's third objective is the one that goes to the root of the vocation problem. At the root of the vocation problem is a lack of discipleship. Here is the way that Chianarong puts it: "The real remedy to our vocation problem is not a bigger and better vocation program. Rather, the remedy will be found at the most basic level of discipleship, the universal call to holiness, the third mission statement of Serra: knowing Jesus. Once people come to know Jesus, repent of their sin, experience conversion, and become disciples, they will naturally draw others to follow him too, in whatever vocation they are called."

If Serra is more than just a service club, then being a Serran is more about who you are than what you do. As Greg Schwietz said, "When improved member spirituality becomes an important club focus, it is then that your members will begin to realize that being a Serran is more about who they are, rather than what they do." This should affect the programmatic aspect of our clubs. I was very struck when I read Cardinal Stritch's letter from 1956, because he said this: "The program of lectures arranged for Serra Clubs each year must never be just a luncheon club program. The program must have its objective of educating Serrans to know better and better their religion." I was struck because I have been to many Serra club meetings, as I am sure all of you have, and sometimes they are just a nice luncheon club.

Cardinal Stritch gives some examples of what we should do. He says that we should try to help the members "in understanding the application of the principles of Catholic truth and Catholic morals to the many troublesome problems of the world about us." We must help the Serran "to understand that his whole person in his private and in his social relations, in his economic

relations, belongs to God.” He points out in particular that we should be looking for ways to strengthen the Catholic family. This is because vocations come from the family, and this is the mission of Serra.

I want to speak about what I think is a very central insight that Greg Schwietz has spoken about in Serra: Christ-centered friendships. He says, “It’s my belief that the ‘secret sauce’ of Serra is its internal spirituality programs, and its efforts to develop what I call ‘Christ’ed friendships,’ enduring friendships that place Christ at their center. It is this element of Serra which holds it all together and makes Serrans ‘Serrans for life.’” How do we do this? How do we encourage Christ-centered friendships? I would like to answer that by proposing a different model for our Serra clubs than we sometimes have today. This is the controversial part of my talk, where I stir up the pot.

I have been working in evangelistic movements for almost 30 years. I am currently the Chair of the Board of two of the most successful groups, which are based in the Twin Cities: NET Ministries and St Paul’s Outreach. In all my years of evangelistic work, I have seen a very important truth. No one becomes holy alone. It is very important to see this. Holiness happens, in my personal experience, when people enter into committed Christian friendships. One of the ways this often happens is in small groups - places where people share their faith with each other and where they also become good enough friends that they can share their struggles with each other. It is through this sharing of the joys and struggles of being a disciple that we grow.

I first experienced this in college, through friends in St Paul’s Outreach. We met together and prayed regularly, and we shared about our faith lives. This allowed us to support each other in growing in holiness. I found this to be so important that when I began to pursue priesthood, I left my home in Colorado and pursued priesthood in the Archdiocese of St Paul and Minneapolis, because this allowed me to have a community like this in my priesthood. I joined a fraternity of diocesan priests called the Companions of Christ. At the heart of our life is small sharing groups, where as priests we get together every two weeks or at least once a month and we share our spiritual lives. We share how we are growing and how we are struggling in our faith. Personally, I have found this essential to my walk in holiness. Knowing that I have friends who are supporting me and walking with me is a great help. They help me to pursue Christ in all the areas of my life. They help me integrate my discipleship. I can bring them my questions and my struggles. They pray for me and they inspire me when they share how

God is working in their lives. These friendships have become the greatest treasure of my life.

I note that Serra already has prepared an incredibly well done spiritual program entitled "A Call to Holiness," which is available on its website. One of the beauties of this program is the opportunity to use it for small group discussion. It anticipates that at a meeting, you would read the prepared material in the context of Scripture, and then would have a discussion. Depending on the size of your meeting, small group discussions would be the best way to go. In these small groups we would be beginning to take steps in sharing our faith with each other. We would be beginning to help each other to become disciples by developing Christ-centered friendships. The beauty of this is that we don't always need to find outside speakers. Let's be honest. Sometimes our speakers make our club more like a service club. It is good for us to be informed about what is going on, but if all we do each time we meet is get good information, it doesn't contribute to us becoming better disciples. We need formation in our lives of faith, and this can be done by using Serra's own resources.

I would like to propose that committed Serrans take this even a step further – yes, I am speaking to all of you here! I would like to propose that you who are really committed begin to meet outside of regular club meetings for true sharing of Christian discipleship. I would like to see Serrans move to a deeper level of Christian friendship than the club meeting model allows. Here is an idea. You get together with four to six Serrans in your club and you invite them to join you every two weeks for breakfast before or after morning Mass. You could also get together in the evening, and it could be every week. You only need an hour if you do it every other week – two hours if you do it once a month. When you get together, you begin with a reading from Scripture and a prayer, and then you share how you see God working in your life. What is God saying to you in your prayer? Where are you seeing God active in your daily life? Where are you struggling to see God active? Is there some difficulty for which you want prayer? As you grow in friendship and trust, the sharing can become deeper. These people can really help you to follow Jesus closely. They will become brothers and sisters in Christ who strengthen you in your discipleship. Not everyone in Serra would be ready for this, but in my opinion, it would be wonderful if this was the goal – that everyone in Serra would be in this kind of discipleship group. There are some wonderful books you could read together as well, that could help you to grow as disciples.

Cardinal Stritch said, "Serra is a sort of little seminary in which we are trying to train you to be enlightened, zealous lay apostles working untiringly and with holy ingenuity under the mandate of your bishops." To become enlightened, zealous lay apostles, we need support and Christian friendships. We need people who will challenge us to be real disciples. We need help integrating this into all the aspects of our life. I like the way Greg Schwiez described it in an article he wrote. He said, "To be a Serran is one of the greatest gifts in the world – one that is treasured by those who find themselves called to serve this noble mission. And it is Christ'ed friendships that make the difference. With these friendships come a mutual understanding and spiritual maturity that makes Serra one of the great organizations in the world. And, it adds immense meaning to your personal profession: 'I am a Serran.'"

This afternoon, the chaplains are going to get together to reflect more on this mission of making disciples. I want to point out that your chaplains can be a real resource in this. Sometimes we see our chaplain only as an encouraging cheerleader. He is one who is encouraging us to keep up our good work. He gives us nice nuggets at Mass, but we don't empower him to help us. What if our chaplains invited us into this deeper walk with Christ through retreats, through confessions and through encouraging these small groups? Most priests love it when people desire to really pursue holiness. They will delight to help you if you can show them this is your goal.