

Learning to love and trust God's divine timing

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Caroline Koch, a junior at Mount Saint Mary Academy in Little Rock, has learned to trust in God's timing and plan for her life, which has helped her overcome hardships and develop a deeper relationship with God.

Who's your abbot? Seeking rebukes of the wise

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

As a Catholic, accepting wise rebuke is crucial for growth and genuine joy with God, necessitating a heart conversion and an openness to correction from those who can identify and articulate faults.

Grappling with mental health with faith

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are increasingly affecting young adults due to societal pressures, stigma, and lack of support. Seeking help and faith can provide hope and closure.

One monk's impact on my family and life

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

Anna Constantino gained insight into true happiness and selfless love through her childhood friendship with Brother Maurus Glenn, a monk dedicated to people and spreading God's love.

Challenges of math class bolstered my faith

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

I tend to enter into the school year on fire with the Lord. I am stress-free and unbothered. I laugh at what the future holds because I know it is in his hands, but as the work piles up and the events of the year become more demanding, that fire seems to die out little by little.

I've suffered with desolation for most of my faith journey, and during the first part of the fall semester, it seemed to worsen. The Lord's voice is drowned out by my constant worries. "I am with you" becomes "You're alone." "You are good," becomes "You are not enough." "Rest in me" becomes "You're running out of time," and eventually, those whispered words of peace go as if they were unsaid.

These periods of spiritual drought, along with the constant torrent of stress, are exhausting, yet it is during these times that I have come to know the Lord better than I have before.

To suffer is to grow closer to the heart of Christ. I don't know where I heard this, but it never really made sense to me until recently. It always used to seem that suffering would draw me away from my faith. Why would Christ want me to suffer? Why would he allow me to go through this struggle and pain? These questions were left unanswered until last fall.

During that time, I was taking the hardest class of my life. Math has never been my favorite, but pre-calculus wasn't just something I disliked — it was the thorn in my side. Most nights, I stayed up until midnight finishing homework sets, and most mornings, I would wake up early to try and finish the problems I couldn't complete the night before.

This class had me in tears. I had never struggled in a class before, and this feeling of not understanding was completely new. I felt worthless and confused. My grades have always been something I define myself by, but since I no longer was the straight A student, I didn't seem to be worth anything anymore.

This mentality, along with the constant piles of homework in pre-calc and my other classes, weighed heavily on my spiritual life. I no longer cared about what I was worth in God's eyes because my worth only depended on my academic performance.

Certainly I wasn't good if I couldn't even stop myself from breaking down over a math problem. But the Lord revealed that this was anything but true.

After weeks of losing sleep and pushing myself over the edge, I broke down. A big, fat, ugly pile of tears and delirium were all that could be found in my place. My exhaustion had caught up with me, along with the realization that I had pushed the Lord away. After hours of crying in bed, dwelling in my suffering and hurt, I asked God why. Why wasn't I good enough? Why did you leave me? Why did I have to suffer so much? And it was then that I got the answer.

It was never my suffering. It was his. In every tear I shed, Christ was beside me, wiping them

away. Every self-deprecating thought I had hurt him just as much as it hurt me. Every doubt in myself, every insecurity, every little obsolete detail that seemed to make or break who I was, was felt in the same heart that I was supposed to trust in.

I was never alone; I was never abandoned. I strayed away from my shepherd, and the journey back tore me apart. It ripped away what kept me from him, and though it hurt, it left me stronger in my faith and closer to Christ.

High school is not easy. It's not always fun. It is a time when we forget who we are while at the same time learning who we are meant to be. It is in suffering that we find the truth.

Although we are hurting, we are not broken. Although we are imperfect, we are not invaluable. Remember, we are his as much as he is ours.

Isabel Vacca is a senior at Mena High School. St. Agnes Church in Mena is her home parish.

When we least expect it, God is working

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

While attending a private Catholic school from ages 3-11, I learned many things about God. Between daily religion class, weekly Mass and endless discussions about what it meant to be a Christian, I thought I knew pretty much everything about what it meant to be a follower of Christ. However, in the midst of reflection recently, it became crystal clear that I had only been experiencing those years mechanically.

Of course, I still loved Christ and appreciated his sacrifice, but it was as though he felt too distant from me to form a bond beyond a one-sided admiration. At the time, I had not yet been placed in a situation where a foundational knowledge of Christ would not suffice. I subconsciously lived under the impression that I would not have to endure a test of my faith.

It was not until I made the transition to public school in seventh grade that my eyes were opened. My class increased by almost 150, and I was placed in a new environment with unfamiliar faces, many of whom seemed to no longer share the same values as me — something that I had not anticipated.

It felt like the bubble I had grown up in suddenly popped, and soon, I was sent down a long road of confusion regarding whether my relationship with God was good enough.

I spent many years in a haze during this transitional stage regarding where I stood in my faith. I continued to attend Mass and maintained daily prayer, but I was unable to pinpoint the role God was supposed to be playing in my life. The connection I had lacked with God in the years prior still remained missing as I attempted to navigate through the years that followed.

It was not until attending a youth rally in my 10th-grade year that I was redirected in my faith. There, I was moved by a testimony from a kid my age who spoke of a similar situation. I found it admirable that they were able to share their story of personal conflict with a room full of

people while I had yet to admit my own conflict to myself.

Leaving the retreat inspired, I found comfort in the fact that I was not alone in feeling lost in my faith. I realized that God had sent me there to find reassurance in him, and I knew that the first step in reconstructing our relationship was simply to allow him into my life. Because early on, I prayed to God as if he were remote, I realized that altering how I spoke to him could help me foster a new perception of him.

With this in mind, I began speaking to God as if he were a friend rather than a notion. This simple modification in my prayer life made a significant difference; I noticed God feeling much closer to me as the gap that had once existed slowly disappeared.

Even though there is room for growth in my relationship, I feel blessed during times of reflection that despite my unknowingness, God has been present throughout every stage of my life, even those where I felt isolated, mystified and ignorant in my faith. His abundant love prevails through the inevitability that I am flawed and am destined to fall victim to sin again and again. The beauty is, however, that I will never be forsaken by him.

A Bible verse that comes to mind that captures the lessons I have learned is Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Although in times of doubt, it can be difficult to fall back on the Lord, we must stay steadfast in his trust and continue to seek out fulfillment in his promise. For it is often in the times we least expect it that God is working within us the most.

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Three habits to add to your daily routine

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says that our “bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit” and that God wants us to keep healthy, happy and productive. As a social media content creator, I’ve noticed how much emphasis influencers put on the importance of a daily routine. After a while, however, these videos start to look the same — exercise regimens, skin and hair routines, food and beverage choices and so on.

Honestly, it overwhelms me. I have struggled to keep a regular schedule every day. I do agree, however, that having a consistent daily routine is important, as it helps us take care of ourselves and ensures we are meeting our physical and mental needs.

While everyone’s lives are different, and we all do different things every day, there are three things that I think everyone should try to add to their daily routines: prayer, listening to Christian music and reading the Bible.

Nurturing our relationship with God is as important as caring for our bodies, minds and hearts.

As we manage our everyday lives, we also need to care for our spiritual well-being.

- The first habit — prayer — should be non-negotiable.

Speaking with God is the easiest and best way to maintain a relationship with him. At the diocese's Junior High Rally in Little Rock last fall, the guest speaker, Bob Perron, mentioned a prayer technique that I recommend you try. It's called the doorway prayer. Every time you walk through a doorway, say a quick prayer. You could thank God for something awesome that happened, or you could ask him to watch over someone you love. You'll be surprised at how many doorways you walk through every day and how many prayers you'll say. We can never thank God enough for everything he does for us.

- The second habit is to listen to Christian music.

When people think of this type of music, many automatically think of hands raised in praise to a gospel song. While there is nothing wrong with this, remember there are so many other Christian genres to explore — surely you can find a category that is your cup of tea. Father Barnabas Maria-Susai, my parish pastor, reminds us of a beautiful sentiment from St. Augustine — “the one who sings prays twice.”

Playing my guitar and singing a hymn is my favorite way to worship God and offer up my prayers to him. Whether you're singing, playing an instrument or just choosing to listen to Christian music when you're in the car, working out or just relaxing, you are caring for your spiritual health.

- The third habit is to read the Bible every day.

Many of us don't bother to open the Bible because it's read to us every weekend at Mass. But there's so much that doesn't get covered within the three-year liturgical cycles, and there are many stories and lessons we miss.

If you want a guided study, Father Mike Schmitz hosts the free “The Bible In A Year” podcast. In it, he walks through the Bible with his listeners each day, reading and interpreting each piece of Scripture. By making time daily to read the Bible and study what God is communicating to us, we can further deepen our relationship with him.

Our routines are very important to us. We rely on them to provide us with a sense of predictability and comfort in our lives. But we can't just pay attention to our physical well-being and neglect our spiritual health. Colossians 3:23 says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” By adding these three small but powerful habits to our daily routines, we can nourish our souls and grow closer to God in the process. I am challenging you all to try these habits with me.

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God should be the compass for your life

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

One of the biggest things that everyone, especially young people, deals with today is finding the direction of where they want to go in life. Things are coming at us so quickly that it is hard to find where I belong. High school can feel like it will never end, but as the end eventually draws nearer, there are feelings of joy and anxiety.

The “last-time” moments hit hard when they start to happen. Knowing that this is the last time I will see something I have poured all my energy into over the past four years brings tears to my eyes. I look back at the things I have accomplished and feel sad that I will not be able to do them again.

Those memories are not lost, however, and new memories will be formed in the coming years. I look back on my high school career proudly because I listened to the path God laid out for me.

It can be so easy to get lost in social media and try to stay “trendy,” but God is calling us to something greater than ourselves. There is a plan that he has for our lives, but we must choose to live the life he is guiding us towards. It feels like I have been guided throughout high school to find places and people I love. The world cannot truly fulfill our lives, only fleeting senses of joy and pleasure.

True happiness is found when you give yourself to God. He calls everyone to find their path and follow it. When we do that, life becomes something so amazingly beautiful that it fills everything we do. Life is filled with so much wonder and amazement that it is hard not to look at it and say, “This is good.”

Following God’s plan for you leads to a life that is fulfilling. It makes me get up every day excited to take on the challenges that lay before me. I know that no matter what comes my way, I can overcome and endure because I have God to help guide me where I need to be. The world will try to beat you down and make you give up, but staying on the path will bring joy into your life.

Sometimes, I think, “I don’t know what I am doing,” and “I am older — I should have all the answers.” I don’t have all the answers, and that is OK because overcoming these challenges helps us open up to God and ask for his help. God will never fail you.

Sometimes everything can feel hopeless and as if there is no real way out of this. The true reality is, however, that it is not hopeless because we have God by our side throughout our journey. God is the light at the end of the tunnel, the hope that things will be better. Sometimes it feels like that light is far away, and we can feel alone and trapped. That light is always there, just reaching out and wanting to bring us in.

God is the one constant in an everchanging and chaotic world. We have to be open to what God is calling us toward. The way he calls us comes in various ways, but he is advocating that everyone comes to him. Prayer and Mass are excellent ways to listen and ask God to guide you into the next phase of your life. God provides us the hope and the peace that is essential to guide us through life. Following God is not always easy — most of the time, it requires doing difficult things and standing up for what you believe. However, taking the route God has planned for you will always lead to a happier life. God is there every step of the way and has a plan for every person, we need to be open and listen to it.

Nicholas Connell is a recent graduate of Catholic High School in Little Rock. A member of Christ the King in Little Rock, he will be attending the University of Arkansas this fall.

Our faith in Christ should flow like water

written by Anthony Gehrig |

Recently I've found myself lacking gratitude in my daily life. During this past spring break, I returned to my *pueblo natal* (birthplace) of La Paz, Bolivia, to renew my daily commitment to a life of gratitude to God and others.

After joining my father to support water supply development efforts, I finally came to understand that when depending on one's environment to survive, basic human needs like water can be seen either as a "given" or a "gift from God." Taking necessities like water for granted has become an unrecognized privilege to us. Meanwhile, for the world's materially poor, access to safe water and other necessities often remains an unrealized basic human right.

Being born to Catholic missionaries in La Paz, I started my life in the Andean highlands. I hadn't returned since I was a toddler, so this experience was different from what I only vaguely remembered. The people I encountered were especially hospitable despite facing poverty and limited opportunities. One visit in particular impacted me the most.

On one of our last days, we traveled to the remote village of Cuipa Kahuayo in the Bolivian countryside. The people were celebrating the inauguration of their first-ever community drinking water system. More than 70 families finally had access to safe, spring-fed water in their homes after generations of relying on dirty river flows and contaminated, open wells.

They received what we take so often for granted. Their sincere thanksgiving to God and reverence toward Mother Earth were woven into the entire inauguration ceremony.

Toil, sacrifice, local municipal support and significant donations from people of faith and goodwill in the United States via Water Engineers for the Americas and Africa (wefta.net) made the opportunity possible.

The joy each community member shared poured over me like a raging river. I was blessed with a necklace full of colorful flowers and oversized vegetables — potatoes, carrots, turnips and

flowers — all produce of the Bolivian high plain Altiplano, representing the life now possible from access to water.

Witnessing how important this day was to those families and their gratitude opened my eyes to how much I take simple things like safe drinking water for granted. I began to realize how blessed I truly am.

While talking about gratitude with my Subiaco mentor, Brother Sebastian Richey, I was directed to the Bible passage of 10 lepers healed by Jesus in Luke 17:11-19. In it, only one of the 10 lepers returned to show gratitude to Jesus for cleansing their lives.

Brother Sebastian explained to me that “the Samaritan, an outcast, recognizes Jesus’ power and expresses gratitude, while the others take their healing for granted. Jesus highlights the importance of acknowledging God’s blessings and how the power of faith can transform us. It should also be a reminder to cultivate a heart of gratitude and help us recognize God’s work in our lives.”

Ongoing, authentic gratitude and repentance transform our lives, saving us just as the healed Samaritan was in his gratitude and faith in Jesus.

As a recent graduate of Subiaco Academy — my home away from home these past four years — I have grown to recognize God’s goodness in my daily life. I am forever thankful for the guidance and support I received from my family, friends, teachers and mentors along my journey at Subiaco. The witness of the monks in their daily lives of community prayer, and in their spiritual guidance of students, are additional causes for my gratitude to God and to them. One of Subiaco’s gifts to me is learning to live in gratitude as a joy-filled discipline, and not just spontaneous reactions to moments when things work out my way.

I have come to understand that gratitude is a gift of love to be celebrated with joy and shared with others — flowing like water out of our faith in Christ.

Anthony Gehrig will be attending the University of Notre Dame in the fall and recently graduated from Subiaco Academy. St. Patrick Cathedral in Fort Worth, Texas, is his home parish.

Get youth involved in Church life, faith

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

I have often heard about the lack of youth involvement in the Church. I see the truth in this statement. Most people my age are more consistent in social media posts than in prayer. This apathy of the younger generation is quite apparent.

However, I have had a different experience. Christ the King Church in Little Rock boasts a very active Catholic Youth Ministry program. The meetings are held every Wednesday at 6 p.m. in the youth center.

These meetings are always well attended by high schoolers from every grade. The first 30 minutes are fun and games. The boys usually play billiards; the girls seem to gravitate toward table tennis. There is also a foosball table and an air hockey table.

In the back there is a room called the cantina stocked with soda and food. Pizza is ordered for special events. Sometimes kids will bring their own homemade baked goods to share with their friends.

After the first thirty minutes, we get down to business. This usually includes informational videos on faith-related topics, peer-led small group discussions or a guest speaker. The most frequent speaker is Father Patrick Friend, a teacher at Catholic High School and the chaplain of the CYM.

I had Father Friend for English class my freshman year. He was always very passionate about what he taught, and he brings the same passion for the Catholic faith to CYM.

The CYM program at CTK is filled with young people who are passionate about the faith. The diocese has a Youth Advisory Team that meets to organize different youth events. The members of this team who belong to CTK also organize parts of the CYM meetings.

Because of the CYM group, I had the pleasure of going to Steubenville Mid-America, a national youth faith retreat sponsored by Franciscan University. It has multiple locations for the convenience of different areas. The Mid-America conference is the zone for the Diocese of Little Rock.

Kids from different parishes come along with our group, but most of the group is from CTK. We all pack into a bus and ride to Missouri State University and stay in dorms during the weekend. At certain points in the day, we all filter into the basketball stadium to listen to incredible speakers. It is an amazing thing to see all of these young Catholics from different states gathered in one place.

Steubenville is an incredible experience, but there is a more personal retreat closer to home. Search is the best opportunity for young people to grow closer to God. Held at St. John Center in Little Rock, Search is a weekend retreat that allows young people to contemplate their personal relationship with God. A weekend away from their phones so they can evaluate the state of their faith life.

The retreat is completely peer-led. The team is divided into two groups. The Inside Team (IT) and the Outside Team (OT). The IT stays with the Searchers throughout the weekend and each member gives a personal witness talk. The OT puts on skits that convey powerful messages.

There are two Search retreats each year, one in the winter and one in the summer. I have had the honor of serving on the teams three times.

This summer will be my third and final time on the team. I enjoyed my own Search, but I got more out of being on the team. It is a wonderful thing to see young people free from their phones so they can focus on God. It gives them a chance to consider how important faith is to them, and why they should trust in the Lord.

I have benefited greatly from the youth ministry in our diocese. Before I began attending CYM, I felt alone in my faith. There were only three Catholics in my private middle school so I felt

like I was one of the only young practicing Catholics in Little Rock. Then I met some faithful Catholics at Catholic High, and we started attending CYM together. Now I have a community of faith around me.

Matthew Lamb is a recent Catholic High graduate and seminarian for the Diocese of Little Rock. He will be living at the House of Formation in the fall.