

Sample Witness Talks For Time and Talent Renewal

by Maria Joseph from St. Gerard Majella in Port Jefferson Station.

My name is Maria Joseph, and it is my pleasure to help the congregation praise God in song. I am a cantor and this is my 5th year as a cantor at St Gerard Majella.

The first time I was called into this ministry was at the age of 19 in my birth country, Trinidad. My ex-high school teacher, Sr. Columba, who was their music director of the senior choir in our parish, sent me a cry for help.

My initial reaction was to ignore it. I did not like the songs they sang. The choir did not sound good and most choir members were twice my age or older. I ended up joining the choir! Why? I wish I could say that I realized that I had a gift to share. But at that time that was not my motivation. Not only was Sr. Columba my ex-Math, Geography, and Music teacher but three years previous to that, I underwent an operation and Sr. Columba was one of two teachers who visited me while I was hospitalized. I felt badly to refuse her. Thus I joined the Senior Choir .

About a year later, Sister was unable to continue as Music Director and asked me to replace her. Naturally I declined. She persisted and insisted that I could do it. I finally gave in and told her I'd give it my best shot. I was now responsible for how the choir sounded. If they sounded terrible I would be held responsible. I began working with them. They were hard-working housewives and parents with a deep faith in God and very weak voices. My voice was needed to support theirs. My voice began to develop. I taught them how to use their voices to sing and praise God.

They deepened my faith in Jesus. The same older people whom I originally shunned taught me so many things. They were in poor to moderate financial standing but never failed to share and give freely. In listening to their life stories I learned that there are many wounded souls and hearts around us, but with Jesus, burdens become lighter. I joined the music ministry reluctantly for the wrong reason and stayed for the right one. I learned that God had given us each a gift to share. They needed my voice and I needed them to teach me that no matter what life throws my way -Jesus is the answer.

God was not finished training me for the music ministry in his Church. By profession I was a Math teacher at a Catholic High School. The Principal always assigned extra duties to all her staff One of my extra-curricular activities was to teach the entire student body (of 600 students) religious songs every Tuesday morning for 15 to 20 minutes. I tried to refuse, stating that I felt inadequate and unqualified for the job. After all, I had no qualifications in music or singing. She overruled my objections.

For years I reluctantly and begrudgingly taught hymns. The one morning, after 10 years, as I was singing with them, it suddenly became very clear to me why I was doing this. God was telling me that he gave me the gift of praying through song and he needed me to share this with his young people.

I was humbled and embarrassed. Humbled, because He had asked me to share in this important work. Embarrassed, because I said "No" for 10 years. From that day, Tuesday mornings were no longer a chore but a mission.

As you can see God has his work cut out for Him with me. I never say yes at first but He persists until the message finally registers in my thick head.

Then I came to this country and St Gerard asked for volunteer cantors. This time I readily volunteered because I had already realized that I had a gift to share.

Sometimes, as a cantor, it is difficult for me to inspire the people to sing, as the Church in this country tends to be more formal than that in Trinidad and I also miss my Caribbean rhythms. Still I know that I am

doing what God wants me to do for there are no words to describe the feeling of elation and rightness that descends on when I urge you to sing and you do. When we all praise God together no matter what we sing. When you sing it helps me to sing even better. ~ I truly understand that it is in working together that we become ~ whole Body of Christ.

What am I trying to say in all this? I am sure that there are many of you out there on whom God has bestowed the gift of song. Maybe God is using me to issue you an invitation to use that gift for His honor and glory. If you think you are too shy let me just say that at one point in my life I was so shy that I used to try to blend into the walls while walking down hallways. I could never conceive myself standing in front of a crowd, but when you say "Yes" to God he gives you whatever is needed to complete the job he set out for you. In the words of Jesus:

"Do not be afraid I am with you. I have called each of you by name Come and follow me I will bring you home I love you and you are mine."

By Pamela Flanagan from St. Ignatius Loyola Parish in Hicksville.

Good morning, my name is Pamela Flanagan, I am involved in the Ministry of Consolation in our parish and would like to share my experience with you. Stewardship or ministry to me is the call of Jesus to love your neighbor or to paraphrase the Golden Rule, to treat others as you would like to be treated. All of you have been involved in ministry all your life, when you shovel your neighbors walk, take a friend to the doctor or just listen to someone when they have a problem, you are ministering to their needs.

Parish ministry or stewardship is the same thing only the person you help is a friend you have just met.. I became active in parish ministry about 8 years ago, I had a health problem and had to leave my job. After feeling sorry for myself for awhile and when my health improved I asked Sister Kay if she could use any help in Human Resources.

At the time I didn't think of helping at human resources as stewardship or ministry, I was just helping out and that is another definition of Stewardship. the tasks I did were not difficult, answering the phone, helping stock the shelves in the parish pantry or driving someone to the doctor -just everyday things, but everyday things are your gift to someone else.

One day Sister Kay asked Dot Briody and myself to help set up a Ministry of Consolation in this parish, my first reaction was somewhere along the lines of "you've got to be kidding, I could never do something like that!" I felt I didn't have the skills for that. Dot and I talked it over and with some *gentle* persuasion from Sister Kay we decided to at least look into it.

I took the Ministry of Consolation course and near the end of the course we were to plan a funeral and my Mom died 2 days later. Due to a scheduling mix-up {not in this parish of course} the priest was unable to come to the prayer service the night before the Mass and because of the information I received during the course and enlisting the help of some family member we were able to conduct a beautiful and personal service for my Mom.

This was a gift from God and made me aware of how important this ministry could be and how vulnerable you are at this time. It has been very rewarding for me and touched me in many ways. Last year a young family had premature twin girls Briana and Julianna. After a short period of time Brianna died and Julianna was fighting for her life. I visited the family, brought a cake and helped them plan the funeral, this was the hardest thing I have had to do.

Last month I received a beautiful letter from them and they invited me to the Baptism of Julianna. I was so touched and so honored, I cried. I went to the baptism and as sad as the funeral had been is how joyous the baptism was. I touched their lives and they touched mine. And that is the bottom line of what Stewardship is about, touching the lives of others.

The Ministry of Consolation may not be something you want to do BUT *every* person in this church from the young to the old has a gift to share with someone else. For the teenagers it is your youth, your new outlook and your energy. For us older folk it is our life experience, our understanding and our patience.

There are so many places in our parish where you can use your gifts, please look over the brochure you received and see if you can find a place to reward yourself by using these gifts, your time and talent for others. If nothing suits you maybe you can come up with a need that needs to be filled. Most things will only take a few hours a month and believe me you will receive more than you give.

If you feel that you can't make a commitment please be a steward in your everyday life, cut the grass for an elderly relative or neighbor, ask a neighbor if they need anything from the store if you are going, make a phone call to a neighbor who is ill or if you haven't seen them in awhile even if you don't know them well. There are opportunities everyday to minister to others even if it is just holding a door, giving up your seat on the train or being nice to the person at work who drives you crazy. Thank you for your time and patience.

By Rich and Helen Mastrogiacomo, Christ the King in Commack.

Hi – my name is Rich Mastrogiacomo and this is my wife Helen. We have been Christ the King parishioners for 21 years. We'd like to tell you our story of stewardship and why we are here. In order for us to show you the true picture of who we were a few years ago, we think it's best to start with the conversations we did NOT have before we recognized stewardship as a way of life. When we heard the words "stewardship" and time, talent and treasure, our conversation was NOT: Oh honey, what inviting phrases and mottos. Let's see what it's all about!

Instead it was more like: There they go with that stewardship stuff again – how irritating – they have the same group who does everything all the time anyway, why do they keep asking us to reflect? Another gimmick to try to draw all the suckers in.....

When we saw Fr. Joe our reaction was NOT: Oh, hi Fr. Joe, tell us how we can make your parish better! Instead it was more like: Oh no, Fr. Joe is standing at the main door after his stewardship homily – let's make a run out the side door so we won't get cornered. Come on kids, no eye contact – grab a bulletin and let's go!

Guess you're getting a picture of what we were all about. We were sort of like the CHURCH-O-MATIC family. We went to church, O-Matically every week. In matter of fact, we left our house at the same time – exactly 4 minutes before the scheduled mass - GOD FORBID we should arrive one minute before mass began. We gave our 2 boys, now 9 and 16, the old "church etiquette" looks every so often – you all know what those looks are.

We went to the Sat 8:00 mass a lot because we knew any priest presiding could get us out by 8:45 TOPS – no singing – no fuss. We proudly walked out at the end of each mass, feeling accomplished that we had done our church duty for the week. When homilies included stewardship talks, our attention span went right out the window with the pigeons who were much more interesting to watch as we whispered

bets on which one was coming into the window. Our chats after church included: Do they actually think we have TIME to spare? We come to Church – that’s enough.

And so it went - our CHURCH-O-MATIC family proudly went on, week after week, bee lining out the doors, and following the quote unquote RULES of being a Christian.

Okay, you get the picture of our before, so here’s what happened to us....One weekend a few years ago we went on a Marriage Encounter weekend and our lives started to change. We were filled with enthusiasm and the desire to pass our new passion we discovered at Marriage Encounter to Christ the King, so we decided to meet with Fr. Joe and ask him to support it here. I thought he seemed like a normal, OK kind of a guy, with a sense of humor, so how bad could it be if we met with him?

But I had other thoughts. I kept telling Helen “He is going to rope us in to something. Just watch. The Church NEVER let’s you get away with ANYTHING without a catch.” I thought that was ridiculous because how could Fr. Joe have any interest in us? We were almost non-existent parishioners doing our obligatory Christian duty.

So, we did have our meeting with Fr. Joe and he absolutely supported us in our desire to spread the word about Marriage Encounter, sharing with us he was an encountered priest as well. BUT he said..... “Hey guys, how about joining our Pre-Cana ministry?” Fr. Joe rationalized that with our experience in marriage encounter and our ability to learn techniques to communicate and share more deeply with each other, we might really enjoy the experience of sharing **that** with young couples. I could feel Richie’s foot nudging mine and I didn’t DARE give him direct eye contact because I knew he was throwing those “I told you so Helen” glares my way. As Fr. Joe continued he explained “just come to an informal meeting we are having and if you think you don’t fit in or are uncomfortable with the couples who are doing it, just forget it – no strings attached. I verbalized a yes, we’d come to the meeting to see what it was about and Rich just nodded .

We left his office and all of you men out there can sympathize with what I was going to say. And I am sure your wives can also just imagine the scene in our car. Helen was trying really hard to change my obvious reaction.

Well, of course I burst into “wasn’t that great Rich? Wasn’t Fr. Joe nice? What a nice guy! And he was so supportive – how insightful of him to ask us to check out Pre-Cana. And I said “You always rope me into these predicaments, Helen . I told you there was going to be SOMETHING that we had to do. I knew it. I’ll go, but it’s a one shot deal. We’ll go to this meeting and that’s it.”

Well, Richie’s plan of just attending to check it out sounded logical, but the **Holy Spirit**, that we had heard other couples talk about, had another plan. Our FIRST YES was the hardest, but after that our life changed like we could never imagine. We went to that Pre-Cana meeting and in spite of ourselves, were taken in by all the couples who so selflessly talk to the marriage candidates one time a week for 4 weeks. It seemed like a small amount of sacrifice for the result, if we could shed some light on these beautiful new brides and grooms to be. So we accepted the challenge of trying to work it into our schedule. And little by little we were drawn into the core of what our spirituality had never been before.

I couldn’t believe my change of attitude, but as we got little notes of thank yous and hugs from our first couples from Pre-Cana, the reward, one that for the first time that was not selfishly based, was beyond words. I was actually shocked at how I felt and how I was reacting to all of this.

We were part of something very big and very special and we had no idea what was happening to us. Who were we? We had no credentials to be anyone special – Special gifts or talents? Who, us? We never imagined ourselves as being able to really offer anything to our church that would make a

difference, but all of a sudden we found ourselves analyzing what we could offer to our Christ the King Church and to God.

I sang in school and loved it – so guess what? I went from the SILENT 8:00 pm mass to joining the CHOIR.

I am a caterer and I saw an ad in the bulletin last summer for help in the rectory kitchen. So Helen and I are now the Saturday evening chefs for our priests. Our children join us on occasion and are witnessing the special joy we all get from giving our time and talent to our parish.

We have just organized the Taize prayer service which is scheduled every 3 months. It is a contemplative form of candlelight prayer that we were drawn to. It is a way for not only us, but for our children to experience prayer in another form that is so soothing to the soul. This is a prayer ministry that has spiritually started to connect us as a family and is something we would never have experienced if we were not open to LISTENING to what God was asking from us.

And in the midst of all this, I joined Knights of Columbus to help in any way I could, which is usually in food preparation.

And I had the desire to become a Eucharistic Minister. There are no words that can suitably justify the feeling this ministry gives me to be a servant of God. It is an honor and privilege that cannot be explained. Participating in the distribution of the Body and Blood of Christ is by far the most fulfilling and rewarding ministry for me.

All of a sudden , we see how important it is for our kids to see the ACTION, not just the words of what stewardship is. We realize the need more than ever to have our children think about what is important – is it every night of television or maybe one night every once in a while to help out at Church or help someone who needs us? We realized we are the ones , Richie and I , to make our Christ the King the loving community we desperately want. Richie and I are responsible for showing our children what it means to love GOD **and** love our neighbor **and** love our Church. It means not having the same downtime as before , but unlike the shallow reward of a television program, stewardship engraves a reward in your heart that makes you feel like a sparkling brook – a shining star – a beacon of light that exudes from every inch of you.

We stand before you today the same as we were a few years ago – a husband and wife who love each other and our family deeply.

The difference now, though, is we thought we also loved **God**, but we had **no idea** what it meant to love God the way the Holy Spirit has been touching us to love him through our stewardship at Christ the King. Fr. Joe's invitation that afternoon and our YES made us see our God love was paper love – we read about it, but we never really felt it as we do now. We watched it from afar but never really saw it as we do now. It is by our actions now that we feel it in our soul and taste it in every form of ministry we are part of . We are fulfilled in a way that cannot be described. We know that our lifestyle now is vital to our existence as members of our beloved Christ the King. Our lives have actually been transformed and we invite you to take the first small YES – your life will be so much richer because of it.

Thank you for listening to our story and may God bless you and your family.

We thank all of those who so willingly shared their talks with us.