

CULTURE OF LIFE

Our Lady Inspires Youth as Her Knights of the Altar

Pro-Life Profile

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Knights, chivalry and their ideals have always been inspiring.

What if knighthood were under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary and associated with a Marian shrine?

That's exactly what is happening at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in La Crosse, Wis., with the start of **Our Lady's Knights of the Altar**.

This new altar-boys guild raises altar service to a new level, both in the sanctuary and out in the world.

The idea began in 2008, when Cardinal Raymond Leo Burke — at the time, the archbishop of St. Louis — was celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe at this shrine that he founded.

"During his visit, he mentioned it would be good to get a program together for altar servers," says the shrine's Friar Joseph Schmitzer, a Brother of the Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate.

Reflecting on that beginning, Cardinal Burke says that he wanted "from the very first foundation of the shrine that there would be a group of young men to assist with the sacred liturgy of the shrine. One of the most important aspects of the shrine is that the sacred liturgy be celebrated worthily."

The cardinal credits "Brother Joseph, who took it forward and has done a wonderful work."

Through online research, Brother Joseph found some guilds centering around knighthood and chivalry. But he had something more in mind:

"I wanted something that would really focus on the boys' internal formation, rather than just on serving, something that would help them to pursue a life of holiness as the essential means of making their service to Christ worthy."

"For that reason, I wanted Our Lady involved," he adds, "because, as many of the saints say, she is the surest and quickest way for obtaining holiness because of her role as the Mediatrix of All Graces."

So Brother Joseph combined specific elements of knighthood and chivalry and Marianized them by centering them on Our Lady.

The result: "We are Knights of the Altar that belong to Our Lady," he says. "We consecrate ourselves to her and look to her consciously for our formation."

Since the first induction of pages in July 2009, the initial group has grown from five servers to 13.

The altar servers are formed like knights of old. They begin as "pages," progress to "squires" and, as they prove themselves, become "knights."

As a first step, the pages, usually those who are 13 years old, carry the candles and cross. After a faithful year, they become squires, whose duties include the Sacramentary, bells and Communion paten. At 16, they may be inducted as knights and invested with the Miraculous Medal as part of their spiritual armor; this reminds them whose knights they are and who they serve. They act as thurifers, who handle the incense, and acolytes, whose duties include assisting the priest with the water and wine and washing of his hands.

Their focus is carried outside the shrine too, as servers build friendships and camaraderie during enjoyable activities together.

Boys may start as early as age 10. Until they are invested as pages, they have no formal duties, but they wear the guild's blue cassocks — the color of Our Lady — join processions, attend Mass in the sanctuary and

receive the guild's prayer cards.

The budding knights receive a pocket-sized handbook, emblazoned with the guild's Marian Shield, which contains guidelines, a chapter on 16 virtues to form them as Christian men and another with prayers, many directed to Mary.

"The whole program," explains Brother Joseph, "is centered on two titles of Our Lady — Mary, the Mother of God and Mediatrix of All Graces. These two titles are brought out in all aspects of the program."

The young men ask their patroness specifically for two things.

"First," says Brother Joseph, "because she's the Mother of God, to help them understand who Jesus is as true God and true man. This knowledge will help them carry themselves worthily in the sanctuary because it reveals to them the great dignity of the One they are serving. Second, through her intercession as Mediatrix, to help them imitate Christ's virtues in their lives outside the sanctuary."

Cardinal Burke notes that the strong Marian connection is essential.

"What the shrine and Our Lady of Guadalupe teach us is the Mother of God brings us to her Son," he explains. "She is the Mother of Divine Grace and the Mediatrix of all the graces we receive. The boys learn a deep love of the Blessed Mother, and it's a love all of us should have." Their service at the altar stems from being her knights, the cardinal says: "She inspires in them chivalry because she is the noblest of all ladies — that spiritual chivalry, that high sense of beauty and high comportment to be worthy servants at the altar."

Cardinal Burke sees several important aspects of the guild's program.

"First, Brother (Joseph) instructs them in a life of prayer adapted to their age.

"Second, he instills in them what a deep privilege it is to serve at the altar, assisting the priest, who takes the place of Christ. He deepens in them the appreciation of the holy Eucharist.

"Third, he instills in them a desire for excellence."

When assisting at the altar, the cardinal says, "it's important they give that assistance with real excellence. He takes a long time with them; they go through various stages. It's not easy."

"Fourth, if you are going to be a knight of Our Lady, assisting her Son, who is offering the holy Mass through the ministry of the priest, then you have to live with the dignity of a knight," he adds. "So he instills in them the virtues" to be practiced everywhere.

"All those aspects are integral," Cardinal Burke says. "They have to go together. That is what I had in mind from the start."

And knights and aspiring knights are responding enthusiastically.

Peter Scyszkiewicz, 18, was present at the shrine's dedication in 2008. As his family continued to come for Mass, he and his brothers volunteered to be altar servers. He had previously served at the Cathedral of St. Joseph the Workman in La Crosse, Wis.

Today, he is a knight with honors, meaning he can also serve at the extraordinary form Mass, and he has served Masses for cardinals, an archbishop and bishops. His brother John-Luke is a page, while his brother Gregory is a squire.

He takes his knighthood seriously. "Serving well, which is what Brother Joseph has trained us to do, helps the congregation with the sense of richness and spirituality of what we're doing," Scyszkiewicz says.

And his devotion to Our Lady has increased. "Devotion to Mary among the Knights is strong," he says. "My family and I pray the Rosary every day." They also pray the Memorare.

William Lehn is also an 18-year-old knight with honors, inducted by Cardinal Burke.

Lehn shared how being a member of Our Lady's Knights of the Altar has affected his spiritual life. Since being part of this guild, he prays "the Rosary more often, and I pray to [Mary] much more often now than I used to. It's greatly deepened my prayer life, especially in relation to the Blessed Mother."

His altar experience is more special as well. "You get to be right up close in the sanctuary, so close to the miracle of the Eucharist," he says. "It's an amazing honor to be there. And you meet so many great priests and men who are such great examples. I'm considering a vocation to the priesthood."

Cardinal Burke hopes the same for other members. He says that, when he was a boy, altar servers he knew made a difference to him in his life, especially regarding his vocation to the priesthood.

Cardinal Burke believes today's knights "will consider their vocations in the light of their service at the altar. Whether called to priesthood, religious life or married life, they will respond to that vocation with holiness, being a knight of Our Lady."

Lehn's 12-year-old brother Peter is a squire who says being a guild member "has given a new solemnity in my life." He especially likes his paten duties, because "I get to see people and how holy they are receiving the Eucharist."

Another plus is the guild's many outside get-togethers. "That's essential for a good serving organization, because it builds fraternity and makes you want to be a part of it," William Lehn says. "It definitely strengthens the bond among members."

Scyszkiewicz points out that Brother Joseph comes up "with amazing stuff" like canoeing on the Kickapoo River, hiking on nearby bluffs, sledding and even ice fishing.

Through these activities, says Brother Joseph, "it's inspiring to see" the boys grow closer to Christ and build friendships among their peers.

Also inspiring is the way these knights and knight-to-be edify the congregation, showing that knighthood flourishes under Our Lady's banner.

"The people are very moved to see these young men who are so dedicated to the service of the altar and how attendant the young men are to the service of the Mass," notices Cardinal Burke. "This inspires in them a renewed sense of the mystery and their reverent participation."

*Joseph Pronechen is the
Register's staff writer.*

INFORMATION

Those interested may easily establish Our Lady's Knights of the Altar in their parishes.

For each step, the ages, timeline and guidelines can be modified.

The thorough website (KnightsofOurLady.com) has ample information, downloads, handbooks and prayer cards for free or for a freewill donation.