

In the early 1990s, when I started thinking a bit about the possibility of a vocation to the priesthood one day, from time to time I'd watch a priest in a Franciscan habit that would come in on a low power UHF channel that often picked up the feed from EWTN. The priest was Fr. Benedict Groeschel, the founder of the Community of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal. He'd speak on topics of much like Bishop Fulton Sheen did for an earlier generation, and had a conversational style.

He once said, "Saint Vincent de Paul said: If you love the poor, your life will be filled with sunlight, and you will not be frightened at the hour of death. I wish to witness that this is true." He said those not too long before he passed from this life to be with God at the age of 81 on October 3, 2014.

He lived and worked in a small converted garage, and maintained a tireless pace as a popular preacher, counselor and author who had the accent and edgy humor of a New Jersey native.

He spent much of his life caring for the poor. He wrote 46 books and was on TV quite a bit. He founded the Friars of the Renewal in 1987, and worked especially in the New York area. His books focused on such things as spiritual development, and sorting through the pain of what do when life doesn't make sense.

Some may remember him from EWTN; he began there in the 1980s.

Born in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1933, he went to Catholic elementary and high school before studying for the priesthood and was ordained a Capuchin priest in 1959.

As a young child, he recalled seeing a nun bringing food every day to a poor widow. He followed the nun and looked in the window to see a woman who looked like a witch in a fairy tale. Scared at first he ran away to church, but he soon realized he wanted to do the same thing.

His first assignment was as a Catholic Chaplain at Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry, New York. His service to the troubled children who were placed in the residential program led him to pursue graduate studies in psychology. He wanted to combine this with his faith.

In 1967, he opened St. Francis House in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn as a new residential program designed to help adolescent boys prepare for a successful adult life and have stability. He was inspired to do so when two boys from Children's Village had no place to live. After struggling to find a suitable location, he found the right building on his birthday. Joseph Campo, the longtime director of St. Francis, recalled Fr. Groeschel's great love for the boys in the program and said that he "naturally saw the good in people," and they responded to that.

In 1980, he met a man who worked with the homeless and runaway kids in Times Square, Chris Bell. Chris said he met him on his toughest day, when he gave a homily

filled with practical as well as spiritual insights which began a long personal collaboration in helping the poor and helping those who help others. Considering the plight of homeless mothers and babies, whom Chris saw coming off the streets into this mid-town Manhattan shelter, he asked Fr. Benedict, "Why doesn't someone do something to help homeless mothers go back to school, find a job, and as he would often say, 'take that next good step in life'?" His final response was that he would help me if he wanted to start a home for mothers and babies. They did. Good Counsel Homes, which still operates and helps moms return to school and find jobs. Fr. Groeschel became chairman of the board. Beyond this, for decades he distributed food to hundreds of people in the South Bronx who couldn't afford to buy their own. At the holidays, he wanted to make sure people who would have otherwise no Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter had enough for a small feast; he'd find donors to give turkeys and hams and then distribute the food.

However while also helping people who were poor, he also helped the poor in spirit.

In 1970, he received his doctorate in psychology at Columbia University and would teach pastoral psychology for almost 40 years at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y. He'd go on and found a retreat center to help priests and religious who were thinking about leaving their vocation and others who were battling addiction or depression; it became a hub for clergy and religious to seek help. One sister who was there who founded another community, remembered hiking in a group with him on Long Island Sound. They got to the end of the trail, and he said "Sister, this will be a difficult undertaking, but I will be there for you." It wasn't just a line; it turned out that whether or not it was 10 p.m. or 4 a.m., she could call on him to find help for a sister in distress or a troubling situation, and Father Groeschel would always answer the phone and show up." The Superior General of the Sisters of Life says because of him, their order survived and succeeded and drew many vocations over the past couple of decades. Over his priesthood, he brought scores of priests back to active ministry or become active Catholics again. He'd also meet with people one on one; according to Chris Bell, he'd see him calm the rage and anger of young men from the streets.

He also was not afraid to speak out on the faith, both individually to people and as a witness. He was very active in the pro life movement, going on marches and speaking out for the unborn. He was arrested with a bishop and another friar at the notorious Dobbs Ferry, New York, so called family planning facility in his defense of the unborn. He'd use his books and his TV program to challenge people; to get people to think. He was a real voice of reason against the extremes and preached the truth: namely God loves you, but God also wants you to follow Him and His commandments. As one preacher, Fr. Leon Pereira, a Dominican put it, Authentic Christian love offers people Christ, not a lie. Citing Fr Benedict Groeschel, he pointed out how he often counseled men with same-sex attraction. He recounted: Once, a young man who had given up the fight to live chastely and had decided to have a live-in relationship with another man. The person seeking help made two requests of me. He said, 'Don't reject me, and don't agree with me. If you agree with me I will never get out of this.' Small wonder he was

sought after for retreats and speaking engagements all around the country; people were hungry (and still are!) for the truth.

His last years were a little slower following a near fatal car accident where he was in a coma for 10 days in 2004; recovery took about a year and he walked more slowly with a cane. But as he put it "God still has some work for me to do" and he returned to a full schedule.

Indeed, for all of us, God has work for us to do too. Jesus is moved with pity for the people in the Gospel. And He helps them, but He also wants to the disciples to do this too. "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few" are his words. Then he calls the 12 and gives them authority over unclean spirits and to cure every disease and every illness.

The Gospel reminds us of our baptismal call to holiness as well; that through our baptism and confirmation, we too are sent. The problem we can have as humans is we can think "well can't someone else do it?" or maybe think "well who am I?" But look at who was called: a rag-tag group of men who had plenty of flaws. But they used what they were given to help change the world. Hopefully we are reminded we have work to do as well and that the Holy Spirit can help get us to work. God has called us, and like Moses, we need to get into action.

In particular, I think we can do this in three ways.

One is by heeding the words of Moses in our first reading: "Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession." All of us are sinners and loved by God. But we also want to keep working at getting better. Even Fr. Groeschel who was humble would scoff at being called a saint; he said he had work to do, and even joked he looked forward to Purgatory because it would be like going back to Jersey City where he grew up. If we think deeper at the 10 commandments, we might challenge ourselves. As I shared at daily Mass earlier in the week, when we dig deeper we find we too have work to do to keep them. Maybe we honor God by coming to Mass, but do we enter into a real relationship with God and honor Him through prayer and getting to know Him? Maybe have not killed, but do we do so with words and postings on social media and gossip? Perhaps we haven't committed adultery but is what's on the computer or TV a problem? Do we objectify people? Or maybe we are respectful, but do we honor our families - parents and our children - by loving them as we should? I know I often fail - and need to work on these. So lets challenge ourselves to daily grow in holiness through prayer and thinking about where we may be lacking in how we follow God's law.

Second, we seek out the poor and the needy, both the materially poor and those who are spiritually poor. There are so many places we can get involved from Sharing and Caring Hands to Feed My Starving Children or Prison Ministry the list is endless. But there are also a lot of people who are hurting out there or who have gone astray, people like Fr. Groeschel ministered to. We know people who perhaps have left the Church; or

have fallen into the cusp of addiction or making bad choices. Think of these people as “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” that Jesus speaks about. Sometimes we can be fearful speaking about our faith. But we should not be afraid. Rather we should invite people to Mass; we should talk and listen; we should try to invite people back to get them in a better space through love.

But with that, as the man said to Fr. Groeschel “don’t reject me” the other part is important too: “don’t agree with me.” We meet those who are lost with love, but to love someone is to will their good. And the problem for so many in the world is a mentality of “do what you want.” When Jesus speaks of unclean spirits, there are some who are possessed; but more often the unclean spirit is sin that has taken over someone. Fr. Groeschel welcomed people back but he journeyed with them; as he said to the Sister the hike - more the spiritual hike they were going on - would be hard. But because he loved her he challenged her. A loving parent sometimes says “no.” And we as Catholics need to do that. Last night, thousands of Catholics poured into the streets around Dodger Stadium, where the Dodgers had a group of so called “sisters” who were in drag, who mocked Christianity openly in public, and make it a point to do every Easter. There was no violence; just signs with people praying, and pictures of the Sacred Heart. Much like Fr. Groeschel in front of the abortion clinic, or giving counsel, or answering hard questions on his show, we cannot fear being hated for the Gospel. Remember most of these men who are called die and pay the ultimate price. But they change the world. As Pope Francis said, you don’t dialogue with evil spirits you drive them out. So let’s not be afraid loving the sinner, but also calling out sin when we see it in the world and taking over someone, whatever kind of sin that might be, and be a witness in the world testifying to the truth, speaking out when we see people abused, when we see immoral things going on, when we see God trying to be pushed out of society. We are the fishermen - it’s our task to cast the nets!

As we honor our fathers this weekend on Father’s Day, I can’t help but think of my own faith journey. At times, like all of us, I had a hard time seeing what I was called to; or even seeing the truth of the beauty of the Catholic Church. Through it all, my dad has been a sign to me; a shepherd to give me counsel, to pray with me, to set an example through his hard work about what the faith looks like in action. His faith led him to his vocation, and it also helped lead me to mine. For me, he’s a true shepherd. And no matter whether you are a mom or a dad, or a spiritual father like me, if you are here today at this Mass, you are part of the Catholic community, and like me, you are a disciple, sent by Jesus. So let us not be afraid to go out into the fields and see the Church as a field hospital, and get to work winning souls for Jesus by helping to shepherd the lost sheep.