



## GOD'S BLESSING ON GRAND ISLAND DIOCESE "CALLED BY NAME 20 to 40"

By Serra Club of Omaha Member and District Governor Mark Bonkiewicz

### DIOCESE BACKGROUND

Msgr. William Dendinger was a retired two-star general from the Air Force when he was appointed pastor at St. Stephen the Martyr Parish in Omaha in June, 2002. When Msgr. William Dendinger was installed as the Bishop of the Grand Island (NE) Diocese in November 2004, there was only one seminarian. **Bishop Dendinger made the focus to increase vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Grand Island Diocese as one of his three immediate priorities.** He called the District Governor for Nebraska, Greg Schwietz, and requested that a club be formed in Grand Island as quickly as possible. The Serra Club of Grand Island was chartered in November 2006.

To maximize the vocations prayer and work across the entire diocese, Bishop Dendinger then requested the formation of two more Serra Clubs in the central and western areas of the diocese. The North Platte Area Serra Club was chartered in February 2009 and the Nebraska Panhandle Serra Club was chartered in May 2011.

### CALLED BY NAME 20 to 40

**After studying demographics of the active Grand Island priests, it was noted that over 50% were 65 years or older.** With only one seminarian, there was cause for concern. District Governor Mark Bonkiewicz, Bishop Dendinger and Vocations Director Fr. Matt Koperski, discussed several approaches for accomplishing their goal and decided to implement the "Called by Name" program and focus on 20 to 40 year old men and women. This target age group was chosen because the discernment period for them would be six to seven years, depending on their education level. A decision was made to begin a two-year program, starting with 12 parishes in 2011 and the rest in 2012. The program was then titled "Called by Name (CBN) 20 to 40".

### SPRINGING INTO ACTION

Guess what happens on July 1st when you, as District Governor, hear one of your bishops say, "We need to do "CALLED BY NAME 20 to 40" program at all 72 parishes and mission churches in the diocese in October 2011"?

**First,** you say a BIG prayer asking for Divine guidance for all the logistic decisions that will be required in the immediate future.

**Second,** you call your Club Presidents and ask them to establish a prayer warrior team to keep this huge project rooted in prayer.

**Third,** you call your good Serra friends and leadership geniuses, Tim and Sally O'Neill, share the diocesan-wide vision of Bishop Dendinger, and ask them to donate one hundred hours of time from July until mid- November to co-lead your team. Tim and Sally, Co-Chairs of the Executive Committee for the 2009 Serra International Convention in Omaha, took less than an hour to pray, reflect and answer "yes"!

### IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

The O'Neills went to work, acquiring information from other U.S. dioceses that previously had this program. They modified existing materials from Baton Rouge (LA) and Billings (MT) dioceses and added new items, including graphics, and made it a family project by acquiring the computer assistance of their son, Collin O'Neill, a junior at Creighton University.

Initially, the logistics seemed staggering in a diocese that is 268 miles long and 160 - miles wide where there are more cows than Catholics. Serra speakers were needed at 114 Masses, with some required to drive over 300 miles round trip to deliver their talks. The diocese was divided into three territories for the Grand Island Serra Club, the North Platte Area Serra Club, and the Nebraska Panhandle Serra Club. These clubs were chartered in 2006, 2009, and 2011 respectively with a total 114 members. The Club Coordinators made hundreds of phone calls in August, September, and October to align speakers with each parish coordinator, usually a parish staff member selected by the pastor.

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Pictured are members from all three Grand Island Diocese Serra Clubs at the Celebration Luncheon, including: (front, center) Grand Island Bishop William Dendinger; (far left) Fr. Matthew Thekkakara, SDB on three year "loan" from India and Assistant at St. Patrick Parish, North Platte; (far right) Fr. Jim Golka, Pastor of St. Patrick Parish, North Platte; (2nd row from back - tall man to the right of the Bishop) Fr. Matthew Koperski, Grand Island Diocese Vocations Director; (either side of the Bishop) Tim and Sally O'Neill, and (2nd and 3rd from right, front) Mark and Paula Bonkiewicz.

## Serra Club of Omaha Celebrating 60 Years

### *A Serra Memory Minute*

By Bill Ramsey and Betty Dineen Shrier

#### THE MASS FOR SHUT INS

##### **The Early Days**

Since the early days of Serra, Archbishop Daniel Sheehan not only served as our chaplain but also helped conceive programs that proved very valuable for Serra and its mission. One of these programs is the televised Mass for Shut-ins which went on the air in 1964. Ed Fitzsimmons, a Serran for more than 40 years, was president of the Serra Club of Omaha at the time.

At that time, WOWT's retiring general manager brought his successor to meet Bishop Sheehan to explain a televised Mass that he helped start at a station in Phoenix. Because WOWT could offer public service time to various non-profit organizations in the 1960s, Serrans would not be obligated to pay for this 30-minute broadcast.

##### **On the Lighter Side**

The program has not been without its unplanned, lighter moments. In those early days, the Mass was televised live. On one occasion, the Serrans, who were also the altar servers, had left the cruets holding the water and wine on the wrong side of the altar. Serran Maurie Grier decided to take matters into his own hands...literally. He crawled—outside of camera range, he thought—to move the misplaced cruets. The young cameraman, thinking this was part of the liturgy, followed him on his journey. One can only imagine what our television viewers were thinking as they witnessed this unfolding scene.

##### **Omaha Club Continues this Ministry**

In the late 1990s, WOWT announced that it could no longer offer this broadcast at no cost unless Serra wanted to air the Mass at 6 a.m. Archbishop Sheehan, knowing that time could not accommodate the needs of the elderly and homebound. Serrans came to the rescue and solicited donations from businesses, parishes, institutions and individuals. The dedicated men and women of Serra made it possible for the Mass for Shut-ins to be offered at 9:30 a.m. every Sunday to this day.

Now in its 47th year, the televised Mass for Shut-ins is believed to be the longest continuously broadcast television program in the Omaha market. The Mass reaches from 5,000 to 10,000 viewers, according to producers at the NBC affiliate.

## PROGRAM

### **THE RESULTS**

Fr. Koperski announced the number of nominees at the celebration luncheon hosted by Bishop Dendinger in North Platte on Saturday, Nov. 19 after an 11 a.m. Celebration Mass. Parishioners had nominated **38 young men as ideal priesthood candidates AND nominated 18 women** as ideal candidates for religious life. Fr. Koperski stated another primary benefit was the shift to a significantly more positive attitude toward vocations. For example, four of the first five men he contacted went on a visit to Conception Seminary within two weeks of their initial phone conversation with him.

"This shift is a positive and exciting sign for our diocese to help us find the holy men needed to bolster the number of priests in our diocese and be ready to be pastors in the next 8 to 10 years. Almighty God has blessed us with enough qualified candidates to potentially DOUBLE the number of our current six seminarians", said Fr. Koperski.

Bishop Dendinger added, "Identifying 18 women candidates for religious life is also exciting because we have a huge need for women religious in our parishes."

Attendees at the celebration luncheon were asked to complete an evaluation of the CBN process and how it could be improved. This information was reviewed for implementation in future programs.

### **PLEASE NOTE**

All materials used in the Grand Island "CALLED BY NAME 20 to 40" program are available for use by other Serra Clubs on the web at [www.serranebraska.com](http://www.serranebraska.com) under the RESOURCES button.

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