

HELPFUL HINTS FOR VISITING PRIESTS

These “Helpful Hints” are taken from some of the experiences I’ve had over the past months when visiting Parish Priests throughout the Sacramento Diocese.

I hope the Californians For Life Church Group will find these ideas/hints useful as you go forth to spread the message of LIFE!

PREPARING YOUR “SELF”

On the Spiritual Level:

- 1) We really need to prayerfully enter into this special assignment, because God picked YOU to “go out to all nations and spread the Good News”! We must prepare our mind and heart:
 - a) I want to find out how I can help the Priest that I am going to visit.
 - b) I come to each Parish to serve.
 - c) I want to work in harmony with the Priest. It is not important what I want to accomplish – it’s essential that I go to each meeting with an open mind, an open heart, a desire to assist and enhance all of the Life-Affirming activities that are presently happening in the Parish and to communicate with the Pastor in such a way that he is feeling neither threatened nor defensive. I come as a servant to the priest and to my Savior Jesus, Who walks before me, beside me, in front of me, behind me...
 - d) Keep in mind that we are NOT ADDING NEW WORK ONTO THE PASTOR’S BACK! When possible, gently remind Father that you want to help, not hinder.

Try to get a feel of the comfort level the Priest has when talking about the dignity of life for every human being, social justice from womb to tomb, the respect for life from conception to natural death.

Many times we know what WE WANT THE PRIEST TO ADDRESS, but sometimes we may not fully listen to his approach on the subject of Life and Death issues. PREPARE TO BE A SUPERB LISTENER!

On the physical level:

- a) Do some homework regarding the Parish you are going to visit. Google the Parish website. The website will give you lots of information that you may need to have a successful visit with the Pastor. See what ministries are up and running. Check out what activities they are offering as a Parish. Get a feel for how involved or NOT involved the Parish is in regard to Respect Life Ministry, Pro Life activities they are presently working on, etc.....

This extra study will prepare you to greet this Priest with a healthy vision of what he finds important and on what his parish efforts are focused. Hopefully, you'll see some things on that site that will prompt you to compliment Father. As you converse with Father, keep in mind that he needs to hear words of encouragement. Validate what he is saying and sharing with you wherever possible.

- b) Engage Father in a conversation about his parish. MEET HIM WHERE HE IS, not where we think he is or where we want him to be. Find out how HE FEELS HIS PARISH IS RESPONDING TO LIFE ISSUES. Gently investigate where HE perceives his parish being presently on Life issues and where he hopes they will grow in the future.

Knowing the answers to these 3 questions will give you an idea of how you can offer your help or assistance to achieve his goals and enhance what is already in place and working for him and his parish.

THIS IS VERY SUBTLE AND NON-TREATENING! IF YOU PUSH TOO HARD TOO FAST, FATHER WILL SHUT DOWN AND THE INTERVIEW WILL END.

MATERIALS

- 1) Preparing materials:
 - a) It is extremely helpful to have the Diocesan Directory in hand when you are selecting your first area of focus:
 - b) Begin with “low-hanging fruit” – the Parishes that are pro-life and/or are leaning toward being involved in pro-life activities.
 - c) I have been keeping a record of each parish in a binder for easy access. Use whatever device you are comfortable with for storing information about each parish you visit.
 - d) My binder is divided by Cities. Then Churches in those cities are put in alphabetical order for easy access.

PARISH PAGE

- 2) Each Church has its own page with the following information:
 - a) A tab with the City name on it (alphabetically filed) and a page for each Church in that city (filed alphabetically)
 - b) Name of Church
 - c) Phone number
 - d) Address
 - e) Pastor’s Name
 - f) Secretary’s Name (if given)
 - g) Respect Life Ministry Contact- name and phone
 - h) Youth Group Contact- name and phone
 - i) Catholic Faith Formation Coordinator-name and phone
 - j) School in the Parish and accompanying name of Principal- name and phone number
 - k) Confirmation Class teacher

If none of this information is available, I leave it blank, but have it on every sheet so that I can get that information when I make my phone call or first visit to the Parish or as I work with the Pastor on the Pro-Life agenda.

PRAYER TIME

Before beginning the process of calling and setting up appointments, I always take the time to quiet myself and pray for Spiritual guidance. Any prayer to the Holy Spirit works very well here! These moments of prayer give me the courage I lack to communicate with all the different personalities, attitudes and guarded inquiries I may meet. I put a smile on my face and talk to the person on the line as though Jesus just answered that phone! Use caution when others have expressed concerns about a secretary or Pastor who might be more difficult to connect with, but don't let someone else's opinion color your vision as you connect with that person. You may have a totally different outcome with them simply because of who you are. Remember: God sent YOU to do this job!!

BACK TO PARISH PAGE

About midway down this page, I record when I placed the call and what the outcome was for each call. I also put a reminder of when the secretary says to call back or I will assume that I will call back in a week or two if I've left a message.

NOTE: In the summertime, many of the Priests are moving around on vacations, moving to new parishes, gone on a Pilgrimage, etc. It is more difficult to make appointments in the summer months and during "Prime Times" like Christmas, Easter, etc. Be sure to be considerate of the amount of work the Priest may presently be experiencing because it's the beginning of RCIA, etc.

- 1) Sometimes the secretary books the meeting for the Pastor.
- 2) Sometimes the secretary will connect you with the Priest's voice mail.
- 3) Sometimes the Priest will be standing there and take the call right then (however, this is VERY RARE INDEED!)
- 4) Sometimes the secretary will try to circumvent you completely by saying, "Give me the message you want to tell Father and I'll deliver it for you." Very kindly but with no hesitation, I explain that "I really want to meet Father face-to-face to share my thoughts and materials with him". The secretary may tell you: "Father is EXTREMELY BUSY and doesn't have a lot of time for meetings." Once again, with great kindness and gentle insistence, I ask for only 10 minutes of his time.

Alternative Encounters with the Pastor: If you are unable to set up an appointment with the Pastor and yet you really want to meet him and talk about your key points, you might approach the problem from a different direction:

- a) Call the office and find out what Mass the Priest will be presiding at on Sunday. Chat with him after Mass so he knows who you are.
- b) Have a parishioner who is familiar with the Pastor set up a little introduction.
- c) Be creative!

5) I suggest how long I would like to talk to the Pastor. Asking for an hour or half hour may cause some dismay.

I usually explain that I only need about 10-15 minutes to see Father. That seems to work best.

NOTE: Once you are in his office, I have found that he can stretch or shrink that office time as he chooses! You may be there for 7 minutes or a whole hour, depending on how receptive and inviting you make your introduction! EVERY PASTOR IS YOUR SHEPHERD! Keep that in mind as you meet all these Priests! My favorite mantra: BE NOT AFRAID...I GO BEFORE YOU ALWAYS...with God I can do all things!

6) Be ready for anything and/or anyone!! I have spoken to Office Volunteers, Deacons, the custodian (after hours!), etc. It has been an interesting experience to talk to these different folks. After telling them my name and position as Director of 40 Days for Life, it is amazing how many of them will want to share their "life" story, whether happy, sad, difficult, traumatic, etc. Because you are a stranger to them, they will often let down their guard and tell you things that are on their heart at that moment, or share a story about someone they know who has chosen life or had an abortion... You become the Lord's Conduit for Hope, Peace, Forgiveness, Compassion, etc., just listening to their story. Perhaps that person is the only one that the Lord wants you to reach out and touch that day – don't be surprised! YOU ARE THE AMBASSADOR FOR THE LORD!

NOTE: BE SURE TO LET THE SECRETARY AND THE PASTOR KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOT THERE TO SET UP A NEW MINISTRY!!! THAT CAN SET YOU BACK PERMANENTLY IF YOU AREN'T QUITE SPECIFIC ON WHY YOU WANT TO SPEAK TO FATHER!

GOING TO THE APPOINTMENT

It is now time to travel to your appointment.

- 1) Leave in plenty of time to avoid traffic jams, accidents, etc. It is amazing what can make you late. It can be difficult to re-schedule if you miss your first appointment.
- 2) The Parish Office is not always easy to find on a big Church campus! Leave plenty of time to find the Office so that you aren't tardy for your meeting.
- 3) If you arrive about 10 minutes before your scheduled appointment, that gives you time to take a breath, perhaps make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, use the restroom, check out the racks that are at the back of the Church, etc. The materials that are in those racks can tell you a lot about that parish before you even step inside the Parish Office.
- 4) Make a note as to what brochures you have that may compliment what they already have.
- 5) If you have something to work on that is an eye-catcher, it may help break the ice in the Office. I bring my twine rosaries to make while I wait. They have started many conversations!

WHAT TO TAKE INTO THE OFFICE WITH YOU

- 1) I have a cloth bag that makes me feel very confident! Use your "Californians for Life" bags for great exposure!
- 2) In my cloth bag I carry:
 - a) My business cards
 - b) Little flyer that explains what 40 Days is ...

- c) Pens, tablet
- d) A copy of the Heritage House catalogue or the address for ordering Pro-Life materials
- e) Something with the “Californians for Life” email address on it
- f) A set of the 7 to 10 week fetal models
- g) A book with pictures of any moms and babies that have been helped, or pictures of the families, children, teens, babies, etc. at the sidewalk as they keep a peaceful, prayerful vigil during 40 Days for Life. If you have baby showers, bottle drives, etc., take pictures to share with the Priests you are visiting. They can see first-hand how simple, yet effective their parish can be in providing help for moms and babies by supporting pregnancy centers or Gabrielle Project, etc.
- h) Your “talking points” paper
- i) The precious feet pins
- j) The 12 week fetal model in a blanket

Trent Horn, an author who writes about Pro-Life issues, cautions all Pro-Lifers to NOT BE WEIRD!!! He points out ways in which the Pro-Life person can approach a skeptical pro-choice person on the topic of “abortion”. Keep your words on the POSITIVE SIDE OF THE DEBATE ABOUT LIFE ISSUES:

Babies are Human vs. Stop killing babies

Gospel of Life vs. the Culture of death

Fetus means “young one” in Latin vs. A fetus is worthless, of no value

Keep your vocabulary POSITIVE, not dwelling on the words “Stop Abortion”, but instead, focusing on words like “Defending Life” or “Choose Life”.

I usually pull out my talking points paper so that I know what I want to suggest and ways that we can work together to bring success to the Gospel of Life.

Below are some of the things that I’m hoping to discuss with the Pastor:

- 1) Find out if there is a Respect Life Ministry at the Parish and who is running it. After we talk about this Ministry, I ask if I may have permission to perhaps call and talk with the Coordinator of his Pro Life group or Respect Life Ministry.
- 2) Find out if the Parish has a youth group or Confirmation Class that might be interested in hearing more on the topic of Human Dignity/Pro- Life activities, The Value of Life from Womb to Tomb. Again, request names and phone numbers if possible.
- 3) Many times, if I give an example of how a life has been saved and the Priest may share a few stories of his own. Ask him if you can share his stories with other people. REMEMBER: WE ARE ON THE SAME SIDE!
- 4) It is easy to draw the conversation of Life into the need to educate our children, from pre-school through high school and college. Direct the Pastor's attention to Californians for Life and some of the materials that are available for CFF teachers.
- 5) Every Priest in California has been approached by their Bishop to become actively involved in the 4-part Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities. This is not new. It's been in the process for the past 10+ years.
- 6) Discussing the handling of the life issues by politicians can liven up a conversation. You aren't there to argue or convince. You are there to share ideas and to offer him any assistance that he or his volunteers may find useful in promoting the Gospel of Life.
- 7) Share the ideas presented by Californians for Life, as explored by the eight work groups in this organization.

ASK HIS PERMISSION TO TALK TO THE VOLUNTEERS IN THE PARISH THAT ARE INVOLVED IN THE PRO-LIFE ISSUES. Every priest has been extremely receptive to this approach.

Explain that you are hoping to find a CONTACT PERSON in the parish that can be a conduit between the diocese and their parish. This contact person could keep the Parish updated on the Pro Life activities that are taking place around the Diocese. As well, it is helpful to have someone in the Parish to contact in regard to 40 Days

for Life in the Fall and in the Spring, to organize groups of parishioners to come and pray at the sidewalk during 40 Days. When the 40 Days for Life Campaigns are finished, it is helpful to have a contact person who can continue to urge parishioners to stay involved at the sidewalks and centers that are helping the women and their babies.

INTRODUCE THE PASTOR TO “CALIFORNIANS FOR LIFE”. The mission statement of Californians for Life is “To recognize the humanity of the child in the womb and seek to help women so that ending the life of our children through abortion becomes unthinkable”.

Discuss the Diocesan Proposal for Parish Implementation of the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life activities.

As you visit with the Pastor, it is helpful to bring up the topic of the USCCB 4-Part plan.

Our Diocesan Respect Life Director offered a worksheet called: ***TWELVE EASY IDEAS FOR PARISH RESPECT LIFE MINISTRY***. This is a wonderful guide for getting started on successful projects that involve the 4 Pastoral Plan areas:

- 1) Prayer
- 2) Education
- 3) Pastoral Care
- 4) Advocacy

Depending on how open and involved the Priest is in regard to Pro Life Parish Activities, the Californians For Life Church Group has developed a handy checklist called: ***CHURCH PRO-LIFE ACTIVITIES***. When visiting with the Pastor, you might suggest this as a way to chart what activities his Parish is presently participating in and areas that may be implemented by the Pro Life group in the future. Another reminder: MEET THE PASTOR WHERE HE IS, NOT WHERE WE WANT HIM TO BE! If the parish has no Respect Life Ministry or other ministries that promote Life in the parish, it would be best NOT to introduce this Activity sheet.

AFTER THE APPOINTMENT

It is so easy to just walk away and not take time to record impressions, discussions, future connections, etc. However, I would encourage you to record as much of the meeting as you can remember as soon as you leave the Parish Office. It is amazing how quickly the days slip by. As you continue to travel from one Parish to another, meeting many different people in many different places, after a while the details of the appointment grow dim and garbled with other visits. Your first impressions and information-gathering needs to be recorded as soon as possible to ensure accuracy.

FINAL DETAILS

Do make notes as to what the next step might be in regard to each parish. For example: Do you want to follow up with calls to the different Ministries Father shared with you? Do you plan on visiting the parish in the future for any follow up activities? If the Priest requested that you send materials, flyers, etc., to him, jot that down: “The faintest ink is better than the sharpest mind”!

I hope these hints have been helpful. Please feel free to create, tweak, share and/or ignore any hints that you feel are pertinent as you go about your ministry of spreading and connecting the Gospel of Life to all of California!