



# Asking the Right Question

By Celeste Fortenberry

*What does the Lord want me to do?  
Who am I supposed to be?*

I had already asked one of the Poor Clares at Santa Chiara in Assisi to pray for my vocation. Now I was kneeling before the tomb of St. Francis during the Gaming semester's 10-day Rome and Assisi trip. I don't remember the words of my prayer; probably there weren't any, just an aching desire to know. Just tell me what to do, please, right now. Should I be a religious? I had tried that (got kicked out); but maybe I should try again. Get married? If so, to whom?

And that was about as deep as it went, my vocation prayer: state in life. But I was asking the right question.

That's the question Franciscan University wants each of its students to ask and begin to answer: What is God calling me to do? "Vocation is a unique, particular call for each of us," says David Schmiesing '92 MSE '00, vice president of Student Life. "It includes the universal vocation to holiness, our state in life, and everything God calls us to do."

This "everything God calls us to do" is beautifully described by St. John Henry Newman in *Meditations on Christian Doctrine*:

"I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created. . . .

"God knows me and calls me by my name. . . .

"God has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. . . .

"Somehow I am necessary for his purposes. . . .

"I shall do good, I shall do his work."

Fostering this call in each of the students is an important part of the University's mission, says Schmiesing. He quotes St. John Paul II's *Christifidelis Laici*: "The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one's vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill one's mission" (No. 58).

"This is a pretty strong endorsement of forming lay faithful in discerning and living out their personal vocation," Schmiesing adds, noting that Franciscan helps students do this through faculty interactions, the ministry of the Franciscan TOR friars, training for resident assistants and other student leaders, Career Services programs, and the student development and mentoring that occurs through households, athletic teams, student clubs, and Missionary Outreach teams, among other ways.



Recently, Franciscan also piloted a personal vocation coaching program within the Center for Leadership, its four-year, invitation-only program for equipping a new generation of Catholic leaders for today's unique challenges. Students in the Center for Leadership, from a broad cross-section of academic majors, receive formation in leadership principles, Catholic social teaching, personalist philosophy, and America's founding principles, as well as practical training in leadership skills.

St. Francis heard the Lord ask him to "repair my house." The call to service was clear. What it was supposed to look like, exactly, wasn't. Francis took this call literally at first, gathering stones and mixing mortar to fix the crumbling Church of San Damiano.

While I was praying before his tomb with my fellow students and a crush of pilgrims, the person kneeling next to me got up, and no one took her place. The student on the other side of the fresh gap looked at me, looked toward the tomb, then scooted over next to me. She leaned her head toward mine and whispered, "I have a word for you."

I froze. But there was nowhere to hide, so I braced myself, determined to be gracious. And then she whispered the answer to my heart's prayer. Again, I don't remember the exact words. Basically: Don't worry. I've got this. I've got you. Persevere.

No details, though. No map, no schedule. It was (and is) still on me to formulate the plan.

Vocational coaches don't tell students what to do; instead they act as midwives to the students' own goals. Practically speaking, this means cultivating self-awareness in students and helping them gain strategies for their own development, according to Dr. Joshua Miller MA '04, a vocation coach and vocation coach trainer at Franciscan and co-author of *Unrepeatable: Cultivating the Unique Calling of Every Person*.

"It means asking questions and listening with empathy as the student reflects on his or her life plan."

Senior Maria Lencki has had exactly that experience with her coach, Dr. Bill Keimig, assistant director of Franciscan's Catechetical Institute.



Junior Mary Kettinger with Liz Schriener of Franciscan's Advancement Department.

David Deptula

"One of my favorite parts about being at Franciscan is having a good mentor who counsels me, prays for me, and is so supportive," she says. "He always makes himself available. . . . It is really touching how hospitable he is to everyone and how he is so humble and caring."

Lencki, a double major in political science and communication arts/journalism, also says Keimig has helped her "grow both professionally and spiritually." She has also learned a lot from him about "being intentional in decision making and discernment" and appreciates his encouragement to "simply trust in God and know that he is a good Father who has a good plan for our lives."

Dr. Marita O'Brien is an assistant professor of psychology and a personal vocation coach at Franciscan.

"I talk students through their basic development plan, the virtues they're working on, the commitments they have, and the growth they want to see each semester," she says. "I ask questions; we have conversations about work and family; we see what fits."

O'Brien meets with her mentees at least a couple of times each semester, during which time they look at their potential and ways to develop it. They identify gaps and possible challenges, discern charisms, and draw up a plan for the year.

She points out to them that God works through the material world and that doing his work doesn't mean every decision is "religious."



Dr. Joshua Miller, executive director of the Inscape Center for Personal Vocation, and junior Nicholas Larkins.

“When a student is discerning about gifts and aptitudes and careers, things like where they want to live, does the job pay enough, and other personal, practical needs are important for shaping what they’re becoming and directing their next steps.

“It almost seems overwhelming to think about the different factors involved in discerning what to do next,” says O’Brien. “In coaching, I walk with the students as they realize that all these factors aren’t separate. God views each of them as a whole person.”

Another coach is Liz Schriener, director of Market Engagement and Special Gifts at the University. Like O’Brien and Miller, her coaching involves doing a lot of empathetic listening.

“My job is to ask questions to help them unpack themselves and decide for themselves,” she says. “I want them to draw on their own experience to craft pragmatic examples that will facilitate their thinking.”

Miller calls it narrative-based assessment.

“As people speak their stories, a pattern is revealed in them. It’s a great example of narrative revealing deeper self-awareness. They share their stories, and we share back what we’re noticing.”

Miller says the students not only discern about themselves and God’s intentions for them through their stories but also through *the* Story, of salvation. With their coaches, they talk about what they do that is most joy-filled; they construct the narrative of who they want to be and how they want to live; and they shape their life stories in the context of what Franciscan University can offer them.

All the vocational coaches, over 40 of them, are volunteers: faculty, staff, or other professionals affiliated with Franciscan University. Freshmen in the Center for Leadership are given a list of potential mentors, with bios. They select two to meet with, and then select the mentor they’d like to be partnered with.

Junior Mary Kettinger meets with Liz Schriener, who, she says, “has helped me realize my personal strengths, my areas of weakness, and my potential as a leader now and in the future.”

The political science major also says she appreciates Schriener’s encouragement to “get comfortable with the uncomfortable” when it comes to leadership. Getting out of her “comfort zone” will better enable her to pursue her passion for “protecting and promoting marriage and family life and educating others about Theology of the Body,” first as a Culture Project missionary and then going back to school for her master’s in marriage and family studies.

Schriener enjoys coaching Kettinger and others.

“I do it because I am passionate about Catholic women being leaders throughout their lives. Pope John Paul II’s teaching is one of complementarity—that humanity is best served with input from men *and* women. When it’s out of balance, outcomes are out of balance.”

Personal vocation is not only state in life, and it’s not only career or ministry; it’s the “sacrament of the present moment,” says Miller. “Personal vocation is now. Coaching helps students to take more seriously their calling as students and empowers them to live out and grow their present calling.”

Says Schriener, “Their immediate vocation is to be a student, which means exploration, discovery, and trying things out. So if they do an internship and decide, ‘That’s a big no!’—that’s a fabulous outcome.”

Each vocational journey is unique, and the call may well change.

O’Brien says, “I’ve done what’s attractive to me. I’ve lived in Manhattan. I’ve lived overseas.”

Her bachelor’s is in mathematics, her master’s is in telecommunications engineering, and her doctorate is in psychology. She’s worked on Wall Street, she’s done programming, she’s been a consultant at Deloitte, and now she’s a psychology professor. Each step along the way has prepared O’Brien for, and enriched, the next one. Not to mention given her the wisdom and experience she draws on in her mentoring.



# “My job is to ask questions to help them unpack themselves and decide for themselves.”

Her vocational journey illustrates the truth of what junior Nicholas Larkins says he’s learned from his vocational coach, Dr. Joshua Miller.

“The glory of a life lived fully alive for God will necessarily be the fulfillment of the talents, aptitudes, and loves of an individual, and moreover, because such a life (personal vocation) can hardly be expected to fit into the usual boxes, there is no use in trying to force one’s life to fit into them.”

Larkins, a humanities and Catholic culture and philosophy major who is also in the University’s accelerated MA Philosophy Program (bioethics concentration), says, “Our conversations have been instrumental in forming a much more holistic conception of personal vocation and its application to my life. Dr. Miller’s mentoring has been invaluable in this process; I owe much of my self understanding to his guidance.”

Personal vocation coaching is currently only available to students in the Center for Leadership, but Miller is eager for the University to expand this coaching to every student.

“Colleges that have taken personal vocation formation seriously have graduates with greater grit and higher satisfaction.”

Schmiesing says the personal vocation coaching pilot program is only one way Franciscan University has begun exploring how best to promote a campus-wide culture in which each student asks and begins to answer the question, “What is God calling me to do?”

“In our classrooms, chapel, and co-curricular activities, we already do a lot to encourage students to become more and more capable of continually discerning and responding to God’s call, not only while they are students, but throughout their lives,” he says. “Our task force on personal vocation is looking at how we can build on this foundation to provide integrated formation and programming, and advising, coaching, and mentoring to all students.”

Internships, experiential learning, and post-graduation career preparation also factor into their discussions, Schmiesing adds.

The Center for Leadership’s pilot coaching program is still young (no graduates yet), but a qualitative survey of students involved uncovered overwhelmingly positive feedback.

“There were only two complaints in 80 responses,” notes Miller, “and one of the complaints was that the coach didn’t have time to meet enough.”

Schmiesing also points out that vocational coaching helps students (and parents) realize a more significant return on their education investment, since they’re exploring their interests, developing their abilities, and plotting their academic and extracurricular choices with a goal in mind. This helps prevent drift, or staying with the wrong major, or not knowing what to do after graduation.



Dr. Bill Keimig of the Catechetical Institute and senior Maria Lencki.

Most importantly, it builds a lifelong habit of “discerning God’s call and embracing the mission entrusted by him” (*Christifidelis Laici*, No. 58) because, as John Paul II said so eloquently, “It is not a question of simply knowing what God wants from each of us in the various situations of life. The individual must do what God wants . . . this is possible through the free and responsible collaboration of each of us with the grace of the Lord, which is never lacking” (*Christifidelis Laici*, No. 58).

Last April, I knelt again before the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, this time with my oldest daughter. She was about to graduate from college and start a job in D.C. That day, my prayer was for her and her vocation, wherever that call would take her. It was also a prayer of remembering and of thanks for my own winding vocational path, at least the last 28 years of it: wife, mother, writer, Congressional spouse, consultant. So far. ■

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