

When was the last time you reflected deeply upon what it means to be a Serran?

Join Father Cisetti as he sheds some light on the subject by looking at Serra's official purposes, charisma, patron and prayer.

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THE SPIRITUALITY OF SERRA

What is Spirituality?

What do we mean by spirituality? Some may regard it as something abstract and ethereal. Others contrast it with religion and invoke the popular phrase, "I am spiritual but not religious." For still others it may bring to mind different schools of spirituality such as Benedictine, Ignatian, et al. There are many different definitions of spirituality but the one I find most succinct and helpful describes spirituality as *the lens through which we relate to God and others*. A lens is not an end in itself but rather is focused on something (or someone) beyond itself. At the same time, a lens affects how one views an object, whether that object is visible or invisible.

What is Christian Spirituality?

In turn, Christian spirituality is *the lens through which one relates to God and others in light of the mysteries of Christ*. It is important to distinguish a mystery from a problem. A problem is like an algebra equation. A mystery is different. It is something we can learn more about and in which we grow, but something we cannot exhaust. With a mystery there is always something more. For example, love and friendship are two mysteries we find in our daily lives. The three central mysteries of the Christian faith are: The Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery.

Saint John tells us, "God is love" (I John 4:16). If God is love there must be love within God. God is an eternal outpouring of love. God is a communion of life and love. We call this love going on within God "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The *Blessed Trinity* connects to how we live our lives. The life and love of God

are the origin of who we are, our goal, and the model of how we are to live our lives.

We learn of God's love not merely by reading a book. We learn it by the example given to us by God himself, in the great mystery we call the *Incarnation*. This literally means the enfleshment of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Saint John says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In the person of Jesus the creator has become a creature. Through the Incarnation, God entered into our world in a real, concrete way. God has become human in the person of Jesus. God lives life with us.

Once in our world, Jesus preached, healed, exorcized, and most important, suffered, died and rose from the dead. This is the *Paschal Mystery*: the movement from life through death into new life that Jesus pioneered and in which we all follow. Again Saint John notes, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat" (John 12:24). Just as the Incarnation is the mystery we celebrate at Christmas, the Paschal Mystery is what we celebrate at Easter. We enter into this mystery by our baptism and then our lives consist in living this mystery more fully.

The Paschal Mystery leads us through the Incarnation ultimately into the life of the Blessed Trinity. Everything in the Christian faith and Christian spirituality comes down to these three central mysteries.

What is Serran Spirituality?

Having understood some basics of Christian spirituality, we can now ask: What is the spirituality of Serra? Different aspects of

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Serran life give insights to answer this question. We can explore these insights by looking at the purpose, charism, patron and prayer of Serra.

The Purposes of Serra

Officially, the purposes of Serra are expressed in three statements:

To foster and promote vocations to the ministerial priesthood in the Catholic Church as a particular vocation to service, and to support priests in their sacred ministry;

To encourage and affirm vocations to consecrated religious life in the Catholic Church; and

To assist its members to recognize and respond in their own lives to God's call to holiness in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

These statements start to reveal the spirituality of Serra. The key words of the first statement are: foster, promote and support. To foster and support vocations to the ordained priesthood is to help build what Pope John Paul II described as a "culture of vocations." First, the focus is on an increase in the number of priests and then on support of those already ordained. In other words, it is about retention. Given the attrition levels that occur for various reasons, this work is also important. The second statement essentially strives to do the same as the first with consecrated life.

The third statement is important and in some ways the foundation of the other two. It concerns what the Second Vatican Council described as "the universal call to holiness." It is not as if some Christians are called to holiness and others are called simply to stay out of trouble. All Christians are called to grow in holiness, living out God's will in our daily lives. So much of the time this involves doing ordinary things with extraordinary love. This statement notes that this is a response to God's own call. We do not initiate it but rather respond to God who has first called us.

Serra's official purposes are useful and start to shed light on the spirituality of our organization but let us delve deeper than this definition and find out a bit more.

The Charism of Serra

Charism comes from the Greek *charis*, meaning "grace" or "gift." Here it concerns a gift given by God to a person or persons for the sake of others. Saint Paul told the Corinthians: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit" (I Corinthians 12:4-7).

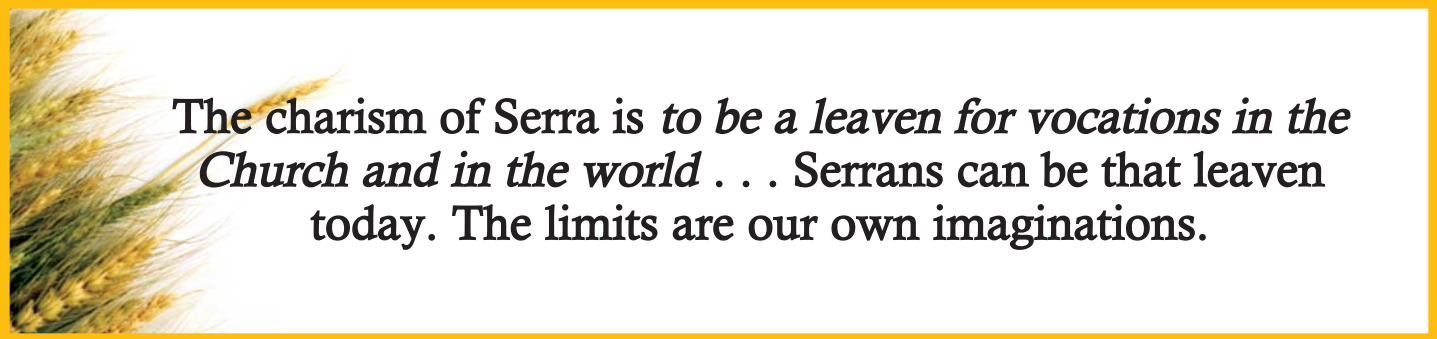
One place where we find this rather clearly is in consecrated life. Each religious order is marked by a charism, a gift to share with the Church and the

world. These charisms complement rather than oppose each other. Contemplatives serve through prayer and missionaries serve through mission work. Each community highlights one or more aspects of the Christian life. They accentuate what all of us should be doing in some way. Thus, while most of us are not called to join the Missionaries of Charity, we are all called to be concerned about the poor.

Just as each religious community has a charism, Serra does as well. The charism of Serra is *to be a leaven for vocations in the Church and in the world*. The vast majority of Catholics will never join a Serra club and yet all Catholics should be concerned about vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As with religious communities, Serrans emphasize one important aspect of the Christian life. They highlight what every Catholic should be doing in one way or another.

To be a leaven for vocations means sharing a concern about living the Christian vocation well and in bringing concern and attention to priestly and religious vocations. As a member of a parish council or other parish body, a Serran can remind the parish of its responsibility to work for priestly and religious vocations. As a Christian in the marketplace, a Serran may be uniquely situated to notice people and encourage possible religious vocations.

Many years ago, before I was in the seminary, I was walking out of church one Sunday and the wife of a Serran very calmly asked if I had ever thought about being a priest. Her gentle but important question helped to confirm what was



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Often we face the temptation to whine, complain or blame. Those in vocation work, including Serrans, often face the demon of discouragement. Father Serra's motto, "*Siempre adelante*" calls us to move past the negativity and instead to remain focused on our mission.

already going on in my heart. A little bit of yeast can make the whole dough rise. Our Church and our world desperately need a leaven for priestly and religious vocations. Serrans can be part of that leaven today. The limits are our own imaginations.

One important way Serrans can do this is to ponder the call of God in their own lives and consider how God has worked in their lives and led them to their own vocation. This involves having a sense of vocation, understanding the universal call to holiness and then living it in the nitty gritty details of one's own life. Serran spirituality reveres the call of God to those called to the ordained priesthood and consecrated life but Serrans can grow in this reverence and in holiness by pondering the call of God in their own lives.

The patron of Serra

Another insight into spirituality is to look at the founder or patron of a movement. While not the founder of Serra, Blessed Junipero Serra is our patron. He was a religious, someone who left everything to follow Christ through poverty, chastity and obedience in the tradition of Saint Francis of Assisi. He was a priest sacramentally conformed to Christ to teach, lead and sanctify. He was a missionary who put an ocean between himself and everything familiar to share the gospel with others. When he was well into middle age, he set out further on a missionary journey to California founding a number of the missions there. Missionaries gener-

ously seek to share the gift of the gospel with others and must courageously face difficulties, discomforts and challenges for the sake of Christ. Hopefully Serrans, each in their own way, will mirror to some degree the generosity and courage of our founder.

Father Serra's motto was, "*Siempre adelante*" -- "Always go forward." There is a valuable lesson here and that is to persevere and continue on. Often we face the temptation to whine, complain or blame. Those in vocation work, including Serrans, often face the demon of discouragement. *Siempre adelante* calls us to move past stewing and complaining and instead to remain focused on our mission.

The prayer of Serra

There is a saying in Church known as "*lex orandi, lex credendi*." Literally, this means that the law of praying is the law of believing. In other words, what we pray is a source of further exploring what we believe. When teaching R.C.I.A. classes one source for teachers is the Bible, another is the Catechism, and a third is the Roman Missal. The prayers of the sacramentary offer another insight into the mystery of our faith. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the papal household, noted, "The surest way of knowing a person intimately is through their way of praying."

Thus, another place to further mine the meaning of Serran spirituality is in the vein of our prayer. Our most popu-

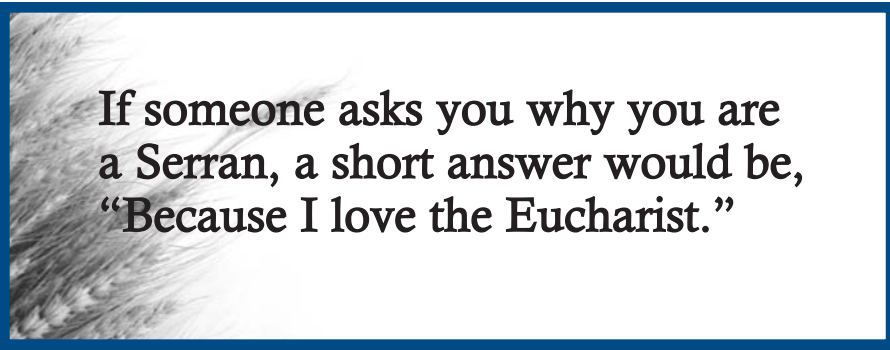
lar prayer for vocations is:

O God, Who wills not the death of a sinner but rather that he be converted and live, grant we beseech you through the intercession of the Blessed Mary Ever Virgin, Saint Joseph, her spouse, blessed Junipero Serra and all the saints an increase of laborers for Your Church, fellow laborers with Christ to spend and consume themselves for souls through the same Jesus Christ Your Son Who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

As with so many prayers, we find a four-part structure: There is an address to God, a praise of God, a petition and then a conclusion known as a doxology. To unpack this prayer is to further explore our spirituality.

After addressing God, we find the idea of *mercy*. We remember that God is merciful, not desiring the death of a sinner. Rather, and this leads to the second aspect, God desires *conversion*. There is the primary conversion of turning away from sin toward God but we are further called to live lives of ongoing conversion. Daily we seek to turn away from sin and daily we seek to be faithful to the gospel. As the prayer continues, we find mention of the Blessed Mother, Saint Joseph, Blessed Junipero Serra and all the saints. This points to the *communion of saints*. The Church is big. The Church extends not only around the world but throughout space and time. We are in communion with the saints in heaven and

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If someone asks you why you are a Serran, a short answer would be, “Because I love the Eucharist.”

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with the souls in purgatory. We form part of a larger whole as members of the Body of Christ.

Our prayer then shifts toward a specific petition. We ask for an increase of laborers for the Church. They are described as fellow laborers with Christ. This is a beautiful image. Priests and others are not simply employees of Christ but fellow laborers with him. This gives an insight into the mystery of the Incarnation. We then ask that these fellow laborers with Christ might spend and consume themselves for souls. We pray for workers who like Jesus would make a complete gift of themselves. This can reveal the importance of the Paschal Mystery and that it is through making a sincere gift of us that we find out who we are. The prayer addressed to God the Father concludes with mention of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Thus in our Serran prayer and hence our spirituality, we find the importance of mercy, conversion, the communion of saints, and the significance of the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and the Trinity.

Conclusion

Just as individuals and religious orders have a spirituality, so too do movements and organizations. Such spirituality is lived out somewhat differently by each member but common elements remain.

As Serrans we find sources of our spirituality in our purpose, our charism, our patron and our prayer. The lens of Serran spirituality values the ordained priesthood and consecrated life seeking to extend and support both while also appreciating the universal call to holiness. This lens further involves being a leaven for vocations in the Church and in the world highlighting something that concerns all Catholics. It values the generosity and courage of Blessed Junipero Serra, whose motto was “*Siempre adelante.*” Serran spirituality involves prayer that includes mercy, conversion, the communion of saints with appreciation for the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and the Trinity. Serrans can grow in this spirituality by examining their conscience in light of these values.

The base line for all Catholic spirituality is the Eucharist. As the source and summit of the Church’s life, everything we do as Catholic Christians in one way or another flows from and leads to the celebration of the Eucharist. If someone asks you why you are a Serran, a short answer would be, “Because I love the Eucharist.”

What I have shared here are some observations about some aspects of Serran spirituality. I invite all Serrans to further reflect on how the lens of Serran spirituality leads them more deeply into the mystery of God’s love, helps them on their journey of faith and helps them to grow in holiness. ☺

A Serran Examination of Conscience

Understanding the charism and spirituality of Serra leads us to consider how we do and do not live these values. To help with this, Fr. Cisetti would like to share this examination of conscience for Serrans to use for their own reflection.

1. Do I understand the idea of vocation and strive to live my own vocation while growing in holiness?
2. Do I pray for vocations, and not just recite the Serran prayer very quickly?
3. Do I act as a leaven for vocations in my parish and greater community?
4. Do I attend meetings and participate in club activities?
5. Do I invite appropriate people to consider priesthood and religious life?
6. Do I keep on hand vocation literature to share with others?
7. Do I ask others to join Serra?
8. Do I prefer complaining to doing something constructive?
9. Do I let my ego get in the way of the work of Serra and the work of vocations?

Would you like to work more on the spirituality of Serra in your club?

Check out the USA Council *Programs Manual — Part II*, which is an essential resource for developing Serrans’ faith education. The manual is downloadable for free at www.serraus.org. **See page 10 of this issue for a program from that manual particularly suited to Fr. Cisetti’s article: “The Mission and Ministry of a Serran.”**