

Vocation directors from throughout the country fill the chapel of Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington for an evening Mass on Tuesday, September 22 during the NCDVD convention.

Vocation work: 'It's about loving our priesthood'

Prayer. Education. Fraternity.

Those are the three vital assets, Long Islander Rosemary Sullivan explained, that the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors (NCDVD) strives to offer vocation directors from throughout the country when they come together for their annual convention, held this year here on Long Island in mid-September at the Hyatt Regency in Hauppauge.

"We average about 45 new vocation directors each year" in dioceses around the country, explained Rosemary, who serves as executive director of the NCDVD, working out of the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington. "When you're new, there's often a feeling of, 'How am I going to do this?'" she said, rattling off examples of the many and varied challenges faced by those tasked with identifying

and nurturing priestly vocations within their dioceses. NCDVD tries to assist them in dealing with everything from the psychological guidelines in helping men discern a possible vocation, to immigration issues that have moved to the fore, how to interview candidates, how to run "Come and See" days or other events for those considering the seminary, as well as "helping vocation directors navigate the family waters" that can be difficult.

"Twenty-five or 30 years ago," Rosemary explained, "if you asked priests about the role their mother played" in their vocation discernment, "you would often learn that it was something they didn't tell their parents about until later," because they anticipated resistance. Today, she said, it is more likely that parents will want to be more actively involved, to "journey with their sons."

Obviously, she said, parents want what is best for their sons. "We want them to know that's what we want, too," she said; and the answer to that question is "the will of God," which — whether it leads them into the priesthood or not — is what the discernment process must help them find out.

And so the NCDVD convention offers vocation directors an opportunity — through varied workshop topics and several prominent keynote speakers — to learn, to grow in their own understanding of the challenges they face, and hopefully to bring back to their dioceses some new ideas and additional resources. It also gives them the opportunity to learn from each other, and to feel the kind of mutual support they gain from being with others in the same ministry, and facing the same challenges, as they are.

"Typically, there is only one priest in a diocese" responsible for vocation ministry, said Father Edwin Leonard, the "newly minted" (three months on the job) vocation director for the Diocese of Dallas, Texas. The convention, he said, is "a wonderful blessing, primarily because it develops community among priests doing the same kind of work."

"We can put a lot of pressure on ourselves," agreed Father Scott Wallisch, vocation director for the Archdiocese of Kansas City. "It's good to be surrounded by guys in the same boat."

But the first job of the convention,

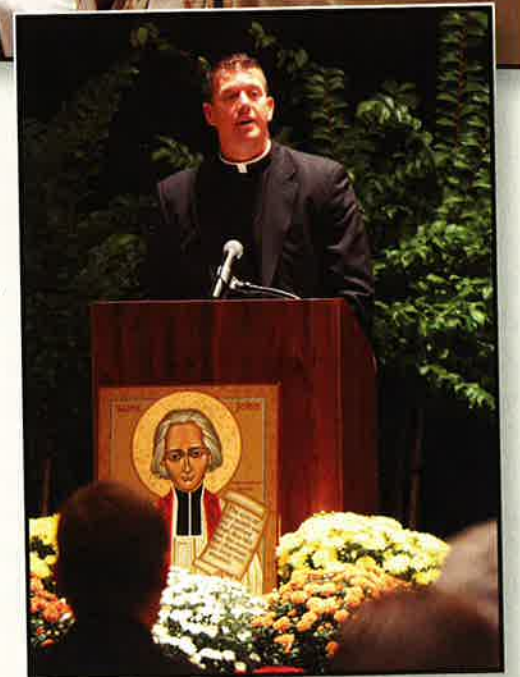


Seminarian Christopher Sullivan of the Diocese of Rockville Centre assists Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York during the convention's opening Mass September 22. Christopher is the son of the conference's executive director, Rosemary Sullivan.

Rosemary said, is to "help train" the vocation directors as "spiritual fathers" to potential future priests in their diocese. "If they don't have their own priesthood intact, they won't be able to help anybody else" discern a calling, she said. So the convention is, first and throughout, spiritual, making sure "we have our prayer life intact."

It began with Mass at the opening of the three-day Institute for Diocesan Vocations Personnel, which preceded the full convention," Rosemary said. "We set up a chapel, and we have the Blessed Sacrament with us throughout, until the close of the convention. Every morning we have a full Holy Hour and then morning prayer. For an hour-and-a-half each day, we do nothing else," so participants "can spend some time with God and then pray together. We have confession every day, we pray the Angelus at lunch, and have evening prayer every day."

They were blessed to have "17 bishops with us, including two cardinals" and Archbishop Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong, secretary for seminaries for the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy. Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York



Father Joseph Fitzgerald, vocation director for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, addresses priests at the beginning of morning prayer at the convention September 22.

celebrated the convention's opening Mass Monday evening, Sept. 22, and Cardinal Edwin O'Brien, former Archbishop of Baltimore and originally a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, was the keynote speaker on Thursday, Sept. 25. On Tuesday evening, Sept. 23, participants traveled to the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, where Bishop William Murphy was the principal celebrant at Mass.

Workshop topics for the convention included the spirituality and psychology of Internet addiction; how vocation



Bishop Murphy, who was the main celebrant of the convention's September 23 Mass at Immaculate Conception Seminary, gives the final blessing to the assembled vocation directors.

ministry can prepare a priest to be a pastor; religious immigration law for clergy and religious; working with discernment groups and college students; high school vocations camps; teaching young men to pray; continuing formation: summer experiences for seminarians; strengthening the vocation director's identity and mission in Christ; and helping the newly ordained priest "live in the tension" between his seminary experience and the reality of the priesthood. In addition to Cardinal O'Brien, Helen Alvarez, a professor of law at George Mason University

as well as a prominent author and commentator, consultant to the Pontifical Council on the Laity and adviser to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, provided a keynote address on religious freedom issues facing the Church.

"I got a lot of ideas from the keynote speakers," said Father Carlos Melocoton, one of the vocations promoters of the Diocese of Wheeling/Charleston, West Virginia, who was attending his first NCDVD convention. "It was very inspiring to come here. It rejuvenates you. It was good to have Mass with all your brothers who are doing the same

work as you are."

The NCDVD "helps us feel we're not on our own, we can seek help," said Father John Szatkowski, Father Leonard's predecessor as vocation director for the Diocese of Dallas, where he now serves on the seminary formation faculty. "They have many resources available, you can call to ask questions, email with questions." The convention, he said, offers the chance to compare activities, "see what other dioceses are doing."

Father Leonard, echoing Bishop Murphy's message in his homily, cautioned against making vocation

ministry "just a numbers game."

"It's about loving our priesthood," he said, and "knowing that it's the Holy Spirit that converts hearts. We're called to foster and welcome these men He brings to us."

Bishop Murphy also urged the vocation directors to "encourage our brother priests to be just as committed" to promoting vocations.

"Most priests live their priesthood faithfully," Father Leonard noted, and their witness helps attract others to priestly vocation. But it's hard, he said, when they are caught up in so many day-to-day responsibilities, "to ask them to

do one more thing. It can be daunting to them." The idea, he said, is to encourage all priests, when they encounter someone who seems like they might have a calling, to just invite them by asking them if they have thought about becoming a priest.

"As vocation directors, we get to see a lot of other priests as we travel around the diocese," Father Wallisch added.

"So we have opportunities to encourage them, let them hear what we have to say, remind them of the joy they have found in the priesthood, and urge them to let that joy always come to the surface, share it with others."

A mother first, Rosemary Sullivan brings 'maternal feelings' to her work in priestly vocations

When Rosemary Sullivan was first asked to help out in the diocesan vocations office, her first question — even, she said, after "16 years of Catholic education" — was, "What's a vocation?"

As her role has grown over the last 14 years, not only locally, but ultimately to become executive director of the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors (NCDVD), she now knows from personal experience what a vocation is — because working with and supporting priests, seminarians and those discerning a vocation has become *her* vocation.

"It's not a job, it's a ministry," Rose said of what began for her as a volunteer activity in 2000, when she was asked to assist Father (now Monsignor) Tom Coogan, then vocation director for the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

"I was a stay-at-home mom

with four kids," she said, having worked in public relations before that. "I asked, 'How am I going to help you?' Father Tom said, 'We'll figure it out together.'"

In January 2003, she was formally hired by the diocese to work in the vocations office; and two years after that, she became events coordinator for the NCDVD.

"The Diocese of Rockville Centre," she explained, "had long been associated with the NCDVD," which was established in 1962 to support diocesan vocation directors in their efforts to build "a culture of vocations." The organization's major annual event is its national convention, which "each year went to a different region, and they were responsible for coordinating it." The board decided it would be better if the coordination were centered in one place, and Rose was approached

to consider becoming its permanent coordinator.

"It was kind of part-time, and Father Tom said you should think about doing it," she recalled. "He said he spoke to Bishop Murphy, who said, 'Yes, she should.'" It would also have the advantage, Rose understood, of giving the Diocese of Rockville Centre a permanent seat with the national organization, with increased opportunities to get feedback from other dioceses.

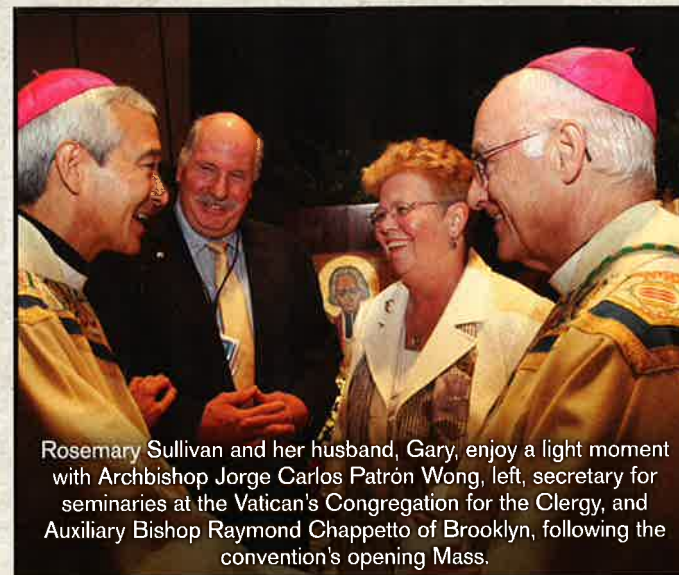
So she "did what I always do: turn it over to the Lord." Feeling called to accept, she did — and four years later she was asked to become the organization's executive director.

"It took a lot of prayer," she said. "I talked to my spiritual director, and went back to Bishop Murphy." She was very involved at that time, she said, in developing

applications for candidates for the priesthood here in the diocese, something she wanted to continue. "It was important to remain involved with the local effort," she said. "If I was removed" from that, "how could I be their voice" with the national organization?

By establishing the NCDVD office in the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington, she was able to do both, allowing her to "see the process on three different levels: the vocation director perspective, the discernment perspective and the seminary perspective."

And now she has moved from the vocations office to become program director for the new Sacred Heart Institute (SHI) run by Msgr. Richard Henning, rector of the seminary in Huntington. The institute works to provide continuing



Rosemary Sullivan and her husband, Gary, enjoy a light moment with Archbishop Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong, left, secretary for seminaries at the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy, and Auxiliary Bishop Raymond Chappetto of Brooklyn, following the convention's opening Mass.

formation for priests of the Dioceses of Rockville Centre and Brooklyn, and the Archdiocese of New York. She is able to bring all the "knowledge and experience" she has gained in her local ministries to her work at the NCDVD — this was the ninth convention she has overseen for the organization — and also to her role now as a consultant to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"All of this," she emphasized, "has been made

possible by the blessing and support of Bishop Murphy. And we're so grateful to him," she added, "for hosting this year's convention and for allowing us to have the NCDVD based here at our seminary."

It is also made possible by the active support of her family, all of whom attend and help out with at least part of the convention each year.

"It's important that the priests see that I'm a mother first," she said, something

that's also important in her own work with the families of men in discernment, and her work with vocation directors who also have that responsibility.

She is sometimes asked, she said, what it's like as a woman to be involved in helping men with priestly discernment and formation.

"I say I'm not a woman, I'm a mother. I have maternal feelings toward them," something that is very helpful as she works on ways to help parents understand that those guiding their sons in the discernment process "want the same thing" their parents want: "what's best for their sons."

Rose knows that literally these days, as her own son Christopher is a second-year theology student in St. Joseph Seminary in Dunwoodie, studying for the diocesan priesthood. Christopher served at the convention's opening Mass celebrated by Cardinal Dolan.

The rest of Rose's family are all active Catholics as well. Son Patrick, who graduated from the University of Notre Dame, now teaches at Gonzaga High School in Washington, D.C., while his wife Catherine, also a Notre Dame graduate, teaches at Notre Dame Prep, an all-girls Catholic school in Baltimore. Daughter Cathryn is studying psychology at Stony Brook University, and daughter Shannon is a senior at St. John the Baptist Diocesan High School in West Islip — Rose's alma mater. And her husband Gary, recently retired from Entenmann's, is working at St. Patrick Parish in Bay Shore.

Her family has always been her primary vocation, Rose emphasized, and it shows.

"She's been a real good example," said her son Christopher, "of showing how to live by the Lord's calling, and that there's real joy in doing what the Lord is calling you to do."