

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

CALLED BY NAME SUNDAY

February 1, 2026

“He’s dead!” Most vocation stories that begin with those words normally don’t turn-out too well, but that’s exactly how my story begins.

I and those accompanying me on a hike to the summit of Mt. Shavino, a 14,229-foot peak in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of southern Colorado, had just left the summit and were descending the trail when I decided to teach the Scout’s proper trail etiquette: Those ascending have the right-of-way, while those of us descending are to yield.

In the face of oncoming trail traffic, I urged our entire group of 12 (9 boys, including our Eagle Scout son John, and three adults) to stand aside and let the ascending group pass. Unfortunately, I stood on the downslope-side of the trail, which promptly gave way. I went tumbling, cartwheel-fashion, down the boulder-strewn mountain-side about 30 feet, before coming to rest on my back in a shallow depression among the boulders.

The first thought of those who witnessed my fall was “He’s dead,” but incredibly, my head and my body were cushioned by my backpack which fit precisely into that depression.

After scrambling down the mountain-side to check on me and verify that I was OK, our group continued its descent of Mt. Shavino. I walked away without a scratch!

A few weeks later, while praying in the pew before Sunday Mass, I had a private revelation, a vision in which God told me that I should have died in that fall but I was being given a second chance to “make the world a better place.”

That vision really unnerved me with the realization that I, but for the grace of God, could have—should have—died in that fall.

So, I prayed further, talked with Mary, consulted a financial planner to determine what was possible and, at the ripe old age of 46—with three teenage children and a mortgage—I quit my job. I became a “professional volunteer.”

Over the next eight years, I utilized my accounting skills to assist many not-for-profit agencies with their bookkeeping needs. Additionally, I mentored young boys at Operation Breakthrough, spent summers volunteering at Scout camp, and volunteered with the City of Gladstone Emergency Management Agency—assisting the firefighters at fire scenes.

Then, in 2009, “he” came into my life. He was the pastor at St. Charles Borromeo Church, our home parish. Like previous pastors, he asked if I had ever thought of becoming a permanent deacon. I answered him like I had those previous pastors: “No, I hadn’t given it much thought and really wasn’t interested.” However, this priest was tenacious, **like a pitbull!** He just wouldn’t let go. Week after week at Sunday Mass, he would come up to me and ask if I had yet applied to enter diaconate formation. Finally, I cried “uncle,” and applied to the diaconate. Lo and behold, I was accepted, went through five years of formation and was ordained a deacon in 2014. That “pitbull” pastor was none other than our very own Fr. Ken Riley!

On the surface, my vocation journey began with that fall down the mountain; however, upon deeper reflection, my journey began earlier, much earlier. I’ve had numerous role models in my life who have demonstrated what it means to live the Gospel, to be a follower of Christ, to be a servant to all:

- My mother, Norma, who attended daily Mass faithfully for many years, and dutifully cleaned the liturgical linens at our home parish in St. Louis,
- Mary’s dad, John Rigby, who also attended mass daily and encouraged me during my formation,
- The “little old ladies” at St. Charles Borromeo Parish, who supported me during my formation with their presence and their prayers, but most of all

- Mary, my dear wife, who has been totally supportive of my ministry from its beginning. It's not commonly known, but during the last few weeks of my diaconate formation, I had a severe crisis of faith. Mary recognized my turmoil and, through her prayers and actions—she “called out the cavalry,” a group of friends and fellow Deacon candidates— to “talk me off the ledge” and not quit only weeks before ordination. I wouldn't be here today without the loving support of Mary.

These people, and many others—who lovingly live faith-filled lives—have been my inspiration to go forward in my diaconate ministry, a ministry of service. I am, to use the words of Bishop Johnston, a “grunt for Christ.”

I will conclude with this thought about **what we can do to foster vocations**:

I've just finished two books about the life of Robert Prevost, better known to the world as Pope Leo XIV. In the book, *Portrait of the First American Pope: Leo VIX* by Matthew Bunson, I came across this 2023 quote from then-Cardinal Robert Prevost on vocations:

First of all, our priority cannot be **to look for vocations**. Our priority has to be **to live the good news, to live the Gospel**, to share the enthusiasm that can be born in our hearts, and in our lives when we truly discover who Jesus Christ is. When we stay walking with Christ, **in communion with one another**, in that friendship with the Lord and understanding how great it is to have received that gift, vocations come. (p.35)

In other words, the challenge is not technical nor strategic: It's not that the church needs to use social media better, or to engage consultants about how to create programs that encourage young men and women to pursue religious vocations. Rather, **It's our daily witness of living a life in love with Christ**, which in turn reflects the love of Christ to others, that draws people to Him. And that's what generates an interest in following God's call, to walk with Him in a special way, as a priest, religious...or even a deacon.
