

As a little girl, Myra Humphrey was walking with her sister, Priscilla, near a bus stop in Rochester during a snowstorm. The two girls spotted another little girl, standing in the storm, waiting for the bus, suitcases in hand. "Why are you crying?" Myra asked. The girl told them, "My mother put me out." The Humphrey sisters responded without hesitation: "Come with us!" "Yeah, you can come and stay with us!"

The girls had confidence that their mother, Emma Humphrey, and their father, Leroy Ford Jr., would welcome a stranger. The little girl, "Carmen," stayed for a month. That stay and her parents' gesture is an indelible memory for Myra, who is today Associate Pastor Reverend Myra Brown of Spiritus Christi Church. "I would watch my mother do that over and over, in my life," she said in a recent interview about the influences that have shaped her thinking, her faith, and her decision to become a priest.

Austrian Bishop Christine Mayr Lumetzberger ordained Rev. Myra on Saturday, January 28, 2017, at Spiritus Christi's Downtown United Presbyterian Church location. Rev. Myra joined Corpus Christi as Hospitality Minister 25 years ago, in 1992, then helped lead and shape Spiritus Christi (formed after the diocese fired the staff of Corpus Christi for inclusion policies that were not allowed by the Vatican).

Her ordination to the priesthood gives Rev. Myra the right to say the prayers of the Consecration, say Mass alone, and give Last Rites, the sacraments and prayers that Catholics receive at the end of their lives. (She will be the fifth priest ordained at Spiritus Christi church; she is the second female priest on staff at Spiritus. Pastor Rev. Mary Ramerman was ordained in 2001. The ordination also carries significance for African-American women, as she is only the third African American female Catholic priest in the country.)

Rev. Myra's childhood, she explained, was a time when she says she "absorbed" her family's compassion for those in need. Both parents, "steeped in the principles of Jesus," had a strong sense of social justice that translated to principles that guided the family, she said. Her parents taught her that, even when your own needs are great, you should still open the door to anyone in need. (Rev. Myra and her sister Priscilla were just two of the eight children in the family, and money was tight. However, it helped that "my mother and father knew how to stretch a meal," said Rev. Myra, explaining that her parents would fish, catch turtles, and trap woodchucks, raccoons, squirrels, and rabbits for meals. Her parents also knew how to grow food in their "amazing garden," which included everything from collard greens to peach trees.)

Interestingly, the open door became a motif for Rev. Myra's life. As for the little girl at the bus stop, Mrs. Humphrey did more than just feed and offer shelter to Carmen; she also contacted Carmen's mother, counseling her on how to establish a better relationship with her child. Eventually, everyone involved decided that the best place for the little girl was in her own home. And so the girl returned.

From her parents, Rev. Myra said she learned, “We can influence each other to do the right thing. All we need is a little relationship courage.”

Just as Mrs. Humphrey’s sense of social justice extended beyond her family, so does Rev. Myra’s, say those who work with her. Spiritus Associate Pastor Father James Callan tells the story of having lunch with Rev. Myra at the Red Front Restaurant on Clinton and Andrew streets, when a fistfight broke out in front of the restaurant. Rev. Myra said, “I’ll be right back,” he recounted. “I said, ‘Where are you going?’” She was headed, in fact, right in the middle of the fight, where she managed to talk with the two men for a few minutes and defuse the tensions. Then, recalled Father Jim, “she gives the one guy a hug,” to which the other man responded, “Hey, what about me?!” What Rev. Myra sensed, said Father Jim, is that what these two men needed more than anything “is love.” Meanwhile, he said, “I was there with my jaw open. I couldn’t believe what I had just seen.”

Both Father Jim and Rev. Mary talk of a colleague who has a multitude of talents. They describe her as having incredible compassion, visiting the sick and advocating for them in the hospital; connecting poor people to agencies that can help; and even putting needy people up in her own home for weeks and even months. “She’s a humble servant,” said Father Jim.

Rev. Myra has, furthermore, been a tireless advocate for better race relations. At Spiritus, she has been especially effective “in awakening us to diversity,” said Rev. Mary. “She really has a tremendous awareness of race relations” and of what obstacles get in the way of racial harmony. “I’ve never seen anyone who can bring people together to talk about race and diversity like she can,” Rev. Mary said. Rev. Myra has worked for many years, not only in Rochester but also throughout the nation, for racial understanding.

No story about Rev. Myra would be complete without discussion of her passion for music, something she has said that takes her to a place almost indescribable in her spiritual life. Her father was a bass tenor singer, her brother played bass guitar, and Myra and her sisters all sang. The entire family played in a band with friends, and her home was a weekend gathering place for musicians. So when some choir members from St. Bridget’s Church left at one point, neighborhood members of that church came looking for the musical talent they knew they would find in Myra’s home. When Myra was 16, she and her older sisters, Betty and Priscilla, joined the church. (Other family members would join later.)

Although she was raised as a Baptist, “My first year there [at St. Bridget’s], I fell in love with Jesus,” she said. “Within that year, I knew I wanted to be baptized.” She began to read Scripture more deeply and more often. Along with friends she had from a nearby Pentecostal church, she continued activities such as “street witnessing,” singing together and praising Jesus on a city street corner on a Saturday afternoon. “When we got together,” she said, “it was always about Jesus.”

Myra became an altar worker, attended Bible conferences, taught Bible study, played roles in plays at St. Bridget's, volunteered in an after-school program for Action for a Better Community, and became a leader in the Black Catholic Revival movement. She read the work of ministers and theologians, and developed "an undying desire to serve and help." (As a young adult, Myra earned her degree in Nursing, and served for the next 25 years in a range of settings, from the Rochester Psychiatric Center to St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center.)

"I wanted to be a part of wherever God was...I just didn't have a 'no' in me. I kept saying 'yes!' 'yes!' 'yes!'"

Except once.

Several years after joining St. Bridget's Church, Father Bob Werth asked her to preach a homily. She said a firm "no," fearing that she could not do it, that she was not cut out for the job. Then she prayed about it – and started cleaning. "I felt this tug in my belly," she said. She remembered the story of God calling Samuel several times, and she said to herself, *I know what this is...This is God calling me.* I felt that God was saying, 'I've called you to preach and teach my word.'"

She continued to pray about it but did not hear a clear response from God. She spoke to her godmother, who said, "Baby, let me tell you something: When heaven is silent, that means God said it, and that settles it."

Rev. Myra recounted with a smile the way she responded in prayer to God: "Fine! If that's the way you're going to be..." Undone by God, she agreed to answer the call to preach, but with a stipulation that recalls the image of the doorway: "I made a covenant with God." If God would "teach me, provide for me, and open doors for me," then she would follow Him. "I said, 'If you open the doors, I'll go through them.'" In retrospect, she says, "everything in my ministry is because God opened the doors."

The homily was a huge success, and when Father Jim, then pastor of Corpus Christi, called Father Bob in 1992 to ask if they had a recommendation for a Hospitality Minister, he told them he had the perfect individual. Father Jim and Mary Ramerman, then Family Minister, hired Myra at Corpus Christi, but Myra made one stipulation: she wanted to be able to continue singing, and she wanted the church to form a Gospel choir.

Today, parishioners who attend the Gospel Mass often see Rev. Myra step back from the altar table to join or lead the Gospel choir, with a voice that is resonant, lovely, and emotionally wide-ranging, conveying and evoking tones that range from plaintive and prayerful to joyous and elated.

Rev. Myra told her interviewer of a recurring dream that she'd had, one in which she was at the altar, "with a sea of people" in front of her. When Rev. Mary came to Rev. Myra two years ago to ask her to become the Associate Pastor, "that vision came back," says Rev. Myra. "In a strange way, God was opening the door for me to say, 'yes.'" She went on about her realization that God was telling her, "it's time for you to accept your call fully to the priesthood."

She went on to explain, "What I have come to deeply believe and understand is that everything we have and understand belongs to God." Hence, "I'm happy to give it up and let God use it." She added, "For me, that truth became my great joy."

-- *Mary Heveron-Smith*, March 2017