

Anxiety can lead to growth, says Walking with Purpose founder

By Tim Puet
Catholic Times Reporter

The founder of the Walking with Purpose program says the key to dealing with anxiety involves looking out, down and up at the same time.

“Look out at your circumstances, look down at the Scriptures and look up at the One enthroned above,” Lisa Brenninkmeyer said at Powell St. Joan of Arc Church.

Speaking on the theme “Hallelujah Anyway!: Discovering Good Despite Anxiety,” Brenninkmeyer encouraged members of her audience to deal with their fears by telling them, “Whatever you face, you are not alone. God has gone before you, knowing the mistakes you are going to make. He’s in the future, fixing what’s going to go wrong. You are not an exception. You are not big enough to get in the way of what God is ultimately doing.”

About 800 women attended two talks in the parish’s sanctuary by Brenninkmeyer – more than 500 on Tuesday evening, Nov. 5 and about 300 on Wednesday morning, Nov. 6, said Jen Vance of the St. Joan of Arc Walking with Purpose group. Walking with Purpose is a Scripture-based Bible study designed for women.

Brenninkmeyer frequently referred to the Old and New Testaments in her hourlong presentation. She began by talking about instances of anxiety she has experienced and how turning to the Scriptures provided her with the peace she needed to deal with those situations.

She said a key Old Testament passage in those times and throughout her life has been Isaiah 62:6 – “I have set a watchman upon your walls, O Jerusalem” – a reminder that God always is looking out for us and that women need to be on the watch for the evils that might endanger their families.

Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, she said, “‘You were not made for comfort; you were made for greatness.’ God has chosen not to deliver me from what I feared most, but through what I feared. ... Philippians 4:6-7 says, ‘Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, ... make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.’ This is a promise from the heart of God.”

She said recent research shows that 40 percent of Americans are more anxious now than they were at this time last year, and that anxiety affects one in eight children and 18 percent of adults in the United States.

“Our fear of anxiety is half the battle. It is blocking our trust in God,” Brenninkmeyer said, following that remark by urging people who believe anxiety is severely affecting them to seek professional help in addition to searching the Scriptures. “Most people who are struggling with anxiety wait for an average of six years to look for help,” she said. “There is no shame in that (seeking help). There is strength and bravery in that.”

She described anxiety as “a response to a perception that we are not

“Who and what we choose to live for today will determine the quality and location of our eternity,” she said.

Sometimes a person might feel stuck in a sense of lacking spiritual growth. At such times, the person needs to remind herself or himself, “I am not stuck. I am moving forward continuously on the pilgrimage to heaven ... going ‘from strength to strength,’ not from crisis to crisis,” Brenninkmeyer said.

The Letter to the Hebrews compares the biblical Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. “Mount Sinai is terrifying, a place where God was met with fear and trembling,” she said. “That’s not where you’re going, but to Mount Zion, where you can see the heavenly Jerusalem, encounter angels, followers of Christ and Jesus himself, and

in the midst of anxiety, he can perform surgery on our souls.”

She told the audience, “I pray that as you study (the Walking with Purpose program), you are not becoming a smarter sinner” – a comment drawing much laughter – “but are being transformed. There is a deeper level of growth and transformation we cannot achieve. Only God can.”

Brenninkmeyer, who lives in Florida with her husband, Leo, and their seven children, said that despite the success of Walking with Purpose, she and Leo went through what St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Calcutta have described as “a dark night of the soul” during the summer. “Leo had panic attacks and could not get a grip on his emotions,” she said. “He had no choice but to let go and trust in God. He came out a different man, and his prayers were answered through anxiety.”

Brenninkmeyer said that the anxiety came back for her husband after a time, as she was going through a similar struggle. “The anxiety appeared to be destroying my family,” she said. “I moved from anxiety to nothing – a deep sense of discouragement. But regardless of how I felt, the one thing I held on to was the prayer ‘Jesus, I trust in you.’ I felt nothing, but I kept saying that and surrendering to Jesus.”

“My spiritual director told me that this was a time God wanted to work on my heart, to allow him to be more and more active while I was being passive. This is the kind of situation where God teaches us we don’t have to be in control. The only thing he asks us is to love.

“This journey into darkness took 40 days – the same time it took Leo,” she said. “God was helping me make sense in a deeper way of truths I understood, but not in their fullness.

“All that we walked through this summer made us more like Christ. The anxiety was a vehicle that brought us to a place where we both wanted to go. It brought a release of control, a level of growth where there is only one will – God’s will.”

Before Brenninkmeyer’s talk, Julie Ricciardi, chief executive officer and board chair of Walking with Purpose, spoke of the organization’s origins and growth.



Julie Ricciardi, board chair of the Walking with Purpose Bible study for women, at Powell St. Joan of Arc Church.



Walking with Purpose founder Lisa Brenninkmeyer spoke on the good that can come from anxiety. CT photos by Tim Puet

safe, that our well-being is in jeopardy – a sign we are facing imminent danger.” Referring frequently to Psalm 124, which speaks of God rescuing his people, she focused on three messages she said the Scriptures are telling us about anxiety – this earth is not our own; God is on our side, and that makes all the difference; and good can come from anxiety.

Psalm 124 is described as “a song of ascent” or of pilgrimage. “We are called to live our lives on pilgrimage,” Brenninkmeyer said. “Each one of us is invited to a journey of ascent with God” and to focus on that journey, rather than to grasp all the pleasure and comfort we can for the moment.

“confidently approach the throne of grace.”

Returning again to Psalm 124, Brenninkmeyer said, “The psalmist describes a feeling of being overwhelmed. Some of you face difficult circumstances because ... you are serving God and you have an enemy hellbent on your destruction. I assure you, his power is limited. He is on a leash that only goes so far.”

In many cases, she said, “Anxiety can be the way God is directing attention to your problems so he can connect you with his healing power. Anxiety can be a stripping away God uses to take us deeper into spiritual life. It’s not pointless. If we surrender to God

First-graders portray saints



Students at Columbus Immaculate Conception School continued a longstanding tradition by dressing up as saints for All Saints Day. After Mass for the holy day on Friday, Nov. 1, each of the students presented a brief biography of a chosen saint.

Photo courtesy Immaculate Conception School

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She said Brenninkmeyer started the program in 2002 as a Bible study group with eight friends in Annapolis, Maryland. Brenninkmeyer, who was raised as an evangelical Protestant and became a Catholic in 1991, felt the Church was lacking in fresh, relevant Bible studies to meet the needs of young mothers. She shared her concerns with her parish priest, who suggested that God was calling her to find a way to help fill those needs.

Within two years, the group had grown from eight women to 55, then spreading to other parishes and along the East Coast. Ricciardi, who lives in Greenwich, Connecticut, joined Walking with Purpose in 2008, when it became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Today, Walking with Purpose, now based in Greenwich, is active in more than 350 parishes in the United States, Europe and Canada, including 25 in the Diocese of Columbus. Father Da-

vid Sizemore, pastor of Newark St. Francis de Sales Church, is one of its chaplains. It has helped more than 42,000 women deepen their relationship with Jesus in the past year alone.

"When a woman decides to get engaged in faith, it has a ripple effect through her family, parish, town and nation," Ricciardi said. "Some women may want to start a Walking with Purpose group, but feel it's too much for them. A wise woman once said, 'The Lord isn't asking you to jump off a diving board. Just put your toe in the water.' That's what Lisa did, and look at what happened.

"There's great power in starting small. Look at the parable of the mustard seed in Mark's Gospel. The seed is small, but nothing happens until you plant it. A tiny bit of effort can be massively rewarded."

For more information on Walking with Purpose, go to www.walking-withpurpose.com.

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in the *Biergarten* of Munich but that seem somewhat removed from the real-world pastoral challenges of the Brazilian rainforest?

"The actual Synod gatherings ... in Rome have featured genuine freedom of expression." This, I'm sure, would come as news to the African bishops warned against consorting with American bishops at Synod 2018, as it would to the members of the final-report drafting committees at Synod 2015 and Synod 2018, who complained about the manipulation of the process by the

synod's general secretariat.

Serious consultation and collaboration are essential to effective pastoral leadership, including the leadership of the Bishop of Rome. But over the 50-plus years of its existence, no one has figured out how to make the Synod of Bishops really work. Propaganda about "synodality" that functions as rhetorical cover for the imposition of the progressive Catholic agenda on the whole Church is not an improvement on that track record; it's a masquerade, behind which is an agenda.

Day of the Dead at St. Andrew



Students at Columbus St. Andrew School are learning about Mexican culture with the help of Spanish teacher Alejandra Galindo, who created a collection of objects known as an *ofrenda* to give her students an understanding of the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration. She explained how Franciscan missionaries blended portions of pagan Aztec rituals with the pious observance of All Souls Day.

Photo courtesy St. Andrew School

Our Lady of Bethlehem 'eco-saints'



Columbus Our Lady of Bethlehem School and Childcare celebrated All Saints Day with kindergarten students researching and portraying an "eco-saint." Students increased their knowledge of the Catholic faith by researching saints who used signs of creation in their work for God. The students also demonstrated their critical thinking skills by finding ways to imitate the saint they portrayed.

Photo/Our Lady of Bethlehem School

St. Rose School 'saints'



New Lexington St. Rose School first-grade students carried on the tradition of dressing up as one of their favorite saints and giving presentations to other classes on All Saints Day. Deacon Ed Christ (far left), Father Michael Hartge (second from left) and Father Christopher Yakkel are shown with the following "saints" (from left): first row, St. Andrew, St. Rose, St. Patrick and Mary, Queen of Saints; second row, St. Michael, St. Peter, Pope St. John Paul II, St. Nicholas, St. Anne and St. Elizabeth.

Photo courtesy St. Rose School