

Priest extends his ministry to the internet

LINDA REEVES
of the Florida Catholic staff

WEST PALM BEACH | Father Dennis Gonzales, a parochial vicar of St. Ann Parish in West Palm Beach, has expanded ministry beyond the parish and diocese, and is reaching families and people around the world.

Father Gonzales, a new Catholic blogger, is touching people globally through the World Wide Web with his blogs and conversations about important life issues that impact families and, at times, tear people apart.

"This is another form of ministry," he said. "This platform reaches many people. I have readers from other parts of the world, like the Philippines, Australia and London. People can easily access the blog because of the widespread availability of internet facilities."

Father Gonzales launched his blog titled "Helping Families Project — A Conversation on Important Life Issues" the day after he celebrated his fifth anniversary as an ordained priest of the Diocese of Palm Beach. On May 5, his web journal began with powerful discussions about difficult topics typically avoided in social circles and by many.

The blog discussions for the most part shed light on various subjects including living wills, appointing a surrogate to address specific medical issues, comfort care, hospice, organ donations,

tube feeding and life support. He also provides an array of resources, references and links.

A point that he expresses over and over is the significance of advance directives and detailed directions when it comes to life, to prevent family stress and family disputes when loved ones are faced with serious decisions on important care and end-of-life matters for someone who has not taken the steps to properly prepare.

"This blog serves as a guide to encourage families to talk about advance care planning," he said. "I would like to tell families that advance care planning is really not about death, but about living a peaceful and meaningful life all throughout, from beginning through the end."

Father Gonzales, a native of the Philippines, is a registered nurse who had worked in a Washington, D.C., medical facility and in hospice care for six years before joining the diocesan seminarian formation program. He also completed an internship program in clinical pastoral education at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and earned a master's in bioethics from Loyola University in Chicago through a grant from the Bernard Egan Foundation of Fort Pierce.

He presents his discussions based on his own training, studies and experience working with the sick and dying, and with individuals and families.



Father Dennis Gonzales

FYI

To read Father Gonzales' blog, visit <https://helpingfamiliesproject.com>.

Father Gonzales can be reached at dmg26@aol.com or at St. Ann Parish, 310 N. Olive Ave., West Palm Beach, FL 33401.

"I present these topics using my actual encounters with patients and family members at different hospitals. I blended these narratives with the moral and ethical teachings of the Church to make my presentation more relatable to readers," he said. "I found out that many Catholics are still grappling to understand the teachings of the Church on many common end-of-life issues like forgoing life-sustaining treatments, use of pain medication for comfort care, forgoing tube feeding or artificial nutrition and hydration, organ donation and the brain-death criteria."

In his blog, Father Gonzales wrote, "The right time to discuss death and end-of-life care is now. During times of serious illness, family members are already confronted with difficulties, ranging from financial constraints of medical care to emotional upheavals from an impending loss. It would be an added burden for family members to be subjected with the sensitive task of deciding the wishes or best interest of their loved ones. We can take this additional burden off their shoulders through advance care planning."

He explained that death is part of life and something that everyone must face. "We need to confront it with openness and love. Our proper understanding of the purpose of medicine, the meaning of life as well as the Church's teachings on both the sanctity and the quality of life, will guide us in preparing an advance directive. This attitude and practice help



In this 2013 Florida Catholic file photo, Bishop Gerald M. Barbarito lays hands on Father Dennis Gonzales during his priestly ordination.

ensure friendship and unity with our family and with God."

On a different and much lighter note, Father Gonzales' online journal includes a glimpse into his 2016 pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a small group of pilgrims he now calls "friends" and "family." He shares photos, agendas, experiences, information and gives some Bible lessons connected to holy places he travelled. "Members of our group have continued to communicate and exchange notes and messages with each

other. A new family and community of faithful have been formed," he explained.

Other interesting elements of the blog are short articles with inspiration and hope. Father Gonzales said the topics on spirituality offer readers "lighter and easier pieces for discussion."

An example is a discussion titled "Embarking on something new helps us discover our best self." It is a reflection with encouragement to get out and try something new and get rid of old things and habits "that prevent us from discovering who we really are. Do not be afraid to get out of that comfort zone and embark on something new."

Blogging is a new experience for Father Gonzales, a new ministry that God brought to him. "I have people tell me how appreciative they have been for my efforts of writing and sharing with them insightful and important information on advance care planning in the perspective of the Catholic faith. This information gives them a sense of direction in formulating advance directives and the courage to be open about end-of-life issues to family members. They also appreciate that I bring actual narratives in my presentation as they are able to relate to it." ■






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