

Sr. Barbara Joseph Foley, CST, received her award as an inductee for the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame on Oct. 16 from co-chairs of the Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women, Leslie Clingenpeel (left) and Briana Ramos (right). *Photo Weston Waugh/OKC Studio.*

Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame gains a 'sister'



Sr. BJ is with the statue of the Blessed Mother in the courtyard garden of her pantry. It was important to her, she said, to have a place of beauty for her homeless friends. *Photo Emily Woodham/Sooner Catholic.*

By Emily Woodham
The Sooner Catholic

Sherri Coale, the former women's basketball coach, spent a successful career sizing up the character and spirit of young ladies for her teams at the University of Oklahoma.

A recent assignment played a bit different: sizing up the life of Sister Barbara Joseph Foley, CST, for her induction into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame.

"(Sister Barbara Joseph) believes deeply in human dignity, both in (this) life and after," said Coale, master of ceremonies for the Hall of Fame gala and a 2001 inductee. "Some people see the needs of the community. Others see the people behind those needs. Sister Barbara Joseph sees friends."

The Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women (OCSW) welcomed Sister Barbara Joseph Foley – known more commonly as Sister BJ – into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame on Oct. 16 for the category of "Humanitarian and Philanthropy" work, recognizing her 20 years of serving the homeless population in Oklahoma City.

More than 230 attended the gala themed, "A Legacy of Light," hosted at The Skirvin Hotel in Oklahoma City. The OCSW states on its website, oklahoma.gov/ocsw, that it "is the official state government commission, led by 30 volunteers who are experts in healthcare, business, education, legal, financial/banking, mental health, legislation/public policy and tribal relations. Since 1994, OCSW has sought to strengthen and empower women in Oklahoma by improving their opportunities and quality of life."

Sister BJ was honored with six other inductees.

"I'm proud to be among the women who have come before and those now present. All their perseverance, their compassion, and their love – I find those three ingredients are really what makes things work," Sister BJ said at the podium after receiving the honor.

Sister BJ founded her ministry to the homeless, Sister BJ's Pantry, in 2006. However, it was eight years before when she began her primary vocation as a sister of the Carmelite Sisters of Saint Thérèse of the Infant Jesus in Oklahoma City.

She received the call to Carmel later in life.

"I was 38 when I first started really discerning," she told Sooner Catholic. "I received my vocation through Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament."

At the time, she was a purchasing agent for the City of Manteca in California.

"I had a house; a blue sports car; I traveled a lot," she said. "I began praying the Liturgy of the Hours at my parish and that led to starting Eucharistic Adoration."

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Book review: 'Blind spot: the evangelizing power of Latino culture'

By Br. Benet Exton, O.S.B.
The Sooner Catholic

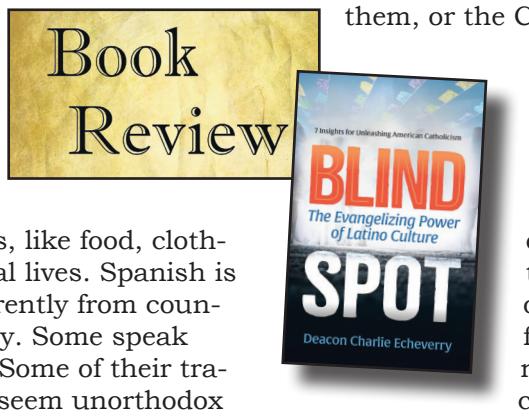
When I first saw this book, it came to mind that I don't know much about ministry, much less Latino or Hispanic ministry. The only ministry I had done was on the higher education level with our Saint Gregory's University as a librarian. As I started reading the book, I discovered it was about Latino Catholic culture and how they are a "blind spot" in the Catholic Church in the United States.

Deacon Charlie Echeverry is a deacon in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He is a preacher, speaker, author and producer of Catholic film and television, as well as CEO of Black/Brown, a consulting studio to help businesses with culture-forward strategies.

He was a senior executive leader in global media companies. His work has been featured on EWTN, America magazine, Our Sunday Visitor and others. He was born to Colombian immigrants in Los Angeles. He has been a permanent deacon since ordination in 2017.

Deacon Echeverry has provided an introduction into Latino Catholicism that non-Latino Catholics, especially those in the clergy and other ministries in the Church need to take note of. He said Latino Catholics are a "sleeping giant" within the Church in the United States that should not be overlooked. They make up 42% of all Catholics in the United States. Young Latinos are at least 54% of the Church population. Their numbers will continue to grow, since Latinos are more likely to have more than one child unlike non-Latino Catholics.

One message from the book: those in the clergy and other ministries, or even plain ol' Catholics, should try to appreciate Latino culture. One thing to know is that Latinos come from various Latin American and Central American countries. They are not all Mexicans.



Cultural practices also vary from national groups, like food, clothing and social lives. Spanish is spoken differently from country to country. Some speak Portuguese. Some of their traditions may seem unorthodox to non-Latinos. Some might be traditions their culture combined with Catholicism. Some of that boils down to not having enough catechesis.

Young Latinos who were born in the U.S. are usually bilingual, and some only speak English. Young Latinos may combine Spanish and English and speak "Spanglish."

Deacon Echeverry suggested ways to reach out to Latino Catholics. He also warns that the Church cannot afford to ignore them, or the Church will suffer losing them to other churches or see them leave organized religion.

At the end of each chapter are discussion questions for group or individual reflection. There are many illustrations, charts and side boxes to explain terms, practices and other items. There are bibliographical references. This book is highly recommended to the clergy, other ministers, and those in the pews. They will learn a lot about this "sleeping giant."

Br. Benet Exton, O.S.B., Saint Gregory's Abbey, Shawnee, is a freelance writer for the Sooner Catholic.

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Her research led her to the Carmelite Sisters in Oklahoma City.

"It is one of the few active Carmelite communities that focuses on pastoral work, and that's what I felt called to do," she said. "I made my first vows in 1998 and my final vows in 2001."

Her formal religious name is Sister Barbara Joseph of Saint John the Baptist, which proved fitting for her first role in pastoral work: serving as youth director at Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church in Edmond.

In 2004, she volunteered with Hotdogs for the Homeless, a ministry started by Rick and Susan Swyden, parishioners of Saint Joseph Old Cathedral in Oklahoma City.

"I went with them to hand out hotdogs on a Sunday to try it out," Sister BJ said. "I loved it."

Although she enjoyed her time volunteering with Hotdogs for the Homeless, she wanted to do more.

"I began to think, 'Wouldn't it be nice to have a place where I could just have coffee with them and get to know them?'"

In 2006, a friend at Saint John the Baptist Catholic Church, Aaron Scott, called her with an opportunity. Scott had plans to open a coffee shop on Fourth Street downtown, but it became clear that the business plan wasn't going to work out although he had already paid the year's lease. He offered the building to Sister BJ.

"That's what got me started at Sister BJ's Pantry," she said.

The first day 12 people arrived at the little building for coffee and some food. And they kept coming, typically more than the week before. Currently, the pantry serves more than 300 every weekend.

With help from volunteers and the Eagle Scouts, the courtyard next to the pantry was transformed into a garden with picnic tables and a statue of the Blessed Mother. It's a favorite spot for her homeless friends to enjoy some respite.

"Sometimes I see someone kneeling before the statue of Mary," she said. "It's very moving to see."

Currently, the pantry serves hundreds of homeless each weekend. About 40 to 50 low-income families are helped with groceries each week. The Order of Malta fields all volunteer work at the pantry on Sundays. Many volunteers on Fridays and Saturdays are from area Catholic parishes and other churches, including Saint Elijah's Orthodox Church, which has been a major contributor to the pantry since it began.

A foot clinic, medical clinic, clothing racks and mobile pantry are among the many other corporal works of mercy that the pantry provides.

Four years ago, Sister BJ coordinated with a mortuary and Resurrection Cemetery on Northwest Expressway in Oklahoma City to inter unclaimed cremains. Sister purchased a crypt at Resurrection and Branden Seid, director of the cemetery, installed shelves so that the cremains of up to 300 people could be interred in it.

Each year since 2022, they gather unclaimed cremains to lay them to rest at Resurrection Memorial Cemetery on All Souls Day, following a Mass at the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows and a procession. With this year's Mass, 280 will have been interred.

"I will continue to bury all the unclaimed cremains in the city each year until all have been properly laid to rest," she said.

Sister BJ has found her experience with business in the secular world has helped her with managing the pantry and also with her administrative duties as superior of the convent. However, her real strength for all that she does, she said, comes from the Lord.

"It's all grace," she said. "God's grace provides everything you need."

Throughout the 20 years of service, Sister BJ and her volunteers have seen God's provision over and over, for physical and spiritual needs.

"If we need it and God wants us to have it, he will provide it," she said.

Despite a lengthy to-do list, Sister BJ continues to make time for Adoration and to attend daily Mass. As a religious Sister, she has set times that she prays with her community, and she also dedicates an hour of each day to contemplation.



Sr. BJ speaks with her homeless friends at the doorway of the pantry. Being present to each person is a part of the mission of the pantry, she said. *Photo Emily Woodham/ Sooner Catholic.*

"Sometimes my hour of prayer has to wait until the evening, but I need that time with the Lord," she said.

Although she is honored to be inducted into the Oklahoma Women's Hall of Fame, she insists that she could not accomplish anything without God's grace and her volunteers.

"I'm really more of a visionary. My volunteers are the ones who work so hard and do so much," she said.

Although Sister BJ does not have a lack of volunteers, she welcomes anyone who wants to help. For more information about opportunities to contribute, volunteer or attend the All Souls Day Mass at Resurrection Cemetery, visit srbjpantry.org.

Sister BJ also takes to heart a quote from the founder of the Discalced Carmelites and Doctor of the Church, Saint Teresa of Avila and believes it is a message for all women, religious or not: "Christ has no body now but mine. He prays in me, works in me, looks through my eyes, speaks through my words, works through my hands, walks with my feet and loves with me here."

Emily Woodham is a freelance writer for the Sooner Catholic.