

## Let Us Pursue Mutual Upbuilding



### Christopher News Notes

*“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”*

*—Romans 14:19*

**I**N HIS LETTER TO THE ROMANS, St. Paul encourages Christians in the fledgling communities to work together. It was a time in the early Church when there was disagreement on whether Jewish or Gentile laws should be followed. St. Paul wanted the focus to remain on the important things: loving Christ and loving our neighbors. The wisdom of this first-century letter echoes to this day.

It can be easy to get caught up in our own priorities or preferences. But when we work together—each adding our own gifts, supporting one another, and building each other up—the ripples of that goodness spread farther than we realize, changing the hearts of others and ourselves.

## An Unexpected Stop Along ‘The Way’

The famous Camino de Santiago, often called “The Way of St. James,” is an ancient Christian pilgrimage trail in Spain, traveled by thousands each year. With routes that stretch across the country, pilgrims walk a journey that ends at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, where St. James is believed to be buried. Along the way, participants find hospitality, a deepened spirituality, and unexpected friendships. For one group in 2020, reliance on those friendships and hospitality took on a whole new meaning. Their story was highlighted in the news source *COPE*.

When Spain declared a state of emergency on March 14th due to COVID-19, a lockdown brought the country to a standstill. A group of Camino travelers from Italy, Great Britain, Germany, and Holland, who had not met each other before their pilgrimage, suddenly found themselves stuck in a small town on the outskirts of Salamanca. With only the minimum clothing and supplies (because pilgrims rely on hostels along the well-trodden paths for food and lodging), they were at the mercy of strangers.

That’s where they met Father Blas Rodriguez, a priest who runs a hostel for Camino travelers. He immediately sought to help them, easing their troubled minds and building a community out of this unlikely group over the next 70 days. To pass the time and contribute their gifts, these pilgrims undertook several projects that needed completing around the hostel and on the Camino. They made birdhouses and beehives, decorated and assisted anywhere they could, building one another up and leaning on their faith to get them through a difficult time. Father Blas said, “Everyone carries out the tasks they like best. One man is a carpenter, so

## Nuns and Brides Support Each Other

In central Italy, in the Monastery of St. Rita of Cascia, a group of nuns has carried on a tradition for more than 70 years. For brides who cannot afford a wedding dress, the monastery has a collection that are “loaned” out, without any expectation of return. Though the nuns have taken a vow of celibacy and obedience to their order, they use this outreach to lift up the vocation of marriage, building up the Christian community in their town and beyond.

Highlighted in an article on *Aleteia*, the monastery receives 10 dresses a month from tailors and women donating gently used ones. Some of the nuns, such as Sister Maria Laura, use their skills as seamstresses to repair and beautify the dresses. Brides can come and try on the dresses in a private space, and can borrow any one they choose. If they keep it, many will make a free will offering. Sister Maria explains that wives who come to leave their wedding dresses are, along with the practical gesture, also making a spiritual act of trust and supplication. They are entrusting to the care of St. Rita the brave and sometimes difficult journey of their vocation to marriage.

he’s doing carpentry; another is a plumber, so he’s helping with plumbing...Providence is taking care of us.”

When the lockdown lifted, some went back to their home countries, while others completed the pilgrimage. None forgot about the bonds formed and the experiences shared among their small, impromptu, and diverse Christian community. Of the group, Father Blas said, “This is a little Pentecost: speaking in different languages, we all understand each other because what matters is good will and the desire for everyone to do the best they can, a disposition they have at all times.”

## ‘Lend a Hammer and a Hand’

When *Today Show* producer Jared Crawford was a child, his parents, Jack and Mary, moved their family from the urban borough of Queens, New York, to the more rural Putnam County. Their house was across an embankment from their driveway, which became a problem when Mary was diagnosed with an aggressive form of spinal cancer. Surgery saved her life for a while, but it left her in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the neck down.

Writing on the *Today Show’s* website, Jared recalled, “One of the biggest problems for my father was simply getting my mother in and out of

the house for medical appointments. In order to bring her anywhere, he needed to carry her out the door, up the steep footpath through the trees, and into the car waiting in the driveway.”

Jack knew this situation was unsustainable, so he devised a plan to build a bridge that would span the yard and provide a ramp to get Mary’s wheelchair from the house to the car and vice versa. The only thing stopping him was resources, but he came up with an idea. Jared explained, “He hired a small team of contractors for the job, but money was tight, and he needed more help. So, he printed up fliers that said something like, ‘Lend a hammer and a hand,’ and went around our community stuffing them into mailboxes. It was an open call to neighbors we barely knew for help building this bridge. And it worked.”

The neighbors came, men and women with tools and big hearts. Over one weekend, they constructed the 85-foot bridge, which Mary used during the final three years of her life. The bridge served as a beautiful reminder of the time a community came together to help a group of strangers in need.

## Connecting Gold Star Children

It’s estimated that 20,000 American children lost their fathers in the Vietnam War. To make matters

worse, these kids had no way of finding and connecting with each other at the time, which would have allowed them to bond with those who understood their pain. Tony Cordero became one of those children at age four in 1965, when his dad, Air Force Major William E. Cordero, died during a mission. It wasn't until 1989, when Tony was already an adult, that he decided to cofound an organization that would bring together the Gold Star children of Vietnam. He named the group "Sons and Daughters in Touch" (SDIT).

During an interview with The Christophers, Cordero recalled, "When we gathered for the first time [on] Father's Day 1992, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial [in Washington, D.C.], we had hundreds of sons and daughters from all over the country who could look at each other and say, 'I know what your life was like. You know what my life was like...Finally I'm able to stand here at the Wall with people who understand my story.'"

In 2003, 50 members of SDIT traveled to Vietnam to visit the sites where their fathers were killed. The experience was healing for everyone. Now, more than 30 years later, SDIT has grown and become a voice for Gold Star families from all wars. Cordero concluded, "To look at the impact that this organization has had on the lives of so many people—when in their darkest moments of despair, if they need a friend, they can simply go to [SDIT.org or] our private Facebook page and ask a question or start talking to people—that gives them comfort."



**"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."**

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## An Unexpected Support Group

With a focus on becoming a professional boxer after he graduated high school, Rehan Staton of Bowie, Maryland, didn't put much effort into earning good grades. An injury, however, ended his hopes of a boxing career just as he was finishing up 12th grade. The teen applied to colleges in a hurry, but was rejected by each one, so he got a job as a sanitation worker.

Rehan's coworkers, who were all formerly incarcerated, noticed how intelligent he was and encouraged him to go back to school. They built up his confidence, helping Rehan see his talent and potential. He told *CNN*, "It was the first time in my life people were lifting me up for the sake of lifting me up and not because I was good at sports."

Brent Bates, whose family owns the sanitation company for which Rehan worked, took the young man under his wing after hearing great things about him. Bates brought Rehan to Bowie State University to meet a professor. That professor was so impressed by Rehan that he appealed to the admissions board on his behalf. Rehan was accepted and began his undergrad studies later that year, earning a 4.0 GPA. Two years later, he transferred to the University of Maryland, graduating with his bachelor's degree. From there, he went on to attend Harvard Law School—all because others saw potential in him that he didn't see in himself.

"Throughout my entire life...all the people in my life who I was supposed to look up to were the ones who always downplayed me and made me feel bad about myself," Rehan said. "I had to go to the 'bottom' of the social hierarchy—that's to say formerly incarcerated sanitation workers—in order to be uplifted."

*"One measure of your success will be the degree to which you build up others who work with you. While building up others, you will build up yourself."*

—James E. Casey, American businessman