

## THE SEARCH

OPENS A CHANNEL FOR GRACE IN A PARISH

***“The Lord has good things in store for us; there will be awesome graces that are coming.”***

**Monsignor John Cihak**

Pastor, Christ the King Parish, Milwaukie, OR

Julie Onderko, the director of evangelization at Christ the King Parish in Milwaukie, Oregon, had been “on the lookout” for a parishwide evangelization program for two years. She felt it should include having people get together to share a meal and watch a video, followed by a “nonjudgmental kind of discussion.”

When she watched the promos for the Augustine Institute’s *THE SEARCH*, Onderko said she “just knew this was it.”

The timing seemed like it couldn’t have been worse. The country was in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, ruling out all but family meal gatherings. Most groups would have to meet virtually. With Christ the King’s subscription to FORMED, however, parishioners could access the program’s seven sessions on their phones, computers, or televisions.

Onderko presented the program to her pastor, Monsignor John Cihak, who was enthusiastic. The two thought that a January launch would give them time to figure out all the logistics.

But as Onderko later reflected: “COVID doesn’t determine what we do; God determines what we do.”

In the midst of a mid-July “downness” that she sensed in members of the parish staff and church volunteers, Onderko was praying intently in the parish chapel. She felt the Lord was telling her, “No, now. Don’t wait. Go now.”



***“That relationship of people growing together and asking questions builds a bond. That’s part of THE SEARCH’s recipe for success.”***



Julie Onderko

Thus began what Onderko called “a scramble” to get the program launched at the end of September. She drafted a letter for the pastor to send to all ministry heads, asking them to serve as virtual- or in-person group leaders. She took advantage of a free online sign-up program to organize and fill the groups. The pastor promoted the program in his homilies, regular Tuesday talks, and in a video created for the parish website.

Monsignor Cihak invited his parishioners to come on “a parish journey to consider the deep questions of life and human existence.” He spoke to them of his confidence that the program would provide “a great spiritual benefit” to the parish, deepening its members’ engagement with life, their walks in faith, and their connections with each other and the parish.

“There’s nothing like it in the Catholic world right now,” Monsignor Cihak said. “I want everyone to be a part of it.”

Despite a hurried launch in the middle of a global pandemic, between 350 and 400 people out of the parish’s 1,246 families joined groups to watch *THE SEARCH* and participate in discussions.

“*THE SEARCH* is very entertaining and so beautifully done,” said Onderko, who has heard positive reactions from a wide range of groups—from high schoolers who “are eating it up” to the woman in her own small group who found a way to lure in her reluctant family members.

While viewing *THE SEARCH*, the woman thought that “anyone would want to watch it,” but she was having no success in getting her husband or her children to join her. When her adult daughter came home from work with a sore neck one day, the woman saw her chance. She offered to rub her daughter’s neck and cued up the first video of *The Search* on the family’s TV. Soon, the woman’s husband came in to watch with his wife and daughter.

“Now, they’re watching [all the videos],” she told Onderko.

Christ the King’s success with *THE SEARCH* led to organizing a retreat after week five. Two of the parish’s priests, a deacon, and a laywoman gave talks on the Holy Spirit, Reconciliation, Jesus in the Eucharist, and the power of personal prayer. The retreat included Eucharistic Adoration and the opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The final two weeks of the seven-week program followed, “leading up to the doorstep of Advent,” Onderko said. The parish has already ordered the discussion guides for a second offering of *THE SEARCH* during Lent.

“It’s going to be like a wave that just gains momentum,” Onderko said.



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