

Crisis of faith leads Sandy Prather to Christian leadership

For Sandy Prather, it took a crisis to deepen her faith.

Prather, a long-time retreat director, writer and facilitator, has been named this year's recipient of the Kevin Carr Leadership Award from Newman Theological College. The award, named for the first layperson to serve as president of the college, recognizes individuals for outstanding Christian leadership.

It may be bit ironic that Prather would receive this award. She grew up in a deeply Catholic household, but the death of her father when she was 16 – and five years later her brother's death in a car accident – led her away.

"It led me to abandon the faith. How could God cause such as agony and pain?" Prather said.

"But what I found was that God doesn't cause suffering. He's in it. He is accompanying us to give us grace and love. It took me 10 years to come back."

In that time, Prather slowly started attending Mass again. She said her own questions of faith led her to study at Newman Theological College, where she would earn a master's degree in theology.

Until she began studying at Newman, Prather said she "had a child-like faith. It was very immature and didn't reflect Church teaching or the understanding of God. But now I hope I can bring the joy of the Gospel. It is good news and it's foundational. God's promise is the resurrection. It's new life."

Prather's faith, and sharing it with others, would become central to her life.

She served for 21 years as executive director of Star of the North Retreat Centre in St. Albert before retiring in 2012. She is in demand locally, nationally and internationally for teaching and leading retreats, seminars and workshops.

Prather is the author of "Breaking Open the Ordinary," a monthly column in the Prairie Messenger, and she also contributes reflections to the Living With Christ missalette.

She also serves as provincial animator of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate Lacombe Associates, and in 2009 was named an Honorary Oblate for her dedication and service with the OMI at various levels of leadership and ministry.

"Sandy has a way of reaching out not only to Roman Catholics but to the

Christian community in a quality way,” said Greg Bounds, who nominated Sandy for the Carr Award and has known Prather for years through the Star of the North Retreat and the Oblates.

“She doesn’t isolate from the community. She does her work in the public realm and she continues to do that in a multi-faith, secular society. I’ve never seen her have an ‘off day.’ I know we all have them, but she brings positive energy to any group that she’s involved with.”

Prather said she was “stunned and humbled” to find out she is this year’s Carr Award winner, and it’s especially significant for her that the award recognizes the laity.

“Lay people are on the frontlines of evangelization. We are the Church. We are the dynamic body of Christ,” she said. “We live our spirituality in the marketplace and the institutional Church supports the body of Christ in the world.”

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Prather and her husband, Bob, have four children and 10 grandchildren. They live in Sherwood Park, where they are members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

So, what’s next for her?

“I’m not sure. But I’ve always believed that when God calls me to something, I say ‘Yes.’ That’s what led me to Newman, to the Star of the North, to the Oblates. I’m going to continue to do that.”

Prather will be honoured at the 14th Annual Kevin Carr Christian Leadership Award Luncheon on Oct. 25 at Santa Maria Goretti Hall in Edmonton. Tickets will be available through Newman Theological College in September.