

## Prather “honoured, embarrassed and humbled” to receive Christian Leadership award

If Sandy Prather has any advice for the contemporary Christian, it might be this: Say yes, and then figure out how you’re going to do it.

That saying, rooted in an old German proverb, became a guiding principle for Prather after an Oblate mentor used it to persuade her to lead a five-day retreat for 60 Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate priests and brothers – something she had never done before. She ended up agreeing and headed into uncharted territory.

But Prather says navigating the unknown – and getting lost along the way – has been typical of her life and career, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

The longtime retreat director, facilitator and teacher was recently honoured by Newman Theological College with the 2017 Kevin Carr Christian Leadership Award. In an acceptance speech peppered with humility and humour, she noted that she is notorious for being “directionally impaired.”

“I can and do get lost frequently, even going to places I’ve been to before,” she admitted to a luncheon crowd on Oct. 25. “So I’m bemused, and that’s why I find it ironic that it’s a leadership award. I never want to lead, because I’m pretty good at following.”

Prather said she has come to realize that many “guiding stars” were placed in her path just when she needed them most.

“I think I actually have GPS – God’s Providential Support,” she said. “Corny but true. I was shown a path. I have been led for all my life; I just didn’t know it for most of the time. It was often in that cloud of unknowing that the mystics talk about, and it was often just one step, one foot in front of the other, one footstep at a time. And apparently, that gets you somewhere!

“Kind of like a real GPS though, you only see the next turn ahead, you still make the wrong turns and get lost, and you hear a whole lot of ‘Recalculating,’ ‘Recalculating.’”



Prather continues to work as a retreat leader, facilitator, and writer, and she also serves as Provincial Animator for Oblate Associates for OMI Lacombe Canada.

Prather's faith story began in young adulthood, when she wandered for several years in what she called a spiritual desert that was becoming increasingly intolerable. She credited her cousin Mary Ellen for being "that initial guiding star, who brought me out of that spiritual desert by reintroducing me to a God that I had abandoned and whom I thought I had lost forever."

She knew she had a hunger that had to be sated, but at the same time was terrified at what she might find. When Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish offered a short course sponsored by Newman Theological College, she decided to sneak in and sit at the back, hoping no one would notice.

"And I was hooked. Because I heard in that class something that spoke directly to my hungry heart and my searching mind. And so I went back the next week, and again I heard something that touched me and moved me to tears, and I stayed – I eventually did sign up and pay – because I heard truly for the first time the good news of the Gospel and of our God. And I thought, I want to know more of this."

After that, she decided to take some theology courses at St. Joseph's College as options for her Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Alberta.

"Many of the professors were Newman professors. It was the same thing, good news, and everything my heart hungered for. What I realized was that bad theology can kill you, can kill your soul and your spirit. Good theology can be life-giving for your soul and spirit, and I was being given life."

She went on pursue a master's degree in theology at Newman, while raising a family and working part-time. She had no idea whether it would ever help her find a job. As she said to her husband Bob, "If I can't get a job in the Church, I'll go back to being a waitress, but I'll be a real good waitress because I have all this theology!"

As it turned out, she didn't have to. She credits her Newman education for changing her life and her career.

"In another time and another place, as a woman I would not have been allowed to study theology. But it was at Newman, with those gifted (professors) ... that's where everything broke open," she said. "I feel I have as good a grounding as from any of the fancy theological schools all over the world. I feel solid in what I learned at Newman.

"Pope Francis says that today more than ever we need an educated laity to take their proper place in the Church, and I think this award continues to speak to that vision. We need to continue to call forth and train lay men and women to take their place in the Church."

A call out of the blue one day led to Prather's accepting a position as executive director at Star of the North, the Oblate retreat centre in St. Albert, where she served for 21 years.

“The Star became my rooftop, a place to proclaim the Lord and good news,” she said. “And the invitations to lead retreats, to offer programs, to facilitate days, every one of them was an entry into unknown territory, where I’ve always felt that I was wandering and lost. None of it would have happened without the Oblates ... because it was the Oblates who kept calling me into another unknown territory, and then gave me the guidance and support to be able to go there.

“The Oblates, with their spirituality and ecclesiology of inclusiveness, of welcome, of gentleness, of compassion, and their empowerment of women in the Church, they have been the guides, the support for the entire journey.”

Prather continues to work as a retreat leader, facilitator, and writer, and she also serves as Provincial Animator for Oblate Associates for OMI Lacombe Canada.

She said she was honoured, embarrassed and humbled to receive the Christian leadership award, which is named for Newman’s first lay president, Kevin Carr.

“If you only knew how often I am lost and uncertain and wandering and unable to guide or lead anybody anywhere – but if by some amazing grace, people have found something of Christ in what I have said or what I have done or where I have been, if some semblance of God has touched their lives, then all I can say is, God is good, all the time.”