

Discovering & Following the Path the Lord has for You  
By: Sherri MacPhail

Good morning, Sr. Loreto, faculty, staff, friends & family, student body, and of course, members of the National Honor Society. Thank you so much for inviting me here today, it is a great honor and blessing to address today's youth.

When I was asked to be your guest speaker, I immediately began praying and reflecting about what message I would share here today, one question kept coming back to me, "What is the one best lesson that I've learned so far in my life?" Well, I've learned several things to be sure, but there is one that has topped them all, and has probably been the most valuable to me, even to this day. It is the one that took me several years to learn, put me through many different struggles, but probably could not have been learned without making the life choices that we are all called to make. So what is that lesson? Well, if there was only one thing I could pass on to you, it would be this; that the most important path you can take in life, is the one that the Lord has for you.

I know, some of you are probably thinking, "Well, duh." And, for the most part, you are correct. It seems like a no-brainer, at first glance. However, when you dig a little deeper, and apply it to your life, it may become a bit more complex. I too have stood/sat where you are. I was an Academy girl as well as a member of the National Honor Society. For all intents and purposes, I was a pretty good person. Above average student, fairly popular with great friends

(many of whom I still have today), had a handsome boyfriend, volunteered in the community, was honest, trustworthy, and a good Catholic who always went to Mass on Sunday, the list goes on & on. I was moving toward graduation, and was very much looking forward to College, as I'm sure many of you are as well. Life was good, and I wanted to be a good and successful person.

As graduation approached, I remembered several people asking me, "So what do you want to do with your life?" which was fairly reminiscent of what we are usually asked as children, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" No doubt that you've probably been posed with that same question. It sets your mind to wandering, and creatively thinking about all the possibilities one could choose. However, what I didn't realize at the time was that it didn't really incorporate any thought to the life that God wanted for me. No one ever asked me, "What do you feel the Lord is calling you to do with your life?" I mean, after all, He did give me my life, and He is the Divine Creator, weaving His tapestry through the ages. It would only make sense to ask Him where I fit into His grand plan. But no one ever asked me this question, so I didn't consider this question when making my list of what I wanted to do with my life.

On I went, merrily along my way, making choices and decisions I thought were best for me and my life. Besides, that's what grown ups do, right? I had my list, and things were going pretty well for quite a while. College was going great & I did great in college. High GPA, Honors student in my chosen field of Psychology, PEER

Educator on campus, manager of the women's tennis team, more friends than I knew what to do with, continued to have the same handsome boyfriend and things were going well with him. I was even selected as a delegate to represent my College for World Youth Day in Paris France. I thought I had done quite well for myself. Soon enough, I graduated and got married to that handsome high school sweetheart, like I always planned. I was living a charmed life. Everything I wanted for myself was coming true, and I couldn't have been happier, or at least that is what I thought.

I had the degree, the handsome husband, the job, things were rolling right along. Next on my list – baby. That was how it was suppose to work in my plan. Because that's how it works, right? Ask any kid; once you get married, you're supposed to have a baby. But, alas, after years, there was no baby. So, I moved to the next thing on my list – a home. It's the American dream, to be a home owner, right? So, I started looking around, but was getting frustrated that nothing seemed to be working out. Why was this happening to me? I had planned it all so well, why wasn't it working out? I was smart, talented, successful, what was wrong?

I knew it must have been because God was asking me to sacrifice, to prove I really deserved it. We learned all about it in school growing up and heard and saw it at Mass on Sunday. Okay, I told myself, I'm willing to sacrifice in order to prove to God that this is something I really want. So that's what I did, I sacrificed. But things kept going downhill. I hit another set back, I was laid off. And a little

while later, to make matters even worse, my relationship with my husband started going south & fast. Life was a mess. In my mind, things seemed to be falling apart while I was trying to keep it all together, even with my sacrifices. Instead of making progress toward my dreams, I seemed to be going backwards, and I couldn't figure out why.

In the course of 8 years, I went from being on top of the world, with my list of life plans and dreams, to being back at square one, not knowing what to do. Why? I didn't understand. I was desperate to save it all, I would do whatever I needed to in order to fix it, and not lose everything I had worked so hard to gain. So, on the advice of a dear friend, I started talking to a wonderful priest by the name of Fr. Michael, and I was convinced he was going to help me save the life I had created for myself. Over the course of time, he really helped me to identify what turned out to be my biggest problem – Me. The truth wasn't that God didn't want good things for me, or that I needed to sacrifice more to prove to God that I was worthy, it was more that I was trying to create a path for myself, without consulting God on if it was really what He wanted for me. I was spending so much time and energy trying to push, pull, drag, and force what I wanted, that I wasn't being open to the path God had for me.

I can see, looking back now, through the course of every day life, God was really working on me, little by little, and nudging me toward what He really wanted me to do. A good friend had given me a DVD by Fr. Robert Baron, called the Seven Deadly Sins & Seven Lively

Virtues. I was going along, enjoying his explanation of Dante's, Divine Comedy, until he hit the deadly sin of Sloth. I had heard about sloth before, but was struck by his description of it. Literally I was in tears, listening to him explain sloth as a laziness in seeking the mission that God has for us. That was me. I was dragging my feet. I had fallen prey to the sin of Sloth, all because I didn't know if I would like God's plan for my life. I was so use to what I had, and being in control of what I had created in my life that I didn't know if I could deal with letting God be in the drivers seat, planning my life for me.

On another occasion, I came upon the story of Jonah, while attending Mass, and was reminded of how, God will never give you a mission without giving you direction and support. In the case of Jonah, he was just too scared to do what God asked of him, because he knew it would be difficult. So he ran in the completely opposite direction and hid. He didn't think he could do what God was asking of him. He didn't trust all that God could accomplish through him, until he tried. But once he decided to give God's way a chance, a whole city was converted.

Again, I was attending a talk given by Scott Hahn at the Cathedral in Norwich. He shared a story about a little boy who worked hard to save up all these pennies. He treasured them because he had worked so hard to earn them. One day his father asked him for the pennies he was holding in his hands. Well, you can imagine, how much the son didn't want to part with his pennies. The father explained he had something to give the son, but he couldn't

receive it unless he put down the pennies. The son was torn, give up his pennies for what's behind door number 2? The whole time, the father really wanted to give his son hundred dollar bills because of how proud he was of him. But the son couldn't get them unless he let go of the pennies he had in his hands. All of a sudden a light went on in my head, "What are the pennies in my life that I needed to put down in order to receive the hundred dollar bills?"

So, all of these things were being revealed to me at different turns. I finally realized it was time to buckle down and start the real work of finding out what God wanted for me. I started with the basics. What's my vocation? We all have our own vocation. Some are called to the married life, some to the priesthood, some to a consecrated single life, and others to become a bride of Christ. But in general, we are all called to be Saints, how we get there is different for each of us. Some have great conversions, for instance, St. Paul or St. Augustine, while others live quiet lives of sacrifice and charity, like St. Therese of Liseux. I had so many doubts and questions in my mind. How was God to use me in His plan? What if I didn't like what God wanted for me? Could I give up all the things I'd worked so hard to put in place? It was a scary prospect. I confided in a dear friend about how scared I was to identify the pennies, and let go of them, I just didn't think I was strong enough to do it. She talked with me and gave me a book called, "Trustful Surrender to Divine Providence" and I learned so many things about the blessings that come when you trust in God, and His plan. I loved it so much, I bought several copies and gave one to everyone I knew that Christmas. To this day, it is an

anchor for me. I've got it highlighted and even have notes in the margins. I promise, if you read it, your life will never be the same.

It took a lot of soul searching, prayer and reflection. It wasn't easy but I had to make a choice – my way, or God's way. Well, my way didn't seem to be working out so great. And after reading that amazing book, I figured I'd give God's way a go. It was amazing the transformation that seemed to happen overnight. I didn't feel like I was dragging, pulling, pushing and forcing things in my life anymore. I was able to let go of those pennies in my life, deal with the consequences related to my selfish choices, including a divorce and annulment process, and waited, in faith, to receive the hundred dollar bills.

Well, I didn't realize how quickly God's plan for me would kick in! Those blessings were right around the corner, but I couldn't have had them, if I didn't let go & let God. I vowed to recommit my life to the service of God, and working toward doing His will, first and foremost. It's now the period in my life that I refer to as 'Divine Acceleration', because as soon as I put His will first, it was only a matter of time before He started putting His plan into motion in my life. Only a few short months after receiving my annulment, I was introduced to a truly good and holy man, Andrew, who would 9 months later become my husband. And a year after we were married we welcomed a precious gift from God, our baby girl, Linnea.

So, you might be asking yourself, “How did you know what was God’s will and how will I know I’m not just attributing my will to God?” Well, that’s a very good question. I wasn’t sure how I would know either, but funny thing about doing God’s will, He seems to reveal it to you and/or bring it to you. For me, I first started by praying a novena, for the really big decisions in my life, things like my vocation, so I would know I was at least on the right path. My personal favorite is to St. Therese, the one where you ask for a rose.

Then, you just have to look for what I like to think of it as “God’s fingerprints.” What are these? Well, whatever you touch has your fingerprints on it. Whatever God touches has His fingerprints on it. The fingerprints God uses are different for each of us. They’re different for everyone because God speaks to each of us in a way that we will recognize. For example, when I first met my now husband, Andrew, I was attending Catholic Underground for adoration with some friends. During the fellowship time after adoration, they picked him out of the crowd at random and practically dared me to go and talk to him. I can’t tell you how hard I tried to get out of it, but ultimately convinced myself I could do it by saying, “Well, it’s not like I’ll ever have to see him again.” Yup, God was laughing alright.

I wasn’t sure I was being called to a relationship with him. Okay, he was nice, and we seemed to hit it off, but I was skeptical, and no way was I going to settle for anything less than the best. So I prayed and cautiously proceeded. I did everything I was sure would

drive the wrong guy away. When talking on the phone I asked tough questions like, what's your stance on abortion and contraception. Can you define what you feel the role of a wife/husband is in a marriage? What are your thoughts on education of children? Tough questions to ask within the first week of meeting someone, right? But he was answering all the questions the way I would have answered them, and then he went and told me how refreshing it was to finally meet someone who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to make sure she's getting it. I was floored, and that for me was God's fingerprint.

A short time later, we both spent several weeks in prayer and fasting to discern if the Lord was calling us to be together, for a lifetime. When Andrew and I were prayerfully contemplating marriage, there were some very clear fingerprints that it was God's design for us to be together. For Andrew, it was the number 11. It's always held significant in his life, and 11 kept being revealed to him in different ways around important things. Most prominently when he went to consult with his parents about the fact he wanted to propose, but didn't have money for a ring. Well, his mom excused herself briefly and came back a short time later. She said she had Andrew's great grandmother's ring, and if he wanted to give it to me, they would love for me to have it. Well, guess how many stones the ring had? That's right, 11.

If you want to find God's fingerprints, you also have to reach for His hand. There is but one thing we can truly do in this life, and that

is to say “yes” to God. That’s how we say “yes:” we reach for His hand. When we reach for His hand, whatever pennies we are holding onto so much will have to fall out, and when He takes our hand he can fill it with those \$100 bills, which are the blessings beyond our imagination. God always wants good things for us, and He wouldn’t ask us to do anything He wouldn’t help us with. He gives each of us talents, and He wants us to use them, for His greater glory, not our own. All we need to do is pray to put our will in line with His.

To be sure, we all make mistakes in life, we’re human. Often times, we have to go through these mistakes, and the difficult times that follow, because it’s the only way we can learn the lessons we need to learn, in order to see God’s will for us, and be open to it. But take comfort in knowing, that even if you stray, once you are on the path that the Lord has for you, there is nothing that He can’t accomplish through you.

So, as you receive the praise and esteem native to membership in the National Honor Society and celebrate your past successes, set yourself up for future success, don’t delay in asking God what He wants you to do next. While the answer may surprise you, don’t fear, remember, He knows you and your every need. As it is written in Jeremiah, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’” Here’s to you, here’s to your success, and here’s to the God who gives us all these wonderful things. Thank you very much.