

A Reflection on Mentoring (an evolving ministry and passion)

From the Pastor's Desk

Release Date: Friday, May 22, 2026

In a recent article where I bid farewell to Father Daniel as our associate, I told you that he was 9th in a string of new priests that I have mentored since August of 2009. The actual number is 10. My first newly ordained priest was the former Father James Melnick. He was assigned to me when I transferred to St Raphael in October of 2009. He first went to Mexico for 10 weeks and I received him right before Christmas. He spent only 2 months with me in Springdale before we sent him to rehab. I will spare you the details, but he was my introduction to mentoring. It did not go well. Let me share with you the history of mentoring in our diocese, with a big focus on my mentoring style.

Before 2009, we really did not have mentors or mentoring pastors. The newly ordained were simply assigned where they were most needed whether they wanted the new guy or not. No attention was given to the personality of the pastor and what he could or could not offer the newly ordained priest. In the late 2000's I had a conversation with Monsignor Scott Friend as he was looking at a very large class of new priests in 2010's. We knew that the new generation of millennial priests would need special attention given their propensity to be anxious and insecure. We came up with a list of initial priests that could possibly mentor. My name was on that list, and it moved to the top of that list once I was assigned to St Raphael because I would need associates. He and I put down what we thought mentors should teach new priests. I knew as we were talking, that at some point I would have to design a manual for mentoring pastors on how to teach, inspire, care for, and walk with newly ordained priests. That document took about 8 years to write, as I developed my own set of skills mentoring the newly ordained. In some ways, I was an unwilling participant and did not see myself as a mentor. I had never even had an associate. I had no style that defined me. All I had was 24 years of priesthood and experience living as a priest. I also had a desire within me to see that our new priests live faithful lives as priests serving the people of God. *I think most of you know by now that my love language is service.*

After James Melnick left, my first successful newly ordained priest was Father Ruben ordained in 2010. What made mentoring hard for me was that I was mentoring a newly ordained priest in the largest parish in the diocese, while learning Spanish and working with a missionary priest from Mexico who only spoke Spanish and was my senior in both age and experience. Those days were stressful on me, and I aged from a young-looking guy in his 50's to a man in his 60's overnight.

During the early 2010's, as I was learning to mentor with priests like Father Alejandro Puello and Father Juan Guido, Monsignor Friend and I began to think about how to expand our pool of mentors and at the same time how to bring the new priests together for fraternity and formation. I finished my manuals on mentoring new priests and a guide for young priests transitioning to administrators. It was during this time that we placed our young priests into support groups, which they now do on their own.

Today we have about 5 or 6 trusted mentoring pastors, and we are testing even younger priests as mentors. There is a danger that the age difference is not significant, but so far, they are proving wise beyond their years.

This brings me back to my style of mentoring. First, I want to let all of you know that when I mentor a young priest, I am never wanting to make a mini-me. In fact, I am deliberate in allowing my associates to set their own direction. Also, I am not a guru of mentoring. I am simply Father John Connell, who mentors young priests. There have been about 3 different styles of mentoring during my 17 years of working with newly ordained priests. In the beginning I was learning how to mentor. So, I was a **mentor** and not so much a pastor, I tried many different methods of working with the new priest. Most of them were easy-going and were understanding when I made a mistake or two in my guidance. The second phase of mentoring began when I received two newly ordained priests at the same time. Fathers William Burmester and Ramses Mendieta were my first two newly ordained priests to arrive at the same time. I became a **mentoring pastor**. This required me to mentor with a hands-on approach, and I had to navigate the internal conflicts that sometimes occurred between the two young priests. The latest style started with the last three priests that were assigned to me, Father Jon Miskin, Father Omar Galvan, and Father Daniel Wendel. These guys were so young when I got them, they were the same age as my nieces and nephews, and they needed me to walk with them. I became a **mentoring father** to them rather than a mentoring pastor. This required a lot of listening, hand holding, and affirmation.

Each of these styles had advantages and disadvantages. The plain mentor lacked a pastoral heart to teach the newly ordained about service, but the mentor taught a lot about priestly ministry. The mentoring pastor could teach them about what they needed to do as pastor and the mentor could show them the best way but often done without compassion.

The mentoring father did everything with a father's heart; teaching and showing the young priest how to live as a priest and how to pastor people. My young associates appreciated this style the most and it was the easiest method for them to learn because the father in me tried to

alleviate the anxiety within them. It was also natural for me to be a father to them. The downside is I spoiled them too much.

Now, I am at a crossroad. In a few weeks I will receive my 2nd newly ordained priest here at St Joseph. My 10th (or 11th) in my role as mentor. For me, it was my passion. However, I sense my style of mentoring is going to evolve again. After all, the future Father Duwan is 40 years my junior. My reasoning is complicated. Those who I mentored, trained, cared for, taught, walked with, and sent forth have given me so much. It is a joy to see them now as pastors in our diocese ministering to the people of God. To be honest, they have given me so much more than I have given them. But as any good mentor would tell you, no matter what your style, if you care for your mentee, there are wonderful joyful moments in mentoring but some extremely painful times. I have experienced both.

Mentoring for me, right now, has lost its shine. I am leaving my options open on how to work with the next few that come along, but it will be time itself that will tell me how to work with them. What interests me most in the mentoring field is working with and training our younger clergy on how to mentor. I want to help them avoid some of the problems I met. Theirs is the future, mine is the past.

Pray for me as I take on yet another new priest. I only want him to love the Church and the people he will serve. Pray for Dc Duwan in his final weeks before ordination. May our Lord bless all 5 of these soon to be new priests and their mentoring pastors, Monsignor Scott Friend, Father John Antony, Father William Burmester (who I mentored), Father Daniel Velasco, and myself. May our Lord give us the ability to inspire them to live out their priesthood to the fullest.

St Joseph pray for us.

Father John