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12 Catholic women under 40 making a difference

Zoe Ryan | Jul. 2, 2012

(Dreamstime/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

To highlight the work of young women in the church, we asked contributors and readers to nominate Catholic women in the U.S. under the age of 40 whose work has greatly impressed them. Here are 12 women our judges selected that you may not have heard of, but are making a difference in the church by the work they are doing.

Alison McCrary, 30

Religious sister, lawyer

Death sparked the flame of social justice in the life of Sr. Alison McCrary. She was providing litigation support on death penalty cases in Louisiana in 2006 when her eyes were opened to the interconnectedness of societal problems. When she looked at the people on death row, she saw how the systems -- education, judicial and so much more -- had failed them.

She started thinking: How are we called to help change these root causes of different poverties? And instead of waiting for an answer, she went out there and searched for it.

For several years, she worked in the slums of Brazil, focusing on racial justice and poverty issues. In New Orleans, she worked with groups on social justice law, police accountability, criminal justice reform, and human, civil and cultural rights. In 2010 she graduated from Loyola University?s College of Law in New Orleans. She did social justice movement work, coordinating legal teams all over the South to provide legal advice and representation to those practicing civil disobedience.

She grew up Methodist and Southern Baptist in Georgia. When she and Catholicism met in 2006, she knew that was the Christianity for her.

Through friends and professors, she became familiar with the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She started attending prayer gatherings and such with the sisters, and soon that tug on her heart to join their community encouraged her to take the leap.

She plans to profess her first vows in 2014.

Beth Knobbe, 39

Campus minister

At Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., students find a Catholic ?home? with Beth Knobbe and the staff at the Sheil Catholic Center.

She?s worked at Amate House in Chicago and in the business world (her undergrad was in math and secondary education). She?s been at Sheil for eight years.

In her work as a campus minister, Knobbe helps any of the 2,300 Catholic students that might walk through the door. If she?s not out attending a student?s violin recital or leading a silent retreat, she might use the paschal mystery as a way to help a student understand a friendship breakup, or prepare for the center?s annual international mission trip.

On an interreligious campus, questions about one?s faith always arise within students. It?s a good challenge for the center to help Catholic students understand and articulate their faith, Knobbe says.

She and the team at Sheil work with other campus groups, religious and not, carrying out projects such as essays for the ?This I Believe? organization, a project where students write about the core values that guide their lives.

As if caring after college students and the broader Catholic community that attends Mass at the center isn?t enough work, Knobbe is also an author. Her second and latest book, *Party of One: Living Single With Faith, Purpose, and Passion* (St. Anthony Messenger Press), explores the spirituality of being single. Knobbe herself is intentionally single.

She?s also a speaker on topics such as spirituality, young adults and the single life.

Anita Vincent, 39

Catechist

Education and motivation must pump through Anita Vincent?s veins.

Once a doctoral candidate/student of biochemistry, she chased her theology interest at the Aquinas Institute in

2008, studying Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

Vincent is from Bangalore, India, and came to the U.S. in 1996 to study. In India, she witnessed a lot of communal violence in the name of God. Maybe if people could see there?s some truth in these other faith traditions it would lead to peace, she thought. She teaches her two sons to embrace nonviolence and work toward peace.

She knows five languages, including Hebrew. She believes language is a cultural entity and that many times, translations can?t translate the cultural part. So when she wanted to study the Hebrew Scriptures, she learned Hebrew.

She first became interested in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in the early 2000s, after her first son was born and she was looking at school options. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is an approach to religious formation of children with its roots in the Bible, the liturgy and Montessori educational principles. The program to Vincent was like the shoe on Cinderella.

She currently runs a catechesis program at a Montessori school in Pennsylvania. She graduated in May with a Master of Arts in pastoral studies with Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as a specialization. She?s looking into a doctoral program.

In the future, she hopes the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd will be an approved model of learning by more people, especially by the Catholic church. She also wants to create a modified program to serve adults. And one day, she wants to take it to India.

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[1]**Go behind the scenes with NCR**
Staff writer Zoe Ryan discusses the selection process [1] for this story.
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Shelly Roder, 35
Volunteer coordinator

Shelly Roder is a people person. How can you not be, she asks, when you?re the youngest of seven kids? She

has five brothers, so she can relate to brothers -- which is good, because a lot of her friends are Capuchin Franciscans.

As a volunteer coordinator for the Midwest office of the Capuchin Franciscan Volunteer Corps, or ?Cap Corps,? Roder recruits, trains and places volunteers to serve in Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Nicaragua and Peru.

Before Cap Corps, Roder was a critical driving force for establishing and running the Gubbio Project in St. Boniface Church in San Francisco?s Tenderloin district. St. Boniface had just been renovated into a beautiful church, and many in the parish felt that keeping the doors closed was wrong. They sometimes needed a place of refuge; why couldn?t they share a place of refuge to those who had none?

The church, including Roder and St. Boniface?s pastor and well-known peace advocate Fr. Louis Vitale, started the Gubbio Project, with the aim of creating a safe place for the homeless in the community. It was there that Roder was given the title ?Guardian Angel of the Tenderloin? by those people who came for refuge.

Now, she?s a working mom in Milwaukee with a husband and two kids. The Capuchin brothers give her the love, support and kinship that any employee could want. It?s a job she loves, partly because it nourishes the soul, she grows as a human being, and she gets to walk with young volunteers as they experience the reality of the world.

Molly Linehan, 35
Master?s student

Retaining Catholic identity while interacting in a global world is important to Catholic schools. Don?t be surprised if Molly Linehan creates such a position that tackles the questions of: How do we as Catholics on a larger global scale interact with others? How do we understand ourselves as missionary people in a global society? Those questions are already in her mind as a scholar at Georgetown University in Washington studying Muslim-Christian relations.

She spent time working with the Catholic church in El Salvador after college, where thoughts on war and nonviolence stirred within her.

In 2002, she was awarded the Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholarship to study international relations and development in India, and it was in India where she had her first conversation with a young Muslim woman. The two, who still keep in touch, articulated together what it was to be a young woman in a religious faith. Linehan?s interest in Islam bloomed when she visited Pakistan. What she saw there and in India was the beauty of Islam, especially its own strong sense of social justice, a part of the religion that isn?t much talked about in the U.S. mainstream. When she returned to the U.S., she was amazed at the continuing demonization of Islam.

Linehan will sometimes speak on Muslim-Christian relations in campus ministry. Jesus witnessed nonviolence to us, she says. Nonviolence forces us to recognize the humanity in ?the other.?

Her expected graduation date is this December. The focus of her thesis is nonviolent conflict resolution within Islam, looking at different models of nonviolence and how it plays out today.

Neomi DeAnda, 37

Theologian

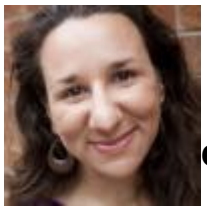
It takes communities to raise scholars, especially Latino/a scholars, says Neomi DeAnda. She knows: She?s one of the few Latina theologians in the U.S., let alone Latinos/as with a doctorate in the field.

She credits different groups for her success as a scholar, from her family to the Marianists at St. Mary University (where she did her undergraduate work) to the Hispanic Theological Initiative that funded and mentored part of her doctoral studies at Loyola University Chicago, to her parish of St. Pius X in El Paso, Texas, where Msgr. Arturo Bañuelas is pastor.

Latin American voices are pretty much nonexistent in early Latin American scholarship, she says. She is searching for at least one of those lost voices. Her research right now focuses on God images in the work of Sor María Anna Águeda de San Ignacio, a forgotten Mexican colonial-era religious woman.

DeAnda has always pondered how one becomes active in learning his or her baptismal call. As director of the Oscar Romero Scholars Program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, she oversees 18 scholars. She gets to explore what it means to be church, work with students, and look at theology from a female perspective -- all things she loves. Her fields of general study are constructive theologies, Latino/a theologies, interdisciplinary theological and pedagogical methodologies.

One of her colleagues commented that DeAnda?s retrieval and translation of the works of Águeda de San Ignacio has tremendous import for trajectories in Latino/a, Latin American, feminist and constructive theologies.



Christin Jezak, 29

Actress, playwright

Getting anyone, even your professor, interested in your thesis is no small feat, but Christin Jezak didn?t even have to try: Word spread and people clamored for it.

Jezak, a cradle Catholic and an actor since her youth, created ?Person-to-Person: A Mother Teresa Project? as the thesis for her master of arts in theater from Villanova University in Pennsylvania. The one-woman play is about seeing Christ in others. She?s performed the play all over the East Coast, at World Youth Day in Australia in 2007, and now that she lives in Los Angeles, she?ll perform it there. She had no idea it could gain this much popularity.

For the play, Jezak performs five different monologues from characters that are on the margins of society. She starts them out as stereotypes, then progresses to get to the heart of who they are. It?s called the ?Mother Teresa Project? because the characters are meant to reflect her values and the litany of people in which she saw Christ.

Like Mother Teresa, Jezak hopes to reach out to all sorts of people with this play. She wants to make theater with Catholic themes and influences accessible to the general public. Too many times people feel turned off by Catholic or Christian plays because of the approach. She wants to bridge the gap. She landed an agent in March,

which should put her closer to her goal.

She is in formation with the Pauline Cooperators, a Pauline lay association. Her outreach to teens and others around her and being a friend to all was commended by a Pauline sister.

Christine Riley, 36

City project coordinator

Working as project coordinator for the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services has been one of Christine Riley?s lives for the past 14 years. The other life this Master-of-Divinity-degree-holding 36-year-old has is her church life, which includes being director of religious education for her parish, among other things.

Before she attended Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, she wasn?t even interested in theology, but she was interested in being more involved in her parish. Her parish offered a workshop that discussed master of theology programs, so she went. After that, she was hooked. That education keeps her grounded at work and has taught her how to deal with people, she says.

Riley is not a 9-5 person. She is an every second person. She fills her time with work, ministry, volunteering, working on a number of different committees throughout the archdiocese, going to religious conferences, prayer or exercising.

One of her ministry mentors told her that Riley?s journey of losing weight has been a ministry because she has connected with so many people who were looking for help or support, especially through Facebook.

She wants to start her doctorate of ministry program in the fall of 2013 and she?s leaning toward a focus on weight loss and spirituality. Being strong in her Catholic faith has empowered her to be strong and dedicated in this part of her life, she says.

She continues to help people in all aspects of her life, including mentoring a young person at her parish to help with youth ministry.

Like she says, ?It doesn?t mean anything if you?re not helping anybody else along.?

Rachel Lustig, 34

Charitable executive

Maybe it was because she grew up with eight siblings, or maybe it was because her family instilled in her a strong sense of community and Catholic social teaching, or maybe it?s because her faith and volunteer work was so integral in youth. But for whatever reason, Rachel Lustig bucked the corporate world and, out of college, took her finance degree to work at an orphanage in Chile.

She returned to the U.S. and started at Catholic Charities USA in 2003 as the parish social ministry associate. She soon became the director, where she trained parish leaders with effective strategies to work for justice.

Now, she is senior vice president of mission and ministry, directing efforts to build mission-inspired leadership at Catholic Charities and its network to build a more just society. In 2006, Catholic Charities began its Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America. This is what Lustig?s made for. Things are changing, she says. How do we seize this moment and make Americans realize that it?s not OK for people to be in poverty?

To connect with people and be a part of the community, she is involved in committees outside of work, such as Friends of Guest House, a transition home in Alexandria, Va., for females released from prison.

Last year, with the O?Grady Institute at Catholic Charities, she had the opportunity to visit the Colosseum in Rome. She reflected on the days of the early Christians, and how in this environment of horrible persecution, Christians were building the faith.

In this environment of sobering economic and spiritual poverty, this is where Lustig and Catholic Charities are building solutions.

Heather Mizeur, 39

Politician

Even at a young age, Heather Mizeur knew that she wanted to serve others. She now serves as a delegate representing the 20th legislative district in the Maryland General Assembly, a position she?s held since 2007.

She has a passion for service, connected to her love for Christ and the social justice teachings of the church. As a teenager, she was respected by elders and given leadership roles as a eucharistic minister and lector, chair of the Altar and Rosary Society, and member of the parish council. She keeps a commitment to the Catholic beliefs of love, peace and social justice.

As a delegate, she has helped extend health coverage to thousands of low-income women and children, amputees and young adults. She has been a leading proponent to repeal Maryland?s death penalty and improve transitions for the incarcerated. Mizeur, herself a lesbian, was a leader in the debate over same-sex marriage in Maryland. In March, the bill to legalize same-sex marriage passed. For four years Mizeur was the domestic policy director for Sen. John Kerry, during which time she was the principal architect of his 2004 presidential campaign?s health care reform agenda.

Media such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation* and NPR have profiled her work.

?Build a church with open doors, not folded arms,? she says. ?A church as enlightened as its Creator. A church whose greatest commandment is to love thy neighbor as thyself.?

Karen Gargamelli, 30

Lawyer

Karen Gargamelli is not working for the weekend. Some people might do that to avoid career burnout, but she is motivated by her own personal joy and growth that comes from her faith.

Her devout Catholic family instilled in her a great respect for the preferential option for the poor. Religious sisters have been some of her role models, especially the Dominican sisters she lived with in Brooklyn, N.Y., as a volunteer for a year after college.

Gargamelli is a lawyer in New York. She works for Common Law, a nonprofit group that she and two of her friends from law school started in 2007 as an experiment, she says, to create a new model of lawyering and provide legal advice in an environment that wasn?t a big bureaucratic mess and gave more client interaction. They specialize in foreclosure prevention, give legal workshops weekly, and do a fair amount of organizing. They recently helped an 82-year-old woman in Brooklyn keep her house from foreclosing.

Most of their civil disobedience actions have been going into foreclosure auctions and singing a song in order to stop the auction. News of one of their singing actions made it onto ?The Rachel Maddow Show.?

Apart from her legal work, Gargamelli is also a part of the Catholic Worker community in New York. She?s held a shift at one of the houses for the past several years.

Leti Bueno, 35

Youth minister

About 150 teens are registered for youth ministry at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church in Austin, Texas, and Leti Bueno, who?s been a youth minister for the past 13 years, is still renewed by their energy and optimism.

As high school youth minister, Bueno hopes that the teens remember their time in youth ministry after they graduate, remembering to speak up for the voiceless and use their faith in making decisions.

She grew up in San Antonio in a ?rough neighborhood,? she says, although she was from a stable family. For youth in her community, the church was the center of their lives.

In Austin, she tries to make sure God is the center of the teens? lives, not just something to fit around soccer practice.

Bueno was chosen to participate in this year?s ?Called to Witness,? a trip for youth ministers cosponsored by Catholic Relief Services, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, and the National Association of Catholic Youth Ministry Leaders. On the trip, she observed the work of CRS in El Salvador.

Bueno describes her family as faith-filled, supportive and having a ?servant heart.? Wanting service to be an

important part of youth ministry, she takes the teens to sites such as Casa Marianella, a shelter in Austin for refugees, founded in 1986 and originally for those fleeing wars in Central America. Upon her first visit four years ago, Bueno was impressed with its mission, and the shelter was impressed with her. She subsequently became a board member and still is today.

[Zoe Ryan is an NCR staff writer. Her email address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

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