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Esperanza*



FIT SHEPHERDS

A Community of Disciples Growing in Faith and Fitness



FIT SHEPHERDS

COVER STORY

A Community of Disciples Growing in Faith and Fitness

I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS MORE CHALLENGING:

waking up at 5:40 a.m. every Saturday morning or dealing with the extremes in the weather — the hot days during the summer or the freezing days during the winter. But, in the end, I don't mind those minor obstacles because I look forward to Saturday mornings like a kid looks forward to Christmas.

The reason is simple: early Saturday mornings is when I work out with a group called Fit Shepherds.

STORY BY
CARLOS
BRICEÑO

This group has done wonders for my levels of physical, and spiritual, fitness. And, equally important, it has opened the door for me to belong to a community of guys who hold me accountable to be a better man and have inspired me in my faith journey.

These are guys I've laughed with, cried with, prayed with, shared with, sweated with and frozed with. We have become a community whose dedication to improving ourselves physically and spiritually has inspired me as a missionary disciple and transformed my rela-

tionship to my parish, Our Lady of Mercy in Aurora, where Fit Shepherds was born.

What is Fit Shepherds? It's a group, founded last April by Father Mark Bernhard, Our Lady of Mercy's dynamic and athletic parochial vicar, with the support and blessing by the parish's pastor, Father Don McLaughlin, that works out for about 45 minutes on the parish grounds and adjacent park district land every Saturday morning. The workouts are then followed by 15-20 minutes of faith sharing, which is then followed by a short period of fellowship.

To listen to some of these sessions, go to this site: catholicsportsandfitness.org/multiplying.html



This is another in a series of articles about Missionary Discipleship in response to Bishop R. Daniel Conlon's recent Pastoral Letter on the Need for Missionary Disciples in the Diocese. If you haven't done so yet, please read or listen to the bishop's pastoral letter in the November 2018 issue of the magazine by going to this site: www.dioceseofjoliet.org/bishop

My aim with this article is two-fold: to give you a deeper understanding of how this group has impacted some of the members' faith journeys, but also to encourage men in parishes across the diocese to consider forming a Fit Shep-

herds' group at their church, with their pastor's blessing, of course.

Except for the several times I've had family obligations or been sick, I've gone to every workout since Fit Shepherds started. That means I — and usually, on average, about

30-40 other guys — show up by the 7 a.m. start of the workout. These workouts are usually very tiring, very creative and can be modified so that, if you can't complete the workout leader's requirement for that weekend of, say, 150 squats, then you do as many as you can.

Each week, a different leader dreams up a grueling routine for us to follow, which means every week is never the same. What's involved includes variations on squats; burpees; shuttle runs; runs up a steep hill in back of the church, which the guys affectionately call "Purgatory Hill;" sit ups; push-ups; arm circles (which is often mocked by the guys, but is a favorite because of the ridicule factor); planks; bear crawls; mountain climbers; and so on. One creative leader even had us carry heavy wooden pallets as we jogged. Another had us use a gallon of water as weights.

The goal during these 45 minutes is to push our bodies and get a great workout in. However, these

workouts are not about egos inflating or competitive juices flowing. Instead, they are about building a brotherhood.

When I see other guys, who have also had a long week at work, wake up that early and are sweating just like me, I feel a camaraderie that

comes from belonging to a team that is on a mission.

When you hear the laughter, as the jokes start flying around, you know that joy is present. When you see several guys run back to run next to guys who are lagging at the end of a long run to keep those laggards company, you realize these guys care about each other.

When you know these guys are trying to get to know Christ more intimately, through sharing their thoughts on a Bible reading or praying for each other, I realized that this is a community of joyful Catholics on a mission together.

Community, in Latin, mean "shared together." We, as Church, need more of this. We need more joy. We need more sharing. We need more caring.

We also need more disciples.

And this word — disciple — is the key to what makes this group so necessary. Disciple means learner, and Father Mark, working in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, realized this when the seed of the idea for the group was planted

several years while he was a seminarian. Back then, he envisioned a group of men working out on the church grounds, leading them to learn how to be better men and to grow as disciples.

Last April, when praying about his homily for Mass during the weekend of April 22, Father Mark linked the Gospel reading on that Sunday — about Jesus declaring He is the Good Shepherd who is ready to lay down His life for the sheep, in order to protect them from the wolves — to the seed of the idea that was planted in him as a seminarian.

Here's part of what he said during that homily:

"There's a crisis of good men in our world today. The standards that society hold for men seems to keep getting lower and lower and lower. We, as a society, have bought into the mantra that men will be men, boys will be boys. ... There's a strong, strong narrative out there that lends to the idea that faith, religion, a relationship with Jesus — that's a woman thing. Raising kids in the faith, that's a mom thing. Taking kids to church, mom's job. ... This narrative that is so strong leads to the idea of thinking that it's ok for men to objectify women. ... This narrative lends to fatherless homes, or at least to being absent. ... A new narrative needs to be created. So what's the solution? I suggest that we work out together. ... Meet me next Saturday in the church parking lot at 7 o'clock to work out. Those of you who have played sports growing up know that there is a special bond that is formed together when you work out with others, especially with men. ... The goal is what? The goal is to write a new narrative. The goal is to transform the culture. To raise up better men for our society. To raise up better men for our families. Ultimately, to invite guys who are not of this fold to a life-changing encounter with Jesus."

The following Saturday morning, around 70 guys showed up. I was one of them. In the weeks that followed, he started asking guys to step up to lead the workouts and to lead the spiritual component at the end of the workouts.

Throughout all this, Father Mark's leadership resulted in a logo being created; t-shirts with the name and logo on it made and distributed

To find what some previous workouts have included, and also to find out more information about Fit Shepherds, go to: olmercy.com/fitshepherds



Father Mark Bernhard

To listen to the homily in its entirety, go to: soundcloud.com/user-316586154/2018-04-22-fr-mark-4th-sunday



FORMING SHEPHERDS, ONE WORKOUT AT A TIME

ABOUT FIT SHEPHERDS:

Fit Shepherds aims to have every man in our community be in the best physical and spiritual shape of their lives.

Fit Shepherds are formed through demanding workouts, fraternity, and discipleship.

WHY FIT SHEPHERDS?

“The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep” (John 10:11-13).

There is a crisis of good men in our world. Entrenched in our culture and society is a narrative that contributes to men living as a hireling, not a shepherd. The hireling undertakes menial work for little pay. He has little care for what he does. He is bored. Therefore, when the wolf comes, the hireling flees, abandoning the sheep. The sheep, without their leader, are forced to scatter and perish.

Fit Shepherds are men striving to model their lives after the Good Shepherd rather than the hireling. Fit Shepherds are tired and fed up with the narrative that encourages the man to scatter when life gets hard. We are men who strive to lay down our lives in a sacrificial way for our families and community.

Due to the strong narrative that lends to men being hirelings, a Fit Shepherd knows he can't do it alone. He needs brothers. He needs other men to go to battle with. He needs to know he has other men alongside him in the trenches — both during the workout and in the day-to-day grind. The wolf will come; his goal is to scatter and destroy. Will you be a hireling and flee, or a Fit Shepherd who sacrifices his life? Join us for a workout! Men of all physical levels are welcome!

WHO IS A FIT SHEPHERD?

Any man 14 years and older who wants to be better. To be in better shape; to be a better son; a better husband; a better father; a better brother; a better neighbor. A Fit Shepherd wants to model his life after the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. A Fit Shepherd not only wants this for himself, he wants this for his brother; he demands this of him.



among the guys; we stay connected through a Groupme app, which allows us to share information (if prayers are needed, for instance) or to share inspiration or if someone needs help; the workouts have expanded to include a half-hour session, followed by prayer, starting at 5:30 a.m. on Wednesday mornings, before the Fit Shepherds head off to work; we already have had a family-building event: a Mass was held last December after a workout that our families were invited to, and then after the Mass, the Fit Shepherds served a breakfast meal that we had prepared to all the families present.

Father Mark's intentions have been clear: to lead us to be healthier — spiritually and physically — but all as part of a tight-knit, but welcoming community of disciples.

He's taught us about *Lectio Divina* (Latin for "Divine Reading"), which is when you read a passage from Scripture several times and meditate upon it so that it becomes like prayer when you share your thoughts on it. He taught us to use a technique called WRAP, which stands for Write a Scripture verse or word that hits home to you; Reflect on what the text means to you; Apply what the word or text is saying to you in your life; and Pray by responding to God with praise, thanksgiving or a petition.

Another fruitful avenue for discipleship that has sprung up has been a relationship between the group and Daybreak, the homeless shelter run by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Joliet. One Fit Shepherd member is Pete Kinsella, Catholic Charities' senior development officer, who suggested to Father Mark that some of the men and their family members

could help prepare and serve meals during the first Sunday of every month. Since last September, Manuel Cordero, another Fit Shepherd, has been instrumental in organizing the group's volunteers to help serve at Daybreak.

Father Mark has seen the positive impact on the men at the parish.

"It's easy to roll over in today's culture and society," he said. "I see Fit Shepherds having brothers right by their side, saying to them, 'Dude, don't roll over. I'm tempted to roll over things, but here I am in the trenches with you.'

He's also seen a positive impact on himself.

"I have a bunch of number of Fit Shepherds in my phone that I text and receive support from," he said, which also strengthens him to not roll over because he's in the trenches, too.

He's seen guys step up since the group started and take on leadership roles at the parish — giving witness talks at Mass or becoming leaders for Alpha gatherings — which is one of the outcomes he was hoping for in forming the group.

"We're trying to be conscientious for the group to serve the community, building missionary disciples," Father Mark said. "A shepherd is a missionary disciple, and we want to launch them to be missionaries to transform the culture. We believe Fit Shepherds can do that." ■



TO WATCH

a short video about Fit Shepherds, go to <https://bit.ly/2lwGrie>.

TO LISTEN

to a podcast about the group, go to <https://bit.ly/2EoCKqR>.

TO INQUIRE

about Fit Shepherds, or to ask for help in starting a group at your parish, contact fitshepherds@gmail.com.



NOW THAT YOU HAVE SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THE GROUP, IT'S TIME TO READ DIRECTLY ABOUT THE KIND OF IMPACT THE GROUP HAS HAD ON THE MEN:



■ JOEY SHAMET, who is 18 years old:

In my life, I don't have many people I can look up to since my family has a lot of problems. I don't have those role models. Here, at Fit Shepherds, the majority are adults, and they're

great men I get to look up to. When I was younger, I didn't have people I could look up to. Now I do, and I'm trying to become a better man. I have guys I can look up to and see what a good man looks like.

■ MARK CRNICH: After you've gone through a strenuous workout with other men, it's much easier to sit down, catch your breath, and talk about God. You know that the guy sitting next to you after the workout has a certain level of dedication and toughness — as well as a love of God — and because of that, you can bare your soul a bit with that man. The dynamic at work in Fit Shepherds is very similar to being part of a sports team: respect must be earned through hard work.

But once it's earned, you develop a great deal of mutual respect and trust in the men on your team, and this frees up space to talk about faith, being

better men, and other important topics that would be hard to discuss merely in passing with another guy. So, the second way I've changed is growing in fellowship with the men of Our Lady of Mercy parish and then using that fellowship as a vehicle to grow in faith, both communally and personally.



Simply being around other men of faith — men whom I respect and admire — has in itself been a boon because it sends the message, "Hey, you're not the only one seeking the Lord. You're part of a community of seekers. And you'll help each other along the journey." Just like how you want to show up and participate in the physical aspect of a workout, you then start to want to deepen your faith to be able to more fully participate in the faith aspect of the group. The beautiful thing, though, is that you're not growing your faith in competition with anyone — rather, you're growing your faith in cooperation with everyone.



■ ERNESTO PACHECO:

Men are active, adventurous, physical, by nature, but we are also very cerebral by nature as well, and deep down we want that relationship with Him, but we don't want to ask anyone how to do

it. We want to figure it out on our own because it is Satan that wants to make us individuals (i.e., Diabolos = Scatterer), but then Jesus (Yeshua = Jesus = Savior = Gatherer) wants to unite us and embrace us so we can love one another like He loves us. That is what Fit Shepherds does, and it is powerful!

As a father, it has done a lot for me, so much that my six-year-old son sees how much I like it, and he had been on me for months for me to bring him to the workouts... So I did! I don't bring him every week, but I am very proud of him when he comes.

■ MAREK MOCARSKI: I haven't been a member of a gym or played any sports for a long time. It's been over 12 years. I got married, and then we had our first baby. Then it was work and then not enough money. And then not enough time. I prefer to watch TV or drink beer with my friends. I was always looking for an

“ YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE SEEKING THE LORD. YOU'RE PART OF A COMMUNITY OF SEEKERS. AND YOU'LL HELP EACH OTHER ALONG THE JOURNEY. ”



— MARK CRNICH



“WITH A GROUP LIKE THIS, YOU CAN ACHIEVE GREAT THINGS.”



excuse. I also gained some weight. It was time to do something about it.

I have to be honest with you, from the beginning [being part of Fit Shepherds] has been very hard. But when you see a passion, a commitment, the hard work that everyone puts into this, it inspires me.

Many times, I feel like I want to give up out there. But then I see Father Mark or some other Fit Shepherd running up to me, give me five, and say, “Hey, good job.” I just keep going. It’s amazing. ... After the whole week of work, after the struggles with life, with the struggle with everyday problems, I can’t wait until Saturday morning. I come here, and through hard work, exercise and fellowship, I leave all that baggage here. So when I leave Fit Shepherds, I feel great. I feel I can face another week.

With a group like this, you can achieve great things. After months of Fit Shepherds, I’m in better shape. But I also have grown up spiritually. I am closer to Jesus.



JIMMY CANNING: I’ve grown deeper in my appreciation for penance, for sacrifice and for offering up those sacrifices to Jesus and to Mary for some good in the world – that notion of, not intentional suffering, but taking any

kind of every day suffering and offering it up. Everyone here in Fit Shepherds is very intentional about that.

JOE SCHMITT: The biggest change in me has been the acknowledgement that I am putting more effort into my faith. It’s beginning to start to show in my family life. It’s beginning to show in how my kids are viewing church and God and their faith. I feel like since starting Fit Shepherds I’m slowly getting to the level that my wife is putting in her faith. I don’t think I’m there yet, but I have hope for what the future for what my faith will become.



PETE KINSELLA: [The group] was just what I was needing. The timing was perfect. Like many of us, there are times when I am working on growing my relationship with Jesus and then times when I am in a rut. Last year, right after Lent, I was in a rut. I was attending Mass, but there were times that I missed with no excuses. My prayer life was a bit stagnant. Then came Fit Shepherds. Since my first workout in May, the leadership, inspiration and support provided by Father Mark and the camaraderie with my Fit Shepherd brothers, my relationship with Jesus is growing. Mass attendance is now a priority again, and my prayer life has improved. I now teach 4th grade religious education at

Our Lady of Mercy and encouraged [others] to add service [serving meals at Daybreak, a homeless shelter] as a component of the Fit Shepherds’ ministry.



“MY PRAYER LIFE WAS A BIT STAGNANT.”

■ **JEFF GULLETT:**

I've gone to other men's workout groups in the early morning, and the thing that keeps me coming back to this one is the faith component. It's the fact that I'm not only trying to get physically fit and not only trying to work out, but I've got brothers who are helping me and pushing me along, but there's a love for the Lord. We are doing this for one another; we are doing this to glorify God. At the end, when we are all together and lift up prayers, and we share, that's what keeps me coming back.



■ **DAN MAXWELL:**

My involvement at Our Lady of Mercy was low prior to Fit Shepherds. We didn't regularly go to Mass. We didn't participate. It didn't feel like a community. Before, it was more of an obligation. It was something we did. We went to Mass and went about our days.



Now, I feel a part of something. I also realize I have [three] kids, and I have to be a good role model and be part of their spiritual growth, not just my own. ... I have always tried to live right, but now I have support to help out when things are struggling or challenging.

■ **STEVE MORES:** The group really gets your thought process going in your faith journey. [It reminds you that] you should have that private relationship with Jesus on your own. But hearing other guys talking about Jesus makes it more natural rather than a scary thing. I used

to be afraid to read the Bible on the airplane. I thought people were going to make fun of me. I don't care now. You start talking about it to people more, trying



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to share your faith, not in a Bible-beating type of way, but in a questioning way. “Are you Catholic or Christian? Tell me a little bit about your faith journey.” I have those conversations now, which I never used to have.

■ **CARL BERG, who**

is retired: I'm coming to church more, three days out of five week days. I'm here at the 8 a.m. Mass. Before Fit Shepherds, I just went to Sunday Mass. That was it. I hear other guys talk about their faith and how they've gotten better. Well, I need to get better too. One of the ways is I try to go to Mass as many mornings as I can.



■ **BRIAN KIBLER:**

As a dad, my daughters see me take the time to get up and go do this early on Saturday mornings and it's really reinforced to them that we need to have spiritual relationships with some accountability and spending time with some other folks in that environment to better ourselves. I encourage them to look for those kinds relationships.



■ **MATT PARCELS:** I'm not necessarily the most vocal person, and I'm not necessarily the most open person, but I have drawn so much from listening to others. And I have learned so much from Father Mark and from the thought-provoking and quiet silences [during the meditation period after a Bible passage has been read]. I've been able to apply that. He's given us Bible passages to read [after the workouts] and think about, and I find myself calming myself down, slowing life down a little bit, and reflecting on not just getting into the moment in a secular way, but in a religious, God-based Christian way, where I'm saying, “Come, Holy Spirit, deliver me some peace and some calm here.” It's helped in a lot when I feel a lot of anxiety and frustration stuck in traffic or whatever; I can feel a change. I definitely can feel a change.



“I DEFINITELY
CAN FEEL
A CHANGE.”



■ **MANUEL CORDERO, who coordinates Fit Shepherd volunteers at Daybreak, a homeless shelter:** My personal growth as a man comes down to the very definition of being a Fit Shepherd: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Joining Fit Shepherds has refocused my definition of what it

means to be a man — one that sacrifices for others. I feel I’ve become a more understanding person at work, a better husband and father at home and a better neighbor serving others.

■ **ALEX BAIER:** I’m in sales, and I have the same group of customers for a little over five years. I’ve probably been to dinner with this one guy [a client] over 25 times over five years. It’s always small talk.

[Alex decided to introduce a deeper subject, faith, based on the confidence of growing in faith as a Fit Shepherd, even though he didn’t know if the client was a Christian. It turns out he was.] We went down this path, talking about some of his beliefs and thoughts. We got the point where he took out a napkin, and I gave him a pen, and he was drawing his beliefs on the importance of prayer and God. [Before Fit Shepherds, Alex said he didn’t have the confidence to start a conversation like that, but now he does because of the faith-sharing that goes on after the workouts.]



“I REALIZE THAT I’M NOT ALONE IN THIS JOURNEY.”



■ **JORGE MURILLO:** As a man of faith, we have our ups and downs. When we share some of those Scripture passages [during the times when the group shares faith after a workout], I realize that I’m not alone in this journey, and I see how my faith is vital to me and my family, and I

see how it is vital to other people who are part of my community, and that helps me to know that I’m not alone — that we are trying to be better community members, better parents, better Christians, better husbands. I see that a lot of us try to do that, and it’s an encouragement.



■ **JESSE PERALES:** I’ve worked out my whole life, since I was a kid. After I got married, I put on 30 pounds. I work out four or five times a week, but I don’t push myself like I should. This group holds me accountable, and it

pushes me to another level. The fellowship has been amazing, just being around men of God — God soldiers I call them. Men that are an example, not just in fitness, but they’re beasts in life.

■ **JONATHAN O’BRIEN:** I never knew a single person [at church] prior to being part of this group, and now I have formed friends. I feel like this has given us a sense of community that we never had at Our Lady of Mercy.



■ **JOHN BAIBAK:** This morning Father Rocky on Relevant Radio said, “You cannot love what you do not know.” I look back on so much of my life, I expected something more from God without putting in the effort. I listened too much to the lies and myths the secular world had on our faith, without taking time to know the Truth. As a pew warmer, I expected it to come easy to me just by being present. Now, the more



I dive into the Catechism and Scripture, the more I love our faith. The rich history. The background on our beliefs. The trials, doubts, and tribulations the saints have gone through. The rock the church was founded on. God has always been there waiting for me to stop, come to know Him and love Him. ■

Mary's Squad Inspires Women through Faith and Fitness

INSPIRATION CAN BE A POWERFUL MOTIVATOR.

Just ask Juanita Pacheco and Elizabeth Vazquez, friends and parishioners at Our Lady of Mercy in Aurora.

Their husbands — Ernesto Pacheco and Jorge Murillo — are members of Fit Shepherds, and they would hear how much the men loved being part of the group.

"I felt like I was missing out," Elizabeth said, adding that she remembers wishing that she had that kind of community, along with a fitness element, with other women at the parish, "because when you have kids, you stop taking care of yourself as much as you should."

Several months after Fit Shepherds started last spring, Juanita and Elizabeth became inspired enough to start a female faith-and-fitness equivalent to Fit Shepherds — called Mary's Squad.

"I was searching for something to help me deepen my faith and to continue to strengthen and grow it," Juanita said.

They decided to hold the workouts on Saturday mornings, after the Fit Shepherds' workouts ended, so that any wives of Fit Shepherd members could hand their children off to their husbands, for them to watch the kids.

Sometimes, even some of their children participate.

"My youngest daughter likes to come and participate, and I love being able to share that with her," Juanita said. "She's nine years old."

Father Mark Bernhard, parochial vicar at Our Lady of Mercy and founder of Fit Shepherds, appreciates that the women were inspired

to start the group.

"I'm encouraged with the woman's component of workouts," he said. "I'm really excited with the community and fellowship and women growing in their faith through fitness that can take place with Mary's Squad."

One way the women share faith as a group during their workouts is to recite the rosary while walking along the Waubonsie Creek Trail near the parish grounds.

"I have always been shy about evangelizing," Elizabeth said. "It's not something I did growing up. It was different for me to walk around the park saying the rosary. It's so public, with people walking by and hearing it. Maybe that affected them that way, them hearing the rosary and seeing a group of women praying the rosary on a Saturday morning."

Another memory that impacted Elizabeth involved rocks.

"Women carry things that are heavy with them," she said. With that in mind, during one workout, the women searched for rocks, which represented whatever they felt was weighing them down. They prayed and reflected on these burdens, and then at the end of the workout, they dropped the rocks at the foot of a crucifix that had been placed at the top of the hill behind the church.

Elizabeth said, "Letting the rock go at the foot of the cross and letting the Lord deal with it made you feel lighter."



Mary's Squad has also incorporated a Catholic-inspired workout — Soul Core, which involves strengthening, stretching and functional movement with the prayers of the rosary.

In addition to the spiritual and physical aspects, another important part of the workouts is respect.

"There's no body shaming," Elizabeth said. "That's important because you don't see a lot of that in regular gyms or exercise groups. The point is not to body shame each other or make ourselves look a certain way, just being accepting of each other as we are. The focus is more on growing in our faith and exercising is an added bonus. As women, we want to focus on our femininity and our modesty and being a good mother. That's one of the reasons why we chose Mary's Squad. She is the ultimate mother, and we try to be like her so that we can get closer to our Lord." †

STORY BY
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