

Women of Influence

“Influencers” are very popular in our culture these days, and depending on one’s vantage point, that may or may not be a good thing. The term “influencer” has taken on a very commercial sense, as in, “the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with his or her audience.” It seems this sort of influencer has a vested interest in flexing such power, even if done so with full disclosure, in order to profit or gain recognition and power that comes with amassing even more “hits” on social media.

Ah, for the more original, less transactional form of “influencer”—someone who inspires, guides, and maybe even graces us by devoting herself, himself, primarily to our flourishing, in which she or he then finds joy and satisfaction. Someone for whom self-interest takes a back seat to self-offering. Someone who cares enough to make personal sacrifice on our behalf.

Marketplace influencers are in competition with one another as there is only so much “share” to go around. Spiritual influencers lead us to something beyond themselves; they are mediators of a message and a mystery that transcends any tension between “my good” versus “your good.” They point us by their very person, their beautiful bearing, to goods that are not depleted in being shared. Such goods are “common” in the sense of fostering community on a natural, social level, and communion on an elevated, eternal plane. They draw us closer to God and to others who willingly allow themselves to be influenced in similar ways.

Marketplace influencers can trigger wariness in accord with the old Roman maxim: “*caveat emptor*”—let the buyer beware. Spiritual influencers, in contrast, evoke trust, generosity, solidarity, charity, hope.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the exemplar of a spiritual influencer. In these weeks of September rolling into October, we process through what might be referred to as minor Marian celebrations (Mary’s Birthday, The Most Holy Name of Mary, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of the Rosary). We span the spectrum of Mary’s whole life, from the joy given Joachim and Anne at her birth, through the heart-piercing moments at Jesus’ side on Calvary, to the whole array of mysteries that encircle the mission and mystery of her Son. Mary hardly speaks in the Scriptures, but we do well to ponder what her traits were as child, bride, and Mom. How did she affect and move the people around her?

Were her parents spurred to greater observance in their own faith as they saw how their daughter was like a sponge for God’s word? Were her peers playing in the streets, going to synagogue, doing chores for their families or simply hanging out, moved to greater dignity and decency in their speech and attitudes toward one another? Were they inspired to greater devotion and prayer during the whole day beyond simply saying a quick word of thanks at meals? Did they pay greater attention in their appointed tasks that then allowed them to more fully relax when the day’s tasks were done—and not fall prey to foolish forms of entertainment that left them even more drained?

Mary tells the servants at Cana’s wedding feast, “Do whatever he tells you.” Remarkably, they listen to her, when they might have actually ignored her Son, for then he was pretty much a nobody to them. (Haven’t we all felt at some point like the waiter at our restaurant

table is either too busy or are outright ignoring us? But we don't quite possess Mary's same compelling influence.)

God the Father, in offering his Son through the mediation of Mary his mother to us, equips special people in our lives to become his influencers. Those who invoke Mary's intercession and aim to imitate her are given the grace to set aside competition and strive for communion rooted in charity and respect for the dignity that is God's prior gift to us. We resist the tendency to flex our own powers of attraction and persuasion primarily for our own benefit.

I would like to shine a light on one woman among many in our Diocese who is such an influencer in our own local culture. Barbara Quijano Decker, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Des Moines these past five years, was recently recognized by the Des Moines Business Record as a "Woman of Influence." The honor is well-deserved, but falls short of capturing the spiritual potency and influence this woman and daughter of the Church exerts upon many in our community, including myself.

A child of Italian and Mexican parents, Barbara witnessed the respect and dignity her parents tendered to her children and to others in the community that surpassed their own sometimes seeming small-minded attitude toward mixed ethnic marriages. She embraced the emphasis on education and hard work gained from her family to the living faith and devotion conveyed by the Sisters of Humility in her parochial school education. She advanced through various degree opportunities at Drake University, culminating in a law degree that enhanced her ability to listen and then offer counsel and wisdom to those above her administration at the Des Moines Register & Tribune, in the corporate sector, in the President's cabinet at Drake University, and at Mercy Hospital. Eventually, her appointed moment to flex leadership at Mercy College of Health Sciences came. As President of Mercy College, her high octane professional standard was blended with her grace, equanimity, and self-effacing commitment to the Mercy charism of healing and restoring hope, especially where poverty seems to have a vise-grip on people's life prospects and perception of self.

Barbara moved on from Mercy after honoring her late parents and humbly accepting the Lord's call to take on the leadership role at Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Des Moines. We should all be grateful that this woman of exceptional gifts, when many options to "cash in" on her professional achievements lay before her, opted to cast her lot toward the "preferential option for the poor" that is at the heart of the Gospel.

Barbara is so simultaneously graceful and compelling in her presence that she stirs persons to focus their attention and muster their mercy and most generous selves for the sake of something greater—call it the Kingdom of God. Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Des Moines has been God's work among us for now a century of Spirit and grace brought to bear on the lives of those who are hurting and at risk of losing hope. Our Diocese now embarks on a yearlong celebration recognizing Catholic Charities' presence among us under the theme: "A Century of Care and Compassion: Fulfilling Christ's Promise of Help and Hope."

Building upon those who preceded her, Barbara oversees efforts to support immigrants and refugees, single moms and their children, and victims of domestic abuse. She has weathered local tension among the initiatives to remedy food insecurity. She and her team tirelessly strive to ensure that adults and children who are struggling with their mental and spiritual health have someone to accompany them toward peace and renewed confidence that life itself and the God who gives life is their ally.

Barbara Decker is a woman of unflagging faith. She is committed to her St. Ambrose Cathedral Parish where she prays and worships, and where she benignly flexes her leadership as

she offers her insights and wisdom among parish groups. She lives and breathes the charity of Christ. When I am blessed to engage her in meetings and more casual moments, I come away more committed to our mission as a Diocese, to my own vocation as priest and bishop.

Like Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Barbara Decker is an influencer in the best sense of the word.