

Society gives blind clergy, faithful access to God’s word

By Father Hank Hilton

Jesus’ last words on earth, according to St. Matthew, were the words of the Great Commission. “Make disciples ... baptize them . . . teach them . . . and [remember], I am with you always.” Conscientious Christians have been taking those words to heart for 2000 years.

Xavier Society for the Blind (XSB) has been living the Great Commission in a unique way for more than a century. Since 1900, it has produced braille versions of Scripture and other religious texts for the blind and the visually impaired. Technological innovations have also enabled XSB to provide recorded versions of religious works. Both the braille and the recorded materials, provided at no cost to the users, enable blind people and the visually impaired to become even more effective disciples.

XSB’s texts enable its clients to participate fully in celebrations of the Eucharist, “the source and summit” of our spiritual lives. The Society sends braille copies of the Mass Propers — the readings, responses and prayers for the Mass — to more than 800 people every month.

Those “braille missalettes” enable blind priests to answer the calls to celebrate Mass and to preach. Father Jamie Dennis of Owensboro, Ky., is one of those priests. Father Jamie, who was ordained in 2016, has been a braille reader and an XSB client since 2008. He used XSB texts when he presided at New York’s Saint Patrick’s Cathedral on Dec. 13, 2017, the Feast of Saint Lucy, the patron of blind people. That annual Mass is one of XSB’s biggest gatherings of clients and supporters.

The braille Mass Propers also enable blind lectors to proclaim God’s word. Richard Nenzo of Philadelphia, a lawyer for one of the region’s largest banks, regularly uses XSB texts when he lectures at his home parish. Mr. Nenzo’s impressive voice, flawless delivery and obvious prayerfulness have greatly inspired listeners here in the Diocese of Metuchen when he has visited Hillsborough and served as a lector at St. Joseph Church.

The braille edition of the “Guide-line for Altar Servers” has made it possible for blind children to serve at the altar. Mara Hug of Kansas is one of the many servers whom the guide has helped. Mara has also made great use of the braille textbooks that XSB provides for religious education programs.

In addition to enriching the experience of Mass for the blind and the visually impaired, XSB enables its clients to participate in many parish activities, including RENEW, a parish-based program that facilitates small group faith-sharing around the world. XSB produces braille versions of RENEW’s “Arise Together in Christ” series.

XSB’s recordings of periodicals also inform and nurture its clients’ faith. The Society offers recorded readings of articles from many religious periodicals including “America,” “The Catholic Digest,” “Our Sunday Visitor,” “Saint Anthony Messenger,” “Maryknoll” and “The Catholic Review.”

Jesuit Father Joseph Stadelman and Margaret Coffey, herself blind and a devoted teacher of the blind, founded the Xavier Society for the Blind in 1900 with one simple goal in mind,

to give the blind and the visually impaired access to God’s word and to the best of Roman Catholic teaching and literature. Their dream continues to press on to fulfillment.

In 2017, Xavier Society served 1,700 clients, 75 of whom live in New Jersey and 12 of whom live in the Diocese of Metuchen. The XSB catalogue has grown steadily over the years and now includes 810 braille books and 790 audio books. The XSB Advisory Group, which like its Board of Trustees consists of blind and sighted members, helps the Society select publications to transcribe into braille and to record.

When Jesus spoke the words of the Great Commission, inviting all of

us to make disciples of all nations and to teach them, it would have been very difficult to carry that mission to the blind and the visually impaired. Today, thanks to the Xavier Society for the Blind, the mission has become far simpler. Also, thanks to XSB, blind people can be the teachers and the baptizers. Might the Holy Spirit be nudging you to make the XSB’s great works known to a loved one who always has been or is perhaps becoming blind or visually impaired?

Father Hilton is pastor, St Joseph Parish, Hillsborough, and a longtime friend of the Nenzo family, and serves on the XSB Board of Trustees and a member of its finance committee.



Above, “braille missalettes” enable blind priests to answer the calls to celebrate Mass and to preach. Father Jamie Dennis, shown reading the text and in the procession in photo below left, is one of those priests. Father Dennis, of Owensboro, Ky., was ordained to the priesthood in 2016 and has been a braille reader and an XSB client since 2008. He used XSB texts when he presided at Mass at New York’s Saint Patrick’s Cathedral Dec. 13, 2017, the Feast of Saint Lucy, the patron of the blind. The annual Mass is one of XSB’s biggest gatherings of clients and supporters.



Below, Lisa Galdi, a client of Xavier Society for the Blind, lectures with the braille “Propers of the Sunday Mass” as Father Dennis listens.

— Gregory Shemitz photos

