



It was a quiet Thanksgiving for Kerry.

She and her husband had just retired from the military, and they were home in Colorado Springs with Kerry's mother-in-law, whom they were taking care of at the time. But the house, with two extra, empty bedrooms upstairs, felt just a little too quiet.

Kerry had no children of her own, but it was around that time that she felt God calling her to foster parenting.

"I just saw this article in the paper for a foster agency and it really spoke to me and I said 'Ok God this is what you want me to do? Because I'm a little bit old for this.' But...I felt I was just really made to do this and God said, you can do this!"

It's something that many Catholic foster parents have in common - the feeling that God called them to open their homes and hearts to foster parenting.

Kerry and her husband began fostering through a local Christian agency called Hope and Home, and after meeting the licensing requirements, embarked on a six-year foster care journey, in which they fostered a total of 10 kids, adopted two, and provided respite care for several other "kiddos," as Kerry affectionately calls them.

“Foster care is a learning experience, and is probably the hardest yet most rewarding thing I've ever done,” Kerry told CNA.

For foster care awareness month, CNA spoke with four Catholic foster parents about their stories, and the faith that inspired them along the way. Only first names have been used to protect the children who have been or are still in their care.

“The greatest of our foster-heartbreaks has become my life's work” - Kerry, Colorado Springs

Kerry's family learned a lot, the hard way, from their first foster care placement, a two-year-old named Alex.

“It was hard, as Alex had suffered abuse and neglect and was terrified of all things to do with bedtimes,” Kerry said. “We spent the first week sitting outside the door of his bedroom, because he was terrified to have us in there and yet terrified to be alone.”

About seven months after Alex had been placed in their care, he was returned back to his biological father. Kerry strongly objected to that plan, telling their caseworker that she believed the father was not ready to take his son back.

Kerry's objections were overruled, and Alex went home with his biological dad. Nine months later, Kerry learned that Alex had died of severe head trauma while in the care of his dad's girlfriend. It was because of Alex that she began to research and advocate for the prevention of child abuse.

“The greatest of our foster-heartbreaks has become my life's work,” Kerry said. “I am part of our county's Not One More Child Coalition, the secretary for our local Safe Kids Colorado chapter, and the Chair of the Child Abuse Prevention Committee for our local chapter of the Exchange Club,” she said.

“We are also working to establish a child abuse prevention nonprofit called Kyndra's Hope - named for another local foster girl who actually entered foster care in hospice, as she was not expected to live due to the severe physical abuse by her biological parents. Thanks to the prayers of her adopted mom, Kyndra is now a lively 10-year-old who, despite her disabilities, has beaten the odds.”

Kerry has adopted two of the 10 of her foster children, and provided respite care for numerous others.

Kerry said she felt relief and belonging in her local Catholic parish, because several other families have adopted children and blended families, “so to just go and sit and be a normal family with all the other people there was just really wonderful some days,” she said.

One of the main patron saints she leaned on as a foster parent was St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes.

“I was always praying to him for myself and for my kiddos who were really lost, just to help us all find ourselves,” she said.

“What do my pro-life duties entail?” - Scott; Lincoln, Nebraska

Scott and his wife were newlywed “classic, orthodox Catholics” living in Lincoln, Nebraska. While they had no known medical issues, they tried for six years to get pregnant, but it just wasn’t happening.

After mourning the loss possible biological children, the couple began to talk about adoption. While the idea of foster care surfaced at the time, “It scared us a little bit,”

Scott told CNA.

They knew that many of the children they would encounter would come from difficult situations, and as first-time parents, they weren't sure they would be able to handle that.

They adopted a son, Anthony, but they still felt the desire for more children. When they considered a second adoption, they were encouraged to look more seriously into foster care.

They took the foster parent preparation class, but still felt some hesitation, and so they "kicked the can down the road" a little longer. But something happened at their city's annual Walk for Life that stayed with Scott.

"We go to the Walk for Life every year, and there's a lady there every year, she had this sign and it basically said 'Foster, adopt or shut up.' That was what she was saying as a counter-protest to a pro-life group," Scott recalled.

"It's something that stuck with me because I thought you know, what do my pro-life duties entail?"

Soon after, he and his wife felt called by God to open up their home to foster children. They told the agency, thinking they would wait another year or two before getting a placement.

Ten days later, a little two-year-old named Jonathan came to stay with them. Even though he was young, the family has had to work with him on some deep-seated anger issues and speech delay problems.

“This is really pro-life,” Scott said of foster care and adoption.

“This birth mom chose life, but she can’t raise this child, and so my wife and I are going to take the ball and we’re going to do the hard work and we’re going to get through this.”

“I really feel like God called us to this, and called us to this little boy,” he added. “You can’t ignore the call - or you shouldn’t - it’s similar to a vocational call in my opinion.”

Something else that struck Scott throughout the process was how much foster parenting is promoted in Evangelical churches, including those sponsoring their family’s agency- and how infrequently he heard it mentioned in Catholic ones.

“I would say that [Evangelicals] do a fabulous job in their churches as far as promoting foster care and getting lots of families to participate,” Scott said. “And we’ve got the one true faith, so I want our families and couples to learn about this and possibly participate in it,” he added.

“I know it’s not for everybody, but there’s lots of different things other than taking a child that you can do,” he said, such as mentoring a child or offering support to other foster parents.

“We’ve always had a special spot in our heart for kids in foster care” - Jami; Omaha, Nebraska

Jami’s family, like Scott’s family, experienced a time of infertility before deciding to look into foster care or adoption as a way to grow their family.

But they were also drawn to it in other ways. Before they were married, Jami and her husband had volunteered at a summer camp that united foster care kids with siblings living in other foster homes.

“We volunteered for that as camp counselors, so we’ve always had a special spot in our heart for kids in foster care, so we wanted to try it out for that reason also,” Jami told CNA.

Jami had also grown up in Omaha, Nebraska, the home of Boystown, a temporary home for troubled boys and youth founded in 1917 by Servant of God Father Edward Flanagan.

“I have a special relationship with him, even when I was younger, I used to think he was so cool,” Jami said. “And all through us fostering, I would pray to him and through him because he knows, he helped these kids in trauma.”

Jami and her husband took an infant, Bennett, into their home. His older sister was placed in a different foster home while they waited to see if the children could be reunited with their mother.

It was an “emotional rollercoaster,” Jami said, because she knew she needed to bond with Bennett, while she also had to be prepared to let him go at any moment.

“I would pray through Fr. Flanagan and tell him just ‘please.’ I trust God and his choice in whether this kid goes home or not, because that was also really hard - I was feeling guilty for wanting to keep the baby, because it’s not yours. We’re there to help the parents,” she said.

“So I really believe that (Fr. Flanagan) was holding this whole situation, he just took care of it,” she said.

“The most challenging thing is letting yourself go, letting yourself bond with the child and not trying to protect your own heart,” Jami said, “and then coping with the emotional roller coaster because that can put a lot of stress on yourself, your husband, the whole family.”

“But the most rewarding part is helping these families, helping the parents have the time they need to overcome whatever challenges they’re facing,” she said. “And getting to bond with the (child) is such a gift because literally if you don’t give it who will? And that is such a gift to give a child.”

“This is hardcore Gospel living” - Michaela; St. Louis, Missouri

Michaela’s foster parent journey differs from many others. She and her husband already had children - four of them, all in grade school or younger - when she felt God was calling her to consider adoption.

When the topic of adoption was brought up during her bible study, “my heart just started burning for adoption, the Spirit was moving within me, but I knew that was not something I could just impose on my family or my marriage,” Michaela, who lives in St. Louis, Missouri, told CNA.

She decided to keep the inspiration quiet, and told God that if this is something he really wanted from her family, then her husband would have to voice the same desires first.

So she never mentioned it to her husband. But one day, some time later, he came to breakfast and said out of the blue: “I think we’re being called to adoption.”

As their research into adoption began, they realized that they didn’t feel called to infant

or international adoption - two of the most common routes. They realized that God was actually calling them to foster care.

“It was exactly the desire of our heart, it was where God was calling,” Michaela said.

The prerequisites for foster care include classes that prepare foster parents for worst-case scenarios - children who come from broken, traumatic situations who will exhibit difficult behaviors.

But to Michaela’s surprise, “They come and they’re just the most innocent children, this pure innocence comes from a broken life, they don’t resemble the brokenness that they come from.”

Michaela’s family is relatively new to fostering - they started just six months ago - and already they’ve had four children between the ages of one and seven placed with their family.

One of the most rewarding things about foster parenting has been the lessons her biological children are learning from the experience, Michaela said.

“These aspects of the Gospel we cannot teach our children - I cannot teach you how to lay down your life for someone else. But I can show you with this,” Michaela said.

“This is Gospel, this is hardcore Gospel living.”

The hardest part about foster parenting can be letting go - the goal of foster parenting is not to keep the children, but to provide them a temporary home while their biological family can get back on their feet, Michaela said.



Michaela said that's a concern about foster parenting that she often hears: "What if I get too attached? Isn't it too hard?"

"These children deserve to be attached to, so they deserve us to love them so that it hurts us when they leave," she said.

For this reason, she asks case workers to let herself and her children accompany the foster child to their next home - whether that's with their parents or with another foster or adoptive family.

"It's super hard for us, but it's really good for the kids to see us cry, to know that they are loved that much, that someone would cry over them," she said.

Michaela said she found great support as a foster parent through the Catholic Church and also through other Christian denominations.

"Our own church totally opened their arms to us, and brings over clothes and car seats and was just hugely supportive and welcoming when new kids come to church," she said.

"Other churches have provided meals - there's just such a community within the church, within foster care. They're all telling us they're praying for us - so it's the bigger body of Christ within the foster community," she said.

Michaela encouraged couples who are considering becoming foster parents to trust God and lean on their faith, even when it may seem like a difficult or impossible task.

“When he calls us to those scary, unknown places he provides, he just shows up in ways that we could have never planned for or imagined,” she said. “He does, he makes a way.”

Adoption and foster care programs for Catholic families can be found through local Catholic Charities or Catholic Social Service branches.