By Sister Kathleen Warren

The approach of National Vocation Awareness Week (Nov. 4-10) invites us to recall how the Diocese of San Diego has been and continues to be blessed by the presence of women and men religious.

We celebrate and give thanks for all the religious of our diocese — past, present and those to come. Currently, we have approximately 208 religious sisters and 115 religious brothers and priests in our diocese.

The contribution of the Franciscan missionaries, beginning in 1769, is well-documented and much celebrated. The first mission established by Father Junipero Serra, San Diego de Alcala, celebrates its 250th anniversary next year.

But, much more recently, another amazing anniversary was celebrated as Casa Cornelia Law Center honored its first 25 years of service to persons fleeing persecution. The center provides legal representation, free of charge, to indigent victims eligible to immigrate legally under the law.

The purpose of Casa Cornelia is stated: “To provide pro bono quality legal services to victims of human and civil rights violations and to educate others on the impact of federal immigration law and policy on the public good.” Since its beginnings in 1993, this work has increased drastically in volume and in importance. This year, the center commemorates over 15,000 children, women and men who received pro bono legal services, were granted protection, and escaped violence and persecution in their countries of origin.

The impetus for such monumental work lies with a religious community of sisters. The mission and spirit of Casa Cornelia is rooted in the tradition of service of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and that of the Society’s foundress, Cornelia Connelly, after whom the law center is named.

In 1993, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an international community of Catholic sisters, founded the law center. In the spring of that year, Sister Ann Durst and Sister Mary Wayne Gradon began providing pro bono legal and support services for the San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program’s asylum program. Changes in the federal immigration law in 1996 prompted Casa Cornelia to incorporate separately.

The rest is history, and the center’s work and personnel were rightly celebrated at the 25th anniversary event on Oct. 20. Along with recognition of attorneys and law firms via the La Mancha Awards, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof delivered the keynote address.

A highlight occurred at the end of the evening when the leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Sister Veronica Openibo from Rome, addressed the audience. She acknowledged the contributions of Sister Durst and Sister Wayne Gradon: “We are very happy [that] our sisters had the vision to start this ministry.”

Thanks also were extended to these two pioneers by the leader of the American province, Sister Carroll Juliano of Rosemont, Pennsylvania. Among the enthusiastic crowd of 600 were 21 Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. Indeed, it was a night to celebrate with gratitude not only the thousands of volunteers and staff of Casa Cornelia, but in a special way the foresight, courage and commitment of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus to the most vulnerable of our world.

To support Casa Cornelia Law Center in its work, visit www.casacornelia.org.

The Southern Cross

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Breaking up with Your Phone

I’ve been emailing my friend Becky, a newspaper editor in South Dakota, about our growing desire to unplug. We used to compare notes on “Dancing With the Stars,” but lately we’re both watching less TV.

“My eyes have started to reject going from screen to screen,” she emailed me. Instead, she said, she’s been reading, cooking and walking her dog, which led to the discovery of downtown trails and encounters with bison, deer and bighorn sheep.

“I notice a difference,” she wrote. “It has gotten to the point where my phone is strictly for texting and calling people on Sundays. I can’t keep up with it all, and I’m not sure it’s worth trying.”

I told her about my week-long hiatus from social media, which retrained my thumb from tapping on Instagram feeds. I used that free time online to enjoy personality profiles and read substantive articles on mental illness, gender identity and child development. I found myself looking up the definition of words like “ersatz,” which means artificial or synthetic, an inferior substitute used to replace something natural or genuine.

Just as soon as I had landed on this snazzy new word — a word that says so much in six letters and has that novel “z” ending — I uncovered an application for it, one that got to the root of my iPhone addiction. Our screen time provides stimulation that is ersatz to real human connection.

Social-media apps purport to connect us with others but actually impair and isolate us, turning us into the kind of people who don’t answer a phone call but text the caller shortly later, only to enter into a rapid-fire exchange that feels urgent but not fulfilling.

It was time to turn to Catherine Price’s 2018 bestseller How to Break Up with your Phone: The 30-Day Plan to Take Back your Life. Reading this book was like eating broccoli: I knew I was doing something good for myself. It offers an eye-opening assessment of the mental, social and physical effects of extended phone use — the way it fractures our attention spans, hinders our ability to form new memories and undercuts our sleep.

The biggest takeaway, for me, was the fact that we do not think critically about the impact of our phones. How do certain apps make us feel? Why is it hard to put down our phones? What are they doing to our brains? Who benefits from our addiction? I was disappointed in myself for being lulled, like an unblinking toddler, into all the scrolling and swiping.

Heeding Price’s advice and cutting back on phone time has made me feel more in control, more engaged with my life. It empowers me to tackle other off-balance areas as I head into fall, which will be a season of change. I’m setting better sleep habits and healthier snacking, replacing Dove milk chocolates with peanuts and pecans. One positive change begets another.

I recently read about a priest who hits the gym several times a week and weight lifts 350 pounds. “It gets you used to doing hard things,” he said. “And when you’re doing hard things in this controlled environment, it’s way easier to do hard things elsewhere in your life.”

When praying is hard, I focus on the simple prayers that ground me, beginning and ending my day.

But I’m also realizing that being disciplined can turn the day into one continuous prayer: an act of appreciation for life, for God’s gifts, a love for something greater than self. And that’s a good reason to set aside the phone.

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