

# Three Catholic apostolates claim \$100,000 prize in first OSV Innovation Challenge

Some of the potential “world-changing” ideas in Catholic evangelization began as scribbled notes and diagrams on cocktail napkins.

“I really think the Catholic innovator, the Catholic entrepreneur, these inspired pioneers, are going to be the saints of the future,” said Jason Shanks, president of the [OSV Institute](#), which on Saturday awarded three \$100,000 grants to Catholics who are blazing new trails in evangelization.

The grants, which will help the recipients to grow their burgeoning apostolates, marked the culmination of the OSV Institute’s first [Innovation Challenge](#), a yearlong contest that was intended to develop projects that have the potential to make a profound impact on the Church and the world.

On Saturday, a virtual panel of judges awarded the grants after hearing 10-minute presentations from 12 finalists who pitched projects that ranged from a podcast featuring Black Catholic voices in Baltimore to a spiritual and fitness regimen designed for Catholic high school athletes.



After more than an hour of final deliberations, the judges awarded the three \$100,000 grants to the [Juan Diego Network](#), which distributes audio faith formation programs to Latino

audiences; Catholic Sprouts: Domestic Church Project, which helps parents to cultivate a faith environment at home; and Eden Invitation, a movement for Catholics experiencing same-sex desires and gender discordance to thrive as disciples within the Church.

“This is for all of us, and for us what it means is more people finding family and acceptance, and the love of the Lord,” said Anna Carter, co-founder and president of [Eden Invitation](#).

In their presentation, Carter and Shannon Ochoa, co-founder and director of community care for Eden Invitation, explained how their apostolate’s “Hearth & Porch” initiative is designed to create community for same-sex attracted Catholics striving to live as Christian disciples, and to attract others through testimonial videos.

“Compared to the secular culture, we as a Church are under-prepared,” said Ochoa, who noted that secular LGBT organizations have long been successful in drawing same-sex attracted people by offering them affirming and welcoming spaces.

“We are shooting straight for the middle of compassionate orthodoxy, being present to those in the messiness of life while being firm in extending the invitation of the Gospel,” said Carter, who added that the grant will help her and Ochoa further professionalize their operation. It also gives them a firm hope that their apostolate will be around in five or 10 years.;

Nancy Bandzuch, the founder and creative director of [Catholic Sprouts](#), and her husband, Bill Bandzuch, the apostolate’s director of operations, broke into tears when Shanks announced their award.

“We entered the Innovators Challenge to support what we were already doing with Catholic Sprouts,” said Nancy Bandzuch, who

added that she and the Catholic Sprouts team, including content manager Megan Swaim, saw a need to help Catholic parents make sense of all the catechetical and faith formation resources at their disposal.

“To be part of this ecosystem of faith innovation makes you very courageous to tackle these big problems,” Nancy Bandzuch said. “It’s easy to get a sense that something is never going to be solved. ... Well, I’m leaving here feeling we can do anything.”

The yearlong OSV Innovation Challenge, established in partnership with Catholic Creatives, the Notre Dame IDEA Center and SENT, began last August when 350 Catholic entrepreneurs submitted applications to have their “napkin ideas” considered.

Over the ensuing months, the OSV Innovation Challenge team whittled that initial applicant pool to 12 finalists. Shanks said the process was designed to encourage Catholic innovators to “think beyond the status quo” and to view the Church through the lenses of innovation and creativity.

“Very early on this process, we realized that this was about game-changing ideas, but also about the pioneer, the Catholic innovator,” Shanks said. “I think what makes these Top-12 special is that they understand the needs of the Church to advance the Gospel, and they’re just incredible people who are hard-working, faithful, serious about their faith, and know how to get things done.”

Reviewing the original 350 applications, Shanks said a consistent theme emerged of community, especially among young adult Catholics. There were several proposals for Catholic co-working spaces, coffee houses, creative art communities and renovating old convents for young lay Catholics to live in community and discern their vocations.

“These were people who wanted a Catholic community on mission,

and they really weren't seeing it in the Church," Shanks said. "There is still a yearning for relationships and a yearning for community."

In addition to providing grants, the OSV Institute sponsored a 10-week Notre Dame IDEA Center Accelerator Program for the 12 finalists. The program began in June and integrated a curriculum and personalized coaching from Catholic speakers, entrepreneurs, ministers and artists. The program also incorporated spiritual support and formation for entrepreneurs.

"The coaches, the experts, all helped us to know that it takes humility to have your assumptions be broken over and over again," said David Kang, the producer of Ecce! Films' "Take Me Home" documentary series that follows the lives of men and women who move off the streets into an innovative village for the homeless.

Kang told Our Sunday Visitor that he and his partners refined their pitch – which, like the other finalists' projects, incorporated a multimedia presentation of graphics, video, photographs and audio interviews – throughout the accelerator program.

"In seeking holiness, to grow in spiritual life, you have to be broken over and over again," Kang said. "That breaking of assumptions is a form of death, but it's also a time to be reborn and grow."

Edward Herrera, the co-creator of Balthasar Media's St. Bernardine Podcast, which examines the complex interactions of race and religion in Baltimore's Edmondson Village district, told Our Sunday Visitor that being one of the 12 finalists was "quite an honor."

"I think it's pretty humbling. There were a lot of great projects," said Herrera, who added that the accelerator program encouraged him and his team to think strategically and

longterm about their podcast project.

“It’s helped us to really think beyond the project,” Herrera said. “It’s helped us to really think of how we can build things out.”

Shanks said the OSV Innovation Challenge will be an annual event, and added that he hopes it will encourage sustainable ideas to advance evangelization “for many years to come.”

Said Shanks, “I hope people are inspired to find innovative ideas and put them into action so that more souls can be saved.”

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*