



Thanks to braille Mass Propers produced by the Xavier Society, Our Lady of Lourdes, Pittsburg, parishioner Kirk Ford is able to serve as a lector. Obtaining access such material in Braille was instrumental in Ford's decision to become a Catholic, he said. (Courtesy photo)

Braille material allows Pittsburg Catholic to serve as Mass lector

(Aisling Redican) – January is designated as Braille Literacy Month, in celebration of Louis Braille's birth month and in recognition of the profound impact his system of raised dots has had on millions of lives. A devout Catholic, Braille was blinded as a child in an accident at his home in rural France and his legacy endures more than 200 years after his birth. For the blind and visually impaired community, braille is not merely a tool; it is the cornerstone of literacy, independence, and equal opportunity.

Since the inception of braille, millions of books have been transcribed by printing houses for the blind throughout the country. One of the earliest of these, Xavier Society for the Blind, is still in operation today and is dedicated to providing free liturgical and spiritual texts in braille, large print, and audio to blind Catholics all over the world. Since its founding in New York City in 1900, Xavier Society's mission has been to provide the Word of God and the best of Catholic literature to the blind and visually impaired community at no cost. From missalettes for Mass, to books on prayer and the lives of saints, this sacred ministry aims to put faith at its patrons' fingertips – both figuratively and literally.

For Kirk Ford, one of several Xavier Society patrons in the Diocese of Wichita, the services provided by the organization are a vital link to his spiritual life and daily engagement with his community. A former Baptist, Ford taught Sunday School but did not have the instructional materials in the accessible format he needed to teach independently. "I used to have to have someone read to me (before class)," he said. "I came across Xavier Society and it convinced me to become a Catholic. Being a teacher, I needed materials in braille."

Ford emphasizes that braille isn't just about reading words; it's about the connection it fosters: "Everything registers when I read braille," he said. "I can listen to books, I have my computer and understand it, but after so long I'm not quite as focused. I focus more with braille. God is guiding my fingers, it feels like I'm really connected."

Since embracing the faith, he has hit the ground running as a lector at Our Lady of Lourdes in Pittsburgh using the braille Mass Propers produced monthly by Xavier Society. He is also the dedicated scribe for the Knights of Columbus Council 883. "I joined the Knights of Columbus in 2002, and they asked me what I could offer," Ford said. "I told them I could be a secretary, as I was always brailleing stuff as a kid. They didn't have a secretary at the time."

Ford says he hopes to return to his education roots and teach in the parish school of religion in the near future. Providing religious textbooks in braille for PSR and the order of Christian Initiation for Adults remains at the heart of Xavier Society's mission more than 125 years after the organization's establishment – its foundress Margaret Coffey, herself a blind teacher of blind children, was frustrated by the lack of accessible faith formation materials available to her and her students.

She teamed with a Jesuit priest, Fr. Joseph Stadelman, and the rest is history. Coffey was also Xavier Society's first donor, providing her life savings of \$300 to get operations up and running. This was a significant sum for a young blind woman in 1900, amounting to more than \$11,000 in 2026 dollars. Coffey envisioned that all of Xavier Society's services and offerings would be available free of charge to anyone in need, and this still holds true today. The organization relies on individual donors, small family foundations, and bequests to fund operations and programs.

In a digital age, the importance of braille cannot be understated. For people such as Kirk Ford and the thousands of other blind and low-vision Catholics worldwide, the work of the Xavier Society ensures that the blind community has the same access to the written word – and the Word of God – as everyone else.

As we celebrate Braille Literacy Month, we recognize that these six dots are more than a code; they are a gateway to a full, independent, and spiritually enriched life.

For more information about Xavier Society for the Blind and its free offerings in braille, large print, and audio, click [here](#) or [call](#) toll-free.

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