

Blind lector, 16, reads Scripture in braille

By Hannah Heil
Catholic Times Reporter

MaKenzie Love, 16, is like many teenagers – she enjoys reading, singing in the choir and playing percussion in her high school band. She also serves as a lector, or reader, at Mass.

“I like to read and try to interpret and analyze what the Word (of God) is trying to say and hear the homily about it,” she said, “but I also like to get up and speak to the congregation.”

She is, however, unlike many lectors.

Love was born blind and receives “The Propers of the Sunday Masses” publication in the mail each month from the Xavier Society for the Blind, a nonprofit organization in New York City that publishes and provides free braille materials for laypeople and religious, such as priests, to use at Mass.

Braille is a writing system with combinations of dots that is used by people who are visually impaired. Braille can be read on embossed paper or on a refreshable braille display, a device that displays braille characters, which connects to a computer or smartphone.

Love uses the braille Mass Propers to read the Sunday Scripture readings at Mass.

The Propers include a braille edition of the first and second reading, responsorial Psalm, Alleluia and Gospel reading for each Sunday, as well as braille Mass prayers and responses recited by the congregation, similar to a missalette, which has the prayers and responses of the Mass.

Love attends Columbus St. Mary Church in the German Village neighborhood, where she lectors at the 4 p.m. Vigil Mass on Saturdays about once a month.

“It’s been really a very nice experience,” she said. “It makes me process the Scriptures in a different way than I’m used to, and I feel like I have gotten to share the Word with others by reading.”

Love resides with her family in the village of Commercial Point in Pickaway County and will be a junior at Teays Valley High School. She has a braille teacher at her school and she uses braille for her high school classes.

She was baptized Catholic as an infant, she said, and used braille Parish School of Religion books published by the Xavier Society for her religious education classes. She received the sacrament of confirmation at Grove City Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church.

Love said she attends weekend Mass in German Village with her grandmother, who lives in Grove City. Her grandparents live next door to parishioners from St. Mary and began attending Mass there, too.

She began serving as a lector in April 2022 after expressing an interest to Deacon Roger Minner at St. Mary.

“I was just honestly curious how they went up and read because I had never had



MaKenzie Love
Photo courtesy Abigail Pitones

it explained to me,” she said. “So, I asked the deacon how you could read, if it had to be from the book, and he said, ‘Would you be interested in maybe trying to lector one time using the Propers of the Sunday Mass that you receive?’ Because I told him that I received that.

“I said that I would be willing to try it, and the rest is history.”

Minner said, “We have, given, two dozen or so lectors here, and she is one of the best. She projects not only the Word, but just this sense of confidence to be able to do that. I think she’s a great model for our community – nothing should hold people back.”

Minner said Love has inspired him personally.

“Whenever she does the proclamation of the Scripture, I just have a great deal of admiration, and I often think to myself, ‘There’s things that I should do,’” he said.

When she is not serving as a lector, Love said she enjoys using braille to participate as part of the congregation.

“I just like to follow along with what’s going on in the Mass, because obviously, I am not able to read the missaltes that are presented, and Xavier was kind enough to do this, where they can provide services and accommodations for those of us who are visually impaired,” she said.

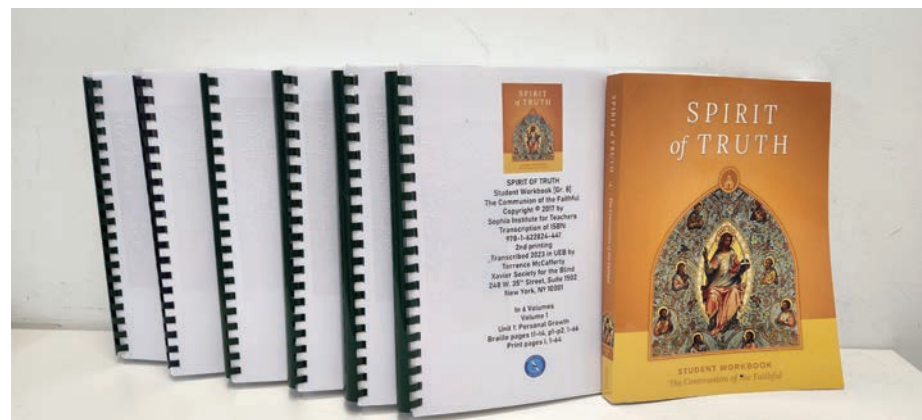
The Xavier Society also publishes braille prayer books, biographies of Catholic saints and contemporary books on spirituality, including titles by Henri Nouwen and Dynamic Catholic founder Matthew Kelly, as well as audio services for the blind.

The organization publishes Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults books for those studying to become Catholic, workbooks and a braille edition of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Love said that she uses braille materials provided by the Xavier Society to actively practice her Catholic faith.

“They have a braille Bible,” she said. “It’s 45 volumes, so it took up like three of my shelves.”

Braille takes up more space on a page than typed words in print, so books published in Braille typically consist of more



Workbooks are provided in braille by the Xavier Society for the Blind, a nonprofit organization in New York City that publishes free materials. Photo courtesy Xavier Society for the Blind

pages and are bigger in size than most books.

The Xavier Society for the Blind, founded in 1900, provides braille and audio services to the blind. Currently, the society provides Catholic materials to 2,500 patrons, or people who are signed up to receive their services, across the United States and in 20 other countries.

“The spectrum of materials that we provide really assists people in learning about and developing and practicing their faith,” said Malachy Fallon, society executive director.

“Whether they’re young children learning for the first time or adults trying to enhance their faith and learn more, or adults who are considering converting to Catholicism, we can provide those materials for them at whatever stage they’re in in their faith journey.”

There are 750 patrons who receive braille Sunday Mass Propers on a monthly basis, Fallon said. Each monthly edition of the Propers includes four weeks of Sunday Masses.

The visually impaired can begin receiving braille or audio services from the Xavier Society for the Blind by registering as a patron on its website, www.xavier-societyfortheblind.org, or contacting the organization by phone.

Love said she is grateful for the materials provided by the Xavier Society that enable her to serve as a lector.

“Without the Xavier Society, and what the Lord has done through them, I probably would not be able to do what I can, and same with braille in general, I think being able to read and write has helped me grow as a person and in my faith,” she said.

This month, Love’s proficiency as a braille reader will extend beyond St. Mary Church as she heads to Los Angeles for the Braille Challenge Finals held June 23-25.

Love is one of 50 finalists from the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom who will advance to the final round of the Braille Challenge, hosted by the Braille Institute. The institute is a nonprofit organization based in Los Angeles that provides free services to people of all ages with vision

loss.

In February 2023, Love competed at the regional preliminary event of the Braille Challenge in Ohio. The regional event is open to any blind or visually impaired student in first through 12th grade who can read and write braille. More than 50 regional events take place throughout the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom.

“The Braille Challenge is the only academic competition of its kind throughout North America and the United Kingdom,” Love said. “We compete in five categories: reading comprehension, speed and accuracy, proofreading, spelling for the younger divisions, and charts and graphs.

“They separate us into five categories by age group. This year, I’m in the varsity level, which is 10th through 12th grade. The top 10 highest scoring participants in each age group get to go to Los Angeles for the final round.”

There are five contest age groups: apprentice (grades 1-2), freshman (grades 3-4), sophomore (grades 5-6), junior varsity (grades 7-9) and varsity (grades 10-12).

“I won (the preliminary event) here in Ohio, but I was also among the top 10 that scored in the varsity age division and is now receiving the opportunity to go to Los Angeles,” Love said.

Love said it is important for people who are blind to learn braille. Using audio services is an alternative to braille, she said, but learning how to read and write braille is literacy for the visually impaired.

“It’s so important to be able to read braille and to grow in your faith just as a person, but being able to read and write, I think it’s so important for every visually impaired person to be able to learn braille and use it in what various ways you can,” she said.

And by learning braille, Love is thankful for those who helped her exercise her knowledge and talents.

“Thank you to the Church for letting me lector and just giving me that opportunity, and thank you to the Xavier Society for the Blind, also, for helping me grow my faith by sending me the materials that I regularly use in my life.”