

## National Fellowship Catholic Men

### The Significance of Fellowship

At the 2007 national conference of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men held in Detroit I was impressed by the fervor, devotion and personal commitment of those that attended and it is obvious that the men's movement is meeting a need in many men's lives. At one of the closing sessions of the conference I spoke of the need to emphasize the importance of fellowship. I said, referring to the name of the organization, that we could all identify with the words "national", "men" and "catholic" but there seemed to be a lack of focus on the significance to the word "fellowship". Fellowship – men sharing their experience of God in their daily lives – is the new component of the Catholic men's movement and defines it.

The establishment of the NFCM and the many state and diocesan wide organizations directed towards the spiritual growth of men is a response of the laity to answer the call of the Church to wake up the "sleeping giant" that is Catholic men. The movement has resulted in the formation of thousands of fellowship/faith groups at the parish level throughout the land. Praise the Lord!

Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI are calling the laity to initiate a new evangelization. Between the clerical and lay components of the Church the laity's role is primarily that of evangelization. We are in the world most of our time and it is in the secular world of family, work and entertainment that we are engaged. The Popes are asking us to discover new ways to make the Gospel alive in men. Fellowship is a new way to evangelize.

In response many new lay movements have come to life. Christ Renews His Parish. Cursillo and Kairos events come to mind. They use peer-to-peer sharing of the significant life events that have major impact, such as illness, death, unexpected losses etc. to bring reality into focus. It is the personal testimony which is an integral part of these programs that makes them successful. They are highly effective means of evangelization but they lack an ongoing means of sharing and after the passage of time the bonding that occurred in the weekend loses its effect. The fellowship format used in Cincinnati is an ongoing peer-to-peer sharing of men who acknowledge their sinful nature and utter dependence on a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in an atmosphere of trust.

Traditionally, the Church has recommended prayer, acts of devotion, the sacraments and attendance at church liturgies as the preferred way of acknowledging God's love, seeking His help in problems, giving thanks for favors received and asking for the grace to renew our commitment to spreading the Gospel.

These all have to have a top priority for any Catholic man aspiring to leadership. Our Spiritual Advisor and one of the founders of the Catholic Men's Fellowship in Cincinnati, Fr. Ken Sommer, say that one hour a day is a baseline necessity.

Notice however, with the exception of the confessional, that all of this is done in private. It is one-on-one with the Creator. The process does not engage a third party. There is no person to listen to our issues or to learn from the responses of others. We believe that fellowship properly undertaken adds the third party that allows us to more fully identify the ways that the Lord is active in our lives. We can grow in our personal relationship with Christ through our relationship with each other. We do not

discuss public issues in the fellowship meeting we only share how the Lord is acting through the ordinary events of our lives. It is a discovery process, a mentoring, that is enormously helpful in coping with life's difficulties and growing in spiritual and emotional capacity.

I think we all agree that whatever outreach we are doing to unchurched Catholics is not working. The recent Pew Foundation survey disclosed that in the U.S. 30 million born Catholics have left the Church and they now identify themselves as agnostics, evangelicals or non-Christians. This is a huge loss of vital people interested enough to reclassify themselves in terms of fundamental beliefs. Many of the 63 millions who still say they are Catholic in response to the survey are with us in name only.

The Catholic men's movement is clearly striking a cord with men. Thousands of men attend annual diocesan conferences around the country and that is no mean contribution to strengthening the role of men in society and in the Church. Much good effort is being placed on teaching, spiritual guidance and conferences at the NFCM level. However, we believe that the initial awakening will be lost unless we come up with a new way to engage men on an ongoing basis. We are hopeful that men's fellowship meetings can contribute to the new evangelization - the new springtime in the Church that we all desire. The one day "mountain top" experience of the conference is continued and completed in the fellowship groups in order to complete the life changing experience of evangelization.

There is so much more to be said about fellowship that is not covered in this commentary. For additional information about the experience of fellowship in Cincinnati over the past 20 years, please contact Kent Linnemann, the executive director of Catholic Men's Fellowship, at 513-793-7519 and [kentlinnemann@juno.com](mailto:kentlinnemann@juno.com) or the website at [www.thecall.org](http://www.thecall.org). On the website you can access a copy of the ***Call to Holiness***, developed by Fr. Ken Sommer with an imprimatur from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, that provides a theological and psychological background to the fellowship meeting style that has evolved over the years in Cincinnati and is still a work in progress. You can also view a presentation on fellowship that was made to a Midwest regional conference held in Cleveland called the 20 Year Milestone. It attempts to equate fellowship with the new evangelization that the Church is looking for.

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