

# CATHOLIC MEN'S FELLOWSHIP

## GREATER CINCINNATI

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### **The Beginning**

The initial meetings of the founders began in 1986. They were simply get-togethers of men who have become vitally aware of the presence of the Lord Jesus in their lives. Having lived depending upon their own talent and skills they were suddenly facing severe limitations to their dreams of success and ability to cope with problems. Many of us had been paying tribute to the false gods of financial security, career, power and social standing and were progressively less content and in my own case was suffering from depression. The Lord come into our lives in many different ways but the result was the same in each case. We were renewed in mind, body and spirit and we knew that we could not longer live without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We also came to realize that we needed to meet on a regular basis to share the ongoing experience of the Lord Jesus in our daily lives.

Keep in mind that we had no master plan, no agenda or no blueprint as to how to proceed with respect to the development of what later became the Catholic Men's Fellowship.

### **The Call to Holiness**

A big part of the process of discernment of what the Lord was doing in our lives was informed by the influence of Fr. Ken Sommer and his retreat talks called "The Call to Holiness". It was under his guidance that the concept of fellowship, as we now know it, evolved. We came to understand, however imperfectly, our slogan "That All Growth occurs in Relationships". He insisted the all growth begins with a relationship with Jesus Christ and that it is in deepening relationship with our spouses, family members, neighbors and co-workers that we work out our Salvation.

Fr. Ken constantly urged us to share our experiences and emotions with one another in Christian confidence because it was in the fellowship environment that we come to know who we really are and can begin to integrate the spiritual and temporal experiences of our lives. Because many of us experienced betrayals and significant let-downs, we were able to identify with the slogans "Your Crisis is your Gift" and "Your Weakness is your Strength".

It was in this evolutionary period that we adopted another slogan “The Teaching is the Sharing – the Sharing is the Teaching”. We came to realize that we were developing a lay ministry within the Church that is based upon sharing in confidence with one another.

### **Peer-to-Peer Ministry**

By virtue of being born we are introduced into an uncertain world in a broken state caused by Original Sin. From the beginning of life we have knowledge of pain and difficulty. When we find that we can no longer cope on the basis of our own resources, the Church wisely recommends that we turn to God for help in prayer. Many times the response from God appears delayed or opaque and we fell like we are simply talking to ourselves. If the problem persists with no resolution in sight, the Church recommends that we seek spiritual counseling from priests or religious who specialize in advising people in such issues. The relationship is still a top-down one of professional to patient, of mentor to pupil. Besides, the diminished number of clergy makes this a remote possibility for most people.

What we have discovered in the fellowship format is a peer-to-peer method of getting help with the issues that bedevil us. The fellowship meeting is a format of

men ministering to men in the presence of the Lord Jesus. The process was fortified by the Holy Spirit, the guidance of Fr. Ken and our own experience of fellowship in thousands of men's meeting.

### **Conferences**

We had no intention of organizing conferences and at the beginning we did not have the confidence or the inspiration to undertake such a formidable task.

However, we used to attend the men's conferences organized by Franciscan University in Steubenville Ohio and we became aware of the Fire Rallies of Fr. Michael Scanlon and Ralph Martin. Two members of our founding fellowship group, Kevin Lynch and Gus McPhie stepped up to organize a Fire Rally in Cincinnati Gardens in 1989. In the early nineties Coach McCartney of Colorado University began the big men's rallies of Promise Keepers. Encouraged by the evident presence of the Holy Spirit in our fellowship meeting we were inspired to start rallies specifically tailored to the spiritual modality of Catholic men. Thus began the first of 14 conferences at St. Gertrude's Parish Hall in Cincinnati in 1995.

These rallies were apparently what Catholic men were looking for. Some 70,000 have attended over the years. With these audiences we were able to attract well-known lay and clerical speakers, from Coach Lou Holtz to Mike Ditka, from Admiral Jeremiah Denton to Sen. Rick Santorum, from Fr. Benedict Groeschel to Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. From personal testimony we know the transforming effect of the conferences. I know personally of two vocations to the priesthood that began or were nurtured by the awesome, spirit-filled, life-changing atmosphere of the Conference.

Our idea of Conferences is to present Catholic lay-men who have achieved some success in life and who were willing to talk about how a personal relationship with God was the key to their accomplishments. Having heard these stories and being inspired by the Holy Spirit to reform their lives, the Conference flows into men acting on that vow by means of a Reconciliation Service and the reception of the Sacrament of Confession. Following on that event, the Conference urges men to join fellowship groups in their home parishes in order to sustain the “mountain-top” experience of the Conference and to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ, their spouse, family and co-workers.

The success of these conferences and the development of men's fellowship meetings have motivated the formation of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men that is promoting the conference concept to dioceses around the country. Some 50 cities are expected to hold conferences this year and up to 150,000 men will attend.

## **Conclusion**

To close I would like to emphasize the following:

- The movement began when a group of men discovered the exciting prospect of having Jesus Christ present in their lives in a meaningful way.
  - The founders wanted to share their personal discovery with each other in fellowship meetings.
  - They wanted to share that the good news with other men – to evangelize.
- The Catholic Men's Fellowship of Greater Cincinnati was founded as a lay ministry of the Church.

- Fr. Ken Sommer's "Call to Holiness" was a critical piece in establishing the theological underpinning of the new men's lay movement.
- We use these public high profile conferences as a means of promoting fellowship among Catholic men.