

THOUGHTS ON FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

Detroit Catholic Men's Conference

June 8-10, 2007

The opening sentence and whole first paragraph of Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled* is "life is difficult".

I think we would all agree that life is not easy; there are difficulties to be confronted and problems to be solved. They involve pain, anxiety, suffering and disappointment. We are never free of challenges. This is not to imply that life is one long series of challenges to be faced. It is not. We also experience joy, accomplishment, happiness in attaining goals, the love of God and the love of family.

However, one of life's constants is difficulty and the task of dealing with it. There is no avoiding the human condition and the pain that goes with it.

How Does the World respond to this Reality?

It suggests that psycho analysis can help – that by going beyond the superficial into the sub-conscience will unveil issues and events, the discovery of which will help ease our minds.

New medications for the treatment of anxiety and depression when properly applied have helped many to experience a higher quality of life.

Doctors sometimes recommend rest and relaxation to help relieve anxiety and restore equilibrium and balance.

Many of these remedies are helpful but they do not get to the core of the problem – the essential mystery of good and evil.

What Does the Church Say to Life's Difficulties?

It says Pray, Fast and Seek Spiritual Direction

Pray to Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, the Angels and Saints. Participate in the spiritual exercises of the Church – the Mass, the Sacraments, the Rosary and reading the Holy Scriptures. Get to establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Communicate your difficulties and ask for help.

Fasting requires coming to grips with sin and sinful habits and to change those habits that inhibit growth and reform

The concept of spiritual direction is traditional in the church. It means seeking pastoral advice about problems from priests and religious about how to proceed. It involves

confiding in a professional in spiritual matters about difficulties that arise from events in life. Although it is one-on-one encounter the relationship is necessarily one of master to novice. Spiritual direction is infrequent today because of the shortage of vocations.

Ignoring the Church

The world is not paying attention to these recommendations. JPII points out that man is ignoring these sources of salvation. The contemporary man is paying attention only to himself and to what science can do for him in solving his problems.

The New Evangelization

JPII called Catholics to pay attention to the Holy Spirit in discovering new ways to make the Gospel alive in men. Many new lay movements have come to life. Christ Renews His Parish, Cursillo de Cristiandad, Kairos come to mind. They use peer-to-peer sharing of the significant life events that have major emotional impact, such as illness, death, unexpected losses etc. to bring spiritual reality into focus. These are highly effective means of evangelization but they lack an ongoing means of sharing and after the passage of time the bonding that occurred at the weekend loses its effect.

Peer-To-Peer Men's Fellowship Groups

In 1986, a group of men in Cincinnati started regular peer-to-peer meetings in which they shared the events of their lives, in the presence of Jesus Christ, in an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence. They discovered that the ongoing meetings helped them to grow spiritually which strengthened their relationships with Jesus Christ and the significant people in their lives. This became a fledging lay evangelizing movement in the Church called the **Catholic Men's Fellowship**.

The basis for a successful fellowship meeting is the ability of the men to share the events of their life. The difference between the CMF and the weekend retreats is the ongoing story telling of fellowship. Sharing is the core of the meeting. The slogan "**The Sharing is the Teaching, the Teaching is the Sharing**" captures the essence of the group meetings. We believe that sharing is the new tool that the Holy Spirit has given to us to cope with life's difficulties.

By sharing our stories in the presence of Jesus Christ we discover how God is acting in every moment of life. We believe that God is present even in the most insignificant moments of our lives – that there are no coincidences. We believe that through sharing we reveal to one another how God is influencing our lives. It is "**Men Ministering to Men**".

We have discovered through story telling in thousands of fellowship meetings that “**All Growth Occurs in Relationships**”. The most important of these is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through prayer and fasting. Second in importance is the state of our relationship with those whom God placed in our sphere of responsibility – spouse, family, co-workers and community. Of these the one that has greatest value is the spousal. The sharing in fellowship meetings illuminates the state of these relationships – what we are doing that is destroying intimacy and what we are doing to foster these bonds. We say in the fellowship that you can measure the state of your relationship with the Lord by the level of intimacy and friendship you have with your spouse.

The meeting is a value in itself. It does not depend upon prior or past meeting activity. A meeting that is blessed by the Lord renews our reservoir of love – our capacity to overcome concupiscence and put ourselves at the service of the Church and others.

The focus of the meeting is always on Jesus Christ – that all life and growth comes from belief in Him. The signature scripture of the CMF is John 10:10, “**I have come so that you may have life and have it abundantly**”. The CMF is about spiritual, mental and emotional growth.. We want to become all we were meant to be by the Creator.

A Lay Movement

The CMF is a lay spiritual movement subject to the Magisterium of the Church. In Cincinnati we have kept the Archbishop Pilarczyk fully informed of our activities in forming parish groups and in developing annual conferences of Catholic men. The fellowship teaching publications that we use have the “nihil obstat” and “imprimatur” of the archdiocese.

The church offers the way to cope with Scott Peck’s observation that “Life is Difficult”.

However, the new evangelization that is blossoming is offering additional resources and methods. One of them is the fellowship meeting of Catholic men. We are just at the start of the learning process in discovering what the Holy Spirit is infusing into the Church. We in Cincinnati want to share what we have discovered and we are anxious to hear how other men in other parts of the country are being prompted by the Holy Spirit.

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Detroit,

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