

CATHOLIC MEN'S FELLOWSHIP

CLEVELAND REGIONAL CONFERENCE

August 4-5, 2006

THE 20-YEAR MILESTONE

THE BEGINNING

When a few men began meeting 20 years ago, there was little thought that they were laying the foundations for a lay movement in the Catholic Church that would spread not only throughout the Greater Cincinnati area but also to many dioceses throughout the United States. Separately, in our own lives, we had experienced the power of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We were drawn into the need for fellowship in order to share the experience and to investigate more thoroughly what the Holy Spirit had in mind for us. That direction was not long in coming. In the spring of 1986, the Catholic Men's Fellowship of Greater Cincinnati was established in order to promote the growth of Christian Fellowship to fellow Catholics. After much reflection and prayer, it was decided to direct the fellowship ministry exclusively to men and men brought up in the Catholic tradition. **From the beginning, the focus was (1) on relationship with Jesus Christ (2) men's spirituality in the Catholic context and 3) fellowship as the unique ministry of the movement.**

It is appropriate to acknowledge the debt owed to non-Catholic Christians who participated in the original meetings. Because of the natural affinity to Catholics and the greater need for fellowship among Catholics, it was decided to direct the ministry to that group only. It was also discerned from the beginning that the fellowship concept would work best in male only group settings.

THE CALL TO HOLINESS

The movement matured slowly. It was gradually shaped by the experiences and lessons learned from hundreds of meetings in the fellowship format over the first 10 years of the Catholic Men's Fellowship existence. Most importantly, Fr. Ken Sommer's THE CALL TO HOLINESS influenced the ministry. Much of the theological framework for the Fellowship is based upon the series of talks and retreat topics that comprise THE CALL TO HOLINESS. It is a presentation that uncompromisingly confronts the challenges that men face in today's world and equally uncompromisingly presents Jesus Christ as the answer. It brutally peels back the layers of wishful thinking that the world has invented in order to perpetuate the notion that we are masters of our own destiny and hence in no need to call on the Lord for help.

The talks addressed particularly the false gods of possession, power, position and financial well being to which the male psyche is particularly prone. The Call takes us back to our origin in sin and how our broken condition can play out in addictions and obsessions. We discovered for ourselves what the Church has been saying for 2000 years, namely, that a personal relationship with the Founder Jesus Christ will overcome our frustration and despair with the unrelenting cycle of sin. **This was a bottom-up, personal experience of the saving grace of Jesus Christ that affirmed everything we were told previously through top-down teaching and instruction from parents and the Church.**

OTHER INFLUENCES

Robert Bly

The first 10 years of slow growth took place against a backdrop of a public interest in the male psyche called the Men's Movement spearheaded by Robert Bly. It got some publicity in the early 1990s through the PBS series called "A Gathering of Men". It urged men to assume the more traditional muscular figure in the family and in society and was something in the nature of a pushback to the Feminist Movement. Bly asked men to get in touch with the natural adventure-seeking, risk-taking selves through weekend retreats into the woods and fairytale type stories about male archetypes like "Iron John". Addressed to the secular world Bly had only limited notice and impact. Nevertheless, he did express some of the feelings and frustrations of men everywhere.

Promise Keepers

At the same time, a much more important group arrived on the scene with the advent of mass stadium rallies of Promise Keepers **that encourage men to reclaim their masculinity and assume their rightful place in their families with the help of Jesus Christ.** Many of us attended these events and we were impressed with the results when the men's movement looked to Jesus Christ for inspiration rather than the mythological figures of Robert Bly. Encouraged by the success of Promise Keepers the Catholic Men's Fellowship decided to sponsor an event similar in nature but more specific to the Catholic tradition. The first one took place in the fall of 1995 and the rest is history. More than 70,000 men have attended the twelve Cincinnati conferences and thousands more attend up to 40 annual conferences in various cities throughout the U.S. The next

Cincinnati conference is scheduled for March 3, 2007. From the beginning, the conferences were aimed mainly at revitalizing the conviction of men in their Catholic Faith and to encourage them to join parish fellowship groups as the primary means of growing their relationship with Jesus Christ and the Church.

FELLOWSHIP

We in the Catholic Men's Fellowship, like all Catholics, have come to the knowledge of God through the Scriptures and the Magisterium of the Church. We also get to know about God and His goodness through life experiences. We live at the pleasure of God. It is His pleasure to come to know and love Him through the events of our lives, be they critical life-changing moments or the routine events that fill our daily existence. In the Fellowship, we believe that there are no coincidences. On the contrary, everything has significance and meaning if we could only discover it. **The purpose of the fellowship meeting is to discover the meaning hidden in the pattern of daily existence – to discern what God is telling us in the seemingly casual encounter with family members, co-workers and neighbors.**

The late Great John Paul II told us to look for the *Truth about Man* in the way we experience life. This in no way diminishes the importance of Scripture or the primary role of the Church in revealing God's goodness. But JP II points out that modern man is not paying attention to those sources of Revelation. He says that modern man is paying attention only to himself and the emotions he feels as he seemingly bounces off one unconnected incident after another. We can supplement and reinforce our belief in the Transcendent by inquiring into and studying the unfolding events of our lives.

We believe that fellowship is the unique setting in which the Catholic man can see more fully the presence of God through story telling.

“We have come to share our Story

We have come to break the Bread

We have to know our rising from the Dead”

FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

The story telling requires a safe and secure place. No story is more valid than another. Men must be accepted where they are. No direct advice is given at meetings. Instruction should only flow from the exchange of personal experience in the meeting. The slogan **“The Sharing is the Teaching and the Teaching is the Sharing”** derives from that characteristic of the group meetings.

The meetings are not prayer/petition sessions, although they have some of that. They are not charismatic gatherings, although praising is incorporated. They are not instructional periods in Church teaching, although it is likely that the sharing will be instructional. They are not bible study discussions, although Scripture is a key element. They are not group therapy sessions, although that component exists in the exchange of experiences. **The focus is always on how the individual has experienced Jesus Christ not just in one or two emotionally charged moments of his life, but also more importantly in the more recent seemingly unimportant events in his unfolding story.** The meeting links Jesus, the Scriptures, the Church and the individual’s ongoing story.

In contrast with the “top down” instructional formation usually associated with Catholic catechesis, the fellowship meeting format is experiential. It is the ministry of **“men**

ministering to men.” Each meeting stands on its own and a successful one sends the participants away full of zeal for the works of the Lord in his home, at work and in community action. The experience in Cincinnati of thousands of meetings in the fellowship style has resulted in a suggested format that is outlined in the “CALL TO HOLINESS” Handbook of the Catholic Men’s Fellowship.

EVANGELIZING

The fellowship meeting should be open to newcomers. The invitation to the growth implicit in fellowship should be extended to all. The typical fellowship meeting has elements of an AA meeting where participants give witness to the leap of faith in which they depend on God (Higher Power) and not on alcohol in order to survive and grow into the abundant life envisioned in John 10:10. Whereas the AA activist has a singular clear identifiable target, the evangelizing Catholic men in the Fellowship have a more diffused target. It is harder to identify the potential convert. The addiction to power, sex, prejudice and material possession are so widespread and socially accepted that it is difficult to identify those in immediate need of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. In addition, fellowship is not a traditional method of Catholicism to promote a relationship with the Lord. It has certainly worked for us, but many Catholic men are skeptical of any claims that Christianity is more than a cultural phenomenon – a good thing but hardly of practical use in coping with life’s challenges.

We believe that men are more likely to respond to an invitation to attend a meeting when experiencing difficulties in their lives. Because many of the men in the Fellowship have experienced the saving grace of the Lord arising from crisis moments in their lives, they possess the faculty to be able to identify similar moments in the lives of

others. Breakdown in careers, health and family relationships are often events that lead to occasions when the affected party will listen and experience a radical conversion to faith in Jesus Christ. The evangelizer is in a position to tell the seeker that he has been where the seeker is and has overcome his addiction to sex or power or material possessions and now depends upon God alone.

SLOGANS

“All Growth Occurs in Relationships”

To attain the rewards of the abundant life, it is necessary to communicate in truth with someone else – to become vulnerable to another. The most important of these relationships is union with God. **The call to holiness is an invitation to be made whole through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior.** The second most important relationship for most men is with their spouse and family. The greater the depth of intimacy, the greater is the potential for holiness. Finally, men grow and become more like Christ in the commitment they make to their chosen vocation and to passion for community service. It is in giving completely to God, Family, Profession and Community that we are radically altered and become all that we were meant to be by the Creator.

“Your Weakness is your Strength”

In the fellowship setting, we share our failures as well as our victories. We thank the Lord for our successes and we ask Him to help in overcoming difficulties. Many men have come to know Jesus out of an experience of failure – in acknowledging our inability to cope with circumstances on the basis of our own abilities. A significant conversion experience born out of desperation in an occurrence in the lives of many men. To acknowledge human limitation and dependence upon God for everything in life is the

beginning of wisdom and the start of a new creation – to be born again into the abundant life.

A LAY MINISTRY

From the beginning, the Catholic Men’s Fellowship has been a lay movement of the Church subject to the Magisterium of the Church. We have informed our bishop of all our activities in terms of fellowship formation and annual conferences. The publication THE CALL TO HOLINESS that references teachings and doctrine of the Church received the “nihil obstat” and “imprimatur” of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. In fact, Archbishop Pilarczyk recommended that we not affiliate directly with the programs of the Archdiocese. The shortage of priests is one reason, but more importantly is the papal exhortation to the laity to intensify spiritual development independently of the clergy and to transform the secular world. Vatican II insisted that all Catholics, not just the ordained clergy, share in Christ’s three-fold office of priest, prophet and king. Lumen Gentium teaches that by “reason of their special vocation, it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will ...” In his encyclical Christifideles Laici, John Paul II says over and over again that the lay apostle must engage the world in which he or she lives. Making no bones about it, he writes that “bearing fruit is an essential demand of life in Christ and life in the Church” and the indispensable condition for bearing fruit, he says, is “communion with Jesus.” John Paul says that it is “imperative” that all members of the Church, acting either individually or in groups, but especially in groups, are “obliged” to engage in a lay apostolate. Given this clear and unambiguous mandate, it seems to me that the Catholic Men’s Fellowship offers an ideal vehicle for carrying out these demands.

We have received all the support and encouragement necessary from the clergy in our endeavors, but we, as lay persons, are responsible for the growth and the success or failure of the project called The Catholic Men's Fellowship.

CONCLUSION

The talk is an attempt to convey the scope of events and ideas that have impacted the formation of the Catholic Men's Fellowship over the past 20 years. It endeavors to communicate the goals and specific mission of the Fellowship in the Church as we dimly see it in Cincinnati. There was no master plan. The ministry evolved slowly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and nothing is yet cast in stone. It is still developing and all are invited at this gathering of regional fellowship leaders to impart their experiences so that the ministry can respond more fully to the needs of men today.

The Lord is not done with us yet!