

CHRIST RENEWS HIS PARISH

DAVID SCOTCHIE

A pastor introduces his congregation to a tried-and-true renewal process that works for active and returning Catholics.

In the first parish where I was assigned, the pastor announced that one of my responsibilities would be to help start a process called Christ Renews His Parish. Ordained for only a few weeks, I hesitated. It would be a big commitment, take a lot of time, and it was not something I would have chosen. Eleven years later, however, I am glad the pastor persisted. Christ Renews His Parish is one of the best projects I have been involved in, having now helped three more parishes to start it. We have just started the process in my current parish.

A Thumbnail Description

The women and men of the parish make separate weekend retreats led by fellow parishioners. The retreats are somewhat like Cursillo—with witness talks, table sharing, and the sacraments. After the program, the retreatants are invited to become the new team, leading the next retreat in six months. Those who return for the weekly formation meetings are guided by a manual and a spiritual director. After six months, the team gives the retreat to friends and co-workers whom they themselves invite.



Finally, after stepping aside for the next team, they discern where the Spirit is calling them to serve in the parish. In sum, the steps are

- Make a weekend retreat at the parish
- Attend six months of weekly formation meetings with other retreatants
- Lead a retreat at the parish
- Discern service as part of the parish

The goal is to renew the parish. "The retreat weekend was a starting point that has helped me renew and deepen my faith in Jesus and allowed me to meet new friends in Christ," one man wrote

in his evaluation. The process can help retreatants to experience personal conversion within the Christian community. It aims to call individuals into community, ministry, and prayer.

Evangelization & Other Benefits

The program takes some planning and upfront expense, but, in my opinion, it is worth it. Hardly a week goes by when someone does not show up at the parish, saying he or she wants to become active in the church after having been away for years. Our parish staff responds to such persons by asking whether someone involved in Christ Re-

news His Parish could give them a call. Consistently, several of these "returning Catholics" sign up for the next weekend retreat.

Most inactive Catholics never stop by the parish office, however. I have found that Christ Renews His Parish, while advertised as a renewal process, reaches out especially well to inactive Catholics. For the first year or so, the retreats tend to attract the familiar faces of the parish. But soon the divorced, the remarried, and the Christmas and Easter visitors begin to make the retreats. Typically these parishioners come because their friends and co-workers in the parish, who have made the retreat and are preparing to give the next one, invite them. Such invitations begin to turn Catholics, who are sometimes reluctant to discuss their faith, into evangelizers.

The process blends high turnover with continuity. If certain personalities dominate a group, the turnover every six months allows new ideas to break out and the process to keep its edge. To ensure continuity, the leaders form a continuation committee with two-year terms. They hash out policies for the approval of the pastor and handle the budget and administration.

The retreats also work well in a multicultural parish. Our retreats, for example, might include several people from Trinidad, five or six Filipinos, and seven or eight Hispanics, reflecting in miniature the parish demographics. On retreat, different culture groups share their faith with each other.

What Is Involved?

It takes a parish of at least 1,500 families to provide the critical

mass, but once the program is started, the process takes care of itself. It becomes a seedbed, building communities within the larger parish community.

Considered as an annual plan, the weekend retreat requires a parish to set aside most of its facilities for four weekends a year. That takes some long-range planning and scheduling. Depending on the size and layout of the parish, the planners may have to be creative about eating and sleeping arrangements. A school with available classrooms is a big help.

The parish will face start-up expenses, however, several thousand dollars for manuals, program fee, supplies, and air mattresses for sleeping. After that initial investment, the program is basically self-supporting.

Each team has a spiritual director to provide spiritual leadership. The spiritual director is a mature, holy person appointed by the pastor or pastoral team, or discerned by the continuation committee. She or he could be the pastor, deacon, religious, or lay staff person. The spiritual director normally goes through the weekend retreat and the six months formation as a participant. He or she serves as a co-spiritual director for the next team and retreat. Ideally, each director serves as a spiritual-director-in-training before becoming a spiritual director, and each mentors the next director—the commitment runs for a full year-and-a-half in all (six months training; six months as director; six months as mentor).

The Experience

Weekend Retreat The process is set up to accommodate the aver-

age parishioner. The first part—the weekend retreat—takes place entirely on the parish grounds. Parishioners gather, eat, and sleep over Saturday night in existing parish buildings, without having to drive to a retreat center. To their surprise, people discover that their own parish is a fine place for renewal in Christ, though the experience does differ from an "away retreat." The parish weekend retreat costs less than most retreat centers, of course. A donation of \$50 per person would cover food and supplies in most regions.

Weekly Formation When the retreat ends on Sunday afternoon, retreatants typically go home with a "retreat high," which lasts about a week. To help the experience take root, they are invited to meet weekly as a group for three-hour meetings over the next six months. That is no small commitment. Yet, if my parish experiences are any guide, more than half of the retreatants make the commitment, and weekly attendance has not been a problem.

During the six months, the team follows a formation program laid out in the manual. The meetings include prayer, faith sharing, Scripture reflection, teachings, and witnessing. At the weekly meeting the spiritual director reflects on a theme, the parish as Christian community, for example. He or she uses material from the manual and from church teaching. The team responds to the reflection. Each meeting usually has a witness talk. The team member discerned to give the retreat witness talk on Christian community, for example, speaks to the team, which offers affirmation and constructive suggestions. This process prepares them to lead the next re-

treat. The underlying idea is that you don't fully experience or understand something until you give it. While participants are renewed in the Spirit by making the retreat, they are renewed even more by *giving* the retreat. As one group put it, "There is no going back to the way we lived before."

Ongoing Involvement After giving the retreat, most team members stay involved in parish life and outreach in some way, as eucharistic ministers, initiation sponsors, religious education teachers or youth leaders. I've noticed friendships forming as participants greet each other warmly on Sunday mornings. An outgoing team often elects to become a small church community, meeting regularly together.

Through the personal renewal of groups of parishioners, the parish undergoes its own renewal. Team members learn that *they* (not only parish staff) can give witness talks, organize meetings, prepare meals for sixty, schedule facilities, borrow keys, order supplies, deal with crises, and make do. The formation process gives them confidence to claim the parish as their own.

While parishioners embrace it readily, priests are more wary. Does the process "run down the priests" while it builds up parishioners? Since it is based on the sacraments, a priest was originally supposed to take part in the whole weekend (four times a year). He gave a thirty-minute talk on reconciliation, celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation on Saturday evening, and presided at retreat Masses on Saturday night and Sunday afternoon. A priest was expected to serve as the spiritual director for six months of weekly

meetings. No longer.

The process has been revised, recognizing that the workload of priests and the initiative of the laity have both increased since 1969, when the program began. Whenever a priest or deacon is not available, the program provides for lay spiritual directors. Still, the parish priest makes frequent appearances and provides the sacraments at the weekend retreats. And during the formation period, he acts as a chaplain and resource. By dropping in on the weekly meetings on occasion, the priest gives moral support to the team. In turn, the priest receives inspiration from the team's stories of faith and examples of service.

My first parish, Holy Name of Jesus in Indialantic, Florida, has sponsored Christ Renews His Parish for

eleven years. More than 1,300 parishioners have made the retreats. The parish now sponsors more than one hundred ministries and was listed in Paul Wilkes's *Excellent Catholic Parishes*. Last spring, Saints Peter and Paul parish in Winter Park started the program. The women's retreat already has a waiting list, and the men are not far behind.

From a Google search, we found that, as of this writing, 826 parishes in thirty-one states have hosted Christ Renews His Parish. God willing, in St. Cloud, Florida, there will soon be another.

Reverend David Scotchie is the parochial vicar at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in St. Cloud, Florida. To find out more about Christ Renews His Parish, contact P. O. Box 19100, Cleveland, OH 44119, phone 216-731-7903.

Please Note

Copyright Spring 2006, CHURCH magazine.
Published by National Pastoral Life Center,
18 Bleeker Street New York NY 10012

Used with permission.

Subscription: \$45 a year.

www.nplc.org

**CHURCH: Promoting Excellence
In Parish Leadership**