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Faith Today

Is there anyone like me in those, uh, groups?

By Father David K. O'Rourke, OP

Think of a prayer meeting, and you may well think of a meeting you're never going to attend. Whatever they're like, and whatever it is they do, many of us are quite content not to find out.

When I was a pastor, I had somewhat similar thoughts. Nonetheless I established a prayer group in our parish. On occasion over the years I attended the meetings. On occasion I still do.

But who else was there?

Spontaneous and informal praying, what many people call charismatic prayer, is playing a larger role in the church presently. People experienced in charismatic prayer were well represented in our group.

These people were accustomed to more personal prayer than is common in formal worship. They liked to complement their Mass attendance with public reading from the Bible and with sharing what the meetings mean to them.

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There was a second group too, a more diverse group, which I would like to describe. I suspect that they are a more significant part of prayer groups than is often recognized.

Some of these people could be called quite traditional Catholics. One couple, friends whom I can describe as dutiful Catholics, started coming to the prayer group simply out of respect for the church. The pastor had invited the parish and they dutifully accepted the invitation.

They admitted that the biblical readings were enlightening and the personal prayer genuinely moving. But the whole tone felt foreign to them. They decided to discontinue the weekly meetings.

But not for long.

This couple's children, all older teen-agers, held a meeting. Then they informed the parents that, after going to the prayer group, they found them more thoughtful toward each other, life at home was happier and communication better. The kids said they didn't know or care what went on at the prayer meetings. But it made life at home happier. So, like it

Separate and unique individuals. Like assembling the pieces of an intricate jigsaw puzzle, it takes time for a man living on society's fringes, a divorced mother, an older couple and several charismatic Catholics to discover how they are linked. But what brought them together in the first place?

or not, back the parents were sent.

Some of the other Catholics who commonly have attended our prayer meetings struck me more as life's victims. They were there unabashedly to ask for help.

I think of a woman, a mother of four teen-agers, whose husband had walked out on them. For a while, she managed to put on a good face. She was going to be strong; she would find work; she would meet the mortgage payments; she would keep the kids' grades up and the semblance of a middle-class life intact.

Then one day it all fell apart. The checking account was overdrawn. Two report cards included urgent notes about disciplinary problems. The crises started coming, too many and too fast, and she found herself breaking into tears at work. Like a ranch pond in the middle of a summer's drought, she found herself drained dry.

Another frequent participant was a young man whom I can describe best as living on the fringes of society. He was coping with life, but only at great effort and with mixed success. Getting through each day, paying the bills and keeping even a simple job taxed his abilities constantly to the breaking point.

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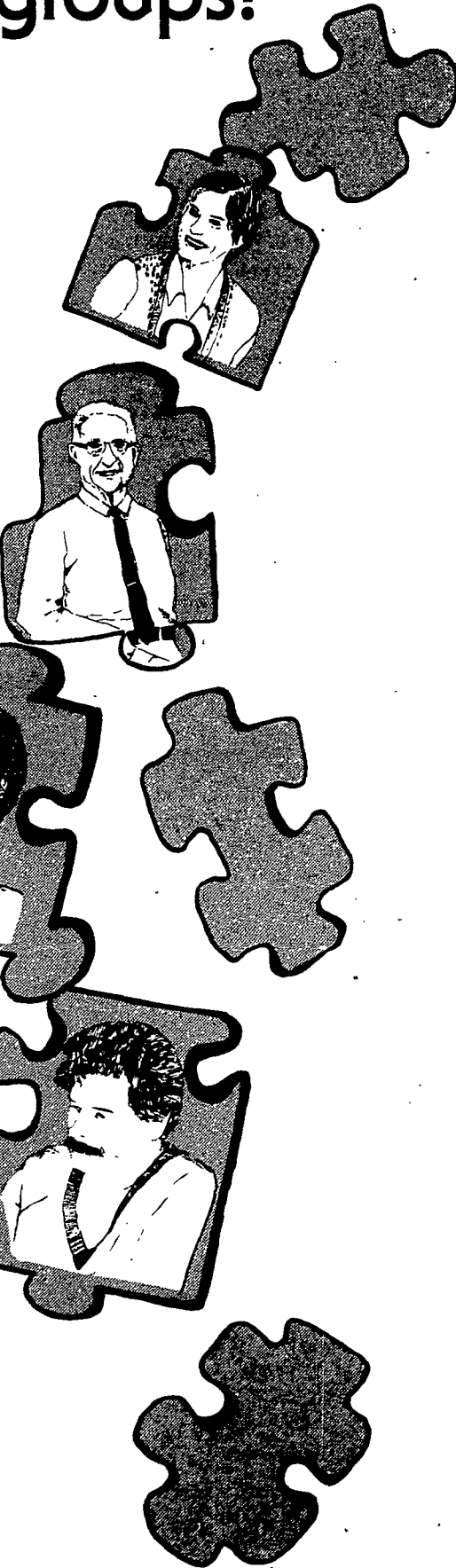
I singled out those last two individuals because they typify an important part of parish prayer groups. They are the wounded. They don't mind letting you know that fact.

These people no longer have any need to prove, to themselves or to others, that they really have it all together. No need to put on

a good show. Life has dealt them a walloping blow and they are still reeling. They need help and are quite ready to ask for it.

People like them are a central part of the membership of many prayer groups. They bring the painful reality of so much of human life directly before our eyes. I didn't need to watch the TV news to see people in real and immediate need. They helped me turn the words of Christ — about healing and compassion, about help and tenderness — from ideas or slogans into daily reality in my parish ministry.

Parish prayer groups often call themselves just that — prayer groups. But they are much more. They are first and foremost groups of individuals, people called together by their common faith. And prayer groups are a sign both of that faith and of the vivid reality of human need.



They bring home the reality that humans can be God's hands when they help to meet each other's human needs.

(Father O'Rourke is on the staff of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

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