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Renew

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They may get involved through the small group faith-sharing, larger group activities, Sunday liturgies, and take-home study materials.

Yet some parishes approach it cautiously because of conservatives' skepticism and because of the work and costs involved.

Maura Sweeney, Renew coordinator at St. Dominic's, is a former skeptic. Having traveled in conservative circles, she said, her reaction upon hearing Renew was being considered was, "You're kidding me."

Growing up in a Massachusetts diocese, she'd heard people say of Renew, "It's the laity taking over," and wonder, "Are they going to be respectful of our priests?"

By the late 1980s, criticism of Renew had led to a strengthening of its catechetical components, even though Renew was never intended to be catechetical, Renew officials acknowledged.

At St. Dominic's, Sweeney continued, the coordinating task fell on her, having worked in youth and adult ministries.

"The more I got into it, I think it has really put me in touch with the Holy Spirit moving in my life," she said.

Renew's focus is on small group formation, which, according to its literature, can

be the deepest experience of the process.

Yet, Sweeney said, "We respect and recognize that not everyone is going to sign up for small groups, and that doesn't make their faith experience inferior."

Sunday Mass attendance is a way to participate in Renew as well, she said.

Participants said they see a connection between Renew and the Synod's goals. Father Cosgrove, for one, pointed to Renew's emphasis on small Christian communities.

"Certainly faith formation, our first goal, will hopefully be an outcome of the program," the pastor also observed.

Diocesan Catholics have experienced Renew in the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, and St. Margaret Mary Church in Apalachin - Father Walter Plominski initiated it when he served those areas, as he did when serving at St. Patrick's in Seneca Falls.

But because Father Plominski was already familiar with the process, from his participation in his home diocese, the Diocese of Scranton, Pa., he used the Renew materials sold through Paulist Press rather than Renew's consultants, in the two former communities. Thus Renew headquarters does not have records of their participation.

The Northern Cayuga Cluster, as well, participated in Renew in the late 1980s with Paulist Press books, according to Fa-

ther William A. Moorby. The priest is now pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Newark Valley.

"I can't see the advantage," he said, of consulting the international Renew office. The program "went quite well," he said, involving numerous people and apparently helping them to grow spiritually.

However, Father Plominski now advises it is "ideal" to connect with the consultants.

"(Renew) is set up to be a new model of how church should work. Basically, it is set up by laypeople, with training from the Renew office," explained Father Plominski, currently priest administrator of St. Columba Church in Caledonia and St. Patrick Church in Mumford.

He commends the Renew consultants' expertise "from A to Z." For a fee often of \$10,000-\$13,000, a church can have such expertise, training, materials, and frequent consultations, Renew participants said.

However, the price, payable over three years, may be negotiated. And Renew will guide a parish's program free of charge, if it proves unaffordable.

Having first experienced Renew while serving St. Mary's Church in Wyalusing, Pa., Father Plominski explained its best effect: increased participation.

"People don't knock doors down for the typical adult education session," he said. "What Renew does, is usually get sev-

eral hundred people to commit themselves to 2½ years, to five six-week get-togethers. If you ever asked people to sign up for 30 sessions of adult education, people would be few and far between.

"I found it to be a tremendous blessing in the parishes I've worked in," he added.

While the Renew's Paulist Press books and tapes help in the small faith-sharing groups, they don't include Renew's personal services of guiding, evaluating and "helping to vision the church, and establishing goals moving into a future of the church," according to Sister Alice Yohe, SSJ, of Renew. "We help them to look ahead."

"The thing that keeps us going is contact with the Renew team coming out of New Jersey," Aldridge commented. "They're available through voice mail, e-mail and everything else."

Moreover, Aldridge is optimistic about the long-term effects of Renew.

"It works to renew people's own personal spirituality and to renew your parish," she said. "I think the two levels appealed to me. Trying to do one without the other would be hard, I think."

Sweeney said she already is reaping benefits from the training and planning.

"Our (Renew team) has been doing faith sharing and speaking," Sweeney said. "Some nights we have a Benediction and rosary first. We are beginning to feel more free sharing our lives in terms of Scripture. That's a pretty profound thing."

"It has carried over into my personal life," she added. "I look at Scripture differently now, and talk to my husband differently about it, too."

Although she could not recall specific objections to Renew, Father Plominski said that perhaps the paraliturgical activities involved in Renew bother some people.

"You don't have to use them," he said, stressing they are options in the small faith-sharing groups. "But someone may say, 'Gee, I've never done this before.'"

The options include lighting a Christ candle during prayer, holding hands around a table, or setting up a dish of blessed water and blessing oneself.

The current form of Renew evolved after the organization responded to criticisms in the 1980s. Renew voluntarily submitted its program to the scrutiny of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the NCCB's Committee on Doctrine issued a report in 1986. The committee commended the program but recommended changes, which Renew then undertook, according to several sources.

Those changes included a greater stress on Catholic teachings and a more balanced theological approach beyond personal experience.

However, Catholics United for the Faith remains unconvinced of Renew's value.

"The Renew program is a well-intended effort to build parish community," said CUF spokeswoman Zoë Romanowsky. "Unfortunately, a certain lack of focus on Catholic doctrine sometimes leads to greater confusion rather than unity."

Romanowsky said CUF recommends that any parish using Renew incorporate as much Catholic teaching as possible.

Renew has made other changes over the years including increased training for the parishes, more focus on small communities, continuous updating of materials, and more follow-through, according to Msgr. Kleissler.

"Every year we try to improve it," he told the *Catholic Courier*. "It has never stood still."

Msgr. Kleissler said he's often on the road, taking Renew around the world, and had just received a commitment from 13 dioceses in India, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Scotland and the Philippines.

He and Father Plominski noted that Pope John Paul II stated while in the United States that he was pleased with Renew's work.

Those commendations should assure Catholic skeptics, Father Plominski said.

"If they say you can't trust the American bishops, you can't trust the pope, I don't know who they can go to," he said.

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