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Evangelization

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"Within a year-and-a-half, we went from people who went to church because we had to ... to being people really involved in our parish," Fountain said of himself and his wife.

Huge 'denomination'

When the Fountains weren't going to church, they belonged to what one national church leader jokingly called the "second largest denomination in the United States" — the estimated 17 million inactive Catholics.

"Some of them don't even remember why they stopped going," said Father John E. Hurley, CSP, director of evangelization for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, based in Washington, D.C.

In a phone interview, Father Hurley said inactive Catholics can be divided roughly into three groups. The first group are those who have an issue with the church, such as its prohibition of women's ordination or its stance on homosexual behavior, he said.

"They're not going to darken the door of the church until the church changes its stance on the issues," he said of such Catholics.

The second group — one many commentators think may be the largest — stopped going to church because of a negative encounter with a church leader or member, Father Hurley said. Members of the second group may be angry because a parish priest didn't visit their ailing relative in a hospital, for example, or they were treated rudely by a parish employee, he noted.

The third group comprises those who simply stopped going because they didn't think the church was really interested in them. For such people, Sunday Mass may have been all the less appealing because no one in their parish ever seemed concerned enough to talk to them about their lives, he explained.

As part of Pope John Paul II's call to the church to celebrate Christianity's Great Jubilee in 2000, some dioceses and individual parishes in the United States are promoting reconciliation between the church and its inactive members, Father Hurley said. To help parishes and dioceses with this ministry, Father Hurley noted that the NC-CB will publish a resource directory in May called "A Time to Listen ... A Time to Heal:



A Resource Directory for Reaching Out to Inactive Catholics."

The resource directory has four parts, Father Hurley said: articles on the evangelization of inactive Catholics; parish, diocesan and national models that give 12 approaches for reaching out to inactive Catholics; six faith-sharing guides for small group reflection on Gospel stories of reconciliation; and a bibliography of resources.

Diocesan outreach

The Rochester Diocese is also formally preparing for the Jubilee, in part, by distributing to parishes this month literature describing models they can use to welcome back inactive Catholics. Developed by diocesan experts, these models use educational efforts, the small Christian community experience and retreats as ways to interest inactive Catholics in their faith again, according to Sister Karen Dietz, SSJ, coordinator of sacramental catechesis for the diocese's evangelization department.

Sister Dietz added that her department stands ready to help parishes train and educate parishioners interested in reaching out to inactive Catholics.

Sister Dietz also said that the diocese in March sponsored 10 regional gatherings of parishes to discuss how they can reach out to inactive Catholics. A total of 150 people attended the gatherings, which centered on discussion of the U.S. Catholic Conference's 1992 document "Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United

States."

"We want to let our inactive brothers and sisters know that they always have a place in the Church and that we are hurt by their absence," the document reads. "We want to show our regret for any misunderstandings or mistreatment. And we want to help them see that, however they feel about the Church, we want to talk with them, share with them, and accept them as brothers and sisters."

Sister Dietz pointed out that every parish needs to consider how it can best answer the church's call to welcome back inactive Catholics. However, she cautioned that parishes must be alive with participation by its current members if Catholics want to bring back those who no longer attend.

"You can't welcome back until you know what it is you're welcoming them back to," she said.

Evangelical insights

In light of the upcoming Jubilee, some parishes have already begun active efforts to welcome back inactive Catholics in the diocese, Sister Dietz said.

For example, the neighboring parishes of St. Catherine of Siena in Mendon, and St. Louis and Transfiguration in Pittsford, jointly promoted a recent series of Lenten discussion sessions for inactive or alienated Catholics, according to Father F. James Lawlor, pastor of St. Catherine's.

Since last December, Father Lawlor said his parish has hosted two other discussions in addition to the Lenten session where the reasons Catholics voiced about why they

had left the church were as numerous as the number of participants. Some Catholics had left because they remarried after a divorce and never got an annulment, he said. Others had disputes with church teachings, he explained. He advised parish leaders to clearly explain church teaching when possible, but he noted that certain issues present complex difficulties that won't lend themselves to easy explanation.

He added that his parish distributed reading material at the discussions, and that St. Catherine's plans to hold another session sometime this month or in May.

Both Father Lawlor and Condon emphasized that parishes thinking about reaching out to inactive Catholics should stress the personal touch.

Condon noted that every active Catholic probably has several acquaintances and friends they could consider inviting one-on-one to discuss their faith. He advised potential evangelizers not to lecture others, but to practice summing up their faith verbally in two or three minutes, emphasizing God's love as expressed through Christ, and the church as the community that celebrates that love.

Condon added that his parish plans to offer training sessions this fall for anyone in the diocese interested in learning how to share their faith in a personal way with others.

Father Lawlor also said that the personal touch can mean being the friend who accompanies an inactive Catholic who wants to rejoin the church.

"Sometimes it's easier when people come with people they know, rather than walking up by themselves to this formidable place called a rectory where they haven't been in 20 years," he said.

Gerry McLaughlin, faith formation minister at Guardian Angels, also said parishes should consider such steps as improving their liturgical music to attract worshippers, or conducting a door-to-door census of their neighborhoods to find inactive Catholics, something the Pittsford/Mendon parishes plan on doing, one parish's official said. McLaughlin added that no parish should be content until it seriously reaches out to inactive Catholics and others who might be interested in the faith.

"I think no matter how comfortable you are, and no matter how happy you are in your little parish, we kind of have an obligation to tell people about Christ and to let people know 'We're here, and we love you,'" she said.

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