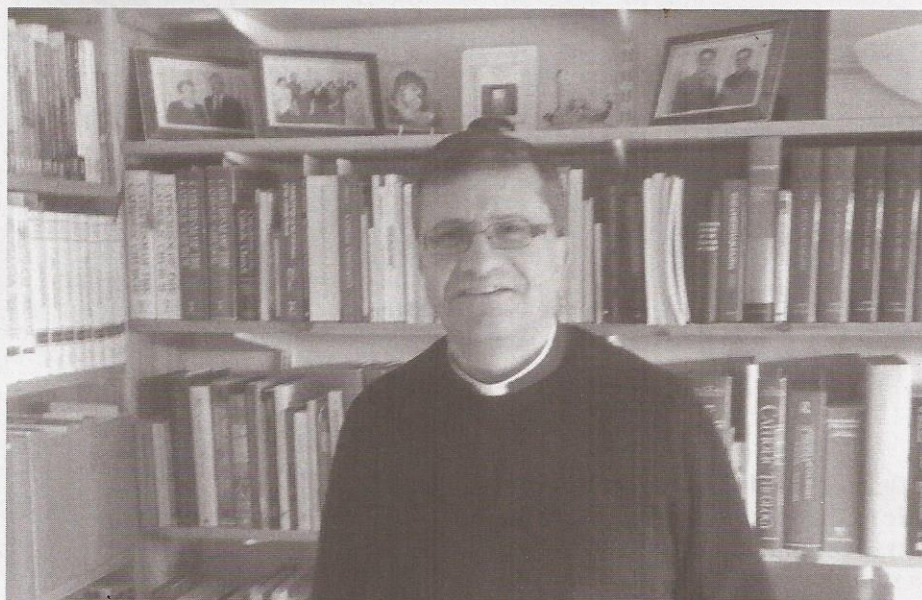


**Kristina Cooper reports on how the parish evangelisation cells are working at Holy Innocents' parish, Orpington, Kent.**

Everyone agrees that the key to transforming our parishes from maintenance to mission is to harness the gifts of the laity and energise them to evangelise. But how do we do this? There are lots of exciting models and ideas and books around (see page 30). One of these is the Parish Evangelisation Cells System (PECS). This was developed at St Boniface's parish in Florida almost 40 years ago by Fr Michael Eivers. This is a way of bringing the graces of the Charismatic Renewal into a Catholic parish context and providing a way of forming people and identifying their gifts and launching them into ministry. Key to its success is its combination of small group meetings, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and regular kerygmatic proclamation.

Popularised in Europe by St Eustorgio's parish in Milan, PECS was adopted by Holy Innocents' parish in Orpington, Kent, following a visit by their parish priest Fr Victor Vella and a team of parishioners in 2012. A two year prayer and preparation process to train the cell leaders and to create the structures that would support the system followed. This included the establishment of a specially created oratory for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and the setting up of a Parish Co-Responsibility Group (PCRG) to work with the parish priest in making decisions about the future of the parish. On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in June 2014 four parish cells were launched. Growth has been slow but steady and three years later there are now six cells with another two on the horizon.

I talked to Fr Victor to find out how things were going and whether the parish evangelisation cells had delivered the way he thought they would. He commented, "I was at such a low ebb in my role as a parish priest, that if I hadn't taken this step, I am sure that although I would still be a priest, I would no longer be in parish ministry.



FR VICTOR VELLA, PARISH PREIST OF HOLY INNOCENTS', ORPINGTON

## PARISH EVANGELISATION CELLS UPDATE

I feel much more realised as a priest now, as I am able to concentrate on prayer and teaching and leading the people."

### A MUSHROOMING OF NEW MINISTRIES IN THE PARISH

At the beginning, he said, there were fears by some parishioners that the introduction of the parish cells would destroy the other groups and ministries in the parish. He commented, "I can say categorically that this is not the case. In fact the opposite has happened. There has been a mushrooming of new ministries in the parish. Existing groups have also been re-energised, as people have become more enthusiastic about their faith. Two cell members for example have re-started the justice and peace group: another cell member, has started a bi-monthly social group for those on their own. Because there is a new climate of joy in service and a spirit of discipleship people ask to start things or take on new responsibilities." He tells me that one retired man felt called to take communion to the sick and is now responsible for overseeing that 26 housebound parishioners receive the Eucharist every week.

Already a good preacher, Fr Victor has had his own communication skills honed by the honest feedback and challenge from the cell leaders, as part of his role has been to provide a cell teaching every two weeks. In the beginning these teachings were very onerous for him and took a lot of time to prepare. They were also too academic for his audience. Now, however, with the encouragement of the cell members, he has learnt to make them more accessible and they are filmed and put on You Tube (*google Fr Victor Vella*) to download. The next stage he says, is to encourage the cell group leaders themselves to give the teachings they think appropriate for their cell, using the library of material that Fr Victor has produced as a basis. In this way, lay leadership is being developed all the time and new gifts discovered.

### TRANSITION NOT WITHOUT PAIN

The transition has not been without pain, however. Fr Victor reckons that about 100 people out of the 700 congregation, not liking this new vision, have left the parish and gone elsewhere. This is not just because of the cells, he says but also because



**Co-responsibility requires a change of mentality, particularly with regard to the role of the laity in the Church, who should be considered not as “collaborators” with the clergy but as persons truly “co-responsible” with the clergy for the being and activity of the Church**

Pope Benedict XVI

the new vision of the parish and the emphasis on discipleship and evangelisation. “Clericalism doesn’t just affect the clergy but lay people too. Some parishioners objected to the new structures I put in place to facilitate the cells and the whole emphasis on co-responsibility. Others objected to lay people giving announcements and being part of the leadership of the parish, which they felt should be the responsibility of the parish priest alone.”

The PCRG has real authority and responsibility. This has created a sense of dynamism in the parish with lay people taking ownership of the future of the parish rather than leaving it all to “Father”.

But the new ethos has been difficult for some. “I have been accused of being protestant and too evangelical because I talk about personal conversion,” says Fr Victor. “You can get hurt by what people say and feel rejected, particularly if the parishioners who leave are close to you. And in some situations maybe I haven’t handled things as sensitively as I could and have been partly to blame. But generally I would make the same choices again.”

He comments, “Very few parishes are living the ideal presented in Vatican II. Unfortunately we threw out a lot of the old style devotions, which helped people to pray and feel part of something, without replacing them with anything.

Thus parishes became simply Mass centres where the sacraments were dispensed.” This is now changing in Orpington through the cells and the on fire disciples this is creating.

All the key committees involved in the running of the parish have cell members in them who play an active role. Such is the support that he has received from members of the Parish Evangelisation Cells, that last Pentecost Fr Victor was able to run a National Life in the Spirit seminar retreat for 100 priests led by Fr Raniero Cantalamessa OFM Cap, drawing on their practical support.

At the beginning of this year a group organised a lunch time and evening Alpha course in the parish. “I did nothing,” says Fr Victor. “The leader was one of the cell members and he drew in other cell members as well as other parishioners to help.” This was a great success and about 50 people took part. The faith of many existing parishioners was enlivened and some who were lapsed or not Catholic were drawn to participate. As a result eight people now want to join the cells. Two more Alpha courses start in September and more are planned for next year.

**Those who are interested in knowing more about the parish evangelisation cells at Orpington should contact Maureen Evans tel 0208 467 3886 or email evans.maureen@btinternet.com**



CELL TWO LISTENING TO FR VICTOR'S TEACHING IN THEIR MEETING