

A WAY FORWARD FOR PARISH RENEWAL?

GOODNEWS interviews FR VICTOR VELLA, parish priest of Holy Innocents' parish in Orpington, Kent about the Parish Evangelisation Cells System they have adopted.

Why did you decide to explore the parish evangelisation Cell system? I had been in the parish for 4 years and I had a "holy restlessness". I believe that if a parish priest is not a pastor and forming disciples he will eventually end up in a crisis of identity, which is what happened to me. I began to think what am I doing here? I felt I was serving a petrol station parish and where we were just providers of spiritual services. We had done the Life in the Spirit seminars in the autumn of 2011 and needed something to follow up on this. I remembered that a friend of mine had told me about the Parish Evangelisation Cells (PECs) a year before. I had initially ignored her suggestion but that Christmas I started to reading about the PECs myself. This inspired me and when I came back I asked my friend to come with me to visit St Eustorgio in Milan because I wanted to see how they worked in practice and to get a feel for them.

What were your impressions of ST Eustorgio? My impression was of a parish as it should be – a centre of formation of missionary disciples. We met the parish priest, Don PiGi Perini. I saw that he was not a manager. He was a pastor, a teacher and a healer. This was what I wanted to be. I envied him. When I told him this he told me that what I was seeing was the fruit of 25 years hard work and the grace of God!

What was the main challenge for you in bringing the idea back to your parish? My main fear was about my own capacity, particularly from a time point of view. I am on my own in the parish with approximately 700 Sunday Mass goers and am extremely busy. I couldn't see how I would have the time to prepare the teachings, which are an integral part of the PECs. The other challenge was how to create a culture of coresponsibility in the parish because I could see pastoral delegation was the key to its success.

What was the next step? I called an open meeting of the parish and told them what I had seen. This was very well attended and I was given the mandate to go back to St Eustorgio's that spring with a group of parishioners to attend the international workshop about the parish evangelisation cells and explore the idea further.

What was the experience of those who went? Fourteen parishioners came. Some I had personally encouraged to come, but I also opened it up to anyone in the parish who wanted to go. For many of those who went it was a life changing experience. They saw for themselves what parish life could be like and wanted it for themselves.

What did you do then? Those who went wanted to start immediately and they did in fact begin to meet informally every fortnight to pray and share, but I knew that it was a huge thing to undertake as it was about changing the whole mindset of the parish. I was also a bit worried about the different cultural context in England and whether it would work here or not, so I wanted to take things slowly. I knew from experience that enthusiasm is not enough and that if it was to succeed the whole enterprise had to be

rooted in prayer. I had to create a greater culture of prayer in the parish, so the first thing I did was to augment the hours of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament from one hour a week to an hour a day. Eventually we created an adoration room which is now open 8am to 8pm. To facilitate this we bought a tabernacle from Rome with a glass front and a special cover which means we don't need to have a formal rota or Eucharistic ministers and people can just drop in as and when they feel like it during the day. The next step, as I didn't even have a parish council at the time, was also to set up a parish co-responsibility group. This is made up of nine lay people and myself and the parish deacon.

Have you had any obstacles? Changing the mindset of the parish has not been that easy as 50 years after Vatican II clericalism is still deeply embedded in the psyche of many parishioners. They feel that it must be the priest who does everything. Also I could see in myself a certain dragging of my feet. Stressed as my life as a priest was, I was used to a certain way of doing things where I was in charge of my time. Now I was taking a step into the unknown and I didn't know what this would mean for me personally. I had a fear that I would not be able to do this.

My motto has been since the beginning to "Hasten Slowly" and I don't regret this.

When did you launch the PECS in the parish? We were going to launch the cells at the end of 2013 after the leadership training course. But everything took a lot longer than some people had hoped and we didn't formally start the parish cells until Pentecost in 2014. Part of this was that it took me quite a long time to discern who should lead the parish cells groups. I knew I needed parishioners who were missionary disciples themselves otherwise they wouldn't be able to lead the groups effectively. My motto has been since the beginning to "Hasten slowly" and I don't regret this. I have subsequently learnt that in some European parishes where they have introduced the Parish Evangelisation Cell System too quickly, they have sometimes had to close some of the parish cells because of leadership problems. I am very happy with the leaders and co-leaders whom I have chosen, however. They come from very different backgrounds, and some of them are very busy people, but they are all on fire with love of God and a desire to love and serve the members of their cells. All the cell group leaders commit themselves to one hour adoration of the blessed sacrament a week to pray for the members of their group. I also insist that they have spiritual directors to help them with their own spiritual growth. If a leader is good at group dynamics that is a bonus but not essential.

How many cells do you have in the parish? At the moment we have five cells with almost 60 people involved. We began with four and started another one a few months ago. Our cells are a little too large, with about 12 people in them. The ideal for me would be eight. We are doing another leadership training course in the autumn and have identified more potential group leaders, so we expect to form new cells then, particularly after the Life in the Spirit seminars that we are running in the Easter to Pentecost period this year.

Have you found time to do the teaching for the parish cells? Yes. This has been a great blessing and an area of personal growth. I always pray beforehand and ask the Lord what topics I should tackle. I have found as time has gone on, my teaching has improved and it does not take me as long now as it did in the beginning. As a priest, however, one has to be humble and I have had to learn to listen to critical feedback from the leaders and co-leaders and what they have said about the teaching. Sometimes the cell members have found the teaching too long or too high brow. It has all been a learning curve for me too. I have also been blessed in that Barry, one of my deacons retired from full time work last autumn. He has taken over responsibility for the school, and the marriage and baptism and Holy Communion preparation and Wayne, my other deacon has taken over responsibility for the RCIA and Confirmation and youth ministry. This has freed me up to spend more time in preaching and teaching. The

Parish Co-Responsibility Group (PCRG) who help me run the parish are also all very able people. They are modelling the gifts that lay people have which can be put to use in the parish.

What is your relationship with the cell leaders and co-leaders? I do not go to any of the parish cells myself, but I am in very close touch with the leaders and after each cell meeting they will feed back to me how things have gone. They also fill out feedback forms which I see and we have regular leaders' meetings.

How does the rest of parish feel about the parish cells? I encourage people to go and visit a parish cell to see if it is for them. But PECs are not for everyone. And if this is not for them, I encourage them to find some other kind of small group for them to belong to, because I believe just turning up for Mass on a Sunday is not enough to maintain your Christian faith today.

What benefits have you seen from starting the parish evangelisation cells (PECS) in the parish? I can see people who go to the cells have had their hearts touched and some of them now come to daily Mass and go to adoration which they didn't do before. Their lives have improved and new callings and gifts discovered. It is a process, however. Before people go out and share the good news with others, they have to grow in discipleship and knowledge of the Lord themselves. I am seeing this happening. For me the PECs are a microcosm of the Church where the members not only have teaching, but prayer and fellowship and support. When I first started talking about evangelisation and co-responsibility in the parish these were alien words to most people. Now everybody knows what they mean because they see them in practice. These things all take time to mature and we are taking on a very big task which is to change the current paradigm of parish from one of maintenance to mission. The parish evangelisation cells are not a perfect model, but for me they are the best tool I have come across to help evangelise, form and support parishioners and help them to realise the calling of their baptism to reach out and serve others. I have also benefited myself in the process. As a priest I feel much more realised and fulfilled. We are not ordained to supervise bricks and mortar and to be managers but to form disciples. We are called to be icons of Christ – preacher, teacher and healer. And I feel for the first time I am really doing this now. A group from Holy Innocents', Orpington will be going to Milan for the international workshop on parish evangelisation cells 28th-31st May 2015.

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