

The Catholic News & Herald, May 19, 2006

Why Catholic? Why not?

New program offers adults chance to explore, expand faith

by KAREN A. EVANS

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CHARLOTTE -- It's often said that Catholics who have come into the church as adults know more about the Catholic faith than "cradle Catholics."

Adult Catholics -- converts and cradle Catholics alike -- throughout the Diocese of Charlotte will soon have the opportunity to expand their knowledge and practice of Catholicism beginning in 2007.

Pastors, directors of religious education and representatives of some 23 parishes, three university campuses and five diocesan Catholic schools attended an overview presentation of the "Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism" program for adults at St. Matthew Church in Charlotte May 15.

The presentation was repeated at the Catholic Conference Center in Hickory May 16.

"Why Catholic? is a reasonable plan to expand what is already happening in your parish, without a lot of extra time or cost," said Msgr. Tom Kleissler, president of RENEW International.

RENEW International is a Roman Catholic organization that fosters spiritual renewal, evangelization and the transformation of the world through parish-based small Christian communities.

RENEW International's ministries include RENEW, Campus RENEW, Why Catholic?, Theology on Tap and Healing the Body of Christ.

Nineteen archdioceses and dioceses in the U.S. currently participate in the Why Catholic? program. Bishop Peter J. Jugis is recommending the implementation of Why Catholic? in all parishes of the Diocese of Charlotte.

A significant shift

Why Catholic? seeks to address the trends of the past several decades occurring in Catholic families.

"In past generations, Catholics were 'marinated' in Catholicism," said Sister of Providence Terri Rickard, institute organizer at RENEW International. "Even if they didn't practice the Catholic faith anymore, they couldn't shake their Catholicism."

Today, only one in every 10 children who are baptized receives first Communion, Sister Rickard said. Also, many adults in their 20s and 30s don't know church teachings like their parents and grandparents.

In response to these problems, the U.S. bishops promulgated “Go and Make Disciples” (1992), “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (1994), “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us: A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States” (1999) and “National Directory of Catechesis” (2005).

Why Catholic? fosters the goals of “Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us,” the bishops’ pastoral plan for adult faith formation. The Why Catholic? process is comprehensive, containing a full range of elements in both English and Spanish. It includes orientation, small community leader formation, retreat experiences, an invitation video and family-oriented bulletin inserts.

Renewal of faith

The prime purpose of faith formation is first to awaken people’s faith and second is to teach the faith, said Sister Rickard. Why Catholic? provides training in evangelization and faith formation for adults of all ages and education levels.

“(People) will be able to say ‘This is why I’m Catholic,’ and share or explain those reasons to others,” she said.

Why Catholic? is designed to meet in six-week sessions, twice a year, for four years. Each year an aspect of Catholic life is explored in small communities.

Why Catholic? offers parishes another way of serving the Catholics in their community, not just those who regularly attend Mass. It was developed for use by any size parish, even those with small budgets, Sister Rickard said.

“On numerous occasions in parish work, I have encountered adults who feel inadequately prepared to defend or discuss their faith,” said Father John Putnam, judicial vicar and pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Salisbury.

“It is easy to lament the situation, but Why Catholic? actually provides a means to begin addressing the problem,” he continued. “Anything that we pastors can do to assist our people to embrace their faith more completely is certainly worth exploring.”

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Why Catholic? is based on the four pillars of the Catholic Church:

1. The profession of faith -- what Catholics believe
2. The celebration of the Christian mystery -- the sacraments
3. Life in Christ -- walking with God
4. Christian prayer -- deepening the experience of God