News



Renew's president, Joe Nuzzi, and its vice president of pastoral services, Meredith Augustin, speak at the Las Vegas 2025 Catechetical Conference Sept. 5. (Courtesy of Meredith Augustin)



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Long before synodality became a central focus for the Catholic Church worldwide, Renew International had quietly been reshaping parish life across the United States with similar methods.

Founded nearly 50 years ago, the nonprofit ministry aims to cultivate what it calls "communion, participation, and mission," training lay leaders to form small Christian communities. Its roots lie in the vision of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, emphasizing lay engagement and practical expressions of faith.

Joe Nuzzi, Renew's president and executive director, has a decades-long connection to the organization. He first worked with Renew around the turn of the millennium, during the rollout of Renew 2000, a nationwide initiative prompted by Pope John Paul II.

The program works with dioceses across the country, building lay formation into parish life.



In September 2025, a Renew banner hangs over Main Street in Beverly, Massachusetts, where local Catholic parishes are in the process of forming small Christian communities. (Courtesy of Joe Nuzzi)

The origins of the movement can be traced back to Archbishop Peter Leo Gerety's time as head of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. Gerety, who served as archbishop from 1974 to his retirement in 1986, was committed to social justice and retrained priests and religious to implement the vision of the Second Vatican Council. Recognizing that laypeople required a parallel formation, Gerety tasked two priests to develop such a program.

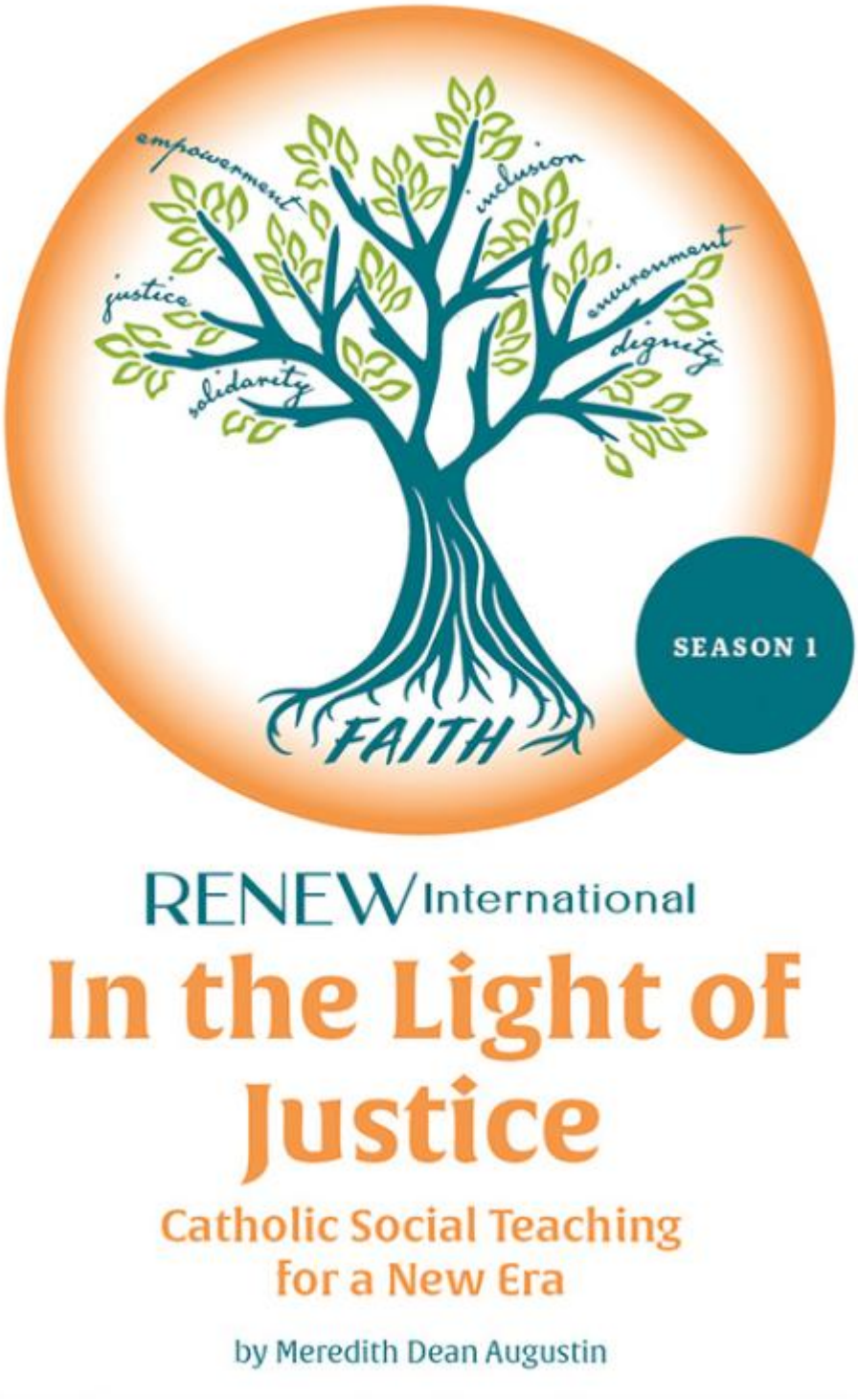
The model's focus on small communities drew on approaches already familiar to American Catholics, such as the Catholic Worker and youth- and family-focused initiatives.

Today, Renew continues to directly engage its members while stressing the practical application of Catholic social teaching. "It's formative, because it calls people to come together, to witness to one another. So it's not a Bible study. It is faith sharing,

where people are discussing the impact of the faith on their everyday life," Nuzzi told the National Catholic Reporter.

"The first step of Renew is actually to create a new ministry within the parish, and we work with those people to implement the vision, and they're the ones that go out and try to get as many of their co-parishioners into small communities to do Renew," he explained.

Meredith Augustin, vice president of pastoral services at Renew, described the program as a yearlong, small group journey that integrates Scripture, faith sharing and concrete action rooted in Catholic social teaching.



Material from Renew's new resource for U.S. parishes (Courtesy of Renew International)

Participants move from learning about justice to living it, creating what she describes as "field hospital parishes" that shift from charity to justice. Her recent

work, a process called "In the Light of Justice," was developed in response to the election of Pope Leo XIV. The new resource is designed to help communities engage with contemporary issues with a grounding in Scripture.

"Success for me would look like parishes shifting from projects to a pattern. Accompaniment is something that becomes normal. Who's missing at our tables? So that parishes become a live sign of mercy and hope," she said.

Renew leaders say their program offers a practical model for how Catholic communities can live their faith. They stress that the small Christian communities aim to turn parishes into spaces where parishioners reflect on Scripture, discuss its impact on their daily lives and act on it.

As synodality is increasingly promoted as a principle for church governance, Nuzzi said Renew illustrates a grassroots method for fostering dialogue, shared responsibility, and communal discernment within parish life.

Helen Osman, who helped introduce Renew into the Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri, reflects on the ministry's historical roots and contemporary work. Osman, a communications expert who worked in parish ministry with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and as a consultant at the Vatican, worked closely with then-Jefferson City Bishop Shawn McKnight to implement synodal principles locally, using Renew's tools.

"Intuitively, I think we have realized in this church that small groups is how we create right relationships, and that's what Renew does for us. It gives people the ability to come together in a safe place, to talk about the word of God, or teachings based on the word of God," she told NCR.

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Recounting a rural parish session that far exceeded expectations, Osman said: "People started showing up. I had maybe eight or nine people in mind, and we ended up with about 50 people there. One older man said, 'I came to this parish for three years, and the first time somebody spoke to me was when I got invited to an Advent small faith group.' The pastor took the notes to the parish council and said, 'What do we need to do so that people aren't coming to this place and not feeling welcomed?' "

Augustinian Fr. Arthur Purcaro, a professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University and a longtime friend of Leo XIV, wrote the foreword for Renew International's new resource "In the Light of Justice" based on his long-standing connection to the organization and its leadership. Drawing on decades of experience in Peru, Purcaro brought firsthand insight into the process of building small Christian communities in diverse, often rural settings, he said.

While in South America, Purcaro helped establish parish neighborhood structures across 1,600 villages in the Andes and desert regions. Families were encouraged to form basic Christian communities, learning to read and write while using the Bible as a spiritual and educational foundation.

The priest told NCR that Renew's materials served as a foundational model, adapted to local contexts and languages.



Renew's "Levantate" ("Arise") small Christian community at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Huntsville, Alabama, July 2024 (Courtesy of Meredith Augustin)

He also said he sees Renew as a practical vehicle for promoting synodality in the U.S. "We need to be a church which is able to let go of the structures which were very adequate for previous times, to adapt itself to become a church which truly listens, to discover God in one another," he said.

He said that Renew offers a structured way "for parishes to cultivate dialogue, communal discernment and relational engagement in an increasingly individualistic society."

"It's not a catechism to learn. It's a style of life to live, to be all-embracing, to reach out and to care for one another. I agreed it was a perfect structure for it," he said.

Fr. Anthony Randazzo, a 65-year old New Jersey priest, says it was this care for others that brought his Italian father to Renew in New Jersey. He said the ministry gave his father a chance to socialize and engage in faith-based conversation.

And now, as pastor at the Church of Presentation in Saddle River, New Jersey, Randazzo has continued using Renew's tools through programs on Pope Francis' environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*, pilgrimages and small faith-sharing groups.

"For my father, what was so essential with Renew was getting out of the house, being with other people, having a cup of coffee with other people, sharing faith, being in conversation," Randazzo said. "Renew is a process that can really enable church to be church, renew the church, be church, renew church again."