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Small communities offer a path to 'renewing the priestly heart'

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today

Reno, Nev. — While a conference geared toward issues of priest leadership can tend to be male-dominated, a few women also made appearances in Reno.

One was Dominican Sr. Terry Rickard, executive director and president of RENEW International, who addressed priests Wednesday morning as part of the 45th annual conference of the National Federation of Priests' Councils.

Her talk centered on small communities and their role in nurturing renewal and the new evangelization.

One aspect RENEW has recently begun to explore involves small groups of priests. Rickard spoke with *NCR* Wednesday about this approach, which she presented the next day to the conference in several workshops.

"What we started to encounter, particularly in the last five to 10 years, is that many priests were having a difficulty in terms of feeling connected to the presbyterate," she explained.

Some priests held anger regarding the Dallas charter and began to isolate themselves, focusing more on their parish and parishioners rather than relationships with their peers. And while priests have had support groups in the past, Rickard said priests told her there was a need for something new.

"The priesthood, I think is really in the vision of Vatican II to be a man of the people, and more of a servant-leadership model, and that's what the priests were really trying to move forward," she said.

The result of focus groups and meetings with Boston priests became "Renewing the Priestly Heart," a 12-session, yearlong program for small groups of priests to develop community around discussions of what it means to be diocesan priest today and how they can grow in that role.

The program utilizes a book authored by Boston archdiocesan priest Fr. John Sassani that focuses around reflections Cardinal Timothy Dolan wrote for seminarians. The sessions cover a range of topics: spirituality; the priest as servant leader, and as community builder; the priest and the homily and the sacraments; the priest as lifelong learners; and credibility and the scandals.

Each begins with a prayer, and then allows priests to talk of their own experiences related to the topic, and then connecting it to scripture. The roughly 90-minute meeting ends with a call to action, and encourages priests to continue building fraternity through a meal or other activity.

So far, RENEW has piloted the program in three dioceses: Davenport, Iowa, Montreal, Canada and Metuchen, N.J. Early feedback from surveys of Davenport priests have shown some progress.

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"They're talking about a greater sense of fraternity "saying that they never really talked to other priests about things that mattered in this kind of focused way," Rickard said.

She noted that the priests participating were not just those struggling in their ministry, but for all looking for spiritual growth in what it means to be a man of God.

"That's why we say these aren't just support groups. It's not just to help the priests emotionally " it's so he becomes a better pastor, that he becomes a better minister, and that in effect will help the church," she said.

Rickard's hope is the priests who work through the program experience community building in a way that allows them to foster similar relationships in their parishes and dioceses, reflecting RENEW's vision of "the church as a community of small communities."

"This is not just the priests' concern, it's a church concern," she said. "How can we have the best ministers " whether they be priests, whether they be lay ecclesial ministers " what can we do to help all of us with pastoral leadership be more energized and dynamic and be about renewing the church," she said.

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