

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 6, 2013 at 6:00am

Well-being of priests focus of federation conference

by Brian Roewe

Reno, Nev. — Biblically speaking, a trip to the desert offers a time for reflection, cleansing and a renewal of the spirit.

Renewal of mind, body and spirit, to be specific, for close to 100 priests who attended the 45th annual conference of the National Federation of Priests' Councils, held in northwest Nevada April 22-25. The conference theme -- "All things renewed in Christ" -- made clear to attendees the focus of the speakers and workshops filling the four days.

In his opening remarks, federation president Fr. Anthony Cutcher referenced the symbols embedded in Pope Francis' first days and his call to "go out to the edges," or as Cutcher interpreted, "to get out of our rectories, get out of ourselves, so that we can be powerful and good ministers."

Before arriving at the edges, though, priests first must ensure their own spiritual health.

That process of renewal often begins with the liturgy, Cutcher told *NCR*, calling it "the touchstone for priests."

Auxiliary Bishop Christopher Coyne of Indianapolis echoed that in his talk April 23, describing the liturgy as a source of constancy and change.

A well-celebrated liturgy -- one with proper reverence, good music and heartfelt preaching -- can revive not only the parish community but the priest himself. Coyne advised priests to avoid "developing a cult of personality" around themselves, and to get out of the way of the liturgy and allow it "to do what it does" in offering glory to God.

But the foundation for strong liturgy begins with a spiritually strong priest, a challenge today given the realities priests face: declining numbers, "liturgy wars" between pre- and post-Vatican II Mass forms, and the demands of the new evangelization, among others. Add to that the responsibilities to parishioners, be it Sunday services, confessions and other sacraments, or special blessings.

"The requirements in terms of just trying to celebrate Mass and do all the things that are part of being a good parish priest can place a lot of stress on guys," Coyne said, "because priests want to help people, be with people and celebrate the sacraments, and sometimes it's hard to say no."

Setting limits on what they can do is a start, he said.

"We become so other-centered, and our lives are going from one appointment to another liturgy to another meeting, oftentimes we are the last person we take care of," Coyne told *NCR*.

The tendency for priests to not practice what they preach can lead to an unhealthy path, both spiritually and mentally.

"When we go back to the roots of our theology and practice what we really believe, that it leads to a healthier sense of spirituality and healthy living," Jesuit Fr. Gerard McGlone said.

Too often today, that just isn't the case, the executive director of the St. John Vianney Center in Philadelphia, a behavioral health facility for religious and priests, told *NCR*.

McGlone presented April 23 at the conference a picture of unhappy priests with low morale across the country, particularly in dioceses where major abuse crises have emerged, such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Kansas City, Mo.

Why are priests so unhappy?

McGlone argued it's a result of subpar formation and an effect of the Dallas Charter, the 2002 procedures the U.S. bishops established for addressing priest sex-abuse allegations. The "dual process of justice and accountability" that the charter prescribes for priests and bishops ruptured the trust relationship, he said, and to repair it, bishops must acknowledge the breach.

"The pendulum has to swing back to a normal sense of sanity that we can protect children and protect the rights of priests," he said.

That the minority of problem priests dominate bishops' time only compounds the failings in formation, McGlone said. He pointed to research showing happiness not as an inherent skill but a learned discipline, and one not well taught to religious. Skills not properly developed include emotional intelligence, a healthy sexuality and how to cultivate nurturing, intimate relationships.

"If we create happy and healthy and holy priests, we facilitate happy, healthy and holy communities," he told *NCR*.

That area -- helping priests come together and discuss what it means to be men of God -- has become of particular interest to Dominican Sr. Terry Rickard, executive director and president of RENEW International. While her organization has focused on small groups as a means toward evangelizing, it has found the model is most effective when priests buy in first.

She used the final day of the conference to lead priests in workshops on how to create small groups that are more than just support groups, but places where the men can experience community among people of the same calling.

Rickard has piloted the 12-session, yearlong program in three dioceses, with so far encouraging results.

"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 those 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.

"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?"

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