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Can the old-movement spirit power the new Francis movement?

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NCR Today

Sixty years ago, the kind of lively Gospel Christianity Pope Francis talks about today was flourishing in the U.S. and 25 other countries. It was achieved through the so-called "movements" -- the Young Christian Workers (YCW), the Young Christian Students (YCS) and the Christian Family Movement (CFM). Small groups from parishes or schools were gathering regularly to examine various problems of life in their own areas, like poverty, politics, racism or culture. They would then discuss how a particular issue relates to Gospel values. Finally, they would determine a specific action that might bring real life and the Gospel into closer alignment.

It was all very simple: See. Judge. Act. Ironically, this procedure had been originally borrowed by a Belgian priest, Canon Joseph Cardijn, from the communist method of forming small cells to begin changing society. Cardijn simply applied the method to Catholic thought and action. Without hierarchical oversight, these lay-run movements would grow and spread from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, then gradually decline and virtually disappear. Was there something there that should be resurrected in this new age of Catholicism?

In a new book, *The YCW I Remember*, published by ACTA Press, Frank R. Ardito Jr., describes his years as a member, leader and organizer for the YCW. You can feel on almost every page his enthusiasm, his love of achievements (often small ones), and his sense of being called as a simple working man to make the Gospel come alive. The movements worked largely because the group members tended to bond and reinforce one another. Many of these groups had a priest chaplain who provided encouragement, but there was a solemn unwritten law that the priest could not comment in any way until the meeting was over.

Veterans of the movements still talk today about how their whole life was transformed by those eye-

opening meetings. Ardito tells how he later got a job with the Chicago Commission on Youth Welfare: "The staff was among the brightest, most dedicated, most experienced and most highly educated people I would work with in city government. I was the greenhorn in the bunch -- the guy with little work experience and formal education. But I was highly motivated to help kids; I was highly motivated to prevent street gang violence; and I was highly motivated to do something about race, discrimination and poverty. ... In time I found I brought something unique to the situation, and that was a belief in the absolute worth and dignity of every person ... white or black, rich or poor in or out of street gangs or whatever. It was a belief that originated with my family and was later reaffirmed and refined in the Young Christian Workers. It was really the reason I was able to make some difference in my work."

For many years, I was involved with CFM groups in several parishes. What I saw was the Second Vatican Council in action before Vatican II even happened -- the open window, the compassion for the poor, the sheer joy of the Gospel. Under the leadership of the charismatic Pat and Patty Crowley, CFM became a staple in the U.S. in Latin America, Asia and Europe. Some bishops feared these proliferating cells might, lacking clerical control, turn into Marxist cells. But that was not a common worry among the bishops of those days.

Why the movements declined and deteriorated after Vatican II has been a subject of much discussion over the years. Some would blame changes in society, the rise of secularization, the pervasiveness of nonstop distractions like television and sports. Others link the decline to *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical that shook confidence in leadership and started an ongoing exodus out of the church and a growing attitude of indifference to anything the church says, especially among the young. Whatever the cause, the good old days are gone.

But wait! With all his might, Pope Francis is preaching what the YCW, YCS and CFM were proclaiming: The message of Jesus is a joy-filled summons that demands action in this world, toward the stranger, the outcast, the poor, the depressed. And people are listening. But thus far, they are listening as individuals. And carrying forth his message is not an easy task on an individual basis.

I dare to propose the development of innovative "movements" that could harness the power of Francis, the generator. He has moved the church in unimagined ways. What we need is a handful of new practical successors to Canon Cardijn and Patty and Pat Crowley to organize small group movements again now that the winter ice is breaking. Fortunately, laypersons of such vision and practical know-how are not lacking in the church today. It's time for them to speak up.

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