

Parish Family Groups

By Breda Theakston FLM Coordinator

'Making faces, into names, names into friends and friends into family', Fr Peter McGrath, of the Passionist Order, came among us this month, all the way from Australia and, at the age of 72, with all the zeal of an early apostle, to share the story of Parish Family Groups.

On a much big tour of the parishes in England and Wales that have already started Parish Family Groups, Fr Peter stopped over in Leeds to visit family friends and was happy while here to go anywhere and meet anyone to share the good news of the Gospel in his startlingly fresh way. His core message is the very Gospel that animates Family Life Ministry 'Love one another as I have loved you', and he was here to share how Passionist Parish Family Life Groups do just that in hundreds of parishes in Australia and the United States sharing with all people, not just regular church goers, Jesus' commandment anew. How? Small groups of about ten families meet once a month to do something fun and low budget.

Fr Peter was all that we might associate with the bluff Australian male, but without the can in the hand or the corks on the hat, and a deal more real. He greeted everyone in a direct and joshing style and as attentively as a true brother or sister. His ability to establish rapport and find what makes us tick was astonishing.

Fr Peter explained to those gathered to hear him in the Chapel at Hinsley Hall, that his mission started in 1957 when he was sent to minister to a small congregation in a small tin hut in the Australian bush, 'where I couldn't do too much damage' as he puts it. Within a few years the congregation had grown from some 20 families to one so big that when he was looking for people for the new parish council he was setting up 80 people applied.

Loneliness, Fr Peter said is a huge problem for many people and the tragedy is that it is hidden even within our parish communities. To counter this Parish Family Groups help people to become real communities. They do this by gathering regularly for very ordinary low cost events like picnics and 'bush walks'. Everybody is welcome and everyone is accepted as they are. In this very ordinary, human way, as people get to know each other they begin to break through what Fr Peter calls 'epidermal Christianity' (skin deep) and to share with each other the love of our Father in much the way that Jesus did, by loving one another.

All we would need to do is translate picnics and bush walks into events that suit our temperament and our climate (as most parishes already do in halls up and down the country). The difference is it would be based on as many groups of ten or twelve families as want to join in and will organise themselves.

Parish Family Groups can be inter-generational or more particular groups. For instance a parish with an older population might have 'senior' groups who meet every month for a fun low-cost activity. Holy Rosary Church in Chapeltown, Leeds already does something like this with it's regular Community Lunches, inspired by Growing Old Grace-fully.

On the evening of his stay here Fr Pater went to English Martyrs Church, Wakefield where he was very warmly welcomed by the evangelisation team there, plus several other parishioners who were curious to hear what he had to say.

The parishioner in Wakefield who had invited Fr Peter that evening captured something of the almost universal response to meeting Fr Peter when he said 'The event was a real blessing to our Parish - an excellent evening. I'm certain something good will come from this'.

Meeting and greeting all people equally and by name and with a strong attentive personal presence Fr McGrath might sound thoroughly intimidating but he is not. He managed to make everyone smile, many people laugh and left just a few a little unsure how to take this hard talking Aussie priest who wears his heart on his black jumper topped with the cross of Jesus (the Passionist Badge) so no one is in any doubt about who he serves and who he wants is all to know.

He certainly made faces into names and names into friends in his all too brief visit here. The question now is will we friends do what it takes to become family?

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