

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Parish Cell Communities as Agents of Renewal in the Catholic Church in Ireland: A Sociological Analysis by Michael Hurley

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ous relationship of Christianity and culture. Indeed, the emergence of the church in the first-century Roman world is an example of this continuity. Christianity's dialogue with and within culture tells us something about the church itself. As Ford puts it, 'the church . . . has been multiple in form across time and space; diverse even within officially united denominations.'

Above all, Ford sees scripture and its interpretation as the creative source of theology. His manifesto is a complex tapestry that covers our understanding of what it means to do theology, how we teach it, and where it interacts with society in all its complexity. At the heart of this lies a continuous exegetical thread. Ford's explanation of theology is itself an exegesis. His contrast of Job's comforters, and their 'packaged' theology, with Jesus, the receptive listener, is an insightful and creative illustration of how theology can be good and bad, hopeless and hope-filled.

To write a manifesto on any subject is an ambitious project. If one criticism could be made it is perhaps that Ford is sometimes overambitious. This is evident in his later chapters, where much of the discussion takes the form of bullet points. Often, these points represent areas that could never be developed in a single volume. This is equally the strength of the work. *The Future of Christian Theology* is an appeal for creativity expressed and performed 'in many modes.' To realize this potential is, like the Christian tradition itself, an open, never-finished task. Ford's central achievement, then, is his insistence on a model of theology that bears witness to the unity, diversity, and vibrancy of twenty-first century Christianity.

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**Parish Cell Communities as Agents of Renewal in the Catholic Church in Ireland: A Sociological Analysis.** Michael Hurley. Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press. Pp. 491. Price: £39.95 (UK) or \$49.95 (USA).

Over the next year or more we can expect to hear the issues of faith renewal and New Evangelisation discussed in various theological and pastoral fora. The next Synod of Bishops will discuss the New Evangelisation and Pope Benedict has set aside a Year of Faith to follow this. In this context the volume under review will prove an interesting resource for those who wish to explore issues of renewal and evangelisation. The book itself is a doctoral thesis, presented at All Hallows College, Dublin. Herein lies its strengths and weaknesses. It retains all the academic apparatus and stylistic features of a doctoral dissertation, which can make it a little tedious for the pastor or popular reader. On the other hand, it holds a wealth of information and pointers for further exploration of the various topics addressed.

The book provides an overview and analysis of the parish cell movement in the light of recent papal statements promoting a New

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Evangelisation. The parish cell movement was initiated by an Irish Spiritan priest, Father Michael Eivers, in Florida in 1983. The movement has since spread throughout the world, although it is not widely known in the Irish context. However, the author is personally involved in its promotion in the diocese of Dublin.

The cell community is described as 'faith group of 4 to 12 people, who meet every two weeks in the informal setting of a home, and who are inspired by a basic understanding that "where two or three meet in my name, I shall be with them (Mt 18:20)"' (p.136). This description is further amplified as 'an *oikos*-related, multiplying small group that seeks to evangelise, disciple and shepherd through daily relationships' (ibid.). The author sees in this movement a valuable means by which to advance the New Evangelisation, which seeks to bring a 'new ardour', a 'new method' and a 'new expression' to the proclamation of the gospel, especially in those parts of the Church that appear tired and dispirited. He emphasises that for the participants the movement 'is characterised by relational and interpersonal qualities, in that it is inspired by a relationship with Christ, nurtured in communal interpersonal settings, and verbally proclaims the person of Christ to individuals as they meet them during their everyday activities' (p.357).

The parish cell movement appears to have much in common with other groups that emphasise intimacy in faith sharing and interpersonal relationships, providing valuable support for their members in witnessing to Christ and his message. One is left wondering to what extent this can be a popular movement in the Irish context, given a native reluctance to be quite reserved in sharing one's faith position or bringing it to bear on social and cultural realities. Many have obviously found the movement helpful to date and that is well documented in the work. It may indeed be one of the more useful means to promote the New Evangelisation and is certainly worthy of consideration. However, the author of this study candidly admits that his own expenditure of energy – 'intensity of time, effort, and emotion' – in the study of the topic 'somewhat blurs objectivity' (p.391). So, while a very conclusive evaluation of the movement is not really available, nevertheless, this work does provide an interesting treasure trove of ideas about developing faith and promoting the New Evangelisation in small group contexts. Certainly those involved in pastoral planning and renewal will benefit from engaging with its content.

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