

## RENEW INTERNATIONAL COMES TO WESTMINSTER

### A review of 'At Your Word, Lord' - Season One

Before reviewing the material used in Season One of 'At Your Word, Lord' (AYWL) it is appropriate to note the origin of Renew. It goes back to the mid-seventies in the U.S.A. and the Call-to-Action Conference held in Detroit. That Conference was composed largely of dissenting 'special interest' groups promoting practices and proposals in direct opposition to the teaching of the Church. There was a particular hostility towards Rome. Out of that Conference the concept of the Renew programme emerged under the direction of Archbishop Peter Gerety of Newark, New Jersey. This was a programme designed to put community before hierarchy, unity before truth, justice and peace before the salvation of souls and personal experience before the teaching authority of the Church. Thus, a programme was born which would fit neatly into the Modernist mould.

The international path of Renew has been well-documented in publications such as *Christian Order*. It has been tried, tested - and found wanting. Diocesan statistics demonstrate that it has failed to produce the results which its proponents claim it achieves. Despite this, the programme has now been imposed on the Archdiocese of Westminster and, no doubt, it is destined for other dioceses in England and Wales.

The emergence of Renew in Westminster followed an all-too-familiar pattern. In May 2002 a 'consultation' about 'spiritual renewal' was carried out in the parishes throughout the diocese. The laity were invited to submit their suggestions. Many concerned Catholics responded, drawing attention to the need for reverence towards the Blessed Sacrament; the opportunity to kneel to receive Holy Communion; the return of altar rails; greater emphasis on traditional devotions, and strong preaching on matters of faith and morals. None of these matters was addressed and it soon became clear that the decision to use Renew had been taken already.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with the format of Renew it goes like this: First there is a presentation of the programme to all the priests of the diocese gathered together for a two or three day meeting. Stage two is the Preparation Year during which parish core committees and group leaders are trained. Then comes the Diocesan Launch event and the programme proper. There are five 'Seasons' - each lasting six weeks - spread over a three-year period. In Westminster these are in the sequence: Autumn of Year 1, Spring and Autumn of Year 2 and Spring and Autumn of Year 3. This means that the AYWL programme will conclude in the latter part of 2005. Each 'Season' has a theme and each weekly 'session' has a topic related to the theme.

At the heart of the Renew process are the *'small groups of six to eight people meeting weekly, guided by the material provided, to reflect upon the themes of the programme, meditate upon the scripture texts chosen, and share with each other their responses to the word of God in the light of their own lives and experience.'*

All views expressed are to be regarded as equally valid and, *even if they contradict the teaching of the Church,* they must be left uncorrected.

The group leader, who has undergone training, is equipped with a Handbook which directs how the group is to be run. For example, the leader should *'encourage all members to have a bible which they can easily read and understand'* (no mention about the bible being a reliable translation or having a sound catechetical commentary). Such words as *'focus areas', 'community', 'collaborative', 'group dynamics',* and *'celebrating'* occur throughout the Handbook which stresses the *'inclusive and non-threatening'* nature of the programme. Every session is divided into five segments: Gather; Listen to Experience; Explore the Scriptures; Reflect, and Respond.

Each participant is issued with an expensively-produced booklet which covers the six-week Season. Looking at the 32-page booklet for Season One of AYWL we find that: the word Catholic appears only once whereas the word *'community'* appears 64 times; the Catechism of the Catholic Church is never mentioned; the Rosary is not mentioned at all despite the fact that the programme commenced in October - traditionally the Month of the Holy Rosary; in Week 5, the Solemnity of All Saints is referred to but the Commemoration of the Holy Souls is omitted as is any reference to Purgatory; the teaching authority of the Church is never mentioned whilst emphasis is placed on individual opinions, personal experience and feelings. In general, the text throughout could have been written by, and for, Protestants.

At each weekly session the participants have three pages of text to absorb. Their responses form the basis of any discussion that takes place. This is when the errors and omissions in the text are likely to go uncorrected. For example, the three Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity are referred to just as '*persons*', and in one paragraph the Holy Spirit is referred to as '*it*' several times. When dealing with the Beatitudes, unsurprisingly, the word '*happy*' is used instead of 'blessed' and it is even suggested that '*lucky*' might be used. The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart is quoted without any reference to the fact that his writings were condemned as heretical by Pope John XII. Prayer techniques based on Eastern mysticism are recommended.

Perhaps the shortcomings of this programme are best summed up in the words of a prominent theologian at the end of his critique of the Renew 2000 material on which AYWL is based: 'In conclusion', he writes, 'my judgement of the text is very simply this: it is seriously impaired in its content and, in its tone or spirit, alien to the ancient and Catholic faith we profess in the Creed. My recommendation would be that it not be used under Catholic auspices, and that it be jettisoned in favour of materials truly consonant to the faith as set out in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (which incidentally is never referred to in the text).'

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