



Engaging Ecclesial Movements and Associations in Support of the Church's Ministry to Marriage and Families

By Reynaldo Montemayor Jr., PhL

Director of Adult Religious Education and Pastoral Institute, Diocese of Laredo

As the first diocesan director of adult religious education in my ten-year-old diocese and one of the few diocesan directors in the country specifically charged with adult faith formation, I know that the creative possibilities and pioneering experiences for adult faith formation are tremendous and exciting. One of these possibilities and experiences is the opportunity to work with ecclesial movements and associations in a common adult faith formation effort, within which a strategic collaboration in marriage and family life ministry can result in a more expansive outreach to and deeper impact on many more couples and families.

I have learned to recognize ecclesial movements and associations as adult faith formation agents, to discover their charisms, to explore their ministry potential, to relate to their spiritualities, and to collaborate harmoniously and fruitfully with them. These are the five brief points that I will elaborate in this article. I

hope my experiences inspire parish and diocesan leaders to engage ecclesial movements and associations in pioneering and creative ways in support of the Church's ministry.

Recognize

Before engaging ecclesial movements and associations, we need to recognize that they are truly adult faith formation agents already evangelizing and catechizing other adults within the Church (see *National Directory for Catechesis* [NDC] [Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005], no. 61.B.5). They also may already be doing marriage and family life ministry. These informal network structures of interpersonal faith-building relationships provide a positive life-changing experience of conversion and renewal. These groups are like spirituality life-support systems, apostolic efficiency maintenance shops, discipleship fitness gyms, lay missionary boot camps for many Catholics. They are

somewhat autonomous and independent, yet they operate under the obedience of faith to the Church's Magisterium and are dependent on her hierarchy. Though not essential to the Church's structure, they are, nonetheless, very important in fleshing out the Church's life and mission, so that the Catholic life may not be reduced to a bare-bones experience. If parishes (and dioceses) can "ossify," as then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect for the Congregation of the Faith, said, without such movements and associations, these can likewise become unhealthy tumors if they lack lifeblood from the Church's bone marrow (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Peter Seewald, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Century*, trans. Adrian Walker [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997], 266). In this sense, we can recognize that mutual recognition, dialogue, and communion between the ecclesial movements/associations and the parish/diocesan structures are vital for the ecclesial health of the Mystical Body.

Discover

After you recognize ecclesial movements and associations as fellow adult faith formation agents, the next step forward is to discover them. To discover is to search out the recognized movements and associations in your parish, deanery, and diocese, or even in your state or region (see NDC, no. 62).

One of the first things I did as a diocesan adult faith formation director was to meet with each movement and association leader in

our diocese to discover their charisms and their special way of living and serving in the Church. Besides inquiring about their recognition or approval status within the Church, I got to know as much as I could about each group: how many members it had, what it did, where it met for activities, and so on. In the process, I also discovered that a particular family life movement had dissolved. I encouraged the members to start the movement again, but they were no longer motivated. At the time, our diocese did not have a family life office, and there was—and always is—a lot more to be done. So losing a potential ally for the expansion of this particular ministry was very disappointing. Only they, or someone from their movement, had the power to make the difference and let their charism be a real gift to our local Church.

I discovered and recognized that movements and associations depend on—and essentially are—a free enterprise. This is something to respect and admire. It is almost always up to them either to kindle or to quench the charism received for the good of the Church. Later I discovered that another family life movement was alive and well in our diocese—and that the particular movement that had dissolved in one part of our diocese was actually flourishing in another part. Discovering the existence of the movements and associations in a diocese or parish can help identify the needs that are being met and those diocesan or parochial needs that are not.

But discovering movements and associations can also help detect those

needs that could be met. For example, the most recent family life movement in our diocese was founded in the Philippines, and its ministry is done in English. I discovered that, in our Laredo context, this movement was meant to meet the need of English-speaking ministry to couples and was ideally suited to reach out to our growing Filipino community.

Explore

After we recognize and discover them, we then need to explore the potential and possibilities for ministry in the movements and associations. We need to explore the different gifts and ways they can collaborate with each other and with the parish or diocese. Even movements that are not specific to marriage and family life may in practice support it in other ways. Almost all groups have an implied or explicit domestic Church ideal in their faith formation itinerary. Groups inclined toward prayer and spirituality may have special workshops or activities for couples. Active and committed Catholic couples from any movement or association may well be able to support marriage and family life ministry in many effective ways.

After meeting with individual movement and association leaders, I gathered them together in a forum called the Assembly of Leaders of Ecclesial Movements and Associations, or ALMAE. (The acronym is derived from the Spanish name: Asamblea de Líderes de Movimientos y Asociaciones Eclesiales.) The ongoing ALMAE meetings provide a space for leaders to recognize each other and the diocese, discover each other's and

the diocese's charisms, and explore ways of coming together as Church. The ALMAE meetings also have an adult faith formation ingredient and a common project for participants to focus on (see NDC, no. 61.B.5). At the first ALMAE meeting, participants agreed to organize, as a common project, a yearly diocesan event called the Diocesan Catholic Encounter. The encounter themes cover essential Catholic topics; they have been evangelization and faith formation events for all Catholics, while also gathering together all movement and association members. The encounters were organized by ALMAE members and their groups and coordinated by my diocesan office. They also created an opportunity for all movement and association members to meet each other and to meet other Catholics who did not belong to any particular group. The event included exhibits of ecclesial movements and associations, to encourage participants to discover and explore this church reality.

In addition to the encounters, we have been exploring other common projects, for example, door-to-door missions, RCIA, and jail ministry. Recently, several movements have initiated groups for children. Another group has initiated a ministry to singles, single mothers, widows, the separated, and the divorced.

These groups have the potential to meet many needs for ministry in the Church. And this potential must eventually lead to exploring and recognizing the faith formation needs of those who minister. This is where well-formed parish and diocesan professionals would be required to provide ongoing formation to

movement and association leaders and members so that they can give more and better fruit for the Church within their particular movement or association.

Relate

To recognize, discover, and explore the movements and associations should then lead us to relate to them as our brothers and sisters in Christ within the church family. Relating is important for a new and deeper recognition and appreciation for the people in these groups and their uniquely Catholic spiritualities.

My experience with ALMAE leaders has been quite positive and encouraging. There are no rivalries among them, only a deep fraternal appreciation, empathy, and charity. We rejoice with one group's success, and we are saddened by another's failures and challenges, because we have cultivated a sense of being part of a family of Christian leaders. The ALMAE gatherings have helped the movement and association leaders relate to each other and enrich one another.

These leaders and their groups have also grown to relate to the diocesan structure through the relationship I have built and sustained with them. To better relate to them and their faith experience, I have tried to walk with them and make their experience my own. I dared to feel and think with the universal Church, which first approved these charisms for all Catholics. And I have been enriched in the process. All parish and diocesan leaders must dare to feel with the Church and open wide their hearts to

Christ, who is present in our brothers and sisters in all ecclesial movements and associations.

To relate also means to communicate and to facilitate communication—not only with and between the groups, but also with their parish and diocesan ministry offices. Parish and diocesan directors should be good conduits and catalysts for ministry opportunities and endeavors. To relate well is to have good “PR”—pastoral results.

Collaborate

Get to work and keep working at it. Collaboration in ministry is the art of getting our charisms to work together. Parish and diocesan leaders collaborate by modeling, forming, providing leadership, and supporting—or at least not hindering—the charisms and endeavors of movements and associations. We in the parish and diocese collaborate when we facilitate the work of the Church and try not to miss out on opportunities to support these ministries, as well as promoting opportunities for them to support the parish and diocesan ministries.

I personally experienced collaboration in support of the Church's marriage and family life ministry at the third encounter, which was organized in 2005. The theme was “The Family as Domestic Church,” and the encounter focused on the vocation and mission of the Christian family. We had priests talk about the Christian family's prophetic, priestly, and kingly vocation and mission as outlined in Pope John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*. We showed a motivating and inspiring video of a large Catholic

missionary family— its members ranging from one to nineteen years old—praying and singing their lauds and sharing Scripture together as a family. We also had a young couple's testimony about their moral struggle and triumph against the social pressures to abort their unborn son who had been diagnosed with a fatal disease—a triumph made possible thanks to the spiritual and moral guidance of a priest. We had a panel and symposium with representatives from three different family life movements, who shared about their particular charism and their activities with couples and families.

This third encounter on the domestic Church was a unique family event. Since then, the encounters have had separate tracks for children and for teens, and they have provided toddler care, so that whole families can attend. Our diocesan director of religious education for children ran the children's track with the help of

volunteer catechists. Some parish youth ministers ran the teens' track with the help of our diocesan campus ministry group. We were able to get qualified volunteer day care professionals to provide the toddler care for the event. Everything was done thanks to the creativity and zeal of these Catholic leaders with whom I have the privilege of working through ALMAE.

I encourage and dare my colleagues to engage with the ecclesial movements and associations and their leaders by recognizing, discovering, exploring, relating to, and collaborating with them to foster a fruitful and enriching encounter in support of the Church's ministry.