By Tony DeGol
*The Catholic Register*

Just days from the start of the diocesan renewal initiative ARISE Together in Christ, two Catholics from two different parishes in two different towns shared one sense of optimism.

“We’re excited because it’s a new program,” admitted Mike Bradley, a member of Holy Name Parish in Ebensburg, where he is a small group leader for ARISE. “There’s a lot of energy. There’s a lot of people that are excited, curious, and I’m kind of anxious to find out who’s going to be in my small group and looking forward to this journey together in our faith.”

Mary Beth Schmidhamer, also a small group leader, loves opportunities like ARISE in her parish of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus in Altoona.

“We had a large turnout for leaders, so it has really worked out well,” she reported. “We started early and we’ve been taking all the steps along the way, and it’s really taking shape.”

Bradley and Schmidhamer were among the many ARISE coordinators, group leaders, and team members commissioned by Bishop Mark L. Bartchak during a Mass on Sunday, September 23 at the Immaculate Conception Chapel at Saint Francis University in Loretto.

“I am truly in awe of you who are here for this gathering,” the Bishop said. “The response across the diocese has been truly amazing, and the anticipation of people in their desire to participate in ARISE Together in Christ is growing as we get closer to the start-up date.”

Season one of ARISE begins in most parishes the week of October 7.

The heart of the initiative involves faith sharing among individuals throughout a series of small group gatherings.

At least 85 percent of parishes in Altoona-Johnstown are participating – a statistic deemed very impressive by RENEW International, which offers the ARISE program.

The pastoral and spiritual renewal effort will also be carried out in Catholic schools, religious education programs, college campus ministry programs, prison ministry, and pastoral care.

“I’m sure that all of you would agree that this opportunity for us to come together to share our faith with each other could not come at a better time, when we are faced with so many challenges in our diocese and throughout the Church,” Bishop Mark offered.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, reminded the Bishop.

“So during the ARISE Together in Christ process in our small groups, we are journeying together along the way, with the Lord Jesus always present before us,” he continued. “During the ARISE Together in Christ process in our small groups, we have the opportunity to share the truth, which includes honest questions and answers about our Catholic faith. And during the ARISE Together in Christ process in our small groups, we encounter in each other the life that we share in Christ.”

Milissa Else is the director of pastoral services for RENEW International. She traveled to Loretto to attend the Mass of Commissioning.

“What a wonderful day to join together here in a Liturgy to help us launch this season of faith sharing,” she observed. “It was so amazing in church to hear the thunderous sound of everyone’s voice in unison as we pray together as we move forward with faith sharing in this diocese.”

Echoed Bradley: “It has been a long time since I’ve been at a Mass with that much energy and that much participation.”

The Lord will be present to all who gather in small groups for faith sharing opportunities, assured Bishop Mark.

“Thank you for being part of this opportunity and gift from God,” he said. “Please know that I continue to pray for you and for everyone who is participating and all those who will be impacted one by one as they hear from you and the others what is going on in this journey of faith.”

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*Sister Linda LaMagna, CCW, diocesan coordinator for ARISE Together in Christ, will offer weekly reflections for ARISE beginning on Sunday, October 7 on Proclaim! The show airs every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. on WATM ABC 23.*