

Becoming Men of Christ

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Profiles of seven men who have dedicated themselves to challenging other men to grow in faith and holiness.

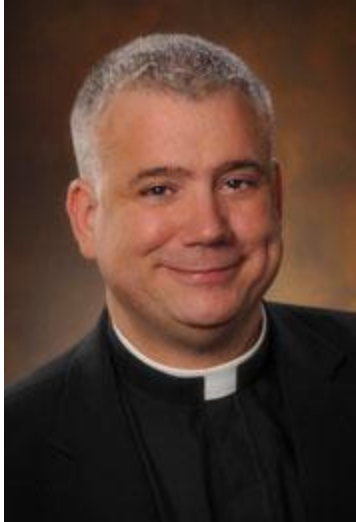
By Jim Graves



Man praying the Rosary (CNS photo)

Catholic conferences and apostolates for men were once few and far between. But in just the last five or six years, the movement has caught fire, with more and more Catholic men being inspired to pray, live lives of virtue and to root out sin in their lives. In short, they want to become the men Christ wants them to be.

Fr. Larry Richards, a popular speaker at men's conferences, declared, "It's the biggest movement in the Church. We're realizing that men are different than women—not better, but different—and need to be ministered to in a different way."



Father Larry Richards

One of the first such men's conferences Fr. Richards addressed was in Boston in 2005. It was an effort to promote healing in the aftermath of the sex scandals that rocked the Archdiocese, and was held with the support of Boston Archbishop (now Cardinal) Sean O'Malley, who celebrated the closing Mass. Fr. Richards was joined on the speakers' roster with such prominent Catholics as Jim Caviezel and Tom Monaghan.

Organizers were hoping to attract 500; 2,200 attended. Eighty priests turned out to hear confessions. A survey was taken of participants; nearly all said they wanted to return for the next conference the following year.

Fr. Richards remarked, "Men need to be challenged to be the best. When you challenge men to be men, they respond."

Fr. Richards is pastor of St. Joseph Church/Bread of Life Community in Erie, Pennsylvania. With the blessing of his bishop, Donald Trautman, he speaks on the road internationally about 45 times per year, mostly to men's conferences. His books include *Be a Man!* *Becoming the Man God Created You To Be* and *Surrender! The Life-Changing Power of Doing God's Will*.

He said, "I'm sick of wimpy men. We're called to a leadership of love and service. A true man is willing to lay down his life for something greater than himself."

Deacon Alex Jones of Detroit is also a popular speaker. He was once a pastor of a black

Pentecostal church, but converted to Catholicism in 2000. He enjoys men's conferences, he said, because "I identify with men. I am a man. We have many things in common, humanly speaking."

Jones likes to challenge his male listeners, he said, by asking them, "What legacy will you leave your children? Will it be your Faith? Your principles of righteousness? Will you teach them how to walk with God?"

His listeners invariably want to hear the unlikely story of his conversion, in part due to his study of the Fathers of the Church.

Jones has been married for 45 years, and serves as a deacon at two inner city parishes, St. Suzanne Gate of Heaven and Ss. Peter & Paul. He hopes to evangelize more in his own community, lamenting that many men in the inner city do not come to church: "God is not the center of their lives. They give up hope and turn to crime."

The conferences, however, give him the opportunity to meet "men on fire" in their love for Christ. He remarked, "They will be a great help in transforming our culture and our society."

Steve Wood, founder of St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers (www.dads.org), is also a favorite speaker on the men's conference circuit. He commented, "We have a crisis of manhood in our country. It has reached astounding proportions."

While such realities as MIA dads are depressing, "what's more depressing is what's to come."



Steve Wood

Wood began his life as an evangelical Christian, and worked as a youth pastor, Bible schoolteacher, pastor of an Evangelical church and minister to the imprisoned. It was as a youth pastor that began developing a special focus on marriage and family life in his ministry. He stated, "It was as a youth pastor that I saw, with great clarity, the importance of a mom and a dad staying together in marriage and leading their children to become good Christians."

Wood became Catholic in 1990, influenced by the teachings of Pope John Paul II. He founded the Family Life Center in 1992, to answer the pontiff's call "to re-evangelize by means of the family."

Wood began speaking at and organizing family conferences, but discovered most who attended were women. Hence, he founded St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers as an "apostolate within an apostolate." Taking St. Joseph as its model, the Keepers program teaches men to be "godly husbands and fathers."

Wood was a pioneer on the men's conference circuit. He's observed a sharp increase in initiatives to minister to men, to the pleasant surprise of many members of the clergy he knows: "Priests thought men would never come to men's conferences."

Early Catholic ministries to men, as well as similar movements like Promise Keepers in Protestant churches, plant seeds from which other men's apostolates spring, he believes.

Wood commonly speaks to men on three areas involving relationships, with 1) God the Father, as a strong faith is essential, 2) their wives, because if the marriage relationship breaks down the father typically leaves the home ("it's a package deal"), and 3) children, at the various stages of their lives.

What do men need most need to avoid in our culture? Three things, said Wood: "pornography, pornography, pornography." It's a killer of marriages, he said, and has prompted a flood of calls to his apostolate from wives frustrated with their husbands' addictions. When the topic comes up at conferences, he sees the eyes of many men tearing up, a tacit acknowledgement of their porn addictions. He said, "I love Church history, and I've read a lot of it. I don't think the Church has ever faced a challenge before like Internet porn."

Wood's website has an extensive section for men on overcoming a porn addiction. He speaks on this and other difficult issues with a directness and bluntness, to which he finds men are receptive.

Wood has been married 33 years and has eight children and four grandchildren. He lives in Greenville, South Carolina. Future plans for his apostolate include expanding overseas, which he is more able to do as his children grow up.

He's excited to continue this work, he said, because "we've seen some dramatic life changes on the part of many men. And, we've received many notes of thanks from their wives."

Deacon Ralph Poyo of Steubenville, Ohio, is also a regular on the men's conference circuit. Deacon Poyo was ordained seven years ago for the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, but has been given permission by his bishop to work full time in his apostolate, New Evangelization Ministries (visit <http://www.newevangelizationministries.org/>). The goal of his apostolate is to train parish staffs to evangelize their parishioners effectively.

Although he's relatively new to speaking at men's conference, he's quickly become a hit. He commented, "The absence of men practicing our Faith is glaring. We need to reach out to them. I like it when they're grouped together apart from women, where I can speak to them directly without mincing words."

Poyo's message to men includes telling them that 1) they need a good relationship with Jesus Christ, and 2) they need to be "men of truth, and not live a lie." Lies, for example, that tell men their purpose in life is to earn a lot of money rather than pursuing a relationship with God.

The deacon agrees with Wood that pornography is a problem for the majority of men; in fact, it was an addiction he himself had which took 11 years to fully overcome. He frequently tells the story of his porn addiction to men in hopes that they will take the steps necessary to overcome it.

His addiction began at age 9, when he found pornographic magazines in his brother's room. Poyo was a nominal Catholic until his senior year in high school, when he had a conversion experience. He began working in ministry, all the while viewing pornography in secret.

His relationship with God developed to the point where he knew he had to give up pornography, however, so he confessed his addiction to his wife and began the struggle to overcome it. It included regular reception of the sacraments, especially Reconciliation. He said, "I tell men, 'Sin is slavery. When you submit yourself to sin, such as viewing

pornography, Satan puts you in chains. The priest in confession cuts those chains, and helps you truly to become free.”

It was a long struggle to rid himself of the desire to view porn, and today, he said, he has an “extreme sensitivity” to any entertainment that is part of the porn culture.

In addition to porn, Poyo noted, men suffer from many other addictions, including watching excessive amounts of television, attachment to money or being a “workaholic.” He said, “The number one religion in our country is hedonism.”

Poyo has been married 27 years and has five daughters. He spends much of his time traveling, giving 50 or more presentations each year in the United States and Canada.

David Renshaw is Executive Director of Real Catholic Men (www.realcatholicmen.com), which puts on an annual men’s conference and retreats for men in the Portland, Oregon area. A decade ago, he noted, there were few national conferences for Catholic men, but the number has steadily increased. He wanted to have one in Portland, and suggested the idea to Catholic evangelist and preacher Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers. The deacon responded, “If you plan it, I’ll be your first speaker.”



David Renshaw

Hence, the apostolate was borne. His most recent conference was held last summer, and drew a capacity crowd of 300 men from throughout the Northwest. The next conference is slated for August 18, 2012.

“There’s a great need in the Pacific Northwest,” Renshaw commented. “The Faith is not strong in much of this area. I like to say we’re rather unchurched, or mission territory.”

When organizing his conferences, Renshaw seeks out nationally known Catholic speakers who address topics related to male spirituality; for example, Poyo and Deacon Larry Oney are featured next August. The speakers he seeks are unapologetically Catholic, he said, who are direct and “speak the truth with honesty and love.”

In addition to the conferences, Real Catholic Men presents men’s retreats, in 2012 featuring Fr. Wayne Dawson and scheduled for April 20-22. Another activity is purity marches, in which a group of a few dozen men pray the rosary in front of abortion clinics and strip clubs. He continued, “We want to put a face on what men should be in society, such as good leaders, fathers and husbands. It’s a role we’ve been abdicating since the time of Adam and Eve.”

Participants come away from Real Catholic Men conferences profoundly changed, Renshaw asserted: “They come away with changed lives and spirituality.”

Renshaw is married with four children, and owns a business which produces radio and television advertisements. He was previously a “quiet Catholic,” he noted, but his charismatic Catholic wife led him to have a more active faith.

He is not affiliated with the Archdiocese of Portland, but frequently recruits parish priests to hear confessions at his events. After priests are exposed to his apostolate, they often become his biggest supporters: “They come to understand its necessity.”

Central to his ongoing success is the maintaining of his own personal spiritual life: “I have to make sure I keep up things like daily prayer and the sacrament of Reconciliation. The more I want to get involved in my faith, the more the devil fights me.”

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers is also from Portland, and another sought after men’s conference speaker. He was born in Barbados and brought to the United States as a small child. He spent four years in a Benedictine monastery, but opted for the married life instead. He works in campus security, but devotes much of his free time to evangelization (visit <http://www.auremcordis.com/>). He has produced several series for EWTN, including “Behold the Man! Spirituality for Men”, “Made in His Image: Family Life Today”, and “Christ the Servant: The Vocation of Deacons”.



Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers

Like Poyo, he believes men are “sucked into the many lies of our culture,” specifically referencing contraception, abortion and pornography, which “pull us away from who we are called to be.”

When he speaks to men, Burke-Sivers said, “I want to be a witness of Christ and Christ crucified. It’s not enough to know the Faith, we have to live the Faith.”

Burke-Sivers travels 100,000 miles a year for speaking engagements, including trips overseas to countries such as the Philippines and South Africa. When he speaks at men’s conferences, his goal is to “create a spark, so that men can return to their own parishes and be active, even after the feeling goes away.”

He has been gratified to receive communication from men he’s evangelized who tell him stories of how they’ve overcome addiction, developed better relationships with their wives and children, become more active in their parishes and achieved a greater balance and perspective in their lives. He said, “They’ve begun to discover how the Holy Spirit can transform us, and make us the men Christ wants us to be.”

Dan Spencer is Executive Director of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men (www.nfcmusa.org) in Kansas City, Kansas. The goal of the fellowship is to train regional volunteers to put on their own men’s conferences, support parish groups for men and to provide resources, such as suggestions of speakers, to each. The fellowship also hosts an annual leadership conference to provide a forum for volunteers to discuss effective

evangelization practices.

The fellowship is staffed mostly by volunteers, and is funded by donations and service fees. The organization was founded in 2000, in part to provide a Catholic alternative to the Protestant Promise Keepers. Today, the fellowship supports 60,000 men attending 50 conferences each year, including conferences in Ireland, Guyana and Germany.

Spencer remarked, "We believe that men grow spiritually best in the company of other men. When we're alone and living in our secular culture, it's easy to let our spirituality slide."

In the end, the fellowship's goal, Spencer said, is to "impact the world for Christ."

The increased interest among men to become involved in such ministries is due, he believes, to a "general hunger for truth in our society." He continued, "As Pope Benedict himself has noted, there is much moral relativism in our world. Men want direction in their lives."

Spencer has been married 36 years and has four adult children. He owns a courier business, but spends most of his time working with his apostolate. He has been active in the Church much of his life, including helping organize the annual Kansas City Catholic Men's Fellowship. He explained, "I got involved with men's ministries because I wanted to be a holier guy, and a better husband and father."