

# Conferences call on men to be leaders of love, service

## Growing movement recognizes the challenges they face in today's society

By Jim Graves - OSV Newsweekly, 11/27/2011

Catholic author and commentator William Bennett addresses what is widely seen as a cultural crisis of manhood in his recent book, [“The Book of Man: Readings on the Path to Manhood”](#) (Thomas Nelson, \$34.99). Himself the son of an absentee father, Bennett underscores the virtues men should — but too often don't — develop.

A similar movement to encourage authentic manhood has been occurring in the U.S. Catholic Church.



Bishop Joseph Perry, an auxiliary bishop of Chicago. CNS photo

## Challenging men

Just a decade ago, men's conferences and related apostolates were few and far between. The number has grown exponentially since, with more and more Catholic men seeking to become the men Christ wants them to be.

“It's the biggest movement in the Church,” said Father Larry Richards, a men's conference speaker. “As a Church we're realizing that men are different than women — not better, but different — and need to be ministered to in a different way.”

One of the first such men's conferences Father 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. Other speakers included such prominent Catholics as actor Jim Caviezel and entrepreneur Tom Monaghan.

Organizers had hoped to attract 500; 2,200 attended. Eighty priests turned out to hear confessions. In a survey taken of participants, nearly all said they wanted to return to the conference the next year.

“Men need to be challenged to be the best. When you challenge men to be men, they respond,” said Father Richards, pastor of St. Joseph Church/Bread of Life Community in Erie, Pa., and the author of [“Be A Man: Becoming the Man God Created You to Be”](#) (Ignatius, \$14.95). He speaks at events internationally about 45 times per year, mostly to men's conferences.

“I'm sick of wimpy men,” he told Our Sunday Visitor. “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.”

## Godly husbands, fathers

Steve Wood, founder of [St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers](#), is another speaker on the men's conference circuit. He said, "We have a crisis of manhood in our country. It's reached astounding proportions."

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

Wood began his life as an evangelical Christian. Working as a youth pastor, he began to develop a special focus on marriage and family life. "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," he told OSV.

Wood became Catholic in 1990. He founded the [Family Life Center](#) in 1992, to answer the call of Pope John Paul II "to re-evangelize by means of the family."

Wood, of Greenville, S.C., began speaking at and organizing family conferences, but discovered most attendees were women. Hence, he founded St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers. Taking St. Joseph as its model, the program teaches men to be "godly husbands and fathers."

Wood, who has been married 33 years and is the father of eight children, stressed that men should maintain positive relationships with God, their wives and children, while avoiding things that would harm those relationships. And what is most harmful? 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. "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 said.

## Speaking the truth

David Renshaw is executive director of [Real Catholic Men](#), which puts on an annual men's conference and retreats for men in the Portland, Ore., area. He first suggested the idea to Catholic evangelist and preacher [Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers](#), who responded, "If you plan it, I'll be your first speaker."

Hence, the apostolate was born. His most recent conference was held last summer, and drew a capacity crowd of 300. "There's a great need in the Pacific Northwest," Renshaw told OSV. "The Faith is not strong here. I like to say we're still mission territory."

When organizing his conferences, Renshaw seeks out nationally known Catholic speakers who address topics related to male spirituality. 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, he organizes men's retreats and purity marches, in which a group of a few dozen men pray the Rosary in front of abortion clinics and strip clubs.

"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," he said.

Participants come away from conferences profoundly changed, Renshaw said: “They come away with changed lives and spirituality.”

Renshaw is married with four children, and owns a business that 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.”

## **‘Pastors of families’**

Bishops, too, have seen the value of ministries to men, and have started groups in their own dioceses. Bishop Joseph Perry, an auxiliary bishop in Chicago, joined with a deacon and a layman five years ago to found [Catholic Men Chicago Southland](#). Bishop Perry’s vicariate is an urban and suburban mix, and the apostolate was designed specifically to help suburban men improve their spirituality. (Men in the inner city need a good prayer life, too, the bishop told OSV, but their immediate needs are for food and shelter.)

CMCS organizes two to three prayer breakfasts per year, featuring a prominent businessman or sports figure who has done a good job integrating the Catholic faith into his professional life. In September, Pat McCaskey, a member of the family that owns the Chicago Bears and who serves on the Bears’ board of directors, made a presentation to the group on “Faith and Sports.”

Bishop Perry also addresses the group about spirituality. “I tell them that they need a relationship with Jesus Christ, and that he is not only our Lord, but our brother. We are not meant to carry our burdens through life alone, but with his help,” he said.

The bishop believes that men are called to be “pastors of their families,” and that wives and children “hunger” for their spiritual leadership. Men must practice fidelity in their relationships, and actively pursue a good prayer life.

The end goal of the prayer breakfasts is to encourage men to return to their parishes and be more active, and to form spirituality groups with other men.

CMCS has helped many men come closer to God, Bishop Perry said; the CMCS website lists testimonials from men who have benefited from the program.

Bishop Perry said, “Our goal is to give men the spirituality they need to live their daily lives better, and keep them Catholic and Christian. It’s all part of the New Evangelization. We need to make Christ the center of our lives.”

Jim Graves writes from California.

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