

Men's Groups Come of Age

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HARTFORD, Conn. — The day before Connecticut's Catholic Men's Conference Nov. 15, only 300 men had registered online. It was the first time such an event had been planned in the state, and organizers were a little worried.

On the morning of the event, held at Hartford's Connecticut Convention Center, nearly 1,000 men showed up. One priest heard confessions for six hours straight. Many men returned to confession after being away for years.

"Deep down in men there's a need and desire for these kinds of things, but it's not always evident on the surface. Men suppress that hunger," said Bob Marcarelli, coordinator of the conference. "But once you get them to such an event, it's like opening up a cavity in their chest and touching their heart."

Gone are the days when busloads of Catholic men attended Protestant Promise Keepers' rallies. Now they're attending Catholic counterparts. The dramatic increase in Catholic men's diocesan conferences and fellowship groups demonstrates that the time has come for Catholic men's groups.

Men are gathering annually for such conferences in places like Boston and Detroit and beginning new conferences in places like Portland, Ore. They are also meeting in smaller fellowship and parish-based Bible, accountability and book discussion groups nationwide.

"It's gone from seven conferences five years ago to 55 this last year," said Bill Moyer, executive director of the Waco, Texas-based National Fellowship of Catholic Men. "I'm getting regular requests from many diocesan offices that are looking to set up men's ministries and conferences for the first time. It's just now catching fire. Men are waking up and asking for these kinds of things."

The largest conferences have been hosted in cities like Boston, Cincinnati, Detroit and St. Louis. The Detroit gathering draws nearly 10,000 men annually. Cincinnati's conference has drawn twice that number.

Moyer recently helped provide assistance for new conferences in Austin, Waco, and College Station, Texas.

David Renshaw single-handedly founded the first Catholic men's conference in Portland, Ore. Last summer's event, titled "Real Catholic Men — A Call to Arms," was held at the University of Portland and attracted nearly 200 men. Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, who hosts the EWTN program "Behold the Man: Spirituality for Men," headlined the conference.

"Men are realizing they need to take responsibility in leading their families and churches," said Renshaw. "They're trying to do something to right the ship."

Newer men's groups, however, don't always look like the men's groups of old.

“Traditional men’s groups, like making pancake breakfasts or fish fries have been dying,” said Moyer. “Today’s men are looking for something spiritual that will help them to be better husbands and fathers. They’re burned out and overworked and realize that there is more out there. They want to connect with their families.”

While conferences happen annually, Moyer said they often feed into local, regular monthly or weekly fellowship gatherings, frequently at the parish level. The National Fellowship offers a study guide to help guide men who want to meet weekly.

Local Groups

In West St. Paul, Minn., hundreds of men gather monthly at St. Augustine’s Church over beer, a meat-heavy meal and competitive conversation on topics of faith and culture. Known as the Argument of the Month Club, the effort started eight years ago with six men meeting monthly at a restaurant for apologetics.

“Half of the men would take the Catholic position, and half would take the Protestant position,” said Kent Wuchterl, founder and director of the apostolate. “Over time, we outgrew the restaurant.”

The group routinely attracts nearly 300 men for fellowship and a presentation on a topic such as the Church’s position on the existence of evil or homosexuality. Other times the format is a debate; a recent debate was between a Catholic priest and a Baptist apologist.

The apostolate’s mission is to seek the truth so that participants can return to their homes and workplaces better prepared to live their Christian faith more fully.

“Men like friendly confrontation,” said Wuchterl. “We like searching for the truth and discovering what’s right and what’s wrong. This format allows us to do that in a fun, healthy way, and that motivates men to do what is right.”

Asked about the male-only format, Wuchterl said that the group started as co-ed, but it attracted few women. He said it wasn’t until after they made it male-only that women began asking why they couldn’t join in.

“Because it’s male-only, there’s a certain atmosphere and culture that’s developed,” said Wuchterl. “When it’s just guys, they’re not afraid to speak their minds.”

He opined that “true” men’s fellowship has been “stifled” because of the feminist movement. “It seems like we’ve had to apologize for being men for a long time,” he said. “Being able to gather as men and talk about our faith in a masculine way is something that men both need and desire.”

Phil Hoepfner has attended the gatherings for the past three years. He enjoys socializing with other men who “know and enthusiastically accept the teachings of the Catholic Church.

“The speakers are consistently impressive, the question-and-answer sessions are informative, the meals are great, and I always leave one meeting eager to return for the next,” said Hoepfner, who works as manager of communications in the University of St. Thomas alumni office.

Hoepfner noted that the gathering draws men from all over the state and beyond, as well as non-Catholic friends and relatives.

“It’s a wonderful form of evangelization,” said Hoepfner. “With much of society focused more on the things of this world than on eternity, it can be easy for faithful Catholics to feel that few people share their priorities.”

Men Online

In August, the Knights of Columbus launched an online initiative for men specifically geared for fathers. Called Fathers for Good, the website includes interactive tools and resources to encourage men in their vocation as fathers.

“The culture is very anti-male. Fathers are portrayed in film, on television, and even in advertising as bumbling fools who don’t know anything or can’t do anything,” said Patrick Kelly, vice president for public policy with the Knights and coordinator of the project. “There’s a tremendous need for encouragement.”

Kelly shared his recollection of being at social gatherings where wives make fun of their husbands, describing them as one of their “children.”

Billed as a site *by men for men*, it includes everything from advice on masculine spirituality to practical information on childrearing.

“It’s very much in line with the vision of why the Knights were founded,” said Kelly. “They were founded to strengthen Catholic men and their families.”

Kelly attributes the rise in men’s movements to the anthropology of men.

“Men are hardwired to be protectors and defenders,” said Kelly. “When these roles are taken away or men feel they’re being made to look ridiculous, there’s something inside a man that says, ‘This is not what my role is as a man. I have real dignity.’ The proliferation of these groups is probably a deep recognition in men that they need to get back to what it means to be a Christian man.”

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