Introduction

From April through October, it is possible that more than a million men will gather in twenty-two stadium events to participate in the Promise Keepers (PK) program for 1996 entitled "Break Down the Walls". Last year more than 720,000 men turned out for thirteen stadium rallies in locations all across the country.

Promise Keepers seems to be the single fastest-growing component within a more general men's movement which is now spreading throughout the United States. Though exact figures are not available, it is known that Catholic men are attending the PK stadium events in growing numbers. Some are joining local men's ministry groups after the stadium conferences. These groups may or may not have a Catholic affiliation. Priests, too, have experienced Promise Keepers either directly by attending a conference (including one designed for clergymen only) or indirectly through being sought out by parishioners returning from a PK event. Bishops, priests, deacons, pastoral ministers, and other interested or concerned Catholics are observing the PK phenomenon and wondering what attitude and response to adopt in light of it.

Over the past several months the NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family has compiled publically-available information about PK, consulted with priests and lay men who have participated in PK conferences, and the committee chairman, Bishop Joseph L. Charron, has met with the top echelon of PK national leadership. During that same period, the committee received numerous inquiries about PK from bishops, priests, pastoral ministers, and others.

This background paper is a preliminary response to those inquiries. The Committee on Marriage and Family offers it with the hope that it will be a tool of pastoral information and guidance enabling you to understand and respond to Promise Keepers from a Roman Catholic perspective -- and in a manner suited to your local situation.

Understanding Promise Keepers

Origin and Organization:

Promise Keepers was founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, head football coach at Colorado University, from a prayer group of seventy men. Their initial idea and goal was to fill a stadium
with men to honor Jesus Christ and to learn more about becoming godly men. Since that time, PK has expanded, filling more than one stadium, and has become a well-organized, clergy-led, evangelically-inspired revival movement calling men to reconciliation, discipleship, and godliness.

PK headquarters is located in Denver. It employs a staff of 300, with an annual budget of $65 million, and offices in 28 states. It publishes a quarterly newsletter, a monthly magazine called New Man, and markets a variety of books, study guides, audio and video tapes.

PK offers several levels of ministry:

1. **Conference ministry**: two-day stadium events featuring worship, music, prayer, and teaching;

2. **Educational ministry**: various seminars to help pastors and men's ministry leaders to develop an effective local ministry;

3. **Field ministry**: regional and state staff who recruit and train local lay leaders and volunteers;

4. **Resources**: books, study guides, tapes for use in personal or small-group study;

5. **Support for clergy**: motivating and encouraging laymen to support the mission of their church and pray for their pastor.

Identity and Goals:

PK does not consider itself a church or a denomination, but rather a Christ-centered, non-denominational ministry "dedicated to uniting men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world." PK holds that Christian growth toward godliness begins with making and keeping promises. There are seven promises at the core of the PK message, summarizing the values of PK ministry. Specifically, a Promise Keeper is committed to:

1. honor Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to God's Word through the power of the Holy Spirit;

2. pursue vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises;

3. practice spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity;

4. build strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values;
5. support the mission of his church by honoring and praying for his pastor and by actively giving his time and resources;

6. reach beyond any racial and denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity;

7. influence his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

There is a "Promise Keepers Statement of Faith" which, together with the seven promises, comprise a PK core message. The statement consists of these beliefs:

1. We believe that there is one God eternally existing in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. We believe that the Bible is God's written revelation to man and that it is verbally inspired, authoritative, and without error in the original manuscripts.
3. We believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles, death on the cross to provide for our redemption, bodily resurrection and ascension into heaven, present ministry of intercession for us, and His return to earth in power and glory.
4. We believe in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, that He performs the miracle of new birth in an unbeliever and indwells believers, enabling them to live a godly life.
5. We believe that man was created in the image of God, but because of sin, was alienated from God. That alienation can be removed only by accepting through faith alone God's gift of salvation which was made possible by Christ's death.

Appeal:

What kind of man typically attends a PK stadium event? An article in Christian Century (March 6, 1996) cited a survey conducted by the National Center for Fathering showing that: 38 is the median age of attendees; 88% are married; 21% have been divorced; 84% are white; 34% attend Baptist churches; 50% report that their fathers were "largely absent" when they grew up.

The appeal of PK to men in general, and to Catholic men in particular, seems to be multi-faceted. Curiosity, stimulated by such a widespread and high-profile phenomenon, is certainly an ingredient. So, too, is the PK use of a "sports mythology" -- highly appealing to the male psyche -- to convey and embellish its message.

But, at a deeper level, PK seems to connect with spiritual and psycho-logical needs being felt by
many men, especially at this time in history and as they themselves are passing through midlife. We highlight a few possible needs and conditions without any attempt to analyze them.

There seems to be, in our culture, a pervasive quest for spiritual meaning and for contact with transcendental realities, especially as people come face to face with limit experiences like: the end of a century/millennium, the increasing complexity and seeming intractability of social problems, the sense that aspects of social and technological change are "out of control", the loss of job security, the end of or at least a plateau in one's marriage, and even for some the achievement of material success and all their other goals.

Spiritual hunger can be expressed in many ways. One way is the desire to find or to return to Christ and his gospel message, to basic values, or eternal truths, or to whatever provides a sure foundation for rebuilding what has been destroyed. Often, but not necessarily associated with this desire, there is the need to distinguish sharply between a "culture" which is acceptable and one which is not.

For men, the challenge to return and rebuild, is often issued and heard as a call to responsibility. The scope of PK's seven promises is evidence of this. Within the call to assume responsibility for marriage and family relationships, for personal and social moral conduct, for supporting one's church and its mission are embedded other calls which traditionally resonate with men: for example, be strong, exercise leadership, join with other men in a team effort.

Because PK functions as and sees itself as a classic revival in the American evangelical tradition, the stadium events in particular will stir up in many men a sense of guilt and a desire for repentance. Guilt may be associated with such things as never achieving intimacy with one's father, being absent from one's children, being unfaithful at a variety of levels in one's marriage. Exposing these wounds in a supportive environment can draw men toward different forms of healing and reconciliation.

Inasmuch as it is rooted in the Protestant evangelical tradition, Promise Keepers places heavy emphasis on the authority of Scripture and on the necessity of personal salvation achieved through "faith alone". Its message is clearly Christ-centered. It is offered in simple and direct terms. It seems accessible to even the most ordinary of believers. The appeal is buttressed in a unique way by the strong current of individualism already running through our U.S. culture.

Any or all of the above considerations may be at work drawing Catholic men to Promise Keepers. In addition, however, three other possibilities should be noted. First, men who have experienced charismatic renewal or similar movements within the Catholic Church may be drawn to PK because they feel comfortable with the style of its gatherings. Second, men with more traditionalist leanings may be attracted by what they hear in the PK message about the need
for a return to traditional values, the family, etc. Third, it is always possible that Catholic men may be finding in Promise Keepers something they are not finding in their own church, namely, a viable and attractive ministry to men. PK may, in short, be filling a spiritual and pastoral vacuum.

Responding to Promise Keepers

Forming a Pastoral Judgment:

The most immediate question which arises within the Catholic community is: should pastors encourage men to participate in a PK stadium conference? Or, if encouragement is not possible, should they at least not discourage men from attending?

Any response will follow from a pastoral judgment which itself could rest upon several different considerations.

First, there is the example of Jesus who counseled his disciples not to forbid those who were ministering publically in his name, even though they were not part of his company. "There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:39-40).

Second, there is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification" (Decree on Ecumenism, #4).

Third, there is the experience of Catholic men, including priests, who have attended PK conferences. Their testimonies, shared with the Committee on Marriage and Family, have tended more toward the positive than the negative. On the positive side, they describe PK as a valuable tool for bringing men to a spiritual awakening and renewed dedication to the Bible, prayer, their families and churches. The Christ-centeredness of the ministry is praised consistently. Although the energizing quality of the stadium events is almost always mentioned as a positive factor, there also is praise for the fact that PK provides structured follow-up in small local groups. Also notable is PK's attempt to "break down the walls" of racial and denominational barriers between Christians.

Negative, or at least cautionary, points have been raised by Catholic participants as well. Though there has been no overt hostility toward Catholics, nonetheless, some PK attendees have spoken about feeling "left out" because Catholicism was not mentioned by name as one of the religious groups participating in the event. This could mask a deeper problem of Evangelicals relating to Catholics.

Several have expressed a concern that Catholic men have not been invited to serve in PK leadership positions, either as board members or as speakers at conferences. This, too, may signal an unresolved tension within the evangelical movement regarding the Catholic Church.
When Bishop Charron asked PK leaders directly whether Catholics were welcomed by *Promise Keepers*, they replied that Catholics are, without doubt, welcome as conference/stadium participants. However, to be a leader or speaker, one must ascribe to the PK core message (statement of faith and seven promises -- see pp. 2-3) and be willing to be trained by PK. The fact that the statement of faith contains references to Scripture being "verbally inspired" and to salvation "through faith alone" could pose a problem for Catholic believers and, certainly for those who become PK teachers.

Moreover, there is a repeated concern among pastors and Catholic leaders that the effect of PK will be to lead men out of the Catholic Church and into evangelical churches which are more naturally favorable to the PK message. This could certainly happen through men joining follow-up groups affiliated with local evangelical churches. Although the intention to do this was explicitly denied in dialogue with PK leadership, there is anecdotal evidence of it happening among the rank and file.

A final point of caution needs to be raised about the understanding of the relationship between men and women and, in particular, of the man's leadership role within a marriage and family. When questioned as to whether PK espoused a doctrine of "biblical headship", the PK leaders claimed that they present "servant leadership" as the ideal for a man, and that hierarchical headship is not part of PK's core message.

Nonetheless, what is meant by building strong marriages and families through "biblical values" (fourth promise) is not entirely clear. Some PK rhetoric seems to drift very definitely toward a view of the man as "in charge" (because he is a man) and urges him to "take back" from his wife the role of family leader. Nowhere in PK literature does one encounter the careful treatment about the equality and mutuality of women and men as one would find in the teaching of Pope John Paul II.

Related to many of these concerns is a different understanding of authority. A commitment to Scripture alone as the source of moral and doctrinal authority can lead a group to place great emphasis on particular biblical texts that speak strongly to individuals, to use specific passages as proof texts to buttress arguments, to consider an individual's testimony as relatively unassailable, and to rely heavily on the personal vision of the leaders.

To the extent that any of these tendencies is present in PK, it could easily conflict with our Catholic heritage of drawing upon Scripture and tradition.

A fourth source to use in forming a pastoral judgment are the statements about PK being produced within other Christian churches. These are not the official statements of the churches themselves. They come either from established groups within the churches or from theologians working on behalf of the church. Here is a sampling:

**Dr. James A. Nestingen** for the ELCA Lutheran Men in Mission:

> There are some things about Promise Keepers to make a Lutheran thankful. The positive view of the role of men in today's world is one of them. Sharing a sense that the world is
breaking down around us, Promise Keepers offers the confidence that men can do something about it both personally and publically. Many will also find the emotional experience of the rallies gratifying, but there are some things to watch as well.

Promise Keepers shifts the emphasis from God's work to our will, a shaky foundation for change. Emotionalism can become manipulative. Further, in some circles when conversations have been held about Promise Keepers, questions have been raised about the view of women and a possible political agenda in some Promise Keeper presentations.

Commission on Organizations -- Lutheran Church Missouri Synod:
There is much for which to commend Promise Keepers. At the same time, careful discernment based upon God's Word is required of those involved with or considering involvement in Promise Keepers. Cautions need to be raised regarding some of the theology presented in Promise Keeper events and literature. These include (1) a tendency in some literature and presentations to confuse Law and Gospel, particularly in the area of sanctification; (2) an apparent avoidance of the sacraments; (3) the potential for small group ministry to move toward pietistic excess; and (4) the propensity toward ecclesiastical unity based on dynamics other than a common faith confessed (fides quae, the "faith which" is believed).

American Baptist Men, USA:
The official ABMen USA position is neutrality toward PK... There are some noted differences between PK and the American Baptist Church. American Baptists celebrate our broad theological diversity; PK prefers parameters. American Baptists affirm women in ministry; PK is not united on that matter. The ABC is a denomination committed to missions; PK identifies itself as a "catalytic ministry that motivates and trains men for men's ministries in the local church." But the commonalities far exceed the differences.

Possible directions:

Catholic men are being drawn to Promise Keepers. This is a fact and, whatever we might think of the PK style or the nuances of its message, the tide seems to be running strongly in its direction. In a longer, historical perspective, evangelistic movements come and go in American religious culture. They often fade, either because their time has passed or because their positive Christian values have become institutionalized in the classical Christian churches.

Nevertheless, Promise Keepers is part of the religious landscape right now. It says that it exists as a "catalyst" to motivate and train men for their churches. It claims to want to support local men's ministries. PK should be taken at its word.

It is proving to be a catalyst, an awakening experience much like the Cursillo or Marriage
Encounter weekend, and now the local church must receive, organize, channel, and develop what PK is providing. As is the case with other intensive "conversion experiences", the pastoral challenge is not so much what to do about the conversion experience, but what to do after it -- with those who move from that intensive moment back into the community. How are they to be re-integrated? How are they to be challenged to deepen their growth using the resources of their own faith tradition?

PK is the proverbial wake-up call to the Church to encourage and offer more ministry suited to the needs of men. This might take the form of men's discussion groups, bible study, prayer meetings, conferences, retreats, devotions, formally ecumenical study and prayer groups, etc. It might mean creating new ways to reach men who are at home caring for children, who are active in the world of work and careers, who are retired. It could involve breathing new life into existing ministries and structures like Cursillo or the Holy Name Society.

PK explicitly urges a man to become involved in his church, support his pastor and the church's mission. Can the Catholic Church, therefore, provide practical and recognizeable opportunities for men to fulfill this PK promise?

Other strategies might also be considered by the bishop or local clergy. For example:

- When the opportunity presents itself, challenge PK organizers in your area to provide for some degree of Catholic leadership presence at a stadium conference. Speakers are an obvious example -- though this seems to have built-in limitations. Another possibility is designated "ministry booths" set up in the stadium area which would be staffed by Catholic organizations. A case in point: in a number of instances dioceses have worked out ways for Catholic leaders to be present within the Billy Graham Crusade.

- Take the opportunity to meet with men who express an interest in attending a PK conference. Affirm their desire for spiritual maturity in Jesus Christ. Be clear about the main differences between Evangelical and Roman Catholic theology. Invite them to meet again after the PK conference for planning a follow-up ministry.

- If PK materials (or other material drawn from non-Catholic sources) are being used by men's groups, find ways to introduce the Catholic perspective and tradition. If this is not the case, then be proactive in recommending directions and materials for men's ministry.

- Beyond the parish level, offer training for men (both those who have experienced PK and those who have not) to become leaders of parish or local men's ministry groups.

- Reach out to other Christian churches which also have men involved with PK or to other churches that have other models of men's ministry, more in harmony with Catholic
ecclesiology; see what possibilities exist for ecumenical dialogue and cooperation in prayer, education, charitable and social action.

Conclusion

In the end, it seems better for Catholic pastors and leaders to become proactive in responding to men's spiritual issues rather than to be reactive to what Promise Keepers is offering. Let us focus and expend our energies on what we can offer distinctively from within the Roman Catholic faith tradition.

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