

Catholic Men's Ministries

An Introductory Report

by

*The Committee on Marriage and Family
The Committee on Evangelization*

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Introduction

Now is the Time

From Los Angeles to Chicago, from Manchester to Miami there is a growing hunger for God among Catholic men. They are meeting together in large and small groups, sharing their burdens, listening to each other's stories, and celebrating Eucharist. Call it a revival, an awakening. Call it a work of the Holy Spirit at the grassroots level. The emergence of new ministries with men is a welcome development within the Church.

Lay leaders in these new ministries are asking their bishops and parish priests for support, involvement, and leadership. At the same time, bishops, priests, deacons and other pastoral ministers are trying to understand and respond to this new phenomenon. We offer this background paper to assist in the process of connecting, understanding, and responding.

A Consultation

Material for the paper is drawn from a two-day consultation held in September 1998. On that occasion, some members of the Committee on Marriage and Family and the Committee on Evangelization met with about twenty leaders from this mushrooming movement to listen to their stories, hear their concerns and offer guidance and support. In a certain sense, the consultation began where the Marriage and Family Committee's 1996 paper, *A Perspective on Promise Keepers*, ended. That paper concluded: "It seems better... 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." The leaders present at our consultation were prime examples of responding to the call to serve Catholic men from within their own Church.

The consultation was for listening and learning. It asked three questions: (1) what are the various realities giving rise to a new interest in men's spirituality? (2) what responses are being offered in the Catholic community? (3) what are the leadership issues for bishops and for the ministry leaders as they seek to promote an authentically Catholic men's movement?

Part One: Understanding

Origins of a new movement

The leaders of the movement are mature men, formed in the Church and seeking the bishops' guidance in their effort to create an authentically Catholic approach to men's ministry. Most of their efforts are lay initiated and funded, though some have emerged from diocesan renewal programs. By rough count, there are approximately thirty men's ministry programs *that are diocesan or regional in scope*. For example, *Catholic Men's Fellowship of Greater Cincinnati* draws in men from the Cincinnati area and northern Kentucky.

Some of these groups have been in existence for more than ten years, while others are quite new. Their two most common features are the large conference or rally (held once a year) and a network of parish-based small groups that might meet as often as weekly. A good number of men being drawn to the new groups have roots in Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, and similar renewal experiences. Others speak of having been influenced by *Promise Keepers* and of a desire to share with their Catholic brothers what they found in PK, namely, a simple, direct, caring approach that allows men to tell their stories and gives them clear directions about how to change their lives.

What men are attracted and why?

This new spiritual hunger seems to be most deeply felt among a large yet particular segment of men. These are married, suburban Catholic men of European descent, who are arriving at midlife and its experiences of limitation or loss. For many of them, economic insecurity driven by vast technological changes and the consequent need to re-tool for new employment has shattered an older identification of masculinity with economic power. Challenges to gender roles brought on by the women's movement, and other developments such as the growing number of women in the workplace, paternity leave, and dual career couples, have brought some men to a deeper search for meaning and identity. A divorce or difficulties in one's marriage have often catalyzed this seeking. The increasing complexity and seeming intractability of social problems has also contributed to a sense that aspects of social and technological change are out of control. And, for some, the achievement of material success and all their other goals has led to a deeper, more spiritual yearning. Taken together, the collapse of old meanings and support structures has caused these men to seek out a supportive environment where they can expose their wounds and find new ways of healing and reconciliation. The need for "a safe place" for men to be with other men, and the power of the "masculine context" were phrases heard often during the consultation.

For some Catholic men, *Promise Keepers* responded directly to their situations and problems. At another level, PK provided a tested and adaptable model for reaching, organizing, and empowering men in a religious context. The Catholic men's leadership acknowledged its debt to PK but, in looking toward the future, did not want simply to create a "Catholic version" of *Promise Keepers*.

Part Two: Responding

New groups and specific needs

The consultation provided an opportunity for participants to describe their programs and to exchange materials and ideas. During the sessions we also heard about examples from within the

African American community, e.g., St. Sabina Parish in Chicago and its mentoring of young men, as well as a program in San Antonio appealing to Hispanic/Latino men.

The leaders consistently emphasized two points as they described their attempts to develop a specifically Catholic men's ministry. First, they incorporate what many Catholics find "missing" in the *Promise Keepers* experience, namely, sacramental celebration (Eucharist and Reconciliation) and devotion to the saints. These elements are usually blended with tried-and-true PK strategies, e.g., motivational witness talks by sports celebrities, in revival-like conferences sponsored by the different Catholic groups. Second, they urgently need resources and program materials particularly to use in the small groups. Because much of the available material does not have a Catholic origin, it does not convey an understanding of church teachings and their historical development, or give careful guidance on the interpretation of Scripture, or provide models of masculinity from within our religious tradition. Linked with the need for resources was an urgent concern for local leadership training. Much of the power of men's ministry lies in the regular meeting of parish-based accountability groups. These groups need leaders who are prepared and formed to carry out their role.

Developments and trends

Among some of the Catholic men's ministries that have existed for a longer time we can already observe certain maturing trends. Consultation participants discussed them in terms of moving:

1. beyond a charismatic-style spirituality to include a variety of spiritualties;
2. from issuing a call to conversion to offering a more developed catechesis;
3. from large-scale events to also supporting a network of small groups;
4. beyond present boundaries to reach out to more traditional men's groups, e.g., Holy Name Society, Knights of Columbus;
5. from a marginal movement to one more integrated into parish life;
6. beyond just a motivational appeal focused through Scripture to a sacrament-centered community experience.

Not every men's ministry group is moving in these directions and certainly not at the same speed. Nonetheless, the participants at the consultation seemed to agree that the trends were desirable goals for all to attain.

The future

In addition to the concerns and needs described above, the lay leaders emphasized two things they considered essential if there is to be a future for the Catholic men's movement. First, they identified the need for a national network of men's ministries and a central clearinghouse for information, leadership training, program resources, and general coordination among the many groups. Such an organization would not only assist existing groups but would also help men's ministries to grow in areas of the country not yet reached. In the months immediately following, several of those present at the consultation began to organize a National Resource Center for Catholic Men that proposes to fulfill the networking and clearinghouse functions envisioned.

Second, the lay leaders asked that their bishops and priests actively support men's ministries on diocesan and parish levels. What might this mean for bishops in practical terms?

1. Be willing to meet with those who have begun a men's ministry or who are interested in starting one. Become acquainted with their vision. Share yours and offer guidance as a pastor of the Church.
2. Once you have become informed, take steps, e.g., writing in the diocesan newspaper, to encourage men to participate in what is offered, e.g., a one-day men's conference.
3. Establish some linkage between you and this grass-roots effort, e.g., a priest, deacon, or diocesan staff member appointed to be a liaison.
4. When invited, participate in a public event, e.g., by addressing a men's prayer breakfast or a one-day conference or celebrating Mass and hearing confessions at the same event.
5. Motivate parish priests to welcome men's groups into their parishes and to become involved in this ministry themselves.

Some challenges from the bishops

The Catholic men's ministry movement is still young, diverse, and growing. It continues to seek clearer definition and a place within the life and mission of the Church. At our consultation the bishops present offered the lay leaders the following points for reflection and, ultimately, for their guidance and encouragement.

1. *Inclusivity.* To date this is not a movement among all Catholic men, but a ministry emerging mostly to meet the needs of midlife, married, middle-class, suburban, European-American Catholic men. Clearly there is an enormous need to minister to the needs of these men. Moreover, many of their issues may generalize to the ministry needs of other Catholic men. Still, what do we know of the needs of, for example, our Hispanic, African-American and younger men? The concern here is that by focusing energies on one significant sub-group of men these new ministries not only do not address the needs of a broader spectrum of Catholic men but may turn the Church away from its larger task of providing a spiritual home for an increasingly multi-cultural people of God.

At the same time, we are aware that for existing groups to reach out to those different from themselves may compromise the vital reasons for which they have came together in the first place. Are the needs of young, single men in any way similar to those of middle-aged, married men? How can this movement provide nurture and support for men in different ethnic and racial groups? How might it address the needs of Generation Xers? We know that to remain privatized among their homogeneous peers is not the answer, yet neither is it sufficient to reach out to others without any chance of gathering on common ground.

What is a common ground shared by all that could provide the basis for a broader men's

ministry? Certainly all of these men share concerns about the workplace, how it has created unjust demands on everyone's time, promoted competition rather than mutual support, and taken our energies away from our homes and families. The dialogue between Catholic social teaching and contemporary issues in the workplace could receive more attention in men's ministries.

2. *The evolving roles of men and women*

In society, church, and family we are witnessing changes in the roles of men and women. Women are moving into new positions of leadership in the workplace and within the church. At the same time, because of the influence of men's ministries across the country, we are able to welcome more men into fuller participation in parish life and to encourage them toward greater responsibility as fathers and sons in their families. In families, we see the possibility of fathers assuming a larger role in the faith formation of their children. In society, we can see expanded possibilities for both men and women witnessing to the teachings of Christ in the workplace and in civic life. Men's ministries should take account of all these dynamics and do its part to promote an appreciation for the complementarity and partnership that flow from the basic equality of women and men.

3. *Distinctive and plural Catholic spiritual needs.* One of the most interesting aspects of these new ministries is the degree to which they can be seen as emerging from internal dynamics within the laity. One promising sign is the increasing centrality of the sacraments of reconciliation and eucharist in small and large group gatherings. While attending to the nurture of these groups through sacraments, Scripture, and church teachings, the leadership should also be continually aware of the many different spiritualities represented in the men. Rather than impose a single spirituality on the movement, leaders and participants need to keep their eyes and ears open to where the Spirit is leading them. Religious communities of men, e.g., Benedictines, Franciscans, have much to offer by way of spiritual resources and models of Christian masculinity.

Conclusion

For all who took part in the consultation it was a significant moment of listening and learning -- and one for which we bishops are very grateful. Above all, we heard from the lay leaders a zeal for serving their brothers and a conviction that the evangelization of men is essential to the continuing renewal of the Church and the strengthening of families and society. There is a definite urgency about this work but, because it is still maturing, there is not yet a need to overly define or manage it. Informed and prayerful discernment by everyone is essential.

At the same time, this does not mean passivity or adopting a *laissez-faire* attitude. Involvement and proactive support by pastors, e.g., by responding to the issues we heard in our consultation,

seems the better approach. At this point, Catholic men's ministry is a field open to cultivation by the Church's teachers and pastors.

We believe that the lay leaders with whom we gathered also heard our concerns about future directions for men's ministries. The Committee on Marriage and Family, with the collaboration of the Committee on Evangelization, plans to continue the dialogue with Catholic men's ministries and to keep you, our brother bishops, informed. We have established a liaison relationship with the newly-established National Resource Center for Catholic Men and, by means of it, will encourage the development of resources, leadership training, and communication among the different groups. We foresee additional background papers, such as this one, that will explore topics related to evangelization and men's spirituality. Finally, we are considering other opportunities for you to discuss with one another what kind of leadership is needed in the Catholic men's movement and to learn from what is already taking place in many dioceses. We welcome your suggestions as we continue to support the growth of Catholic men's ministries.

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