

# Where Did All the Men Go?

An ABC/Beliefnet poll (February 2004) made a rather striking statement about Catholic participation at Sunday Mass. Women (49% weekly attendance) outnumber men (26% weekly attendance). This 2 to 1 ratio of women to men at church stirred a lot of concern at the time of the survey. It led many women and men who are regular church-goers to ask, "Where did all the men go?"

Since that time many have written about why men don't get involved in church, why men might hate church, or why some would rather get-a-root-canal than come to Sunday Mass. Some observers have also noted that Holy Name Societies, Knights of Columbus, Serra Clubs, and other Catholic men's groups, though once bulwarks of parish life, are watching their memberships age and dwindle. Others conclude that the average parish doesn't seem to have the capacity to start, sustain, and grow such groups, although new men-only groups are flourishing in some parishes. Beyond recommending these gender-specific groups, how do we draw men to participate in the average, less-than-perfect, Catholic parishes?

Here are six suggestions about what a parish might do to evangelize more Catholic men:

First, many believe that **men are hard-wired for evangelization**. It is a natural part of male physiology, psychology, and spirituality. The very depth of masculine being moves outward to create, to start new things and to bring more people to life in Christ. When we look at ministries where men are usually involved, these are more **about doing and reaching out** than about nurturing. This observation does not imply that nurturing and holding people together are not critically important to the Church and the parish or that men cannot and should not grow in these capacities. Neither is it meant to imply that women are not equally concerned and gifted in evangelization. As numerous people have observed, if not for faithful and faith-filled women evangelizers, the Catholic Church would have ceased to exist long ago.

Second, when parish life and ministry are **focused on Christ's mission of evangelization**, more men are willing to become involved. We have been conducting a practical, 9 day-long (spread over 12 months) diocesan training course entitled, "Share Your Faith without Losing Your Head! Intensive Training for Parish Evangelization," for over a dozen years (with more than 500 participants). Many who come to this training are stunned by the unusual percentage of men to women, as much as 55-60% of participants are male. This is radically different from usual attendance at most Sunday Masses or in small faith-sharing groups.

Third, many men will not become active in their faith and evangelization unless they **see other men in leadership and ministries**. Sometimes the pastor or a priest may be the catalyst to encourage men to become involved. Often permanent deacons are able to do this. However, it seems that unless other single and married men work at evangelizing and drawing men into ministry, over time men disappear into the woodwork.

Fourth, one of the best vehicles for bringing men into active Catholic ministry and evangelization are **ministerial communities**, versus just task or prayer oriented groups. Most of us are familiar with small faith-sharing groups, RCIA groups, prayer groups, or Bible study groups where participants come together for the purpose of prayer, learning, or sharing ways God is connected to everyday life. Some parishes have all of these and more, but there is always a kind of "glass ceiling" of participation—a point at which no matter what we do, we stop getting new members, participants start dropping out, and soon the men stop coming. Ministerial communities are, instead, aimed at transformation and evangelization through

prayer, faith-sharing, study, evangelization and business at every meeting. (For more see pp. 32-36 of our book, *When You Notice the Empty Pews: Simple Ways to Share Our Faith* at [www.catholicevangelizer.com](http://www.catholicevangelizer.com)).

Fifth, **dare men to live dangerously close to Jesus Christ** and to invite others to join them. Consider the lives of the great male missionary saints and martyrs. Danger is a common thread running through their lives. Pope Paul VI exhorts, "...The presentation of the Gospel message is not an optional contribution for the Church. It is the duty incumbent on her by the command of the Lord Jesus, so that people can believe and be saved... **It merits having the apostle consecrate to it all his time and all his energies, and to sacrifice for it, if necessary, his own life.**" (*Section 5*) Evangelizing is the bungee-jumping, the sky-diving of the Christian life because failure, rejection, or even martyrdom is possible. And bringing someone closer to Christ and the Church is the greatest thrill and the wildest ride there is! There is real power and strength involved. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (*Acts 1:8 NRSV*)

Sixth, **ask the Holy Spirit** to give men in our parishes a holy boldness—a holy madness—to evangelize other men! "And now, Lord... grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." (*Acts 4:29-31 NRSV*)

### **Small Group or Ministry Sharing (3 or 4 people—20 mins.)**

1. How does a "2 to 1 ratio of women to men" compare to attendance at Sunday Mass in your parish? How are men more or less active in other ways in parish life?
2. Which of the six suggestions for evangelizing Catholic men has your parish already tried? What happened?
3. Which one of the six suggestions for evangelizing Catholic men would you like to see your parish try? Or try again? Why?
4. Why is it important to evangelize men?

### **Take an Evangelization Challenge**

Use this sheet to speak with three or four Catholic men who are not involved in parish ministry. Talk to them individually or in a small group outside a church setting. What are their reactions to the statistics on male attendance? What do they think might bring men to church? Which of these suggestions do they think might work? What other suggestions do they have? (You might plan right now to meet again to talk about what happened when you tried this—successes and/or failures.)