

Emergence and Growth of the Catholic Men's Conference Movement

Origins in the Early 1990s

The Catholic men's conference movement as we know it today took shape in the early 1990s. Prior to that time, Catholic men's spiritual activities tended to be limited to parish retreats, small fellowship groups, or fraternal societies – nothing like the large-scale, lay-organized conferences that would soon emerge. The first modern Catholic men's conference is widely credited to Cincinnati, Ohio, where local organizers launched an event in 1994 that gathered Catholic men for a day of faith-based talks and worship ¹. Around the same time, a small group of men in Rockford, Illinois, inspired by an evangelical men's rally they'd attended in Steubenville, decided to “host a Catholic Men's Conference” in 1994, encouraged by the success of the Protestant Promise Keepers movement ². These early efforts mark the *genesis* of a distinctly Catholic men's conference movement – something that *did not exist in recognizable form* before the '90s. Even participants noted that “*this was something different*” from prior experiences: while many Catholic men had attended generic Christian men's rallies or Cursillo retreats, a Catholic-specific conference with sacraments and speakers was a novel idea in 1994 ³. From these humble beginnings in a few dioceses, the movement began to spread organically.

Defining the Conference Format

Though started in different places by independent groups, Catholic men's conferences soon converged on a *common format* that has proven consistently fruitful. Typically a **one-day event**, a men's conference is packed with opportunities for spiritual renewal and brotherhood. The day usually opens with prayer (often a Rosary or morning worship) and features a **series of inspiring Catholic speakers** – priests, deacons, lay evangelists, even the occasional Catholic athlete or celebrity – addressing themes of faith, virtue, and men's vocation. Integral to the schedule are the **sacraments**: most conferences offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confessions heard by multiple priests on-site) and celebrate **Holy Mass** together, often as the closing liturgy of the day ⁴ ⁵. Eucharistic **Adoration** is frequently included as well – some events incorporate a Eucharistic procession or an Adoration chapel available all day ⁶. In between talks, attendees share meals and informal fellowship, building **fraternity** through small-group discussions or simply by mingling with hundreds of fellow Catholic men. Another common feature is an exhibitor hall with Catholic vendors, ministries, and apostolates offering books, devotional items, and information on men's apostolic initiatives ⁵. All of these elements – **Adoration, Confession, Mass, dynamic talks, exhibitor tables, and fraternal camaraderie** – have become the hallmarks of the Catholic men's conference model ⁷ ⁴. This template, first developed in the 1990s, has been replicated in dioceses across the United States and beyond.

Independent but Imitative Spread Across Dioceses

One striking aspect of this movement is that it has no central governing authority mandating these conferences. Instead, the idea caught on through imitation and local initiative. By the 2000s and 2010s, “men’s conferences [were] popping up all over the country,” in the words of one involved deacon ⁸. Virtually every region saw Catholic laymen (often in partnership with their diocesan offices or Knights of Columbus councils) organizing annual men’s days. These conferences often adopted the proven format from earlier pioneers, sometimes even borrowing the same event names or themes. Yet each remained **independently organized**, usually by a volunteer committee of laymen. For example, the long-running Great Lakes Catholic Men’s Conference in Illinois began as a grassroots effort – “*not a diocesan sponsored event*,” as its history notes – and continues to be run by a nonprofit lay fellowship with support from (but not control by) the local diocese ⁹. The Cincinnati Men’s Conference likewise was a lay-organized initiative that inspired many others but operated on its own until it went on hiatus in 2011 ¹ ¹⁰. In New England, the Boston Catholic Men’s Conference (launched in 2005) arose independently in response to local needs, and soon similar conferences appeared in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Out West, dioceses from Phoenix to Anchorage have held their own yearly men’s summits. Even in Canada, the trend took hold: for instance, the Archdiocese of Winnipeg and several Ontario parishes host annual Catholic men’s conferences modeled after the U.S. events ¹¹ ¹². Despite the lack of any central organizing body, a clear “**conference movement**” emerged. Organizers often network informally – sharing speaker recommendations or scheduling tips – but each conference is autonomous, rooted in the local Catholic community. The format’s reproducibility has led to a proliferation of men’s conferences, all strikingly similar in structure and spirit. As one commentator noted, the *concept* started in 1994 has since “spawned all over the country” (now even internationally) ¹, demonstrating an organic growth driven by lay enthusiasm rather than top-down directives.

Hallmarks of Ecclesial Support and Normalization

What began as a grassroots lay movement in the 90s has, over time, won broad acceptance and encouragement from the Catholic hierarchy. Early on, some bishops were cautiously supportive, sending a priest or offering a blessing to these new gatherings of men. Now it is common for the diocesan **bishop himself to participate** in his local men’s conference – a strong sign of institutional recognition. Many conferences culminate in a Mass celebrated by the bishop or an auxiliary. For example, the tenth annual Scranton “Be a Catholic Man” conference in 2025 concluded with a Mass at which **Bishop Joseph Bambera presided and preached** ¹³ ¹⁴. In Milwaukee, the archdiocesan Men of Christ conference regularly features the Archbishop’s presence; in one recent year Archbishop Jerome Listecki even led a Eucharistic procession and addressed the crowd, drawing applause as he brandished a rosary and affirmed his support for Catholic men’s spiritual leadership ¹⁵ ¹⁶. Similar examples abound: the Archbishop of Hartford was principal celebrant at the 2023 Connecticut Catholic Men’s Conference Mass ¹⁷, the Bishop of Trenton annually celebrates the Mass for the Catholic Men for Jesus Christ conference in New Jersey ¹⁸, and so on. This **consistent episcopal involvement** – bishops celebrating sacraments, endorsing the events in diocesan media, and sometimes even mandating promotion of the conference in all parishes – signals that the men’s conference has become a normalized part of church life. What might once have been viewed as an experimental lay endeavor is now mainstream. In fact, many bishops credit these conferences with reinvigorating men’s faith. Diocesan news coverage often highlights the bishop’s encouragement to attendees; for instance, Bishop Bambera in Scranton exhorted the 400 men present to “*be light in the darkness*” of an increasingly secular society, linking the conference message with the broader mission of the Church ¹⁹ ²⁰. Such integration into the life of the Church means the movement is no longer at the fringes

- it enjoys **full ecclesial approbation**. The hierarchy's support, in turn, has further legitimized men's conferences and helped them become an expected annual fixture in many dioceses.

Shared Speakers and a Common Catholic Message

Another indicator of how unified this movement has become (despite no central authority) is the emergence of a *shared ecosystem of speakers and content*. A relatively small circle of popular Catholic speakers tends to appear repeatedly across conference line-ups nationwide, creating a cohesive pedagogical thread. For example, **Fr. Larry Richards**, a priest from Erie known for his challenging men's retreats, was among the early conference preachers and remains in high demand – he has “**directed hundreds of ... conferences**” and has spoken at men's conferences from Ohio to California ²¹ ²². **Matthew Kelly**, the Australian-born Catholic author, has keynoted multiple U.S. men's conferences (including the large E6 Conference in Indiana) ²³. Celebrated Catholic apologists like **Tim Staples** of Catholic Answers or **Scott Hahn**, the theologian and convert, frequently tour the men's conference circuit as featured presenters ²⁴ ²⁵. **Fr. Mike Schmitz**, whose engaging podcasts and youth talks have made him a household name among Catholics, has headlined events from Idaho to Pennsylvania – in 2021 he drew tens of thousands of virtual attendees to the revived Cincinnati Men's Conference ²⁶ ²⁷. Lay evangelists such as **Jon Leonetti** travel extensively to speak at diocesan men's conferences across North America, from Kansas City to Pittsburgh to Calgary, often appearing at several different conferences each year. This overlap of speakers means that a man attending a conference in, say, Dallas one year and Cleveland the next might encounter a familiar face and a consistent emphasis on certain themes (e.g. fatherhood, brotherhood in Christ, or overcoming modern moral challenges). It has created a kind of “**shared language**” and enthusiasm across these otherwise independent events. Attendees everywhere are urged to deeper conversion and missionary discipleship in similar ways, reinforcing a nationwide Catholic men's *apostolate* of sorts. The repetition of key figures and messages is not merely celebrity-driven; it reflects how these conferences collectively form a “**pedagogical ecosystem**,” cross-pollinating ideas and best practices. Media coverage notes that the first conferences helped launch this ecosystem – the Cincinnati event's model of using “**Catholic motivational speakers [to] inspire men**” has indeed been replicated widely ¹. Now, a speaker's message delivered at one conference may ripple out as he carries it to dozens of others, helping to unite men from different dioceses in a common call to holiness and service. In this way, the movement has both **local flavors and a national coherence**. Each conference remains rooted in local realities, but the core content – powered by a network of renowned Catholic speakers – is shared across the movement, creating a vibrant fraternity that transcends any one location.

Recognition by the Holy See and Catholic Men's Conference Day

In recent years, the Catholic men's conference phenomenon has even drawn attention and blessing from the highest levels of the Church. Organizers and supporters see this as a sign that the movement's impact is being acknowledged globally. Notably, in 2020 a group of conference leaders (spearheaded by the Connecticut Catholic Men's Conference team) proposed establishing an annual “**Catholic Men's Conference Day**” to celebrate and promote the men's conference movement ²⁸. They chose **October 17th** as the date for this observance, positioned in the Church's calendar roughly mid-Fall, and set up a website to connect men with conferences in their area ²⁹. What began as a grassroots idea quickly gained momentum. By 2025, the initiative received an extraordinary mark of approval: the **Holy Father's apostolic blessing** on all those involved in Catholic men's conferences. On October 17, 2025 – Catholic Men's Conference Day – a papal telegram (signed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State) conveyed “**the Holy Father's good wishes**” to everyone “*associated with Catholic Men's Conferences in North America*,”

encouraging the apostolate and imparting the Pope's Apostolic Blessing ³⁰ ³¹. In this message, Pope **Leo XIV** (as the new pontiff was referred to) praised the gatherings for strengthening men in faith and charity, and expressed hope that Catholic men, inspired by these conferences, would bring Christ's love to their families and communities, especially by serving "the poor and most vulnerable" in imitation of St. Joseph ³² ³³. The Vatican explicitly acknowledged the now-annual **Catholic Men's Conference Day (Oct. 17)**, describing it as a series of men's conferences across various locations aimed at deepening men's faith and commitment ³⁴. This remarkable recognition – a sort of *papal nod* to the entire movement – underscored how far the Catholic men's conference concept has come from its modest 1990s origins. What was once a handful of local experiments is now seen as a coherent movement worthy of a papal blessing and even its own day on the calendar. Organizers cite this development as a **historic milestone**: the **universal Church's affirmation** of their efforts to renew Catholic manhood. The institution of Catholic Men's Conference Day (with its accompanying Apostolic Blessing) serves both to honor the "genius" of the men's conference format and to invite even more men to take part ³⁴. It is, in effect, a call from the Church for Catholic men everywhere to **"rise to the challenge"** of faith – a call first heard in those arenas and parish halls decades ago, now amplified from St. Peter's itself.

Conclusion: A Movement Comes of Age

Over roughly thirty years, the Catholic men's conference movement in the U.S. – with parallel efforts in Canada – has matured from a curious new idea into an established feature of Catholic life. Its **origins** in the early 1990s were humble and innovative, filling a void for male-focused faith formation that had previously been unaddressed. Its **structure** crystallized around key spiritual components (Mass, sacraments, speakers, fellowship), a formula that has proven remarkably transferable across regions. The movement's **expansion** has been driven by the energy of laymen on the ground, not by any central plan, yielding a rich variety of conferences that nevertheless feel like part of one family. It has achieved a notable level of **institutional acceptance**, with regular episcopal participation and encouragement, integrating these once lay-led events into the pastoral fabric of dioceses. A cadre of **shared speakers and teachers** has further unified the message, forming generations of men in a consistent understanding of Catholic discipleship. And now, with a **papal blessing** and an official day of recognition, the Catholic men's conference movement stands affirmed at the highest level of the Church.

Yet the movement remains, at heart, what it was at the beginning: **men answering the call** to follow Christ more deeply and to support one another in that journey. Conference by conference, year by year, thousands of Catholic men continue to experience conversion, healing, and camaraderie in these gatherings. Bishops, priests, and lay leaders alike have noted the fruits in parish life and families as men return from the conference fired up to be better husbands, fathers, and apostles in the world ³⁵ ³⁶. In a society that often marginalizes faith and confuses the nature of true masculinity, the Catholic men's conferences have provided a much-needed forum for *rejuvenating authentic Catholic manhood*. They do so not by inventing new doctrines or programs, but by **re-presenting the timeless teachings of the Church** in a context of male fellowship and honest personal challenge. This movement's story – from non-existence before the '90s, through explosive growth, to global acknowledgment – is a testament to how the Holy Spirit can work through lay initiative to renew the Church. In the words of one early organizer, *"we are finally responding boldly... to serve, protect, and defend what God has entrusted to us"* as Catholic men ⁸. The Catholic men's conference, now a fixture from coast to coast, has become a powerful instrument for that response, calling men to holiness and strengthening them to **"go forth and serve"** in ever greater numbers.

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