

Asking for direction ... finally: after years navigating the road of life, some baby boomer men are finding meaning in the unlikeliest of places.

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Sometimes the best place to talk to Catholic baby boomer men about spirituality is far removed from the quiet of a church sanctuary.

Kevin Bartels of Queens, New York, 48, is talking about God while some of his fellow baby boomers play weekend basketball at a city playground, a weekly ritual he partakes in with as much diligence as he attends to his Sunday Mass obligation.

This group has been together for more than 15 years. These guys used to be spry, energetic, going quickly to the basket. Now they run just as hard, but the end result at times can look lethargic. The joke among them is that their game is being filmed in slow motion. The before-game banter about the Knicks, Yankees, and Mets is now accompanied by details of diagnoses on aging knees and tendons falling apart.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Their very generational name speaks of youth and vitality. But some baby boomer men like Bartels--what demographers have dubbed those born between 1946 and 1964--are taking this more slowed-down time in their lives to smell the roses of a spirituality they may have missed out on in their young adult years.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Bartels had a son at 22. "Then the most important thing was going to work and making money," he recalls. The money--Bartels works in the mental health field as a job counselor--never really came. His first marriage broke up and he says he spent some time after his divorce looking for love in all the wrong places. He is now married to a woman he considers his best friend. They have three children, 8-year-old twins and a 3-year-old.

A renewed interest in things spiritual came to him around his 40th birthday. He made a practice of reading self-help books, including evangelical pastor Rick Warren's *A Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan), and began returning to regular Mass attendance.

Bartels has progressed spiritually largely on his own efforts, tapping into the Catholic school and parish tradition in which he was raised. But for those men who want to join the men's movement, Catholic style, there also are group opportunities that grew out of the wider men's movement that took off in the 1990s and was the subject of much media interest and, in some circles, ridicule.

Men are from Mars

One such approach is led by Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, who has built his priestly ministry around bringing men to a deeper awareness of spirituality in their lives. For modern American men, he says, it is not an easy task.

"In our culture there are so many aborted attempts to opening up the soul," he says, particularly for men, who are geared to developing careers and climbing the corporate ladder. Even the language of Christian spirituality, with its emphasis on concepts such as vulnerability and opening oneself to God, speaks of a language that women are more likely to embrace.

Men are different from women and seek spirituality in unique ways. That's true, says Rohr, even if church structures rarely recognize this. It's no accident that most pews in traditional churches are filled by women.

"The male psyche pays attention to different things," he says, something obvious to anyone who has hung around a sports bar for any length of time. If something is too pretty or too nice--such as much liturgical worship as it has evolved over the centuries--men will often be quick to avoid it.

Men, Rohr says, are used to competing and need, at times, to be pulled down. He looks to Jesus in the gospels for inspiration: Jesus is often chiding the male apostles for not getting his message, while he treats women, such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, far more gently.

There are signs that baby boomer men, many of whom have achieved financial success and are married to women who have pursued their own careers, are finding less solace in job achievement and are willing to look elsewhere. Rohr's group, for example, sponsors rites of passage weekends for men, during which participants are urged to embrace their spiritual selves. They are filled up months in advance and are held in locations in the West, Midwest, and Northeast.

Like more secular men's approaches, Rohr emphasizes that men suffer from distant fathers and need to reconnect with a loving and supportive male presence in their lives. Participants in the rites of passages are expected to bond with nature as well as their fellow man.

New lease on life

A recent New York Times article chronicled the emergence of a kind of fashionably unemployed group of middle-aged men. The article noted that 13 percent of American men between the ages of 30 and 55--usually considered the prime income-producing years--are out of work, up from 5 percent in the late 1960s. The Times attributed the phenomenon to a convergence of factors: men who were laid off and unable to find similar work, those who were successfully able to put away money and can live off savings, those who find other things to do while their wives bring home the bacon, and the growth of government disability benefits and other programs.

Rohr taps baby boomer men, both employed and unemployed, as mentors in his rites of passage system. Such older men, he says, have two alternatives: They can become what he calls "generative," sharing what they have with younger people; or they can become selfish and turned inward. Those who connect with a spiritual path, says Rohr, find themselves more concerned about issues such as social justice. They stretch their worldview and grow in concern for others whom they may have ignored in their working lives.

William Buckley of Manhattan--not the conservative pundit--has lived that "generativity" that Rohr talks about. At 59, Buckley is retired from a high-powered New York brokerage firm, the kind that dominates the finance pages. While still in his early 50s, Buckley left the firm, secure in his financial future yet unsure of what he might do with the years he expected to have left.

"I was too young to just go to the beach," he says about his retirement.

For a year and a half Buckley took college courses, read a book a week, played golf, and reconnected with old friends. "It was a lot of fun," says Buckley, who is married with two adult children. "But it became clear that there was something missing." Like many men needing a quest, Buckley discovered that the leisure lifestyle offered no objective or mission.

Now he's found his mission, teaching math to girls at St. Aloysius School in Harlem through the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, a Jesuit-run group that provides ministry opportunities and spiritual counseling and support for older adults willing to volunteer in some kind of social service work.

Jesuit-educated and an active lay Catholic much of his life, Buckley had the means and inclination to donate money to good causes. But the stories of his students in Harlem make for a different view from that on Wall Street.

"You hear the stories of these kids. Some are living in cars, some are visiting a parent in the prison system, some need medicine [and are uninsured]. These kids are dealt such a bad hand. It's not right and it's not fair," he says. With the help of a spiritual adviser, Buckley regularly reflects upon the lessons he learns from his Harlem students about social injustice and how they can be applied to his spiritual life.

Edmund Stankiewicz, 60, of Mountainside, New Jersey says that a cancer scare turned his life around six years ago. He was determined "to do something I wanted to do, not what I have to do" with his second chance at life.

He sold his investment counseling business and put his business skills to work at a homeless shelter.

"I had made it to the top of my profession," he says. "But it was no longer fun. It became a grind to stay there. All the toys in the world weren't doing it."

While he waxes enthusiastically about how his business efforts have contributed positively to the work of the shelter, he credits the lessons learned from regular spiritual counseling and retreats as a member of the Ignatian Volunteer Corps.

"The goal is to see God in all things," he says. It is a broad principle with daily applications. Every night before he goes to bed, Stankiewicz reviews the events of the day, putting them into perspective. "You reflect upon your whole day, where you saw God and where you didn't."

In the spirit

Joe Canlas, 60, of Queens, New York, is an accountant who has been largely unemployed over the past four years, as layoffs and switchovers to younger people have made it difficult for him to remain in the workforce. He has filled the void with devotion to his parish, including service on the finance committee and in religious education.

Married and the father of an adult son, Canlas found he has the time to follow up on his passion, a faith renewed after he got involved in the Charismatic Renewal and Marriage Encounter.

"Now God is a big part of everything. I find a parking space and I say, 'Thank you Lord,'" he says. Without his conversion, he wonders if he would even be alive today, whether the stress at work would have taken its toll. An immigrant from the Philippines, where he learned his Catholic faith from his mother, Canlas worked for high-pressure, Manhattan-based firms and found it wearing. Constant corporate "reorganization"--a frequent euphemism employed for layoffs--threatened any sense of security he may have felt in the business world.

Canlas is a man who, while galvanized by the Charismatic Renewal and Marriage Encounter, has found his niche in parish life at Ascension Church in Elmhurst, Queens. The parish offers the kind of leadership skills the corporate world failed to nurture.

Dominican Sister Donna Ciangio, who works in pastoral services for the National Pastoral Life Center (NPLC) in New York, travels the country exploring parish life. (NPLC acts as a consultant to parishes and dioceses.) She finds that men like Canlas are relative rarities. Go to just about any parish, she says, and you will discover the absence of two groups: young adults and men. There are stirrings of efforts to attract young people, yet there are relatively few efforts to attract men to parish life.

Most parishes "don't know what to do about [the absence of men]," she says. "I don't know the answers. I don't know anyone who does."

But, she cautions, it is not a new or particularly American problem. Fraternal organizations such as the Holy Name Society and Knights of Columbus were formed in part to incorporate men into parish life. Father Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus, was inspired by competition for the attention of Catholic men from other, more secular lodges.

Think outside the chapel

In much of the Catholic world, spirituality is largely seen as a feminine pursuit. In Latin America the church pews are largely the domain of women. Even in Catholic Ireland, the tradition is for men to stand outside the church doors on Sunday while their women pray at Mass.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Some church groups have been able to tap into male involvement. The largely evangelical Promise Keepers, popular in the 1990s for massive stadium rallies, is one example. For Catholic men, the Cursillo retreat movement, literally a "short course" in Christianity usually held over an intense weekend, still exists yet hit its height in participation in the 1970s. That movement was able to inculcate men with lessons in "what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in a manly way," says Ciangio. She suggests that perhaps the sex segregation of Cursillo, in which men and women held separate retreat weekends, fostered this dynamic.

For whatever reason, it appears, Catholic men often find it necessary to break out of parish walls to find a space to talk about God. While much spirituality talk focuses on the need for American men, in particular, to get off the career merry-go-round at least for a while to contemplate a higher calling, Heart to Heart Communications in Akron, Ohio involves men by getting them to talk about their work.

Father Norm Douglas is a priest of the Cleveland diocese and director of Heart to Heart, an organization that fosters leadership in organizations, both profit and nonprofit. It consults with corporate leaders to talk and reflect upon the spiritual dimension of work.

It is open to both men and women, Catholics and non-Catholics. But, notes Douglas, its programs attract men by a wide majority, who participate in discussion groups and websites such as livingfaithatwork.org. It's difficult to attract men, say, to a parish scripture study group. But frame it into a discussion of leadership and give it the imprimatur of the leadership of their workplace, and they do respond, he says.

Douglas finds that older men, baby boomers in their 50s and 60s, are particularly interested. They know they are nearing retirement and are concerned about "leaving a legacy."

Their question about work, he says, is "How do you want to be remembered?" He finds them eager to pass on life lessons to younger colleagues.

Douglas notes that Heart to Heart starts with spirituality as a priority and then focuses on how to integrate work with the religious quest. It's the focus on the active, particularly what it means to make spiritual sense of corporate life, that is attractive to men, he says.

Chicago writer Greg Pierce notes that men are trained to take seriously the realm of work. It's increasingly true of women as well. He has long preached that traditional piety doesn't often speak to the quest for meaning in vocation, which Pierce defines beyond the realm of religious life.

"A lot of men find their identity in their work," he says, noting that it's in that arena where men live out their faith. In his new book, *The Mass Is Never Ended* (Ave Maria Press), Pierce argues that church rituals need to address the world of work beyond Sunday. In this model the Mass is seen less as a serene respite but as a place where Christians take their inspiration to transform their world through their work during the week.

Such an approach, he says, should be inviting to younger people, both men and women. As a group, young adults "are not looking for a refuge from the world. They love the world. It's the church that they're not so sure of."

But it could appeal to people of all ages. Pierce notes that when his 82-year-old father recently died, the people that gathered around for the funeral, besides his family, were those his father ran across through work in varied occupations as a grocer, a real estate agent, and proprietor of a Christian bookstore.

Men in action

It's this celebration of the active that seems to be the crux of male spirituality. Talk to those who have thought seriously about male spirituality among American baby boomers, and they come to the conclusion that men are different from women, particularly in the way they approach spirituality.

Leaders in male spirituality in the church note that attracting younger men is one of their most difficult tasks. Some argue that younger men--immersed in the world of work and raising families--are perhaps not ready for exploring such issues.

Lenny Sclafani, 65, is a deacon for the Diocese of Brooklyn, New York and has been leading various men's spirituality groups around New York City for decades. A former police officer, he traces his own spiritual awakening to a Cursillo weekend when he was 37.

As women reach mid-life, they have a tendency to move beyond the area of family life and into the wider world. For men, says Sclafani, "the challenge is to go inward" after decades of competing in the wider world.

Jay Bowes, 63, a professional educator, has led small groups of men on retreats at the Mercy Center in Madison, Connecticut. The goal, he says, is to make men comfortable in sharing their spiritual selves through a process that emphasizes informal conversations and avoids formal retreat presentations.

It's men in their 50s and 60s who often feel a need to connect with their spiritual selves, says Bowes. "Younger men often don't stay," he says. "They are often not at a point in their lives to ask the questions."

It's not to say that groups for younger men don't exist. Sean O'Malley has been part of such a group for nearly two decades, as nine of his friends from the Chicago area get together each year for a Lenten retreat.

While they may not have grown old together, they have reached middle age. Most have just passed the magic 50, while O'Malley himself is 47. He's found that the tone of their retreat--no drum beating or mountain climbs, instead relying on friendly dinners, reflection talks, and quiet time--has changed over the years.

The early years focused on the issues surrounding establishing young families. "The last two years it has evolved more into discussions about death. We're starting to lose parents," he says. As his friends get older, he says, there's more emphasis on slowing down, enjoying the time they have together. They also do informal mentoring--O'Malley still has young children, while his friends, whose children are now in college, can offer advice on parenting.

Still, that deep level of quiet, shared reflection is relatively rare among men.

"Masculine spirituality emphasizes that doing, or acting, is the primary way of developing a spirituality--not hearing, not talking, not reflecting," says Rohr, who notes that reflection comes after action for many men.

Ciangio agrees. She says that perhaps the best model for male spirituality might come from the American institution that arguably reaches men the most: the National Football League. The NFL is geared to intense activity, followed by analysis, whether that be from sportscasters or around the water cooler on Monday morning. It's a model that parishes should explore when contemplating reaching out to men, she says.

One such man might well be Bartels. A New York Jets football fan, Bartel's spirituality is on an active--definitely not on a monastic--contemplative level. Still, with the demands of family, work, and of course, weekend basketball, he finds time to regularly tap into the divine.

"I do a lot of praying, mostly in the shower. It's the only quiet time I have," he says. Encouraging that kind of reflection as part of an active life remains the challenge of male spirituality for American baby boomers.

Out of the and onto the court

Men, according to a Gallup poll, comprise only 37 percent of weekly adult American Catholic Mass-goers. Why do they remain a minority?

For Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, much of it has to do with Catholic liturgy. In *Adam's Return* (Crossroad), he notes, "Church became a women's thing in most countries" because "most official church rituals appeal much more to the feminine psyche than to the masculine." While the leadership of the church is male, its worship appeals, with its incense and candles, to a feminine consciousness, writes Rohr.

Leon J. Podles, author of *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Spence), puts it more succinctly: "Women go to church, men go to football games."

It's not football, but an unscientific place to test these theories is Sunday morning on the basketball courts at Crowley Playground in Queens, New York. There's a Sabbath obligation regularly expressed here, but it has little to do with church. Nearly every weekend morning for the past 20 years or so, about 15 men gather for their weekly pickup basketball ritual. Their ages range from 25 to 75, and they are comprised of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. While some of the Christians in the group make an effort to attend services, most don't.

One weekend warrior, Joe Grosso, 56, is a college counselor by profession and graduate of Catholic schools. His father recently died, and at the wake, amidst the family photos set up in a shrine near the casket, were pictures of the deceased along with photos of the last two Italian popes. Joe's father was a regular Mass-goer for much of his life, but Joe rarely attends.

"With all the hypocrisy in the church, I'm relying on my own way," he says. He says he was turned off when he and his wife requested First Communion for his now-deceased daughter, who lived with multiple handicaps. The pastor turned the family down, saying her inability to understand the sacrament made her ineligible.

Grosso also soured on the church when a priest who supervised altar boy trips when he was a child was caught up in the sex abuse scandal. Although not physically abused himself, Grosso wondered about the priest's behavior, which included overly frank talks about sex with 10-year-old boys. He remembers feeling uncomfortable at the time.

Among this small sample, the spectre of the sex abuse scandal is not far away when the topic of Catholicism is raised, at least among those who no longer attend church and who spend their Sunday mornings practicing their jump shots instead of their prayers.

Charles Pagan, 59, is a banker, retired police officer, and infrequent church-goer. He's convinced that men "are not as religious-minded as women are." Like others, he cites the priest sex abuse scandal as something that turned him off church. All the publicity about the scandals, he says, caused him "to start thinking about things that happened in the past." While he himself was not abused, he wonders what might have gone on in past years.

"I believe in God, but the church as an institution has been degraded," he says.

By contrast, Charles O'Boyle, 55, an auto mechanic, rarely attends Mass yet says he never got mad at the church and had positive experiences in his own Catholic school education. "I just stopped going," he says.

"I still pray. I still believe in God," he says. He made sure his own three children went to Catholic schools. While he doesn't attend Mass regularly, he says, "I have my own way of doing things." He sees looking out for the elderly in his neighborhood as a way of fulfilling his religious obligation.

Whether it's specific church policies, the legacy of the sex-abuse scandal, or simply a spiritual malaise, it appears likely that most of the baptized middle-aged Catholic hoopsters at this playground will remain among the vast

majority of men who rarely, if ever, engage themselves with the church of their youths.

--Peter Feureherd

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