

# Catholic Associations: Reviving the Faith through Small Communities

Famous individuals receive all the attention. Whether in a history book or a popular magazine, celebrated men and women dominate the headlines, but what is the impact of a single individual? Is there a limit to what one person can accomplish?

A dynamic and talented political candidate will not get very far as an independent. Rather a potential politician needs an elaborate network, such as a political party, with scores of volunteers and an endless source of revenue just to make the ballot.

The same principle is true in the religious sphere. If Mother Teresa acted alone, she would have helped a few thousand individuals and had only been known locally in Calcutta. It was because she founded a religious order that millions of people were helped in dozens of countries and her influence spread around the world.

Similarly, Father Michael McGivney probably reached hundreds of parishioners during his life, but the organization he began, the Knights of Columbus, has impacted millions of people around the world from its beginnings in the 19th century to the present day.



*Members of the Knights of Columbus hold American flags.*

*(CNS photo/Bob Roller)*

In short, associations have been overlooked in their ability to affect change. Possibly, this disregard is because individuals are exciting, and associations are boring. People neglect the influence of associations across the board, and this is likewise the case in the Catholic world.

On the level of the parish, most would assume that a dynamic pastor is the key to a vibrant parish. Instead of reflecting on the pastor, I would judge the parish by examining the bulletin and determining how many groups are active in the parish. The latter is a more telling sign of the dynamism of the community.

From a historical perspective, the church in the Middle Ages had a thriving culture due to religious guilds, which were distinct from the more well-known professional guilds organized around a single profession. Religious guilds were dedicated to a patron saint or title of Jesus or Mary, emphasized community prayer and Mass attendance, and hosted religious celebrations and processions. Many scholars argue that the guilds, which existed in churches all across Europe, were responsible for

the flowering of Catholic culture in the High and Late Middle Ages.

The American church experienced a similar growth in Catholic associations in the early part of the twentieth century. The Knights of Columbus was only one of many organizations thriving in Catholic parishes. Lay Catholics flocked to groups, such as the Holy Name Society, the Catholic Daughters of America, and dozens of other sodalities, confraternities, and third orders groups.

Today, most Catholics do not belong to a parish-based group. Many groups still exist with a handful of members from the 1960s and 1970s, but as the older members die off, few new people join them. The Holy Name Society in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, for instance, went from 40,000 members in 135 parishes at its height to now 500 members in 18 parishes. As a result of declining associations, parishes have lost a lot of activities and members.

A few bright spots do exist as the Knights of Columbus continue to expand and youth groups are now a staple of many parishes. Yet, the majority of Catholics are not involved in any association.

From a purely anecdotal level, many people I know have grown in their faith through joining an association. My wife and I met and grew in our faith while attending a Theology of the Body study group. My brother-in-law recently revealed it was through his youth group that his faith began to blossom, and currently, he is on track to be ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of Baltimore next June. At my college, numerous nominal Catholics joined a Catholic fraternity (called a household) in which I was a member and became practicing, dedicated Catholics through it.

Why are Catholic groups so effective? In part, members feel part of a community. Often, the parish is too large, and one could attend Mass every weekend and still not know anyone. Within a smaller group, individuals form personal relationships with other Catholics, leading to a deeper faith.

More specifically, there is an increased level of support being part of a Catholic association. Peer pressure has a negative connotation, and we often instruct children not to hang around with the “bad crowd” because their influence will lead them to perform negative actions. The principle, however, works in reverse. If you associate with people that share your beliefs, it will strengthen your faith. We live in a culture that is constantly directing us away from God. It is important to have a group that supports and encourages us to stay on the straight and narrow path.

In addition to support, a smaller group also provides accountability. It is easy to skip Mass from time to time or to stop praying all together when you are on your own. In my current men’s group, we reflect on our prayer life as a group. It is not judgmental or accusatory, but meant to be encouraging. I want to pray more, but sometimes, I can be lazy. Occasionally, you need a friend to push you along and to hold you accountable.

Returning to my original point, the individual is weak, and conversely, there is great power in numbers. Ten people acting together are more effective than ten individuals working by themselves. In the history of the church, there has been an emphasis on working in groups. From the very beginning, Jesus selected the Apostles to minister with him, and the disciples were sent out in pairs. As the church developed, communities formed in local churches, and religious communities developed in monasteries and convents.

If you do not belong to a group, think about joining one: a youth group, a young adult group, a Bible study, a men's group, a mom's group, the Legion of Mary, the Knights of the Columbus, and so on. If there is not a group that fills your particular need, then start one. Lastly, if you are already in an organization, invite someone else to join.