A Pittsburgh Catholic Men’s Movement

By Mike Aquilina

Anyone tuned to the popular Catholic press has grown accustomed to the intermittent rumblings about a “Catholic men’s movement.” Some organizations have risen up, following the model of Protestant movements like Promise Keepers. All very good. But there’s another model that should not be forgotten, because Catholic—and it’s ours.

The story begins in the depths of the Great Depression.

For most of the country, the Depression conjures up memories of bread lines, soup kitchens, grinding poverty, and all the miseries that accompany economic collapse. But it was, paradoxically, a glorious time for the Diocese of Pittsburgh. It is true that money was tight, and that Catholics suffered as much as anyone else—perhaps more so, since Catholics were drawn disproportionately from the working classes. But the faith itself had never been stronger.

Nothing made the Church more visible than the gigantic Eucharistic Rallies sponsored by the Holy Name Society. An institution since 1911, the parades drew many thousands of men to march in the streets every year.

In 1930, the first year of the Depression, the Holy Name Society rounded up 100,000 men for their Eucharistic Rally—a number equal to something like 10% of the male population of the whole Pittsburgh metropolitan area, Catholic and Protestant.

The Eucharistic Rallies grew to such epic proportions that they moved the secular press to new heights of sensation. Headline writers hailed out the “second-coming” type—the headline type so large that editors reserve it for events comparable in importance to the Second Coming of Christ. Richard J. Lamb, Jr., a writer for the Press, left us this description of the procession in 1936:

Two urchins clung to a woman’s threadbare coat on the fringe of the throng which lined Terrace St. Last night.

The woman, her deep-lined face framed in a black scarf, caught, peasant-fashion, at her throat, cupped a bony hand around the flame of a candle, shielding it from the wind.

In the glow of the candle, her lips moved silently. Now and then she’d rise on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the religious spectacle beyond that wall of women, lined shoulder to shoulder along the curb—the procession to the Eucharistic rally at Pitt Stadium.

Presently she drew a rosary from a worn purse, kissed the crucifix and made the sign of the cross. The waifs at her side also had candles. Too young to know why they were there, they contented themselves with catching the wax drippings from the candles in their hands and molding them into fantastic patterns.

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Gathered Fragments

Prayers Intoned
Above the murmur rose the sharp voice of a priest:
"Hail Mary, full of grace, the lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women...."

Hardly daring to raise her voice, the woman whis­pered in broken English:
"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

As she rose again on tiptoe, the full splendor of the occasion was unfolded before her. In abject humility she dropped to her knees in the rain-soaked earth and pressed a gnarled fist to her breast three times. The youngsters looked at their mother, then at each other, and did the same.

All around them, women—and a few men—knelt with lighted candles. They, too, struck their breasts—the Catholic’s outward expression of inward humility.

An Old Ceremony
The solemn pageant being enacted before them was an old one—almost 2000 years old—a procession of the Blessed Sacrament.

Beneath a white and gold canopy borne by priests, walked Most Rev. Hugh C. Boyle, Bishop of Pittsburgh, the folds of his brocaded cape gathered around the radiant gold vessel in his hands. In the glassed center of the vessel was a white wafer of bread—the Consecrated Host which Catholics are taught is the physical and spiritual essence of Jesus Christ, their Lord.

Four thousand altar boys in flowing cassocks and surplices led the procession. Behind them marched almost 600 priests, representative of most of the 444 parishes in the Pittsburgh Diocese.

Holy Name sponsored two Eucharistic Rallies in the 1950s, and they were even bigger and more elaborate. In 1950, a gigantic rally jammed Forbes Field with candle-carrying men. Nine tons of candles had to be provided for them. Three thousand altar boys marched in blocks. About eighty thousand men participated; as many as fifty thousand more couldn’t get in.

But in 1955, the Holy Name Society staged its greatest production yet. A gigantic parade, the biggest in the entire history of the city, began marching past the reviewing stand in front of St. Paul’s at noon.

By eight o’clock that night, the parade was still going. It took nearly nine hours for the whole parade to pass the reviewing stand. Sixty thousand men marched in the parade; another hundred thousand people watched it go by from the sidewalks.

Marchers had come from all over the country; the Cleveland delegation alone—more than five thousand men and twenty horses—took more than half an hour to pass the stand. New York sent more than a thousand, including a large contingent from the New York Police Department. Bishops and monsignors lined the reviewing stand.

Spiritual successes should never be measured merely by attendance figures. And that is certainly true of Holy Name’s rallies and processions. The real story — and the story that remains to be told — is in the personal conversions worked among Pittsburgh’s men in those particular moments of grace.

Nevertheless, the numbers are impressive, and they are testimony to the “faith of our fathers.”

It is a history that warrants much further research. It is a history from which we have much to learn.

Top: Priests and acolytes surround the altar at Forbes Field in the 1941 rally. In 1955, the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph put out a special edition covering the procession and eucharistic rally. All photos courtesy of the Diocesan Archives and Ken White, archivist.

The 1915 procession.