

Fatherhood and the Church

The remedy for the empty pews isn't a softer faith but a harder one.

Wall Street Journal, By Will Thibeaup, June 18, 2026

Pictured at right: Good Friday at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Washington, April 3

The central demographic fact of many modern American congregations is this: Men in church on an ordinary Sunday are outnumbered and aging. The American church has been stripped of much of its male presence.

The culture has noticed men's absence and rushed to profit from it: the podcast strongmen, the testosterone clinics, the influencers peddling discipline and dominance—all selling at a markup the claim that they can restore a place for masculinity. That's something the church offered and then abandoned. Men never stopped craving greatness. They stopped expecting it at the altar.

The expectation of finding manliness in faith died for a reason. The church kept one half of its inheritance and shelved the other half. Sermons and homilies still preach charity and mercy toward the weak, and rightly so; strip those out and nothing Christian survives. But contemporary Christianity has muffled the martial half that built it. Tertullian, an early Christian writer, taught that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. For centuries the sacrament of confirmation told boys that they were enrolled as soldiers of Christ, and the faithful called themselves the Church Militant. Men met God as a captain who demanded much of them.

That tradition channeled male impulses into service of God and the weak, but the modern demasculinizing of the faith demanded therapeutic reassurance instead. The Church Militant devolved into something closer to the Church Impotent (to borrow from the Catholic historian Leon Podles). Parishes became a circuit of women's clubs that invited a man to picture himself a bride rather than a soldier.

The men understood the invitation and declined. The consequences fall on the next generation, and the figures are grim. A much-cited Swiss study from the 1990s asked how faith passes between generations, and the answer upset every assumption about gentle



piety: The father decides. When a father practices, most of his children keep the faith; when he stays home, a devout mother rescues almost no one, about 1 child in 50. A mother instills devotion, while a practicing father supplies the harder lesson that faith isn't a feminine refinement but a masculine obligation.

Remove the father, and the structure gives way. About 1 in 4 American children, some 18 million, live without their biological father, the Census Bureau reports, and they grow up poor at four times the rate of their peers. The sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur showed that having two parents in the home produces better social outcomes in every race and income bracket.

About 40% of American babies were born outside marriage in 2025, nearly four times the rate in 1970. This wasn't a private failure of fathers but the result of a public project. Law and politics, having declared themselves neutral toward family, stopped encouraging stable families. Politics is upstream of culture, and a regime that won't prefer married-couple households will cease to produce them.

The same pattern occurs with believing fathers. Couples who worship together divorce roughly 30% to 50% less often, the University of Virginia sociologist Brad Wilcox finds, and a 2018 Harvard study linked regular attendance among tens of thousands of women to a 50% lower divorce rate.

The church should stop apologizing for the man the faith demands and stop offering comfort where it should offer command. Consider the patron saint of fathers. St. Joseph was no mild domestic ornament. The litany hails him as the renowned offspring of David, who handed Christ a king's lineage and a contested throne and calls him the terror of demons and the model of artisans. When the angel warned him of danger, St. Joseph didn't deliberate. He took the child across a hostile border into Egypt. No wonder Pope Francis called that "creatively courageous."

This is the manhood the faith could forge. Thomas Aquinas named it magnanimity, the stretching of the soul toward great things. Pope Benedict XVI pressed the point in his 2007 encyclical "Spe Salvi": God made man "for greatness," but the heart runs too small and has to be stretched to hold it. We should aim past money and applause toward something worth the cost: a mission beyond the household, in the public world it exists to shape.

The remedy for the empty pews isn't a softer faith but a harder one, summoning men not to endure the world but to conquer it for Christ. Martyrdom is faith's final argument, held in reserve. Its daily work is marriages that last and politics that stops pretending faith is irrelevant.

Scripture says every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named from the Father, so that a man's own fatherhood is never merely his. It is a share in a paternity older than the world. St. Joseph proves it, a father by vocation rather than blood, who raised the Son of an eternal Father.

This is what Father's Day honors: not sentiment and not biology, but a man's place in a relationship beyond time. Men aren't gone from the modern world. They are waiting to be told that their ambition, aimed greatly enough, was never a sin, and that to win the world for Christ is to win their children to a love that outlasts it.

Mr. Thibeaudeau is founder of Escoreal Solutions and a director at the Claremont Institute.