

Conclave is male enclave

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A jury just convicted a former Boston priest of raping a child. The Vatican just defrocked four other Boston priests accused of similar attacks on children. Parishioners are occupying churches across the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston to protest their closure.

What is Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley's response to all this pain and division? How is he reaching out to create a more inclusive community of faith in Greater Boston? He is promoting a conference exclusively for Catholic men next month that is being convened by a national evangelical group to help men "sort through the current confusion about, and attacks on, masculinity and maleness."

Who knew that a machismo crisis was such a serious threat facing the Catholic Church in Boston?

"It is confusing to be a man today," says the material provided for the conference by the National Fellowship of Catholic Men, the organization that began running these events across the country a few years ago. "The man of today is expected to be protective and hard-working on the one hand, and gentle and supportive on the other. What is a man to do?"

Gee, I don't know. Maybe be protective and hard-working on the one hand, and gentle and supportive on the other? Women manage.

O'Malley, a difficult man for most Catholics to get an appointment to see, will not only celebrate Mass at the First Annual Boston Catholic Men's Conference on March 19 at Boston College High School, he will have breakfast beforehand with the guys who recruit the most men to attend a gathering that really should be called the Conference for Very, Very Conservative Boston Catholic Men.

Besides O'Malley, featured speakers will include Tom Monaghan, founder of the Domino's pizza chain who is using his millions to open what he calls a "truly Catholic" university in Florida to counter the influence of heretics at places like Boston College and Notre Dame. Jim Towe will be speaking, too. He is director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Even Jesus is making an appearance in the person of Jim Caviezel, the actor who portrayed him in Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ."

No one takes issue with the right of conservative Catholics to gather, even in gender-exclusive conclaves, to bemoan what they perceive as the erosion of male authority in the larger culture (though it is hard to see how it has eroded very much in the Catholic Church). But at a time when the church in Boston is rent by real divisions, why would O'Malley choose to highlight such a narrow gathering as "an important event"?

Why did he not carve out a similar swath of time last spring when Boston College held a session, open to men and women, on the role of women in Catholicism as part of its Church in the 21st Century series? Why has he not responded similarly to the heartfelt appeals from so many Catholics who have begged him to visit their shuttered parishes to talk about the disastrously flawed reconfiguration process?

Ann Carter, spokeswoman for the archdiocese who works for the Rasky/Baerlein Group, a Boston public relations firm, notes the archdiocese did not pay for nor did O'Malley organize the men's conference. He merely gave it his blessing. That he surely did. "My prayer is that this Men's Conference will draw men closer to Christ and strengthen their respective vocations," O'Malley wrote in his letter to organizers endorsing the conference. "The New Evangelization calls for a deeper holiness of life. The Men's Conference will lead the Church in Boston towards a deeper renewal in serving Christ. Now is the time for men of all generations to rise up to the challenge for the mission of the Church."

When exactly, Archbishop O'Malley, will it be the time to include women in that mission?.