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## **Catholic divorce group's mission completed**

### **A support group for divorced Catholics disbands amid thanks and praise**

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The Friends of Mercy bid a melancholy farewell to themselves last Sunday at a \$30-a-plate dinner at the Sheppard Pratt conference center in Towson. They bid a final goodbye to their organization and perhaps, at long last, to the old stigma that had brought so many of them together.

In the mid-1990s, there were more than 500 dues-paying Friends of Mercy, a support group for men and women — mainly Catholics, at first — who were recovering from broken relationships, separation and divorce. FOM's mission was to help people adjust to being single again; it provided comfort for conflicted Catholics who felt shunned by their church.

The group developed in the 1980s, as the U.S. divorce rate was still growing. It emerged from the work of a nun who was then a math teacher and alumnae director at the all-girls Mercy High School in Northeast Baltimore. Starting in the 1970s, Sister Joannes Clifford had heard several Mercy graduates describe the emotional difficulty of divorce.

So she organized a Sunday afternoon lecture series for anyone seeking advice and healing words. "I try to follow what Jesus Christ did, accept people who are deeply hurt," Sister Joannes once told The Sun. "Jesus was gracious and kind and never made them feel that they were not worthy."

The first lecture Sister Joannes arranged was in the Mercy High library in the fall of 1981. It drew 36 people.

"After a while, a number of regular attendees, both men and women, approached Sister about forming an organization that would offer support and social activities on a more regular basis," says Chip McMann, who has been active in FOM for nearly 15 years. "Sister agreed to mentor this group, and FOM was born."

By 1991, more than 200 people, and sometimes 300, would attend to hear messages about recovery and moving on. FOM's peak membership topped 500 a few years later.

"The central theme of FOM was peer support," Mr. McMann says. "Newly divorced and widowed attended discussion groups led by other members. Members hosted house parties and organized social activities. The goal was for the newly 'single-again' to understand that they are not alone and that here was a group of people who understood what they were going through."

It seems in some ways like ancient history now, but it's not. When FOM and other support groups first formed, divorce was not as accepted as it is today. Divorced men and women felt stigmatized; many were judged harshly by their married friends. That still happens, of course.

But you can take a few significant meanings from the dissolution of Friends of Mercy, an organization founded for Catholics in conflict with church doctrine, who were accused of breaking faith and commitment to a holy sacrament: that in 30 years, the arc of FOM's life, the stigma has faded, or that,

for many Catholics, doctrine has become less important than personal freedom and happiness.

You might also see in this a generational change in how we get through life's difficulties — instead of going to meetings and engaging peers-in-pain in a support group, we now seek other remedies.

"The centerpiece of FOM activities was the monthly meeting," Chip McMann says. "One Sunday a month, members would gather in the Mercy High cafeteria to hear a speaker on something of interest to the newly single-again — depression, grief — or of interest to all single adults: relationships, communication, dealing with difficult people. Most of the speakers were secular. Many were psychologists or motivational speakers."

But during the last few years, membership in FOM dropped precipitously, Mr. McMann says.

And that's not because of any grand shift in the numbers of people, Catholic or otherwise, who are getting divorced. Mr. McMann thinks it's because of a number of factors — changing attitudes about divorce; more single women in the workplace and heading households; greater acceptance of outpatient therapy and pharmaceuticals for treating emotional trauma and depression.

Or maybe people get their support online. Perhaps they find regular use of Facebook to be therapeutic.

What remained of FOM's leadership voted to disband FOM after last Sunday's dinner. About 80 people attended, and Sister Joannes, now retired and in her 80s, received praise and thanks for her early leadership and for her years of mentoring the group and so many people on the difficult journeys of life.

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