News



Matthew Kelly speaks at a Living Every Day with Passion and Purpose event, June 1, 2015. (Wikimedia Commons/The Dynamic Catholic Institute)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: *Matthew Kelly may be one of the best-selling Catholic writers of this generation. The Ohio-based author, speaker and management consultant also founded and runs a nonprofit evangelization organization, the Dynamic Catholic Institute, and owns a number of for-profit businesses. This series examines Kelly's enterprises, as one of the most successful efforts of a growing number of entrepreneurs selling catechetical, spiritual, organizational and leadership materials to the country's 76 million Catholics. This is Part 1. Part 2 was published Jan. 16, with Part 3 on Jan. 17.*

Although National Catholic Reporter requested an in-person or telephone interview over the course of six weeks, Kelly agreed only to answer questions in writing. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from him are from that email interview.

This Christmas, millions of Catholics in the United States received an extra holiday gift: a book about the saints, distributed free at parishes that participate in a parish book program, run by a nonprofit organization dedicated to the "new evangelization."

"The saints show us what is possible, and what is possible is amazing," the author writes. "Take time to reflect. Look deeper. Seek out the unseen opportunities that you have overlooked at first glance. Possibilities abound. You and I — human beings — are capable of incredible things."

That advice comes from Matthew Kelly, a Catholic author, speaker and business consultant, who has first-hand experience of such possibilities. It is no overstatement to say the 46-year-old Kelly's own professional life has been incredible.

He is the author of nearly two dozen books, which have sold more than 40 million copies in English and have been translated into more than 25 other languages. By comparison, that's twice the number of books the late popular author Fr. Andrew Greeley had reportedly sold by the age of 71.

Kelly is not only a prolific author, but a popular speaker both on the Catholic circuit and in business circles. He is the founder and CEO of a $20 million a year nonprofit,

the Dynamic Catholic Institute, which is dedicated to helping Catholics become "the best version of yourself" (a phrase he trademarked).

He also owns multiple other companies, ranging from a book publisher, a management consulting business, a high-end watch company and several real estate companies.

All of this has brought Kelly material success, leading some of his critics to compare him to evangelical Protestant "prosperity gospel" advocates, such as Pastor Joel Osteen. But Kelly rejects the principle as "a complete distortion of Jesus' teachings. If I did subscribe to it, as a three-time cancer survivor it would raise some very serious questions."

"I live in a nice home, I drive a nice car, and I have many material conveniences and some luxuries," Kelly told NCR, noting that "certain financial rewards understandably come with that type of success."

Yet, Kelly said he takes the stewardship of those financial resources as seriously as he does the stewardship of the talents God has given him. "He has given [talents] to me to share with the world. In the same way, I do not consider my financial resources to be exclusively mine. God has entrusted them to me and I am responsible for their stewardship," he said.

"At the same time, I believe that God wants us to enjoy this world he has created for [us] and the fruits of our labor," he added, "but not without limit and not without consideration of our responsibility to those in need."



Screenshot of video featuring Matthew Kelly speaking at the Man Up Philly conference, March 2019 in Aston, Pennsylvania (NCR photo)

Kelly's public life makes him an "easy target" for judgement. But there's a private side as well, and he said that he drives a luxury car because his mother made him promise to drive the safest car he could afford after his oldest brother died in a car accident.

Kelly once told an interviewer at Cincinnati magazine in May 2018 that he knew from the beginning of his career that he didn't want to make his money from religion. "People are hyper-critical of that kind of thing," he said.

But a look at his business interests indicate that the "best version" of Kelly depends on a market of Catholic readers, parishes and donors. In fact, donors foot the bill for much of Kelly's income, through an arrangement in which his for-profit companies do business with the nonprofit he founded, ostensibly to evangelize.

His is a tale of business acumen, accessible religious content and an easily identified market apparently hungry for new materials and direction. It is also a tale that raises

some eyebrows over the relationships between his nonprofit, which receives millions in donations, and the for-profit entities that apparently provide the good life.

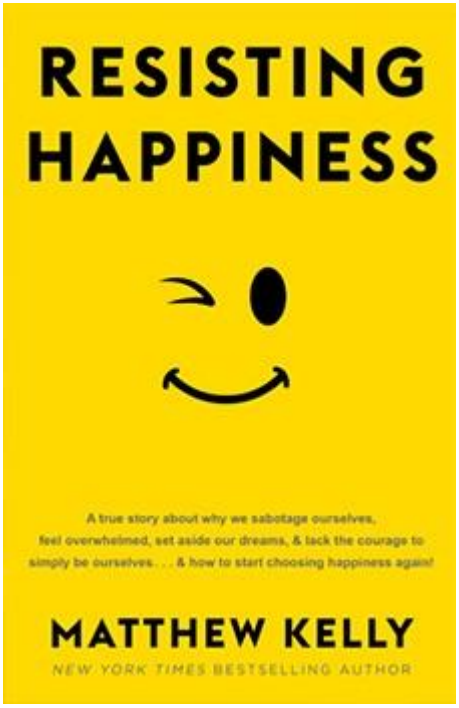
> "As I prayed about where to focus my efforts, having seen the influence America is having on the world, it became clear to me that if you want to help clean a water supply for as many people as possible, best to start as far upstream as possible."
>
> —Matthew Kelly

A successful life

Kelly's entrepreneurial spirit was ingrained by his father, Floyd, who grew up in poverty in London and left school at the age of 12, but eventually became a prosperous businessman in Australia. "Sitting at the dinner table each night was basically like taking classes for an MBA," Kelly writes in *Resisting Happiness*, his 2016 spiritual self-help book, which contains much of his personal story.

Matthew, the fourth of eight sons, followed in his father's footsteps, starting a number of businesses in high school, so that as a sophomore, he was "making more money than my teachers," he wrote.

"If I'd had my way, I would have become a marketing executive for Coca-Cola," he wrote.



Instead, Kelly believes God intervened when a family friend encouraged the teenager to follow a spiritual path, which taught him that holiness and happiness are connected. Kelly became what he calls "an engaged Catholic" and began speaking and writing about "the genius of Catholicism" while he was in business school in Sydney. (Kelly didn't finish but has since been awarded honorary degrees.)

Young Kelly's positive message — particularly from an energetic 20-something — was appealing and refreshing, especially given the exodus of young people from institutional religion in the late 1990s, precisely when his star began to rise.

Throughout his 20s, Kelly crisscrossed the globe, traveling first to some 50 countries and ultimately 3,000 parishes in the United States, seeing more of the world "than most presidents and bishops," he writes. That travel led him to the insight that all people have the same basic concerns and desires, or "thick veins of gold," as he told Cincinnati magazine.

Around the year 2000, he realized the strain of the constant travel and decided to settle down where he could have the most impact: the United States. "As I prayed about where to focus my efforts, having seen the influence America is having on the world, it became clear to me that if you want to help clean a water supply for as many people as possible, best to start as far upstream as possible," he told NCR.

Over the decades, Kelly has moved from speaking at small parish gatherings to auditoriums of thousands. He also has crossed publishing genres, making the leap from Catholic books to secular and business self-help. His first general self-help book, *The Rhythm of Life*, became a New York Times, Wall Street Journal and USA Today bestseller in 1999.

In one year (August 2018-19), Kelly released three titles: *The Biggest Lie in the History of Christianity: How Modern Culture Is Robbing Billions of People of Happiness*, *Rediscover the Saints* and the business book *The Culture Solution*.

Last year, according to the Cincinnati magazine interview, Kelly addressed 225,000 people in person and another 1.3 million via inspirational videos — more than triple the number three years prior. Yet despite the ubiquity of his books and appearances, he was still "under the radar."

As he told the magazine: "I mean, who sells 30 million books and has never had a national interview?"



Screenshot of video featuring Matthew Kelly speaking at the Man Up Philly conference, March 2019 in Aston, Pennsylvania (NCR photo)

Business interests

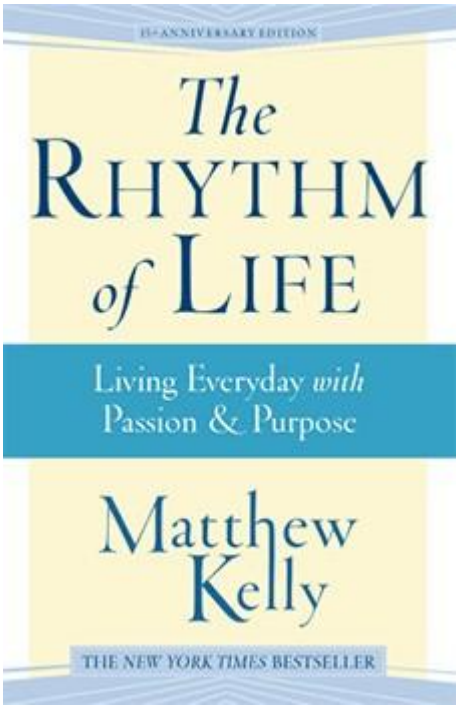
Kelly has been published by major houses, including HarperSanFrancisco (now HarperOne), the religion division of the large trade house HarperCollins Publishers, Ballantine Books, Touchstone (an imprint of Simon & Schuster) and Hudson Street Press (part of Penguin USA). But in the 1990s, Kelly decided to buy back his rights from those publishers.

He said other publishers "lacked the imagination to explore new ways to reach readers."

"They wanted to make as much money as possible, and I wanted to reach as many people as possible with the message," Kelly told NCR.

By the late 1990s, he had founded the nonprofit Mathew Kelly Foundation, which also served as his own publishing house as well as to conduct "retreats, seminars and conferences," according to documents filed with the Ohio Secretary of State. The foundation was based in Steubenville, Ohio.

Incorporated in 1998, the foundation reported use of the name "Beacon Publishing" to the state of Ohio and published its first book, the first edition of Kelly's *The Rhythm of Life*, the next year.



"The Rhythm of Life" by Matthew Kelly, 15th anniversary edition

He spun Beacon off as a for-profit company in 2001, according to state documents.

Four years later, he started another for-profit company, a management consulting firm, first called Dream Manager Consulting (named for his first business book of the same name) in 2005. The company's name was changed twice over the next two years: first to Beresford Consulting in 2006 and then to Floyd Consulting in 2007, when it moved its offices from Ohio to Chicago, according to documents filed with the state.

Floyd offers executive, business and life coaching, training, speaking and consulting services. Its philosophy, drawn from Kelly's writings, is "that your organization can only become the-best-version-of-itself to the extent that the people who are driving your organization are becoming better-versions-of-themselves," according to its website.

In addition to its "Don't Just Manage, Coach!" training, Floyd offers multi-day "Dream Manager Certification," off-site team building and a special "Bigger and Better Future" program for schools. Floyd's seminars and speaking engagements start at $5,000 and can go to more than $50,000, Kelly said.

Among Floyd's clients are Fortune 500 companies such as Pepsi, General Electric and Michelin; the U.S. Navy, Air Force and Department of Defense; small businesses — and Dynamic Catholic.

Kelly regularly turns down corporate speaking engagements due to his commitment to his nonprofit, said Dynamic Catholic board member Brian Caster.

Kelly seems to have consolidated a number of his for-profit businesses in Florida. Beacon moved there in December of 2007, giving as its address a $1.2 million waterfront condo on Singer Island in Palm Beach County that Kelly purchased that year. (He bought a second unit in the same building in 2012 for $1.9 million.)

According to state documents in Florida, Beacon (currently being rebranded as Wellspring) is now located in an office building suite purchased in 2016 by a limited liability company owned by Kelly, Highway One Atrium. Floyd Consulting also lists its address in that building, according to documents from the Illinois Secretary of State, which lists Floyd's previous paperwork in that state as withdrawn.

Kelly owns at least nine companies based in Florida, including a high-end watch company and several that appear to be holding companies for real estate.

The nonprofit Matthew Kelly Foundation was dissolved in 2015, after Dynamic Catholic Institute's founding in 2009, according to tax and state documents.

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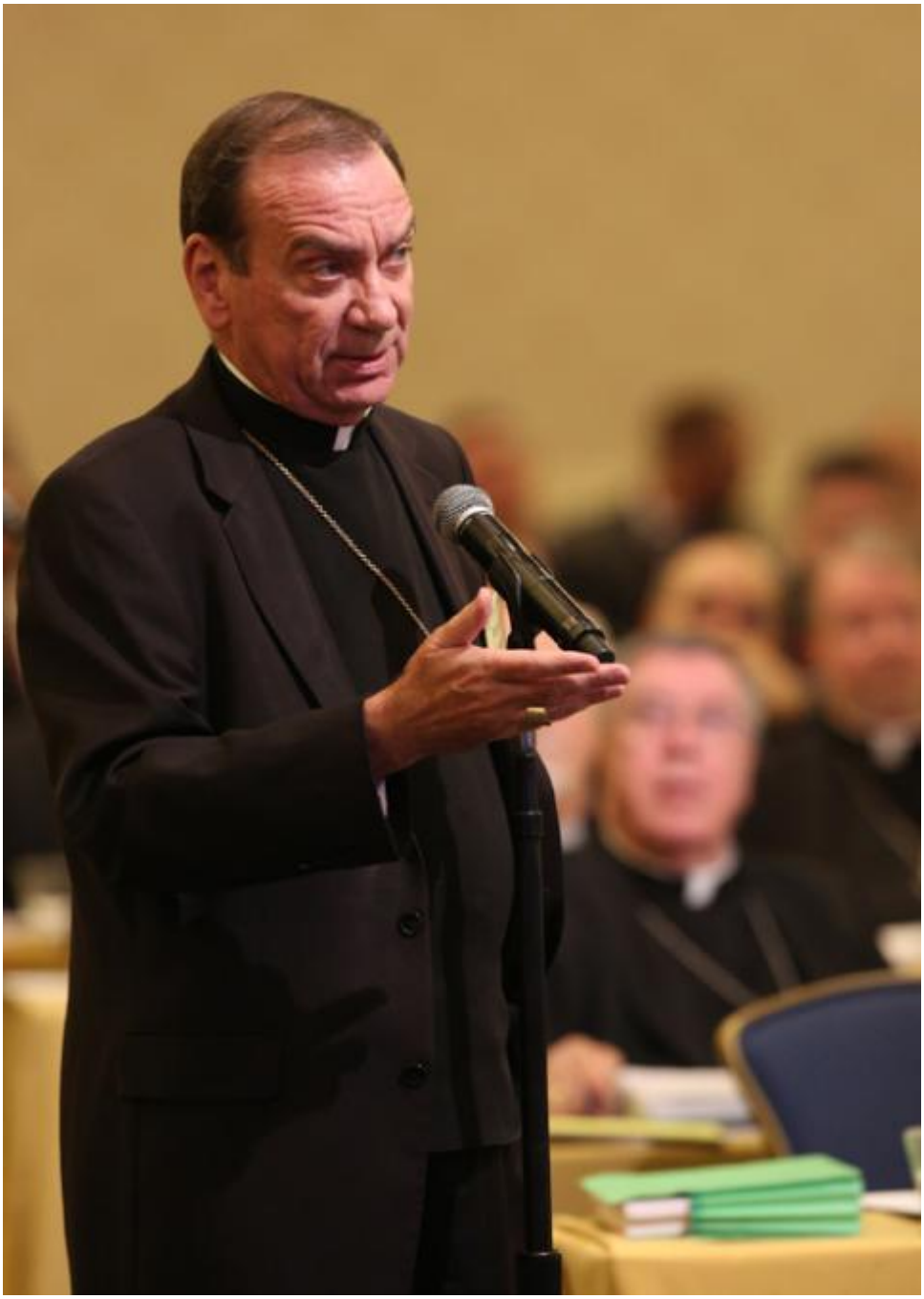
Dynamic Catholic — which at one time had nearly 100 employees (according to reviews posted on Glassdoor) and nearly $20 million in total revenue annually — is about 12 times the size of Kelly's previous nonprofit, the foundation. The vast majority of the institute's money — nearly $14.5 million in 2017 — comes from contributions and grants.

Its recent growth has been impressive, with total revenue growing more than tenfold from $1.9 million in 2011 to 19.9 million in 2017, according to tax documents. The organization also has opened a West Coast office in the Orange County Diocese's Christ Cathedral, which also houses offices for EWTN and other Catholic organizations.

Dynamic Catholic distributes Kelly's (and a few other authors') books for free or very low cost through its Parish Book Program, coordinates Kelly and others as speakers for events around the country, and provides consulting and materials to parishes through its new Dynamic Parish program.

It also provides free sacramental preparation materials for first Communion, first reconciliation, confirmation and marriage. They include student workbooks, leader guides, animated short films for the children and apps for the teens and adults — all for less than $20 shipping and handling for the bundle.

The confirmation materials, called "Decision Point," are the most popular confirmation program in the U.S., with 10,000 parishes using it, according to Dynamic Catholic's website. Kelly told an interviewer in 2018 that 80 percent of all U.S. parishes use at least one of Dynamic Catholic's programs.



Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati speaks Nov. 13, 2017, during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Beyond labels

It is difficult to pin a conservative or progressive label on Kelly. His critics include folks from both sides of the polarized U.S. church, as do his supporters.

Jeanine Walker of St. Thecla Parish in Clinton Township, Michigan, finds Kelly's books and materials to be accessible for everyday parishioners. "They're geared toward what we need to get across to people today," she said.

St. Thecla, where Walker is director of religious education and campus minister, has been one of 21 pilot sites for the new Dynamic Parish program, which includes distribution of free books — more than 1,000 during one weekend at the Detroit suburban church.

"Parishioners that are getting the books are actually reading them, rather than throwing them in the back seat of the car," Walker said.

Cincinnati Archbishop Dennis Schnurr also is a Kelly fan. "It was St. Pope John Paul II who said we have to find new methods and approach evangelization with new ardor and new materials," Schnurr told Cincinnati magazine. "I think that's exactly what Dynamic Catholic is doing."

Early on, Kelly had connections to a number of people affiliated with the Franciscan University of Steubenville, a school known for its conservative instruction and for its graduates who go on to take positions in church institutions.

He said he landed in Ohio because of a support network he already had there and because of its central location for travel across the country. His wife, Meggie Burke, whom Kelly married in 2009, is from Cincinnati. Her father, Patrick, is managing partner of a high-profile Cincinnati law firm and serves as chair of the Dynamic Catholic board.

The Kellys have five* children, and he says spending time with family, golf, piano and literature are his hobbies, according to his personal website. He has beaten cancer three times: thyroid cancer in 2008, melanoma in 2012 and kidney cancer in 2015.

Kelly told an interviewer that he hoped to be remembered as a generous person: "For me Christianity, at its very core, is generous," he told Franciscan Media, "and when we are generous to those around us — with our time, money, energy, material possessions, praise, advice, gratitude and talents — people catch a glimpse of God's love."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]

**This story has been updated to correct that the Kellys have five children.*

Read this next: Matthew Kelly's companies do business with the nonprofit he founded

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