



The opening image for faith-based dating-site Catholicmatch.com. The site is among the many niche dating sites aiming to find singles a partner.

A faith-based love story

Sites like CatholicMatch.com are a legitimate option for singles who are seeking a partner

By Adrian Garcia

Just fifteen years ago a love story like Holly O'Connor-Bovet and Joe Bovet's wouldn't have been possible. The digital age has allowed for this young couple in New York, and millions all over the country, to find a partner online.

Two and a half years ago, the then Ms. O'Connor found herself tired of traditional dating. The shy 24 year old found herself trying a modern approach when she decided to sign up for an online dating site.

"I didn't want to do the bar scene and I was bored with trying to meet people through my friends so I decided to give it a try," she said.

O'Connor didn't just sign up for any dating site though; she registered for a six-month membership on CatholicMatch.com.

"We thank God every day that we met each other and the site was there," O'Connor-Bovet said.

Among the more than 1500 dating sites to choose from, the niche of religious ones has grown in popularity in recent years. Their advertisements can be seen on TV, the back of church bulletins, and throughout the country from Boston to Boulder. There are specific sites for every major religious group including Jews, Roman Catholics, Christians and Muslims.

In 1996, online dating sites became popular; a mere three years later Catholic Match was created. One of the reasons creators, founders, and friends Brian Barcaro and Jason LaFosse originally created the site was to find spouses for themselves.

More than twelve years later Barcaro and LaFosse are still working—along with a third co-founder/partner, Michael Lloyd—to improve the site so its 2.5 million active users can find spouses like they did.

Finding a spouse was exactly the reason O'Connor paid to be an active member back in 2010.

"I didn't want to do the whole dating just to date thing, I wanted to do the dating to find a husband thing," O'Connor-Bovet said.

She carefully planned what her profile should include, cautious not to be conceited or less than interesting. Then she waited to see if any interested male would message her.

According to a survey Catholic Match recently conducted, the fear of being rejected—being turned down or not asked out at all—was the number two reason people were hesitant to sign up. The number one reason was a stigma associated with online dating; that is slowly changing as more and more relationships begin with online dating.

O'Connor's wasn't worried about that stigma and her wait did not last long. On the second day using the site she received a message from Joe Bovet. It would be the first and last message she would respond to.

O'Connor and Bovet messaged back and forth on the site, later they communicated via instant messages, and before they met in person they talked on the phone. Like many users this form of interaction allowed her to open up. It also reassured her, the person she was talking to was safe to meet.

Within a month of the original message on CatholicMatch.com, O'Connor and Bovet met up at café. O'Connor walked away from that meeting with a premonition.

"I just had this big feeling in my gut that he was the one I was gonna marry," O'Connor said. "Of course I couldn't tell him right away, because I didn't want to scare him."

O'Connor's premonition proved to be right and for a little over two years she has been Mrs. O'Connor-Bovet; a little over two months ago the two had their first child, a daughter named Emily.

The Bovet's story is an example CatholicMatch.com can be proud of, but it is not representative of the story all users experience. Of course, not all members are messaged by a future spouse within their first week; they aren't all young adults looking for marriage for the first time either.

"[CatholicMatch.com has] a really healthy number of young adults; we have a ton of 50-somethings and 60-somethings. We have nearly 500, 80-somethings," said Christine Ries, a spokesperson for Catholic Match.

All members share a basic faith in Catholicism and the fact they are single but other details of their demographics range.

"When people think of singles they sometimes think of just young adults who have never married," Ries said. "A good fraction of our membership is divorced, another good fraction is widowed and third chunk are those who have never married."

O'Connor represented a young person from that third chunk of users but Mark Ronck exemplifies another group entirely.

Ronck is a 57-year-old father of two young adults who these days "need him less and less." He has been divorced for around two years and "separated even longer." Nearly five months ago he began using CatholicMatch.Com.

"I'm looking for another marriage someday, one thing they call it in the church is a 'soul mate.' Someone that you can relate to communicate with do things with and you have something in common with," Ronck said.

The Texan was referred to the site by two priests. Later he noticed it was also advertised on the back of his parish bulletin.

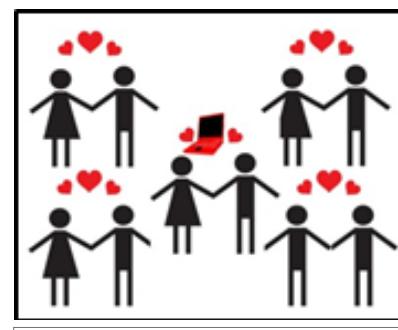
Local Boulder priest, Rev. Bill Breslin has also been recommending the site to members of his parish; the site is advertised on the back of Sacred Heart Parish's Sunday bulletin, Breslin's parish.

"I think it's a phenomenal method, over the 38 years that I've been a priest the most common ways people have met is A) at a bar and B) through people they know," said Breslin as he sat on the rectory porch with iPhone in pocket and iPad on lap.

Ronck took his priests' advice and found that Catholic Match "opened a whole new world" for him. Much to his children's excitement he has been going on dates locally and to nearby towns.

This new-again dater also contributes to forums the site hosts for members to communicate. These forums allow Catholics from different backgrounds to discuss success rates with dating, politics, their faith and more.

The faith-based dating site has more than 40 forums and a weekly blog. Blogs are sometimes written by members of the clergy who are allies and supporters



According to Match.com 1 out of 5 relationships start online.



The Bovets holding baby daughter Emily.

Facebook

of the site. These forums and blogs facilitate the members to be an online community.

The site welcomes "every kind of Catholic". According to Ries, "members who are unalike in other regards come together and talk on forums."

Ries went on to say Catholic Match wants to be more than a dating site. Later this year it is publishing a report on single Catholics, releasing a series of books, and looking for more ways to be the cutting edge religious dating site.

Successful members are "hesitant to quit because they love the community so much," she said.

Ronck is confident he will be a successful member soon, and already sees a couple "good prospects"; one of them may just be the soul mate he is looking for.

"The key is not jumping over boundaries to get what you want, but to work within [the ones] given to you by the Church," he said. "As long as you stay within the boundaries and do the right thing you're gonna get something out of it."

The 64-year-old Boulder priest, Breslin, remembers a time when letters were the main source of personal communication but he believes the approach Ronck is taking and O'Connor took can be a positive thing and something the Church overall can get behind.

"We're much more open to online dating," he said. "If you meet someone you are physically attracted to but their whole approach to life is off base from your moral system, you can end up falling in love with somebody who can take you away from your roots or you just bail out on who your real identity is as a person."

Breslin has conducted a few weddings for people who have met online.

Muslims, Christians, Jews and Catholics are all using online dating sites specific to their faith to find a partner. Ries says it allows these people to "hit the ground running" since they already have a foundation and shared values in common.

For O'Connor-Bovet using CatholicMatch.com has made a huge difference in her modern day love story. She credits the site with the finding of her husband.

"My faith is what made me want to find a Catholic man. [CatholicMatch.com] was the first thing that popped up when I Googled 'Catholic dating sites'; so that must have been a sign," O'Connor-Bovet said. "We can pray together, that's always been a strong point in our relationship even before we got married."