however, move on. Now that we have looked with honesty at the acute need for renewal in our Church, and have cleared the floor of the junk that hinders our ability to truly receive and live the Gospel, we can begin to lay a foundation and prepare a welcoming and warm home. Now we can go out from ourselves, inviting some to return and others to enter for the first time.

5

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

How to Transform the Culture of the Parish Community

When I led my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I told the tour company that our visit to Galilee should include a visit to the ancient city of Tsipori, 2 miles northwest of Nazareth. This is not a common stopover for Catholic pilgrimages, and even our tour guide was surprised to be taking our group there. Although there is no conclusive evidence in the Gospels, it is entirely reasonable to believe that Jesus spent a great deal of time in this city, which was known as Sephoris during his lifetime. Sephoris was the capital of Galilee during the time of Herod the Great, and had been destroyed by the Romans after a rebellion of the locals the year before Jesus was born.

The Gospels tell us that the people of Nazareth knew Jesus as a "carpenter" (Mark 6:3). The term in Greek, *tekton*, has a much wider meaning than woodworker. It generally means "builder," or even a "worker". Every time I visit Tsipori and walk on those stones and view the ruins of that ancient city, I can't help but imagine a teenage Jesus working with Saint Joseph – not just working with wood, but building and laying the foundations of the city, once

destroyed, that would again flourish in the lifetime of Jesus. These foundations can still be seen today.

Jesus taught very clearly at the end of his Sermon on the Mount what everyone who has been in the construction business from ancient times until today has always known in theory and from experience. A building, no matter how grand and beautiful, is only as good as its foundation. The house built on sand will fall in the face of the storms of life, and the house built on rock will withstand all that is hurled against it. (Matthew 7:24-27) The foundation that Jesus proposes is listening to his words and acting upon them. The foundation is not just about believing or trusting, but includes actions.

Culture

When we examine the question of Church renewal, of rebuilding the Church of God, we begin this enterprise with a clear sense of purpose of what we are building and why. In earlier chapters, we have examined the need to recall and reclaim the lost identity of the Church as being essentially missionary. We have spoken of the pain that needs to be acknowledged before we can move forward in the rebuilding process, and of the junk that needs to be cleared out of the theological subconscious. Now we need to lay a foundation. The foundation of any human organization is the culture of that organization. The Church is no exception.

Although the Church is the spotless Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, and, therefore, of divine essence, she is also fully human. We stand on solid ground, therefore, when we propose that anything that allows a human organization to be healthy will likewise contribute to the health of the Church. Saint Thomas Aquinas goes farther, telling us that "grace builds on nature." Therefore, it is not just a question of being attentive to the human *and* the divine. The foundation of the work of Grace (the divine) is the human, and so the human dimension of the Church takes priority in the process of rebuilding. If the human foundation of the Church is not healthy, then no matter how intense or sincere our

spiritual commitment is, the foundation will be a fragile blend of clay and iron.

Values

The human foundation of the Church, whether at the universal or local level, is the human culture of that Church. When speaking about the culture of a diocesan church or a parish church, we are not speaking about its ethnicity, but rather of the values embraced by that human community. The culture of any organization is reflected in what is truly valued. These values are seen not primarily by what is said, but by what is done or left undone. Values are communicated by what is celebrated, by what is tolerated and by what is presumed. These unspoken values that make up the culture of a parish are like the 80% of the iceberg that lurks beneath the surface. Churches may have developed mission statements and may even have published a list of values, but all of these usually make up only about 20% of what a church or organization truly values. Jesus said that building on rock took place only when his words were listened to and acted upon. It is not enough to listen. It is not enough to speak about what is valued. How we act communicates our true values.

If we wish to identify the values of a particular parish, we must look at how it spends its time and money. Look at the parish budget. Look at the staffing positions. Look at what the priorities are, as evidenced by what is done, and not by what is said, and you will identify the values of that particular parish. If a parish says that evangelization is a priority, what is the budget for evangelization? Where I come from, it is more common to see a budget for snow removal than for evangelization. If a parish says that formation of adult disciples is of high value, why then is there no budget and no staff member who oversees this process?

Parish leaders who truly wish to identify the values of their parish communities should look at the parish calendar of events. How are the buildings used? For what kinds of activities? Evaluate the nature and proportion of the uses of your buildings. Look at

your parish staff positions. This is a dead giveaway. Do you have more administrative or janitorial staff than pastoral staff? This will tell you that you are a maintenance church. Who are your pastoral staff? How much of your resources go into pastoral ministry, and what is the nature of this ministry? Many parishes have a generic DRE (director of Religious Education) who may have a wide range of responsibilities, including working with children and adults. What proportion of her or his time goes into doing which task? I once did a mission in a parish in the U.S. They saw themselves as a large parish with a school. After seeing the activities and the staffing structure and the use of resources, it seemed to me that this community was really a large school that happened to have a parish attached to it. An honest evaluation of a parish budget will remove any doubts about the true values of any parish, regardless of what statement may be framed on the wall. The sum of what a parish values will constitute its culture.

Common Values

Every parish has a culture, but this often remains hidden, invisible and unnamed. Over the years, I have been fascinated by the question of what makes some parish churches strong and healthy, as opposed to others that are weak and unhealthy. I have studied both Catholic and non-Catholic churches, and it is obvious that there is generally a set of common values among those churches that are healthy and growing. These values are vastly different from those of churches that are in decline, shrinking and dying.

In August 2010, I was named pastor of a relatively new and large parish in our city. This parish had been formed four years before my appointment through the amalgamation of three parishes that were all in close proximity. The pastor at the time led these three communities through a process of union that involved the sale of all three church buildings and the building of a brand new, beautiful, large, state-of-the-art church that would house the newly constituted parish of Saint Benedict in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Three months after the new building was opened

and the people moved into the church, I arrived as pastor. If our values are demonstrated by what we do rather than what we say, it was clear that the leadership of this community, not without difficulties, had boldly declared that the mission of the Church was of greater value than the preservation of our buildings: that where we were going was more important than where we had been. After many years of subjecting the mission of the church to the infrastructure, a bold move had been made to rebuild the infrastructure in order to serve the mission. The core values of this community were beginning to change.

As Catholics, our buildings have deep significance. They are not merely functional structures that house the people of God. Our church buildings are consecrated for a sacred purpose and are themselves sacramental, reminding us of the presence of God in our midst, and housing the Eucharistic presence of Jesus himself. As true as this reality is, our buildings, in the end, are always of relative value. Jesus himself, entering the great temple of King Herod, would make the scandalous remark that not one stone would be left standing upon another, that all would be thrown down. (Luke 21:6) We must always remember that this will be the fate of all the buildings we build. The Church of God that will last into eternity is the Church of living stones, built upon the cornerstone of Christ, that must constantly be built up. (1 Peter 2:5) In spite of the great attachments and the sentimentality that the people of Saint Benedict Parish had for their buildings, they participated in the painful process of letting them go and moving into the new, unfamiliar church on May 16, 2010. Three months later, I arrived to a collective sigh of relief. With the arrival of the new priest, surely all the changes would finally be over. Right?

New Wine for a New Wineskin

I am convinced that the primary challenge of the New Evangelization is nothing short of the transformation of the cultures of our churches, which means a conversion of our values. Renewal of our parishes will never be accomplished merely by

a change of address and by shifting the furniture. On my very first weekend, I told the parishioners of Saint Benedict that I was haunted by one burning question: What will stop the cultural forces that necessitated the amalgamation and closure of the three previous parishes from continuing to chip away at our foundations so that we will have to repeat the process in another 20 years? The answer to this question, of course, is nothing. Nothing will prevent the continuation of the very decline that got us to where we are now – unless we strive for a deeper kind of change. Our task at Saint Benedict Parish was to allow the Lord to make us into new wine for the beautiful new wineskin we had received.

This necessary change, of course, is one of culture. In the 2007 Aparecida document, which I discussed in Chapter 4, the bishops of Latin America, among them the future Pope Francis, concluded that those who left the Catholic Church to join non-Catholic churches did so not for theological reasons, but for "vivential" reasons. It is not about changing our theology, but about how we live out an already rich theology of the Christian life. This cultural change means a deep, deep change. It means changing what we consider to be normative for the Christian life. It means a total conversion of our lived values, not merely the stated ones. Compared to this change, all others, including closing churches, are merely cosmetic.

In many dioceses across the Western world, bishops are struggling to restructure their local dioceses so that their people can be served by a dwindling number of priests. Sometimes churches are closed. They may be falling apart and may not have the resources to keep their doors open. It does take courage to do this, but closing churches without doing anything else is simply putting them out of their misery. Often parishes are "clustered" (a cluster is when the local priest wakes up in the morning to find out that instead of running one or two churches, he now has three). The expectation that comes with clustering is that everything will continue as before, except that the priest now has two or three of everything. By far, the most sensible option is parish amalgamation. This means that even if two or three parishes come together, they will function as one parish, with one staff and one parish council and one office and one bank account. Churches can exist as an amalgamated parish and continue to worship without any buildings being closed. At the very least, there is a concentration of resources.

The best-case scenario is what I was gifted with at Saint Benedict in the summer of 2010: an amalgamated parish that had just moved into a single new space. It was the best scenario, but was still not enough. It is not enough to pull the trigger on decaying structures. It is not enough to heap more parishes on the shoulders of already discouraged, overworked and frustrated priests, and it is not enough to amalgamate and even build a beautiful new building. None of these actions will suffice unless we address the underlying issue of the culture of our churches that prevents us from becoming healthy. A church that is healthy grows, and a church that is not healthy dies. Even though everything looked great at Saint Benedict, we were still dying.

Living in the Atlantic province of Nova Scotia, we enjoy using maritime metaphors. I think of the three parishes that came together to constitute Saint Benedict Parish as three ships that were drifting towards the rocks. Two small ships and a mid-size ship were caught in a strong current and were all drifting slowly but surely, and it seemed nothing could be done to change this. The current is the cultural forces that have shaped the last three generations. Our ships were not built to sail in these kinds of waters, and none of the three ships had the engine power to turn out of the current. The amalgamation of the three parishes gave us a beautiful new ship with the potential to build a powerful engine, and build it we did. Over the course of my first year, we began to restructure the pastoral team, to add new staff positions and to speak about the vision for our parish (we will consider this stage in more depth in Chapter 7, when we look at the question of leadership). With a new engine, we now had the capacity to do something about this inexorable drift; all that remained was

to change the course. A change of course is nothing less than changing the culture of the parish, which ultimately means a conversion of our values.

In a time when the term "New Evangelization" is a kind of buzzword, we often look for a quick fix. We search the ecclesial landscape for the best programs and grab someone in our parish to run them. In the end, no matter how good the program, these attempts will always fizzle and die out. They will not produce the robust flame of authentic renewal in the Church. Any course run in a parish will be only as good as the culture of that parish. Even a very successful tool for evangelization like Alpha will have a very limited impact if the values of a parish are vastly different from the values within a particular program. Alpha places high value on hospitality, great music, amazing and relevant talks, and a transformative experience of community in small groups. Those who are non-churchgoers can come on this course and experience conversion. Then they come to Mass. They taste and see one thing through our program and a very different thing on Sunday morning. Running evangelistic, outreach or renewal programs without addressing the necessary cultural conversion of our parishes will only leave us open to charges of false advertising.

As we prepped for our first full ministry year in the fall of 2010, and as I began to propose new ways of doing things, no one group could say those words that had haunted me ever since I first served in a parish: "That's not how we do things here." What a relief. Due to every parishioner feeling new in this new space, there was a window of opportunity to begin to bring about change. It was about as close as anyone could get to being able to create a parish from scratch. Since that time, we have implemented a focused and sustained campaign to transform the culture of our parish. I have made no secret about this with our staff and ministry leaders that this is our goal and nothing less. I have been clear with them that it will be hard work and that it will take time. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, speaks of the capacity for the cultural transformation of a parish: "The parish is not an outdated institution;

precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community." (EG, no. 28)

Values are also transferable. That means that whatever the context of your church, small or large, urban or rural, these values – if they truly become the foundation of all you say and do – will bring about health, and health will bring about the growth of the parish. The key is that any one value will be manifested differently in different parishes. How a parish expresses a particular value may not look exactly like how we strive to do it at Saint Benedict Parish, but it is the values that bring health, and not the mere imitation of another parish's best practices.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline ten common values that are shared by healthy, growing churches, and give examples from my experience at Saint Benedict Parish of how we attempted and are attempting to implement a conversion in each of these values.

1. Giving Priority to the Weekend

> This is the day that the Lord has made;
> let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 118:24)

Over the years I have been accused several times of turning the celebration of Mass into a production. As often happens in such moments, what I could have said came to me later – responses that would have been amusing, if not necessarily charitable. To the accusation that everything is a production, I am tempted to say, "Thank you, I'm so glad you noticed."

Duh!

Eleven years ago, after being a priest for six years and a pastor for three years, the obvious occurred to me. The only time we see 80% of our people is on the weekend, yet only 20% of my time in any given week was invested in planning, preparing and executing weekend Masses. It is the classic 80/20 rule. In pastoral ministry, it

is easy to expend the other 80% of time and resources on a small number of people. I remember thinking that if the Church was a business, it probably would have gone out of business a long time ago with this kind of strategy. The Church is, of course, not a mere business, it is mystery, but grace still builds on nature and there is an essential truth here. The priority of any parish, and any priest, ought to be about preparing for and celebrating the Sunday Eucharist to make it the best possible experience for the maximum number of people. Too often in my own ministry, and in many parishes, the weekend, and everything that happens, had merely been an afterthought, a mild interruption to the real work of ministry that takes place from Monday to Friday.

Sunday Eucharist ought to be a "production" in the best sense of the word. It deserves to be so. I presume here, of course, a positive connotation to "production." We are not speaking of showmanship, or anything shallow and insincere. We are speaking about being intentional about every aspect of the Sunday celebration. To give our best for the Lord so that people who come to our church can leave with a sense of "Wow!" Why not? If I can go to a sports event or a concert and say "wow," why shouldn't this utterance be genuinely on the lips of those who have been sent from Church to "glorify the Lord with their lives"? The days of the 50-minute get-it-over-and-done-with Mass must end. Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God was like a wedding banquet. (Matthew 22:1-14) The Eucharist is to be a foretaste of this banquet, and so it ought to produce an exclamation of "Wow!" It ought to be "a production."

Many of the values and examples that follow in this chapter do refer to the experience of Sunday morning, so I will refrain from giving any detail here. I do wish to say, however, that if the weekend celebrations are to be a priority, then we must have sufficient time on Sunday mornings to gather, celebrate and connect afterwards. This can be a real pressure on priests as we see the quality of Sunday mornings compromised because of our tight Mass schedules. The parking lot must be emptied on the hour so

that those coming for the next Mass can arrive, or the priest must sprint for his car and play loosely with the speed limit to get to the next location for the next Mass. We need to honestly look at our Mass schedules, and ask what we truly value. Do we value meaningful and transformative celebrations of the Eucharist, or is our primary value convenient and static Mass times? Are we willing to change our Mass times so we can have more breathing space during and after each Sunday Mass? In some pastoral situations, due to the size of the building, this may not be an option, but then there is another question: do we value our buildings over a meaningful and transformative experience of Sunday Eucharist?

Saint Paul says in his Letter to the Ephesians, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism." (Ephesians 4:5) I sometimes think that the typical Catholic version of this scripture would read, "There is one Lord, one faith, one hour." In all my years studying Scripture, theology, the history of the Church, and canon law, I have not found any reference to Sunday celebrations having to be no more than one hour "or else." Furthermore, in all the times I have crossed over (God forbid) the one-hour mark, I have never seen a single person turn into a pumpkin. Never! Where does this value come from? Sports events are never less than an hour. If we went to a concert that was only an hour long, we would demand our money back. Movies and theatre productions are usually about two hours long, but "Thou shalt not go over one hour for Mass!"

Where Did That Come From?

During my first year of ordination, I was assigned as an assistant priest at the Cathedral. Every other weekend, I found myself filling in around the diocese. I enjoyed this very much, as I was able to get to know the lay of the land. I will never forget my first experience of Palm Sunday as a priest. I was sent on Saturday afternoon to fill in at a local city parish. I was so excited about my first Palm Sunday celebration: a procession of palms, singing, the reading of the Passion and a chance to invite the people to enter into the riches of the Sacred Triduum in the days to follow.

I arrived at the church and was met by a very grumpy usher who told me in no uncertain terms that there would be no procession and that there would be no homily. When I asked him why, he told me that people "were on medication." By the time that liturgy was over, I needed to be on medication! I was the only person in the whole church, other than the cantor, singing Hosannas during the entrance, and in spite of the glares of the usher and his companions, I did dare to preach, even if only for five minutes. So much for my first Palm Sunday celebration, which did conclude, by the way, within the one-hour mark.

My friends from Africa tell me that in their countries, people bring their lunch to Mass, and their celebrations can last well beyond the three-hour mark. I have been to Masses in the Vatican that regularly go beyond two hours. When Eastern rite Christians, Catholic and Orthodox, celebrate Divine Liturgy, it would be unspeakable to even try to bring it to completion before the 90-minute mark. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians will sing for an hour, and you know that the pastor is not going to preach for any less than half an hour. So why are we so different as Catholics in North America and in Europe? The answer is so simple: habit.

We formed the habit of fast-track Masses due to constrictions of pastoral practice at a time when our churches were full and it was a societal value to go to church. In 1950s North America, it was not uncommon to find urban parishes that had eight or nine Masses on a Sunday morning. These Masses would be on the hour from 6:00 a.m. until noon, often with two different celebrations at once – one in the church and one in the basement. Parishes had to schedule in this manner for two reasons: 1) the sheer number of people who came to Mass, and 2) the discipline of fasting at that time. Before the Second Vatican Council, Catholics receiving the Holy Eucharist were required to fast from food and water from midnight the night before until they received the Eucharist. This explained the prevalence of early morning Mass, after which the faithful could break their fast at "break-fast." It also explains why

Masses did not usually go later than noon. Senior priests who remember those days have told me stories of how fainting and collapsing parishioners were a common occurrence. Today, we have vigil Masses on Saturday evening as well as Sunday evening Masses. The Eucharistic fast is only one hour before receiving Holy Communion, and we do not have the sheer numbers of people attending Sunday Eucharist as we did in the past. The context that conditioned Catholics in the Western world to get addicted to the 45-minute Mass no longer exists, but the practice lingers on.

In the end, it is not really a question of how long the Mass ought to be or could be, but whether this value leads us to health. I believe it does not. It contributes to a "get it over and done with" mentality that turns our Eucharistic celebrations into something to be endured rather than something that endures. Serving the unspoken value of "convenience" may be the reason why, in spite of the change in context, we continue to value the one-hour Mass. I remember as a young teenager going to a Saturday afternoon Mass in town with a friend of mine. This Mass was held in a retirement home and was a Sunday Mass. Presumably, the residents of that home did need food and medication, and somehow the priest was able to move through the entire Sunday liturgy from beginning to end, including a brief homily, in 20 minutes (after being a priest for seventeen years, I still have no idea how he did this). The point of this story is not the amazing feat of rapid worship, but the fact that there were at least a hundred non-residents of all ages who crowded into the small common room and lined the hallways outside in order to avail themselves of the fastest Mass in the West. I cannot be too indignant on this matter as my best friend and I were there for exactly the same reason.

A Culture of Minimalism

The fast-Mass addiction continues to be played out in parish after parish all over the Western world. During my first months at Saint Benedict, I had to address what I considered to be a major problem at our Saturday vigil Mass. We used to get about

600 people at this Mass, and at least 25% of them would leave as soon as they had received the Eucharist. That was bad enough, but the back wall of our church is all glass, and you can see the entire foyer from the front of the church. I will never forget the first time I saw this: I could not believe my eyes. Hundreds of people were leaving while I was still giving out Holy Communion. Over the weeks that followed, I addressed this phenomenon in the parish newsletter and during Mass. I was bold enough to say that, although there were indeed exceptional reasons to leave Mass directly after receiving communion, anyone who left at that time every week needed to seriously consider what they were doing. I suggested that they refrain either from leaving early each week or from receiving the Eucharist. This earned me a stream of anonymous letters, including a letter to the bishop and even a letter to the pope (a first).

Some of these letters informed me that if Mass was not so long, then people would not feel compelled to leave early. Two weeks later, the priest who was assisting at the parish was presiding at the Saturday Mass. I was planning to make a few announcements at the end of Mass. I pulled into the parking lot at 4:45 p.m. (45 minutes into Mass) only to see the usual flood of people heading for their cars. That's why I am convinced that this phenomenon has little to do with the length of Mass and more with a desire to just get it over and done with.

The sad truth is that we as pastors have often catered to this minimalist culture, but what other option did we have when we were working within a model of pastoral care that required the feeding of people who had no appetite? Remember that we come from a tradition that would discuss this question: How much of the Mass can I miss and still have it count? A commitment to the priority of the weekend means declaring this frustrating capitulation to be over. Minimalism and convenience cannot be the primary values of a healthy church. Minimalism and convenience have no place in the life of the disciple who is called to save his or her life by losing it. Someone once said that Jesus doesn't ask for

much – he asks for everything. If our liturgies are to be meaningful and transformative "productions," they need to be able to breathe and not be constrained by a rigid one-hour rule. Likewise, there needs to be enough time between Masses so that those who are hungry for God are able to linger with one another after Mass to encourage and support one another. We as pastors are called to facilitate this, even if it means – horror of horrors – changing Mass times, eliminating underattended Masses, or even acknowledging that we are being confined by buildings that no longer serve the needs of this new pastoral context.

2. Hospitality

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me." (Matthew 25:35)

Someone once said that the Church is the only organization that exists mainly for the sake of those who do not belong. This is the difference between a church and a club. Clubs exists for the sake of their members. I remember having a conversation with a parishioner who asserted that my job as pastor was to meet the needs of parishioners. I was perhaps too quick to point out that this was *part* of "our" job (the entire community, not just the priest), but that my role was principally to lead an army of missionaries to reach those who were not yet part of our church. This missional orientation is the identity that needs to be embraced in an incarnational manner, and not only in the abstract. It is, again, the difference between what we say we value and what we value deep down. Hospitality, therefore, does not mean being friendly with our friends and all the people who look, think and talk like us, but reaching out to the stranger.

The Eyes of a Stranger

When looking at this value, we need to ask ourselves what the Sunday morning experience is like for the person who does not yet belong. Several years ago, I was leading a parish mission in a neighbouring diocese. After driving for several hours through a snowstorm, I arrived at the parish fifteen minutes before the

Saturday evening Mass. The local pastor and I had exchanged pulpits for the weekend, so he was not around. When I walked into the relatively small church, no one greeted me, even though I was obviously a visitor. When I asked the usher where the bathroom was, I received a grunt and a gesture towards what I eventually found to be the bathroom. I was wearing a scarf that covered my Roman collar, so no one knew I was a priest. The contrast in the way people responded to me after I took off my scarf to reveal my identity was striking.

As a stranger I was Jesus, and no one welcomed me. As a priest, I was just a priest, and it was the "Yes, Father, no, Father, three bags full, Father" routine. I do not want to pick on this particular parish as, sadly, it differs little from what I would have experienced at any other parish. This fact reveals a fault in our culture, and therefore our values, as Catholics. My experience at this small parish was not primarily because I was not *recognized* as a stranger (this is an aspect of church life where smaller parishes have an advantage over large parishes). My experience reflected a value that considers the Eucharistic celebration as a private and anonymous experience, thus rendering the call to welcome the stranger a moot point.

Who's on the Team?

The first step in truly embracing the value of hospitality is to begin with a hospitality team. There do need to be some people who pay specific attention to welcoming at every Mass, and although it seems obvious, we ought to have people on a welcoming team who enjoy welcoming people. We need this ministry to begin before people even enter the building. On Sundays, when it's not too cold, I will often stand outside and welcome our people into the church; when it is really cold, our director of evangelization can often been seen outside, all bundled up in jacket and scarf, welcoming people. Once those arriving are in the foyer, we have two to four people who welcome all comers, as other members of the welcome team hold the doors and are available at the back

of the church for anyone who needs assistance. Our welcoming team also includes a team of emergency first responders, appointed for every Mass to be ready in case of any medical incidents. It is surprising to me just how often such a team is needed when about 2,000 people pass through our doors on a weekend. Another vital part of our organized efforts at hospitality has to do with the cleanliness of our buildings, especially the bathrooms. Over the years, I have seen church bathrooms that reminded me of the bathrooms when I was in high school: no soap, no paper towels, no toilet paper, no toilet seat, no lock on the door of a stall, and, once, even no door!

As great as these efforts are, a formal welcoming team can be a double-edged sword, as it can create the impression that hospitality is the exclusive domain of those with official parish name tags rather than being the responsibility of the entire community. Several years ago, I was away on vacation and decided to go to Mass at a local parish with some friends. I was in my "civvies" and did not identify myself as a priest. It was a busy Mass and I was shown about halfway to the front of the church to find one of the few available empty seats. Not only did the elderly lady who was hogging the outside of the pew not move into the centre, she elected not to stand to allow me and my friends to be seated, and glared at us as we gingerly clambered over her. My smiles to the other churchgoers were not returned, and I was left feeling embarrassed and unwelcomed. It was good for me to be reminded about what it feels like to be a stranger in a church.

Pew hospitality is one obvious place to begin when teaching parishioners about their responsibility to be hospitable, but the most simple yet effective way for a congregation to impact the welcoming coefficient of a parish is to remember to smile. Several years ago, Colgate undertook a brilliant advertising campaign on social media to promote the sale of dental floss. Their campaign displayed three photographs of different smiling couples. The man in each photograph had some of his lunch visibly stuck between his teeth. The genius of the campaign is that while the eye is quickly

drawn to his afternoon snack safely stowed away between the front teeth, the viewer fails to realize that in one photo, the woman has six fingers, in another, the man has only one ear and, in the third, the woman has three arms. The point is that a smile covers a multitude of sins. Smiling at one another in church is not just a great social practice. It has solid theological grounds, as we are told in Scripture to "rejoice in the Lord always." (Philippians 4:4) Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, tells us that "an evangelizer must never look like someone who has come back from a funeral." (EG, no. 10) So, as someone once said, "If Jesus is in your heart, please notify your face."

Welcoming the Stranger

On November 13, 2013, Pope Francis preached a weekday homily on the parable of the wedding feast told by Saint Matthew. (22:1-14) The pope made two essential points. The first was that when we gather for the Eucharist, or anytime we gather as a Church, we are responding to an invitation to a party, and a party is always a joyful experience. The second point was that in the parable, the servants are instructed to go to the highways and byways to bring in the good, the bad and the marginalized:

> "I go to the feast, but I don't go beyond the antechamber, because I want to be only with the three or four people that I am familiar with …." You can't do this in the Church! You either participate fully or you remain outside. You can't pick and choose: the Church is for everyone, beginning with those I've already mentioned, the most marginalized. It is everyone's Church!

The question of how the marginalized feel when entering our churches is one that haunts me. How welcomed does a person feel who does not look like us, sound like us, dress like us and smell like us? How does the person who is struggling with mental illness feel when entering our churches? How does the person living an alternate lifestyle or struggling with sin and brokenness feel? As my priest friend said, he often felt like the president of an upper

middle-class social club. It is not just a question of treating "these people" the same as everyone else; they are the guests of honour. I can recall many occasions at various parishes when I observed someone who does not fit the typical parishioner profile being treated dismissively or as "suspicious" by parishioners. The earliest recorded words for parish hospitality ministers are found in the letter of James, when he chastises Christians for giving preference to those who appear in fine clothes:

> For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:2-4)

A wonderful way to measure just how hospitable our parishes are to the marginalized is to measure the sense of security that exists in our churches on a Sunday morning. I once heard a pastor at a conference say that he realized his church had become a safe "club" for a group of like-minded people when he saw parishioners walking around and leaving purses and handbags in the pews. He concluded that if there is no risk that someone might steal your purse in church, then we are not truly welcoming the marginalized. He commented that if there is no one in our churches who drops the occasional F-bomb, then we are not welcoming to the marginalized, but attracting a group of like-minded people. One weekend later, after a particular Mass, a parishioner who is one of God's "little ones" came to me a little frustrated, as she was unable to find the drop-off box for one of our charity drives to help the poor in our area. "Fr. James," she asked in a loud voice, "where the f____ am I supposed to leave this?" I almost had a heart attack. I did gently remind her about where she was, then laughed to myself as I remembered the pastor's words of the week before. Remember what Pope Francis says: that the Church exists for the most marginalized. We are called to be fishers of people.

(Luke 5:10) Anyone who has ever gone fishing knows that there is a big difference between the flapping, smelly, slimy creature that is caught, and the fish that is served up on a plate, complete with a slice of lemon.

The Liturgy

There is one unavoidable difficulty that we must struggle with as Catholics when it comes to being hospitable to those who do not attend church, or those who are non-Catholics, and that is the liturgy. As beautiful as the liturgy is, it is, by its very nature, inhospitable to the outsider. It is so because it is the worship of the initiated. It presumes knowledge of basic theology, gestures, postures, prayers and ritual that are often foreign to the non-Catholic or non-churchgoer. To make matters worse, as Catholics, our actions show that we too often presume that every person in church is a Catholic and knows what to do and what to say.

I was reminded of this recently when presiding at a funeral Mass. One trick I learned a number of years ago for getting a measure of a congregation at a funeral Mass was to take a mental picture at the very beginning when we make the sign of the cross. The number of people who make the sign of the cross will give an immediate sense of at least who the cradle Catholics are and will also identify a few Anglicans. Knowing that in North America the largest religious category is fallen away Catholics, it is generous to infer that less than 50% of those who make the sign of the cross are practising Catholics. At this particular funeral, only one third of the people gathered made the sign of the cross. Immediately, I was struck by the incongruity of the situation. I was assisted by a deacon at that Mass and, as we concluded the Our Father, I somehow wanted to give some explanation for what was to happen next. There was no time. Our deacon eagerly invited the congregation to "offer one another the sign of peace," only to be met with puzzled looks from most of the people present. This let's-all-pretend-everyone-is-a-practising-Catholic attitude remains a significant obstacle to genuine hospitality in our churches.

There is no real solution for this problem as long as the unchurched are going to be present with us on weekends and other celebrations. The first step is to recognize that "the problem" is a great opportunity. The very first thing we can do in situations where there are obviously people from various backgrounds, such as at weddings and funerals, is to acknowledge them, welcome them and invite them to enter into our worship as they are able. Pretending that guests are not really present is extremely inhospitable. More and more, I have found that it is better to presume nothing. Therefore, at appropriate moments, I will often give a brief description of what we are about to do next: listen to readings from Scripture or pray the Eucharistic prayer, "a long and ancient prayer in which we ask God to transform bread and wine into the sacrament of his Body and Blood." I give hints to help people pray the Mass, and I am often surprised by the number of Catholics who approach me afterwards and thank me for helping them to enter into the celebration of the Mass. Brief explanations in the homily or during Mass can help us be more centred on the kerygma or first proclamation and avoid using overly technical and specialized vocabulary. Displaying the prayers of the Mass on a screen or directing our guests' attention to booklets in the pews with the responses can also be a great aid to providing hospitality.

Catching the Fish

The ultimate goal of hospitality is to welcome guests so well that they themselves decide to join the parish and help welcome other guests. During my first year at Saint Benedict, I was struck by the fact that each weekend, at least 30 to 40 guests were "checking us out" to see if, at some level, they could belong in our parish. As wonderful as this was, it was equally clear that we were "catching" very few of them. Another problem was the process in which guests became parishioners. We had the "blue card" option and the "online" option. As the foyer would flood with parishioners at the end of Mass, I would greet as many of them at the door as possible. (I often feel like a hockey goalie getting 600 pucks fired

at him in the space of five minutes.) As I spoke to people, I would receive many requests about how to sign up for the parish. This would result in me shouting over someone's head that, if they just pushed through the crowd, they would find a table at the other end of the foyer where there might, or might not, be a blue card they could fill out. This card requested name, address and basic contact information, as well as a box to check if that person wanted envelopes. That was it. The online option was much the same, except you could become a parishioner and never enter the building or speak to another human being.

There were two hospitality-based issues that we needed to address. The first was to make our church foyer more user friendly, not only for guests, but for our own parishioners. We made a move in the right direction by building a mobile welcome booth that would be staffed by parishioners at every Mass. This mobile unit housed a computer and was attached to a big-screen TV that ran friendly and light-hearted slides on upcoming programs and events. The welcome booth also was home to our hearing assistance devices and displayed all of our parish brochures and publications: stewardship booklets, brochures on weddings and baptisms, information on parish membership, etc. It was a point of contact for any questions or inquiries. The key was that it was visible from all directions and staffed by friendly parishioners who were eager to help. Now, anytime I meet new parishioners, I bring them over to the booth right away and introduce them to the welcome team (which is distinct from the hospitality team).

The other question we struggled with was that before we could devise a process for new parishioners to sign up, we needed to know what it meant to become a parishioner. I will say more about this later, but we knew that being a parishioner could not simply mean having your name added to a list. This led us to abandon the "registration card" approach – both the blue ones and the virtual ones. We now invite potential new parishioners to complete a "communication card" and drop it in the collection basket. These cards can be found at our welcome booth, but are

also in our weekly newsletter. They are now the first step to make becoming a parishioner a relationship-based process. This way, we reduce the chance of a person being a name on a list. The risk, of course, is that such a process can be interpreted as a kind of obstacle course that makes it difficult to become a parishioner. While one side of the communication card gathers the typical registration information, the other side outlines the process of registering as a parishioner of Saint Benedict. It is intentionally relational and reads like this:

We can't wait to meet you! In such a large parish as ours, we need to be purposeful in being personal. It's important to us that you feel at home here. Our membership process is set up so that we can get to know each other a little better. It's a four-step process. Here goes:

1. *"I like this church!" Complete the Communication Card.*
2. *"But I don't know enough about it." A member of our welcome team will call and arrange to meet with you.*
3. *"Sign me up! I want to be a part of the team." Attend a New Parishioner Welcome Event to fill out a formal registration card.*
4. *"Do they remember me?" Your Welcome Team member will check in with you periodically to see how you are doing.*

After we receive the communication cards, our welcome team swings into action, arranging a visit to the homes of new families to drop off a welcome package that contains, among other things, a DVD featuring the story of Saint Benedict and a visual tour of the church with explanations of the architecture, design and artwork. The welcome package also includes stewardship booklets outlining ministry opportunities, a brochure on expectations, and the latest parish newsletter. In all of this, we are clear that membership in a parish does mean something, and that moving beyond attending to becoming a member ought to be an informed and intentional process.

The final step in this process is something we have struggled to get right. We call it an NPE, or New Parishioner Event.

Its designation as an "event" only happened after failed attempts at having receptions and luncheons. Finally, we believe we have something that works. We host this NPE on a Saturday night every two months, or as needed. As we seek to connect personally with every new member, we limit these events to no more than 20 new parishioners. Attendees are asked to RSVP, and the event is held as a wine and cheese reception lasting no more than an hour, including brief words of welcome by a member of the welcome team, our parish Director of Engagement, and me. The rest of the time is spent mingling, chatting, laughing and enjoying getting to know one another over a glass of wine. Before people leave, they are given an opportunity to fill out a formal registration card at the end of the evening.

Of course, some people find this process overly demanding and intrusive. That cannot be helped. Anyone is welcome to attend our parish. A person can attend our parish every week and not be registered, but when someone decides to sign on, surely it should mean something. Our process has slowed the rate of new names being added to the list, but in the past, most of those names were removed at the end of the year anyway. The real gift of this new process is that it enables us to build relationships – and this is fitting, as relationships and belonging are at the heart of hospitality.

3. Uplifting Music

O sing to the Lord a new song. (Psalm 96:1)

It has been said that Church renewal is all about the three *h's*: hospitality, hymns and homilies. There is no question that music has the power to reach deeply into our souls and touch us. "He who sings prays twice," said Saint Augustine, and so music and singing songs of praise and canticles to God (Ephesians 5:19) is an integral part of the liturgy. It has been more than 50 years since the Second Vatican Council published *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) as the first of sixteen documents. This document sounded a clarion call for the renewal of all aspects of

the liturgy so that all the faithful could enter into "full, conscious, and active participation." (SC, no. 14) The context of this call to renewal was the liturgical movement that had begun at the end of the nineteenth century and had brought scholars to discover more about the way the early Church celebrated the Eucharist, and how this celebration had developed over the centuries.

What had originally been a unified experience of worship for all the people of God, clergy and laity alike, had, by the Middle Ages, devolved into three distinct modes of participation. First was the person of the priest, whose prayer was almost solitary. He prayed in Latin, which by that time was no longer the language of the people, and he prayed silently. Second was the choir, which sang elaborate versions of the prayers that had once been proper to the assembly. Third were the laity who, removed from the altar, neither sang with the choir nor united themselves with the Eucharistic Prayer prayed by the priest. Those who were literate could attempt to follow the liturgy by using their own missal, but until the 20th century, most Catholics could not read. Instead, the laity were merely passive spectators. Attendance at the Eucharist was often driven by a sense of duty, and the obligation to "hear" Mass was fulfilled by private devotions, such as the rosary, with attention directed not to the altar, but to the presence of Jesus in the tabernacle.

In the years following the Council, attempts were made to call the laity into "full, conscious and active participation," and music was seen as a prime avenue to effect this change. Sadly, what followed in those decades was a wholesale turning away from the beautiful and transcendent to the merely functional. Participation was narrowly defined as "joining in," and the overall quality of liturgical music was greatly lowered. At this time, a deeply erroneous notion took root in the Church: the old is bad and the new is good. In response to the proliferation of this very un-Catholic perspective, there emerged an alternate perspective that was equally flawed: the new is bad and the old is good.

The Old and the New

Jesus said, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52) I remember when I was studying theology, a professor wisely told us that the great mysteries of the Christian faith always involved both/and. This both/and approach also has great pastoral merit, especially when it comes to music. The old must have a place in our worship, because the Church is always the Communion of Saints stretched out across history. To be Catholic is to be in the Church "according to the whole" (*kath' holon* in Greek), and this "whole Church" does not permit geographic or chronological limitation. To worship at the Eucharist is to enter into something much, much bigger than ourselves and far wider than one particular cultural expression in one particular time. The old cannot be excluded.

To be Catholic is also to be missionary. While treasuring what is old, the Church cannot be only a repository of ancient things, no matter how beautiful. She must reflect the face of God who, in the words of Saint Augustine, is "Beauty ever ancient, ever new." The worship of the liturgy must also have a missional dimension and must bring ancient and eternal realities to bear in a way that they can be understood and received by the people who gather. It must speak their language. The new is necessary, and even the songs of the Bible command us to "sing a new song to the Lord." (Psalm 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1)

For this reason, I believe that the music we experience in the liturgy must strive to embrace both the new and the old, and must resist the temptation to settle for some kind of lowest common denominator. Uniformity is not a Catholic value, and diversity ought to be welcomed into our experience of music at the liturgy without fear of its impact on unity. Imposed uniformity does violence to unity. We should boldly bring the ancient musical treasures from our storehouse and give them a place in our worship. We have a fundamental need to do so, to remind ourselves that the worship

of the Church is far greater than our momentary and parochial likes and dislikes. We have a fundamental need to worship with songs that are new and with instruments that are new. We must be prepared to worship with music that speaks to the people who gather, music that is not alien, music that they can even enjoy.

At my parish, we seek to embrace the old and the new by committing ourselves to distinct flavours and experiences of the liturgy at each of the weekend Masses. No one style or flavour is imposed on the whole parish. In this way, we celebrate a diverse experience of music that embraces the breadth of Catholic musical expression, and we leave parishioners free to choose the style of worship that speaks most to them. Our Saturday afternoon Mass features a mid-size choir that sings typical parish hymnbook offerings accompanied by piano or organ. At the Sunday morning 9:00 Mass we have a contemporary band complete with electric guitar, bass guitar, acoustic guitar, keyboard and drums. The sound is professionally mixed to ensure the best quality, and the band plays a variety of old and new hymns, but in a contemporary style. This Mass tends to draw the largest number of young families, and we really do rock the place! I love it.

At the 11:15 Mass, we have a 30-voice choir that sings classic congregational hymns and choral pieces accompanied by organ. This Mass sometimes includes Gregorian chant and Latin Mass parts, and has all the smells and bells. I love this, too! Our Sunday evening Mass features a fifteen-member contemporary choir that sings more contemporary hymnbook music. We are blessed with four unique flavours to choose from, with the entire parish acting as a wise steward, bringing out the old and the new.

Beauty

Another very Catholic value is beauty. Music, as one of the ancient arts, never exists for its own sake, or it can become merely functional. When beautiful, it mediates the divine, because the One who is Beauty is always to be found in the beautiful. It is beauty that contributes powerfully to the wow factor that we ought

to be striving for at every celebration of the Eucharist. Beauty often evokes a silent response. This is so when we behold a stunning sunset, or a striking work of art. It can also be our response to wondrous liturgical music, and I find it small-minded to imply that being caught up in listening to something beautiful does not involve "full, conscious and active participation."

There is a place in the liturgy for this type of participation, but the norm for music in the liturgy surely involves opening our mouths and singing God's praises. "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord." (Psalm 40:9) After almost a thousand years of letting the choir do all the singing, there is still much work to be done in our parishes to call our people to experience the power of singing God's praise.

To Whom am I Speaking?

This task has not been made easier by the types of hymns that are sung in our churches. When I first arrived at my present parish, it was not uncommon to go through an entire celebration of the liturgy, sing the usual four hymns (processional, preparation of the gifts, communion and recessional), and not once sing to God. I have already made a case for diversity over uniformity, so I do believe the liturgy should admit all genres of hymns, and not just hymns or songs of praise. What do I mean? The first question is who are we speaking to, and the second is what are we saying? We can be speaking to God (hymns of praise or petition), about God (confessional hymns), with God (singing the words of God from Scripture) or to one another (exhortation). If we are to take the oldest hymnbook in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Book of Psalms, as our model, we will see that all these genres of hymns belong in our worship. We ought to sing songs that cry out to the skies about who our God is. The oldest Christian hymn that we know of, recorded by Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians (2:6-11), is such an example. We ought to take the sacred words of Jesus, spoken to us, and put them to song. Singing "I Am the Bread

of Life" helps the living words of Jesus penetrate our hearts as we approach the very mystery through which he gives himself to us. Calling each other to worship, to service, to love and faithfulness also reflects the impulse of many of the psalms.

As right and fitting as all of these genres of hymns are, I believe that hymns of praise ought to have pride of place. They are the most transformative, because they do not just suggest that we pray, call us to pray or tell us how wonderful it is to pray: they are prayer itself. Prayer is talking to God, and is distinct from talking about God or exhorting one another to talk to God. Only in the hymn of praise do we pray twice, because in all other genres, though they have a place in the liturgy, we do not even pray once. It is the hymn of praise that unites us to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the hymn of praise that can bring about the entirely necessary, intense, personal encounter with Jesus that the New Evangelization calls for. In spite of this, however, if you scan the most commonly used hymnbooks, and drop into the occasional parish celebrations of the Eucharist, the hymn of praise is not as common as it should be.

In my years as a priest, the most sublime moments of the liturgy have been when hundreds of voices are united in praise to God. It matters not if the praise is led by a contemporary band or by choir and pipe organ. There is just something about "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name," or "Joyful, Joyful We Adore You," because we are speaking directly to God. It is also my experience that people are much more likely to cut loose and sing with everything they've got when they are giving praise to God and not just calling each other to go and dance in a forest.

The oldest non-scriptural hymn we have in our tradition is the Gloria. It is so ancient that the oldest manuscripts of the Greek Old Testament, which was the Bible used by the infant Greek-speaking Church, includes the Gloria in a book of scriptural songs and canticles. This most ancient of hymns is pure praise: "we praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify

you." This pure praise is followed by beautiful, intimate praise of Jesus: "you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord…." It is the language of intimacy, the language of lovers. It is in praise to God that we move ourselves away from fixating on the *idea* of God to the *experience* of God. Singing *about* God and never singing *to* God is the musical equivalent of only knowing about God and not having any personal knowledge of God. Surely at least once in a while, during Holy Communion, we can sing to Jesus himself rather than singing about him or about "the banquet," or endlessly recommending that we eat the bread and drink the cup. The Eucharist is not an idea. It is not a thing. It is a person. It is Jesus himself, not *in* the sacrament but *as* the Blessed Sacrament.

To be clear, I am not advocating the use only of hymns of praise, or sung prayer (sometimes we sing petitions to God, still better than singing about God), but a return to giving the song of praise a preferential place in Catholic hymnody. It is hymns of praise that move the heart most and help lead those who gather into a personal encounter with Jesus. These are the true love songs, and of all the songs we hear, it is love songs that capture our hearts.

"Praise and Worship"

It is widely known that churches that are healthy and growing are Evangelical Protestant churches that have a strong preference for contemporary hymns of praise. They have produced a huge body of music in the contemporary style known as "praise and worship." There has been much debate in Catholic circles about whether these songs, once described to me as "a bunch of songs about me and Jesus that all sound the same," should be used by Catholics at all, never mind in the liturgy.

Musical preference aside, critics often point out that many of these hymns are overly individualistic, choosing "me" over "we," and tend towards sentimentality. While this is true of some, it is not, in my experience, true of all. The Psalms themselves suggest that there is an ancient tradition of speaking in the first person singular, even in communal worship. While there is a preference for the plural in our hymnody, I do not believe we have any grounds to exclude singular expressions of praise. Regarding the accusation of sentimentality, while some hymns are overly such, I would much rather sing a song with some sentiment than sing some of the sterile, idea-bound hymns of the last decades. Songs move the heart and not just the mind. Love songs are supposed to have sentiment. If the liturgy and our music are to have a missional dimension, our evaluation of music must always include the question of what speaks to the people we are attempting to reach. We live in a post-modern, hyper-individualist culture. Post-moderns do not want to sing about doctrine or theology. Abstractions do not attract them, but authenticity does. As individualists, they relate much better to hymns in the singular, as a sense of collective identity can never be presumed, and young people who do not go to church generally do not have playlists on their iPhones that feature organ music. All this points to the fact that the contemporary "praise and worship" style of music employed by so many churches today does speak powerfully to our culture.

As Catholics, we need to be careful about how we employ such music. An evangelical pastor once told me that he uses the "Brenda Principle" when it comes to evaluating the music sung in his church. When I asked him what that was, he said, "If you can remove the name of Jesus and replace it with 'Brenda,' and it works, it should not be used in church." This approach would address the concern about sentimentality!

Contemporary non-Catholic hymns should also always be reviewed for blatant theological problems. This is rare, and matters little to the average person in church, but the liturgy is the prayer of the Church and pastors must act as gatekeepers. This is becoming less and less of an issue, as many Catholic composers, such as Matt Maher, are writing "praise and worship" material that is gaining wide acceptance in Catholic and non-Catholic circles. In addition, there are a huge number of traditional Catholic hymns that can be successfully set to a contemporary style. There's

nothing quite like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" when played by our 9:00 am band. It is ever ancient and ever new. As already stated, while lyrics that allow the congregation to sing with one voice as "we" are to be preferred, we do not need to be afraid of the occasional "I" and "my" in the great assembly. It is biblical, and it speaks to our age.

But Is It Any Good?

Lastly, when delving into the world of contemporary music, the question of quality must never be forgotten. We have already spoken of the role of beauty in music, and quality is related to this. The human mind and heart are drawn to quality, to things that are well done, and recognize them as beautiful. Contemporary music must be played well to be successful. This requires a level of competency and skill from musicians. It also demands a certain level of technical support so the music will sound right. In many Catholic churches, the sum total of sound monitoring is pushing the on/off button. We have this sense that sound takes care of itself, that it never has to be monitored or mixed and, really, is not that important.

In my previous parish, before we could move to introduce contemporary music, we had to address the fact that the sound system was the very same one that was installed when the church was built in 1959. You could not even plug a single acoustic guitar into the system without overloading it. It is frankly shocking just how sub-standard the audio systems are in most Catholic churches. I believe that installing, maintaining and operating a quality sound system that will highlight the spoken word and allow a full range of music is a better investment for a parish than hiring someone to run Sunday School classes. Hymns, homilies and hospitality are key to leveraging the weekend experience, and a proper sound system touches each of these dimensions.

Putting the V into the A/V

Using screens in churches is indirectly related to the issue of music and helping people feel part of things. When we installed

a new sound system in my previous parish (a parish that was housed in two locations), we also installed large screens in both churches. When Saint Benedict Parish was being built, the architect designed the building to allow the use of screens during the liturgy. There is much discussion in Catholic circles about the use of such screens, but I am convinced they can be used in a way that not only respects the dignity and nature of the liturgy, but also adds to it and facilitates that "full, conscious and active" participation we've been aiming for.

Screens allow a diversity of music to be used in the liturgy (requiring that licensing fees be paid), they are cheaper than filling pews with expensive hymnbooks, and they increase participation. I have seen many teenagers in church who would never pick up a hymnbook become drawn to the screens. Even though some of them are not yet singing, at least they are reading the words. Screens also allow us to display some of the key responses in the liturgy and help us extend hospitality to those who may not be familiar with the prayers. Screens give us flexibility to include visual components in the homily, and announcements at the end of Mass.

Arguments that claim this is an innovation foreign to the liturgy do not hold much water. I am sure the same thing was said the first time an electric light or a microphone or even a hymnbook was used in the liturgy. Besides, what is a stained glass window if not a big screen to help people enter into the mystery of the Eucharist? Anyone who has ever entered a Baroque or Rococo (once described by a professor as "Baroque gone wild") church will have to admit that the entire interior of the church is one "big screen." It was also not uncommon in monasteries in the Middle Ages to have a very large hand-copied psalter placed in the monastic choir so that all the monks could sing the chants from one book, or one "big screen."

I have to be honest and say that I have seen some hideous examples of screen use in parishes. Let me offer some principles

to follow. The first non-negotiable must be that the screen cannot distract from the liturgy. The focus during the liturgy is threefold: the presider's chair, the ambo and the altar. Any use of screen technology must facilitate this focus and never take away from it. This influences many aspects of screen use, primarily physical placement. I do not believe there is any justification to place a permanent screen in the sanctuary, or even above the sanctuary, as is seen in many non-Catholic churches. The worst example of this I have ever seen was a church that had two big-screen TVs mounted on the wall behind the altar, on either side of the crucifix. Walking into that church was like walking into Best Buy or Future Shop. I'm not sure how they manage to read the Passion each year, especially when we are reminded that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. Screens need to be visible if they are to be of use, yet should not be in the sanctuary proper, but off to the side. This peripheral placement usually necessitates two screens, especially in large churches. Motorized screens, mounted against a wall, are to be preferred, so that outside of the liturgy, they are retracted and become invisible. Projectors should be mounted from the ceiling, so as not to be a distraction, not to mention out of safety concerns, so that no one trips on wires or cords. The physical placement of screens is one issue, but how the screens are used during the liturgy can also be a huge source of distraction.

First of all, please, please, please avoid the ugly white empty screen. This should never be seen by anyone less than 20 minutes before the liturgy. If a church commits to using screen technology, you cannot just use it for the words of a hymn or a prayer. It must be aesthetically pleasing. At Saint Benedict Parish, each week we design a slide that reflects the theme of that particular Sunday; this is the default slide that appears on the screen throughout the liturgy when nothing else is being shown. The theme slide will include the Sundays in Ordinary Time, and will contain a Scripture verse from one of the readings. This verse is carefully chosen and is usually the central theme of the homily (this verse is also on our outdoor electronic sign and is featured prominently in our

weekly newsletter). The main focus of this slide is an image that reflects the week's theme. We often use sacred images that blend well with the décor of our church. The theme slides are attractive and provocative.

The background colour of our slides changes from green, to violet, to red or gold to reflect the liturgical season, and during the Eucharistic Prayer the theme slide gives way to a muted and simple Eucharistic symbol so as to minimize any possible distraction from what is taking place at the altar. Animated backgrounds of flowing waters and drifting clouds, sometimes featured in non-Catholic churches, are never used. Likewise, projecting images from a camera onto the screen could be justified only for those who could not otherwise see what is going on in the sanctuary. Even Saint Peter's Square uses screens in this way. We do make an exception to this rule when we baptize during the liturgy, so that those at the front of the church can see what is going on (our font is at the entrance of the church). It is obvious, then, that the decision to use screen technology in our churches is a bit like getting a puppy. They are wonderful and can add to our experience, but they are a lot of work. To install screens means committing to creating content each week and training a team of slide operators. The good news is that this work appeals to many people, young and old, in our parishes, and many will be willing to come forward and be trained in this technology.

Get to Work!

Earlier in this section, I spoke of the need to continue to work to invite our people to know the joy of praising God in song and not just being passive spectators. If we are to grow in this area, regardless of what style of music we use, we must teach and invite. At least once a year, I will preach a homily about the role of praising God in song, but almost every week I will either talk about or extend an invitation to grow in our praise of God. The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, and means "the work of the people." Coming to the liturgy means showing up for work.

We need to teach our people that when they stand mute and do not even mouth the words, they are not only not doing their share, but are also discouraging others around them.

Once when I was a seminarian, I was visiting a priest friend for the weekend. I attended the Saturday afternoon Mass at his church and had to bear the discomfort of being one of the only people singing besides the cantor. People were turning around to see who I was. It was not a very encouraging experience. I will never forget what happened at the end of Mass. The priest announced that it was the birthday of one of the altar servers, and the entire congregation spontaneously broke into rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday." I was stunned, but gained a valuable insight that day. Many people in church do not refrain from singing because they cannot sing, or are unwilling to sing, but because they do not know how to sing to God. There are many reasons for this. As mentioned in the previous chapter, perhaps many of them did not know the "joy of salvation," so there was no song in their hearts to be sung. Perhaps this problem was compounded by the type of hymns being used. Either way, we need to acknowledge this and help and encourage our people to sing praise to God.

Often in the liturgy I will take time to invite our people to enter into a particular hymn. At the beginning of Mass, once I reach the presider's chair, if we are singing a hymn of praise and it looks as if half of the church is attending a ventriloquist convention, I will invite the congregation to go back and sing a refrain again. It is important to do this in a way that is not seen as a rebuke spoken in frustration, but as a joyful invitation to "taste and see." It is a word of encouragement, a reminder to be mindful of breaking an age-old habit, and an invitation to prepare our hearts to enter into the worship of the Eucharist. I will sometimes do the same thing as the gifts are placed on the altar or after Holy Communion, when a simple repetitive refrain can be prayerfully sung without a need to look at the screens. This invitation to experience the praise of God generally only works, of course, if we are singing hymns of praise.

4. Homilies

"Woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!"
(1 Corinthians 9:16)

We come to the third of the *h*'s. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis made what may be the first official papal joke in writing when he described the state of preaching in the Catholic Church. He said that both the laity and "their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!" Sadly, this is often true. Saint Paul says that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17) It is the call to faith through the proclamation of God's word that leads those who hear and accept it to the "obedience of faith." (Romans 1:5) The word "obedience" in Greek, *hupakoe*, literally means to be "under hearing."

Preaching is a huge part of the ministry of the priest, and today, more and more, non-liturgical preaching is an essential part of a variety of ministries in the average parish. We need to learn to do this well and give it the best we have. We must remember our context, however. After the theological wars of the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformers reacted to what they considered to be an underemphasis on the Word of God and preaching. After the Reformation, the sacrament–Word duel continued with the Council of Trent's reaffirmation of the centrality of the sacraments in the life of the Church. (This was, of course, a false opposition. It should never have been an either/or question: both the sacraments and the Word are central.) As a result, solid biblical preaching was not a strong characteristic of the modern Catholic Church and, even 50 years after the Second Vatican Council, we still struggle to implement the clear guidelines laid out by the Council fathers.

Banquet or Fast Food?

As we approach the task of preaching, we must keep in mind that the Word of God is a banquet and not fast food. "Long" and

"short" are relative terms and need to be discerned in light of our own church cultures and practices. Not a few jokes were aimed in my direction after the publication of *Evangelii Gaudium* when it came to Pope Francis' comments that homilies should be "brief." I was quick to retort that Pope Francis was saying that the homily should not take the form of a speech or lecture, and that his definition of long was a whole hour!

> A preacher may be able to hold the attention of his listeners for a whole hour, but in this case his words become more important than the celebration of the faith. (EG, no. 138)

I preach on Sundays for fifteen to 20 minutes, and I make no apology for this. The ministry of preaching is key, and we should take it seriously. It's the biggest bang for our buck in ministry and we need to do it well. I do not believe that the people in our pews who are truly hungry for God's Word can get enough nourishment for the week ahead of them if they are only being served up five-minute homiletic hors d'oeuvres. A commitment to more robust and intentional preaching will be favourably received by those who are hungry, but there will be pushback from those who have no hunger. In all of our churches, a portion of the congregation would rejoice if we announced that we were committing to five-minute Sunday homilies. They would rejoice even more if we announced that we were doing away with the homily altogether. But the task of the shepherd is to feed the sheep, and I do not believe the servings for all should be measured by what the non-hungry sheep will receive. From some quarters in the various parishes I have served in, there is almost a sense that the homily is an intrusive add-on to be endured rather than an essential part of the liturgy, and draws out the time it takes to receive Holy Communion and be on one's way.

Perhaps if we paid more attention to the style and content of preaching we could make the homily less of an endurance test and more of a joyous feast of faith. Pope Francis has over and over again reminded us of the centrality of the kerygma, or first proclamation. He reminds the Church in *Evangelii Gaudium* that it is

called "first" "not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by some other more important things." (EG, no. 164) Preaching, then, will always be Christocentric and evangelical. Saint Paul said, "we proclaim Christ crucified." (1 Corinthians 1:23) Every homily, no matter the setting – Sunday, weekday, wedding or funeral – ought to preach Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and the new life found in him through a life of faith, hope and love. Every time we preach, there should be a clear enunciation of this and an invitation to respond to the one who said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) In this way, those who hear can be led to that necessary personal encounter with Jesus, which is the starting point of being his disciple.

When we preach, we need to be intentional about speaking to the entire person – mind, heart, conscience and will. Our liturgical and non-liturgical preaching should be intelligent and informative, but not come across as an academic lecture. Preachers will always have to resist the temptation to show how smart they are or to demonstrate all the big words they learned while studying theology. Exegesis should be the foundation of our preaching, and foundations are always hidden. This is a real struggle for us in the Church today, as a result of poor formation in seminaries and schools of theology. These places of formation are academic institutions where one course on preaching, often given by an academic who has little pastoral experience, is but one of about 40 theology courses that will be a part of a priest's training. Seminarians are formed for four to five years, listening to homilies every day given by professors in a hyper-intellectualized environment. It is no wonder, then, that homilies tend to come across as dry and boring to the average churchgoing Catholic. I have often joked that a seminary preaching course could be entitled "Introduction to Boring Preaching" and that the advanced course would be called "How to Put Your Congregation to Sleep in Five Minutes."

Preaching to the Whole Person

Someone once said that one of the greatest distances in the universe is the 8 to 10 inches from the brain stem to the heart. We are very much children of the Enlightenment and are often more at home in the head than in the heart, with the idea of something rather than the reality itself. When asked about the greatest commandment in the Gospels, Jesus refers to the famous passage in Deuteronomy known as the *Shema*: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteuronomy 6:4-5) What is interesting is that in none of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) is the passage quoted as is. In Mark's Gospel, we hear that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, *mind* and strength. In Matthew, we are to love God with just heart, soul and mind, and Luke gives us the order of heart, soul, strength, mind. We can conclude that while Jesus gives new emphasis to the role of the mind, the heart is first when it comes to love. This is something we already know. This is how it works in any relationship and should be so in our relationship with God.

To speak to the heart means seeking to move people emotionally. We have hungry, restless hearts, and they cry out to be given the rest that only God can give. It is Good News we preach, so the one emotion that should be experienced through our preaching is joy! I always ask myself, and others, if people are experiencing what I say as Good News, no matter how challenging my preaching may be. An indication of whether our people are experiencing joy at what they hear is the presence of smiles or laughter. This is the most human reaction to any good news. I believe that a mark of a good homily is if the people have laughed at least once. The Good News is joyful, life is funny, and there are many great jokes or funny stories that can occasionally be employed by a preacher, providing they have some bearing on the theme of the homily. When people laugh, something happens biochemically in the brain – they relax and become more positively disposed to what you have to say. I think the people of my parish have figured out

that if they are laughing a lot at the beginning of a homily, there is probably a difficult and challenging message about to come.

We hear in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles that Saint Peter preached a very challenging homily – which began, by the way, with a joke about not being drunk, as it was only 9:00 a.m. At the end of this bold and daring proclamation, or kerygma, in which he told the people, "you crucified and killed [Jesus] by the hands of those outside the law" (Acts 2:23), Saint Luke, who wrote Acts, tells us that Peter's hearers were "cut to the heart." (Acts 2:37) This post-Pentecost sermon is a wonderful example of speaking to the conscience. Peter spoke a difficult message. He was specific about what he wanted people to know. They were convicted and it led them to ask the question "What should we do?" If we are truly to speak to the whole person, we cannot stop at the mind and the heart, but must seek to cut into the heart as well, so that it leads to action. In this, the preacher also speaks to the will, as fruitful preaching will lead people to make a decision, a choice.

To preach to the conscience and the will, preachers must know exactly what they want their hearers to know and what they want them to do. If the preacher does not know this, neither will the people, and the homily will be a nonsensical accumulation of unrelated ideas that will not be improved by even the funniest story.

I have found that using Twitter has helped me focus my preaching. I usually communicate the content of my homilies in two tweets: one that sums up the core message of my homily (what I want people to know), and one that describes "what should we do." If I cannot communicate these ideas in 140 characters each, then I, and those who will have to listen to me, am in trouble. If the core message of a homily cannot be summarized in one sentence, it probably should not be given. Creating a one-sentence summary is the first thing I do when I begin to build a homily. It is the fruit of reflection and prayer that took place throughout the week, and becomes the centre of the homily-building process.

The What and the How

Pope Francis reminded us in *Evangelii Gaudium* that it is not enough to know "what ought to be said"; the preacher must also be intentional about "*how* it should be said." (EG, no. 156) This is especially true for a difficult message that needs to be preached. The first rule of thumb is always to preach in love. In Ephesians 4:15, Saint Paul says that it is in "speaking the truth in love" that we grow in every way into Christ. If we translate this passage literally, it would read "truthing in love." English does not have the verb "to truth." But we can speak the truth, live the truth or tell the truth, and all of these must be done in love.

Preachers must pay strict attention to their own emotional state when preparing to preach, lest they speak out of frustration or anger. This is deadly. Difficult or challenging truths must be spoken of only out of love – a concrete love for the people themselves, not a love for an abstracted truth. Pope Francis speaks beautifully to this task in *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 140), where he points out that "the dialogue between the Lord and his people," which is the homily, "should be encouraged by the closeness of the preacher, the warmth of his tone of voice, the unpretentiousness of his manner of speaking [and] the joy of his gestures." He then goes on to reflect on his conviction that what helped people receive Jesus' challenging message was the way he looked at them while he spoke. He looked at them with love, "seeing beyond their weaknesses and failings," and never with judgment or frustration.

The key to speaking about Jesus like this is found in the experience of Jesus speaking to us like this. Pope Francis tells us that "what is essential is that the preacher be certain that God loves him, that Jesus Christ has saved him and that his love has always the last word." (EG, no. 151) Before any preacher can afflict the comfortable or comfort the afflicted, he himself must be afflicted and comforted by the same Word. This is the full meaning of the Word of God being a "two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12): it cuts both ways. Those who would dare wield this sword to cut others must first be cut themselves.

When the preacher is cut first, he will preach as one who first hears and believes, before helping others hear and believe. The homily will always be about "we" and "us" and never just about "you." This yielding to the blade of God's Word is *the* most important step in preparing to preach; it demands time in prayer, wrestling with the Word and the core message that must be preached. I have found in my own life that this prayer in preparation for preaching has been my most fruitful. It can be exhausting. How many times have I opened the Lectionary and thought, "Oh no! I hate that reading." Those are usually my best homilies, because they involve my resubmission to an element of Scripture that I find particularly challenging. At these moments, I am profoundly aware that the first person I am preaching to is myself. Pope Francis agrees:

> Yet if he [the preacher] does not take time to hear God's word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow imposter. (EG, no. 151)
>
> Ouch!

This vulnerability to the double-edged sword of the Word of God cannot only be present during the preparation process, but should also be evident in the preaching. Pope Paul VI said that our contemporaries no longer listen to teachers, but to witnesses. People desire authenticity. The first question our people are asking when we begin a homily is this: Is he real? If there is any hint that we are not being authentic in our preaching, or are hiding something, or are using the homily as a kind of safe intellectual exercise, our words will not penetrate. Our preaching may be informative but it will not be transformative.

Be Real

We must communicate what the text speaks to us: that we are challenged by it, that we struggle with it, and not speak as if

we have it all together. Being vulnerable and real with our people should involve telling the occasional personal story to illustrate a point. This helps people to know (hopefully) that we are real and believable. We should be careful, however, and not overdo this. Referring to ourselves is a necessary rhetorical device in our present climate, a means to better preach the saving message of God's love revealed in Jesus. We preach to lead our people to Jesus, not to ourselves.

Early in my life as a priest, I learned another very important aspect of what it means to be authentic and honest when preaching. It was a Friday afternoon during my first months as a priest. I was late for 5:15 Mass and was not properly prepared for the five-minute homily I would give. I winged it. The next week, I received an anonymous letter from someone who had been at that Mass. This man had been away from the Church for years. That Friday afternoon was his first time back. He noted, although not in an angry way, that I had obviously been rushed, distracted and unprepared. He said that this experience of Mass did not encourage him at all to return to the Church. What made this situation more tragic was that the Mass that day had been offered for the repose of the soul of his recently deceased mother. As you can imagine, I was cut to the heart. The answer to the question "What should I do?" was obvious: be honest, be genuine, be authentic, be vulnerable, and never try to fake it.

Why had I been late that day? That afternoon, I had been working at the local hospital, visiting patients. I had gotten caught up in a pastoral visit and lost track of the time. As I backed out of the hospital's underground parking lot, I ran the entire length of my new car along a concrete pillar, ripping off my front bumper in the process. I was almost sick to my stomach over this. Between car payments and student loan payments, how was I to pay thousands of dollars for repairs? This what was on my mind when, ten minutes later, I arrived the sanctuary to begin Mass. I know I could have been excused for being distracted, but what was inexcusable

was that I proceeded to celebrate Mass and preach as if nothing had happened. I tried to fake it and did not succeed.

Some Tips

Here are a few other tips to help preachers give their message meaning and impact. These may not apply to every reader of this book, but you may find something relevant to your ministry.

- Get maximum input for your homily preparation

Theologian Karl Barth once said that preachers should prepare their preaching with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Current news stories are always on people's minds, especially those that reveal existential questions, such as natural disasters like earthquakes or typhoons, great evils such as school shootings or 9/11, moral failure or heroism. Pope Francis reminds preachers in *Evangelii Gaudium* to not seek to answer questions that people are not asking. The news evokes questions, and preachers must be aware of the issues their people bring with them. When we fail to address the obvious, we affirm a suspicion that we are ungrounded and otherworldly. Another way to get a sense of the questions being asked is to hear from parishioners. Every week at our staff meetings, we take time to reflect on the readings for the following Sunday; in many instances, one of these gems ended up at the centre of my homily.

- Remember to preach on what has been proclaimed

Preach the Scriptures, and preach the Scriptures that have been proclaimed that week. Do not preach on the previous week's readings, or the version from Luke because you prefer it to Matthew's (I've heard this done). Do not preach on movies, or novels, or sports or the news. These can assist the point of the homily, or be the occasion of a particular focus, but we must always bring the Scriptures of the day to bear.

- Start with a hook and land the d*** plane

This is about the opening and closing of a homily. If a preacher can do this well, much will be forgiven. The opening sentence of a

homily is the only chance we have to make a good first impression. Have a catchy, strong opening that connects with life experience in some way. Tell a story or ask a sudden question: "Do you remember where you were when...?" "Have you ever...?"

The ending is all about landing the plane. Once when I was on a flight back to Halifax, we came into land on a really windy afternoon. The plane was about a hundred feet from the ground when all of a sudden the engines kicked in and the plane turned back to the skies. We had to circle for another 40 minutes before the speed of the wind dropped and we were cleared for landing. It reminded me of some homilies I have heard over the years. Land the plane. Do not give the impression of coming into land and then take off again. A good ending can be strengthened by a judicial use of an *inclusio* (ending with a reference to the hook story/image you used at the beginning), but use it sparingly and don't become too predictable. When I prepare a homily, my opening and closing is often the last part of the building process.

- Go text free

One time when I spoke about the time I take to prepare a homily, a parishioner, with genuine surprise, looked at me and said, "You prepare them? I thought you just got up there and did it." I wasn't sure whether to take this as a compliment or an insult. Anyone who has ever prepared to give a homily without a fixed text knows that it takes a great deal of work to make it look like you are just winging it. The extra work is worth it, as our people experience that they are truly entering into a dialogue, rather than listening to a monologue. Even an unpolished homily, delivered without constantly gazing at a text, is much more engaging than the most brilliant oration that is read out loud. Most of my preaching is text free. It is much more exciting and nerve-racking than the safety of a text. I still get nervous before I preach, because as much as I prepare, each time I give the same homily it comes out a little differently. To be sure, there are times when I have used a text, but I limit these to preaching on controversial subjects or at

a difficult funeral. There is definitely a case to be made for precision in particular circumstances. When I preach without a text, I generally have a series of simple speaking points that help me stay on track.

- Humble yourself

Approach the task of preaching with fear and trembling (literally), but believe that God is going to use you. As I process to the ambo to proclaim the Gospel, or as I listen to the Gospel being read by the deacon, I always pray the same prayer, over and over again. It usually goes something like this: "Lord, help me not to be a total idiot. Use me. Come, Holy Spirit. Let me get out of your way. Let my only motive be your glory and the building up of your kingdom." I believe and have experienced that God always honours this prayer.

There is a story told from my native land of Scotland of a young minister who walked into his church and approached the pulpit, very sure of himself, if not with a slight air of arrogance. He proceeded to massacre his sermon and withdrew at the end of the service with embarrassment. An old man on the way out said to him, "If ye'd have come in the way ye went oot, you'd have gone oot the way ye came in." When I was a lowly seminarian, the late Bishop James Mahoney of Saskatoon paid us a visit and told a story I will never forget. He told us that one Sunday at the cathedral, he had been preaching what he thought was a very good and powerful homily. After Mass, a young man, visibly moved, came up to him and said that hearing the homily had been a life-changing experience. Naturally curious, the bishop asked which part of the homily had touched him so. The young man replied, "Well, I don't really remember what you were saying, but at one point you said, 'That's the end of the first part of my homily; now I want to move to the second part.' When you said this I just knew that my old life was over and I had to begin anew."

- Don't believe your fans

"Nice homily, Father." It is a refrain heard at the doors of almost any Catholic church as the faithful head for their cars. I once had a little old lady say this to me – and I hadn't even given the homily! The Second Vatican Council told us that the task of preaching the Word of God is the first task of the ordained priest. As with any profession, we can never stop trying to improve. Every preacher can become better. Simple techniques and skills can be used even by preachers who, although they may have the office or task of preaching, may not necessarily have the charism or gift of preaching. Have a group of parishioners who will give you brutally honest feedback about your preaching. Listen to recordings of your preaching. Video yourself. You may be surprised at what you see and what you hear. If secular professions can strive for growth and improvement, how much more should we who have been tasked to proclaim the saving message of Jesus strive to improve.

- Screen your homilies

Many would say that we now exist in a post-aural culture. We are audio-visual learners. We will refrain from entering the discussion of whether this is a positive development. It's just the way it is. It is unthinkable that a lecturer would present anywhere these days and not have something on a screen. No executive would make a presentation to her board without the requisite PowerPoint or Keynote presentation. Young people are constantly stimulated by visuals through their hours in front of a television, computer or smartphone screen. Why then would we not seek to do the same thing when communicating the greatest story and the best news of all?

At Saint Benedict Parish, I prepare eight to ten slides to accompany my homily. I do not use them every week, as I think it best not to become predictable. I preach in what could best be described as a "Ted Talk" style, using the keynotes sparingly. My slides tend to be minimalistic, often containing a single word, phrase or image. At times I may even use a short video clip that

assists in delivering my message. I realize that this may drive some liturgists mad, but I will call Saint Paul to my defense: he said, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:22) It has amazed me to hear parishioners say how much this visual aid helps them – and especially their children – to remember the message of the homily. These images and words serve as great prompts and can also help the preacher get away from using a text.

- Avoid the stand-alones

I really believe that we need to be much more intentional about interconnecting homilies in a parish. Too often our preaching is like those TV shows that have totally independent plots each week. They happen at the same time, in the same place and with the same characters, but are totally unrelated. Our preaching should be consciously building upon previous homilies and be more like TV shows that have a continuous building narrative throughout all the episodes, like *24*, *The Walking Dead*, *Homeland* or *Downton Abbey* – but definitely not like *Lost*.

In parishes with more than one preacher on a given weekend, the homily should not just be the homily for that particular person. It should be the homily that the parish as a whole needs. Preachers need to communicate with one another and agree about what they want people to know and do. The pastor especially needs to preach programmatic homilies on a regular basis that speak about the vision, the plan and the strategy of the parish. He needs to address questions such as where we are going, why we are changing and why we are doing what we're doing. The occasional use of a four-week series that is planned in advance to address particular pastoral concerns can be a real help. The challenge with these, however, is respecting the integrity of the Lectionary.

- Have fun

Lastly, and quite simply, love and enjoy what you do. If it is onerous and unpleasant for you, it will also be so for the people who have to listen to you.

5. Meaningful Community

> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul. (Acts 4:32)

It was the end of a Saturday evening Mass, and, as I left the entrance of the church to go to the sacristy (located behind the sanctuary), I noticed a young woman sitting in a pew by herself. She seemed upset. When I emerged from the sacristy, ready to go home, she was still there. I went over to her and sat beside her and waited. Eventually, she lifted her head and began to tell me her story. She was a doctoral student at one of the universities within the parish boundaries. She was overcome with stress and anxiety about writing her thesis and had not been eating properly or sleeping. She seemed close to some kind of emotional and physical collapse. Her family lived in a different province and she was alone in the city. I scrambled to think of what I could do to help. I had to be somewhere within half an hour, and it was one of those things I could not miss. I made a phone call to Karen, a young woman in the parish who was also a doctoral student and who lived a block from the church. Thankfully, Karen was home. We quickly concocted a plan – I would drop this young woman off at Karen's before heading to my appointment. Within minutes of arriving at Karen's home, the young woman was sitting in a rocking chair smothered in a blanket, a cup of tea in her hand. While supper simmered on the stove, Karen took out her harp and began to play a beautiful soothing melody.

I will never forget that day. What struck me about this experience was the contrast between the two responses to this person in distress. A relatively full church had emptied out around a person who was visibly in need of help. Those who had lingered in the church after Mass would have seen her, but no one approached her. I do not write this as a reproach, because I do not believe that the issue was that no one cared. I knew some of the people, and they are caring people. Rather, their behaviour was shaped by an attitude that often hinders our ability in the Church to form meaningful community: "it's none of my business."

> "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9)

Experiences such as these beg a question of us whenever we use the term "Christian community" to describe our parishes. Christian community? Really? Does the gathering of a group of often isolated and anonymous individuals under the same roof for an hour constitute a community? I think not. Authentic community is a place where we are known and loved. It is a place where we find others to whom we are accountable and who are accountable to us. This is the heart of Christian community, of *koinonia*, the Greek word that can be translated as "fellowship." When I first arrived at Saint Benedict Parish, I knew immediately that the question of authentic community was going to be a huge challenge. I had never had oversight of such a large parish – large, at least, by Nova Scotian standards, with an average weekly attendance of 2,000 people over four Masses. Someone once said that the larger you are, the smaller you have to become. This is a real advantage that smaller parishes have over larger ones. In the very first months, I began to speak in homilies about Christian community. On one weekend I reminded the people of the words of the theme music for the TV show *Cheers*. I showed the *Cheers* sign on the screens and played a snippet of the refrain.

> Sometimes you want to go
> Where everybody knows your name
> And they're always glad you came
> You want to be where you can see
> Troubles are all the same
> You want to be where everybody
> Knows your name.

Is this not the foundation of any human community? If so, how much more should it be true of the Christian community? The following week, a parishioner gave me a small plastic *Cheers* sign that played the refrain when you pressed a button on the side. I keep it in my briefcase and always bring it out to play when I give talks or presentations on community. Everybody recognizes it, and some even sing along.

We have been talking about values in this chapter. Remember that values are manifested by what we do and not by what we say. If visitors from outer space, or from a very different culture, were to come and observe our behaviour, what would they see? What would they conclude? At the end of Mass the priest or deacon says, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." He might as well say, "On your marks, get set, go!" The mad dash for the parking lot might lead one to conclude that someone had shouted, "Fire!" or that there was a prize for the first person out.

In the early months of my time at Saint Benedict, at a Saturday evening Mass, I was once overtaken by a little old lady with a cane and dozens of her followers as I processed out. What can be concluded about such behaviour? One could be excused for thinking that most people just could not wait to get out of there. This feeling is tangible at the end of most Masses. When the priest says, "Let us pray," after Holy Communion, listen carefully and you will hear the sound of jingling car keys being made ready for the escape. If the Christian community is to be a place where everyone knows your name, we seem to say to one another, "I don't want to know your name, I don't really care if you came, your troubles are your own problem, now get out of my way."

Several years ago, my Archbishop, Anthony Mancini, wrote a beautiful pastoral letter on the New Evangelization. He addressed this question of community: "The church cannot be a collection of individual believers practicing their faith in private, satisfied with their self-sufficiency." The truth is that the Church can be this, has been this and, sadly, often is this. When the Church is such a sign of contradiction to its own nature, it is a sick and dying Church. If the renewal of our Church is to take place, the question of community will be essential.

Belonging

Social scientists tell us that today, the question of belonging and loneliness is far more crucial than in the past. Fifty years ago, the cultural landscape was very different than it is today.

Fifty years ago, there was still a strong sense of communal morality and social mores. People knew how they were supposed to behave. Most people knew exactly what they were to believe. Sometimes communities were literally divided along belief lines. To mix with the "other" could literally mean crossing the tracks. Fifty years ago, if you behaved properly and believed correctly, you could belong. How things have changed. We now live in a hyper-individualistic post-modern culture. Gen Xers, the generation after the Baby Boomers, and Millennials, or Gen Ys, those born after the early 80s, will not behave in any particular manner just because it is what they are supposed to do. Most people today will behave in a particular way only if it lines up with their personal beliefs. Appeals to authority or tradition hold no water for these generations.

When it comes to believing, a similar dynamic can be observed. Belief systems are of little value. There is no sense of obligation to anything beyond the individual and his or her own personal – and private – beliefs. Most people today are not compelled by a quest for truth, and are largely uninterested in doctrine or any proposal that presents a systematic, comprehensive worldview. Most people today neither join, stay or leave a Church because of belief or doctrine. While this may be distressing to many of us, we must recognize that this is our new reality, and this is the character of a generation to which we are called to bring the Gospel. Most people join, stay and leave churches not because of belief, but because of a sense of belonging, because of community. The old order of behaving-believing-belonging has been reversed. Many are willing to change their lifestyles and behaviours, but only if they truly believe it for themselves. Beliefs are changed not by preaching and teaching, but by building trust through relationships, through caring, through belonging.

The implications of this new reality for us as a Church are huge. First, the state of community in the average parish is an enormous liability when we attempt to attract a younger generation. Second, we must recognize that our pastoral approach is

almost universally shaped by the older behave-believe-belong paradigm. How then can we transform the culture of our parish to begin to live out a belong-believe-behave model? Are we ready and willing as a Church to provide opportunities for a real and authentic experience of belonging for those who do not believe what we believe, or do not behave as we believe they should? How will we do this if the only time we gather as a community is at the Eucharist, which by its very nature demands a certain measure of believing and behaving before full belonging can happen? It is the age-old question of whether we are willing to go out to the highways and byways and welcome the "good" and the "bad." It is about going to the margins and the marginalized and shattering the "private club" mentality that is present in most parishes, which are for those who believe the same things and act the same way.

If we get this right, the question then becomes this: "Are we willing to provide experiences of belonging for those who do not *yet* believe, and do not *yet* behave? It is the traditional distinction between the *lex gradualitatis* and the *gradualitas legis*, the "law of gradualness" versus the "gradualness of the law." This was a term used in the pastoral discipline of moral theology. It means that, while we stand by our moral code, our sense of right and wrong, we also stand by the person who is gradually moving, changing and transforming. We love that person into the Kingdom, into the Church, and onto the journey of discipleship. This is a gradual process that cannot be defined or confined, and we must be ready to walk with each person as they move from an experience of community, to reframing their belief systems, to allowing the Lord to change their lives (belonging-believing-behaving).

Evangelii Gaudium tells us that "The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel." (EG, no. 114) As I reflect on this truth, it seems almost self-evident now after years in priestly ministry. I must admit that I cringe when I think back on many pastoral situations when I was a young priest ministering out of a behave-believe-belong mindset. I think of the

young couples who came to see me for marriage preparation who neither belonged, believed or behaved, and where did I begin? By hammering on their behaviour. They were living together; they were not going to church. No matter how gently or lovingly I did this, for those who had no sense of belief, let alone belonging, it yielded very little fruit.

Beginning with behaviour adjustment was also at the root of my past attempts to labour for the renewal of the parishes in which I served. I was convinced that if I just preached enough homilies on the need to grow spiritually, to serve in ministry and put more in the collection, and if I just provided enough opportunities for parishioners to take programs to help them change their behaviour, then it would all work. I was convinced that if we could just get the right books with the right information into our catechism classes, then we would witness the transformation of belief. After years of working myself into the ground, with a few exceptions, I saw the same 10 to 15% of parishioners taking advantage of these opportunities for growth, and the same 85 to 90% remaining in the pews, unchanged. In the remainder of this section, I will look at some practices and tools that we have employed at Saint Benedict to address this question of meaningful community.

Alpha

I have been a huge supporter of Alpha since I first ran it in my parish in 2001. Remember the story about card socials that I spoke of in the Introduction? After doing the course, I knew that it worked. The hungry were fed, the lukewarm were brought to life, and non-churchgoers and even non-believers were coming to faith in Jesus and returning to church. People were eager to begin serving in ministry, they were hungry for more, the Mass was coming to life for them and the collection was going up! I had never experienced that kind of discipleship fruit from any investment of time and energy in pastoral ministry. It was able to speak and touch people from a variety of backgrounds and levels of faith. How could it do this so successfully? What made this

program so different? I was keenly aware that this tool presented the first proclamation in a compelling way, but so did many other programs. On the surface, Alpha is a ten-session process that introduces the Christian faith. Each evening begins with a shared meal, or some experience of shared food, in a relaxed environment. Then there is a talk on some aspect of the first proclamation, the kerygma. After the talk there is a substantial amount of time devoted to small groups of eight to ten guests with at least two leaders. The purpose of the small groups is not to teach, but to listen and facilitate discussion among the guests.

A look under the hood of Alpha reveals that the secret to its success is that it embraces the belong-believe-behave approach to evangelization. It is perfectly suited for the post-modern mindset. The first goal of Alpha is to create a warm, welcoming, non-threatening, non-pressurized and non-judgmental environment where guests are loved and accepted unconditionally. They are given permission, by word and example, to be authentic and real. No one will correct them for their unorthodox (or even crazy) beliefs, their doubts or their struggles. There will be no judgment about their lifestyles. Through the ten-week process, trust begins to build as meals are shared and participants experience being listened to in small groups. As the sense of belonging grows, they begin to let down their guard and receive the message of the talks. At this point, the truth of Jesus and his Gospel begins to knock on the door of their hearts, and by the end of the ten weeks, the process has led many of them to a personal encounter with Jesus and to a decision to follow him. What happens after this transformation of belief is a total re-evaluation of lifestyle and behaviour, as the journey of discipleship begins.

I have been running Alpha in all my parishes since 2001, and I am even more convinced than ever that it is the most effective tool I have found to date. There may be another, but I have not yet found it. I have seen all my parishes transformed by placing Alpha at the centre of our evangelistic efforts, and have even expanded the use of Alpha in my present parish. At Saint Benedict, we are

clear that Alpha is not just one of many programs we use, but that it is foundational to our identity as a missional and evangelizing Church. We recently concluded eight different Alphas running concurrently, with over 350 guests, about a third of whom are non-churchgoers. We host daytime Alphas, Friday night Alphas, Thursday night Alphas, Pub Alpha, Sushi Alpha (we take over an entire sushi restaurant), Youth Alpha in the parish and in the local public high school, Alpha in a community centre, Alpha by the Hearth (in homes), and Alpha in a prison. All these courses are run by our parishioners, many of whom have experienced conversion and transformation through their own experience of Alpha. We have a veritable army of evangelizers successfully using this program to create a profound sense of belonging so that guests may hear and receive the Good News of Jesus Christ. To find out more about this, visit alpha.org/catholics.

Pope Francis, through his teaching in *Evangelii Gaudium*, would support the Alpha approach: "All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental." (EG, no. 165) In spite of this affirmation of the style of evangelization, in some Catholic circles two common objections are raised about using Alpha as a tool for fulfilling the mandate of Jesus. The first is that the course content is limited and leaves out essential aspects of Church teaching. The second is that this course originated in a non-Catholic context and is used by a wide variety of Christians of all expressions and flavours, and that it will to lead to confusion for Catholics.

I have already commented on the need for the kerygma or first proclamation to be clearly articulated, heard and responded to before authentic evangelization can take place. It is therefore necessary to separate the kerygma from the *didache*, the "teaching" or catechesis. Once again, *Evangelii Gaudium* supports this:

> Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing. (EG, no. 35)

Lastly, in the mind of this pope, the ecumenical base that Alpha enjoys is not in any way a liability, but something that will enhance the effectiveness of our efforts:

> If we [all Christians] concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. The immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization. (EG, no. 246)

Sunday Morning

Alpha is a door through which many people can begin to walk the path of discipleship. We offer a wide assortment of catechetical programs to those who have completed Alpha so they can continue their formation and journey towards maturity. Sooner or later, a church that runs Alpha will experience a tipping point when a substantial number of parishioners have been touched by the experience. When this happens, the experience of Sunday Eucharist will begin to change. I would like to speak about three specific changes we introduced to our Sunday Eucharist that, in effect, were an attempt to move a little bit of Alpha from the basement into the sanctuary.

a. Name Tag Sunday

Yes, it is what you think. Name tags for two thousand people! We do this once a month. Parishioners bring their own name tags with them and we set up tables in the foyer where people who didn't bring one can write their name on paper name tags before they enter the church. One of the parishioners inspired me to do this. During my first months at Saint Benedict, I received word that a particular lady was a little upset with me. When I eventually spoke to her, she told me why. "At the end of Mass, you always greet my husband by name, but you never call me by name." I knew exactly who she was. She was Fred's wife, and the reason I knew she was Fred's wife is because Fred wore the same jacket to Mass every week, a jacket that had his name emblazoned on the shoulder. Just like the Cheers theme song says, we really do have a deep desire to go where people know our names.

I am a realist. I know that it is fundamentally socially and psychologically impossible to have warm and fuzzy feelings for 600 people in church. We cannot have meaningful connections with everybody, or know everybody's name, but we can try. We can at least do something about it to show that it really is of value to us, no matter how poorly we may be doing it. We want to go to war with the notion of anonymous Christianity. So everybody gets a name tag once a month.

It has been over three years now since we began this initiative. Resistance has been minimal. In fact, on the very first weekend we did this, I was sure that the usual flow of complaints and anonymous letters would arrive on Monday morning. I received only two complaints, and both were lamenting the fact that we were not going to do this every week. Although we could never know everybody's name, with at least 2,500 regularly attending parishioners (not everyone attends every week), most parishioners do go to the same Mass every week and most sit in the very same pews. As creatures of habit, it is very reasonable that even at Sunday Eucharist we can begin to break through the wall of anonymity and take the first step towards building meaningful community.

b. Prayer Partners at Mass

Since it is the only time the entire community gathers, I have struggled to use the limited time at Sunday Mass to build community over my years as a priest. At the beginning of the liturgy, after the sign of the cross and the greeting, there is a place that is appropriate for a word of welcome before entering into the Penitential Rite. How I have used this time has changed down through the years. A warm welcome, especially to regular parishioners, visitors and guests, is always well received. From there I have moved through the different versions of inviting people to turn and acknowledge those around them. I have moved from a good-morning-to-your-neighbour tack, to the get-your-neighbour's-name approach (this has definitely been made easier on Name Tag Sunday). Both have yielded fruit and have contributed to the defrosting of the church on Sunday mornings.

It does call many parishioners out of their comfort zones. I still remember the looks on people's faces before and after I would extend the invitation. As I would introduce it, I could almost see what they were thinking: "Oh no! He's going to ask us to talk to someone." In spite of this, by the time attention was returned to the presider's chair, there was always a smile on everyone's face, as well as a collective sigh of relief that the exercise was over.

When I came to Saint Benedict Parish, I decided to change this approach. True community is not just a time to socialize. The communion that we celebrate at the Eucharist is not just a smile and a handshake. It is a celebration of our oneness in Christ, in our joys and in our sorrows. Besides, a meet and greet is not really appropriate at the Eucharist. It really needs to happen before we reach our pews. Instead of inviting people to say good morning, or shake a hand or get a name, we invite parishioners at every Mass to find a prayer partner, someone they will pray for, and who will pray for them. We are clear that you do not have to know what you are praying for; God knows. Each week, we take a moment to explain this for the sake of visitors, guests or new parishioners.

We invite people to partner with someone they do not know, if possible, and to pray for that person by name during Mass. Each week, at the end of the Prayer of the Faithful, we pause in silence to pray for the person we met at the beginning of Mass. Small things really can and do make a difference.

Since we have introduced this practice, I have received a lot of positive feedback and stories of encounter and transformation. People have told me in tears that they had come to Mass burdened and wondering if anyone cared, or even if God cared. The experience of being connected spiritually to those around them was hugely significant, and, as most people sit in the same pews week after week, this connection builds as faces become familiar, names are remembered, and people admit to even praying for "that person" during the week.

c. Prayer Ministry after Mass

Several years ago, I made a promise to God that whenever someone asked me to pray for them, I would pause and do it right on the spot. I have not always kept my promise, but more often than not, I do. I did this for a number of reasons – not least of all because I have a terrible memory. How could I keep saying I would pray for people or their loved ones, knowing that I would probably forget? The problem was decisively solved by my saying, "Of course I will. Let's pray right now."

The second advantage is also mostly selfish on my part. The times I am most tempted to respond to a prayer request by promising to pray in some vague, distant future rather than on the spot is when I am feeling spiritually weak or distracted. It is difficult to minister to people in this way if you are feeling not very holy. By forcing myself to pray for them when they ask, I allow my own weakness and sinfulness to be challenged and remind myself that God uses me not because of who I am, but because of who he is.

The third advantage is that the person being prayed for receives not only the benefit of prayer, but of hearing and

experiencing the prayer. These moments have led to profound encounters, often with tears and the experience of relief, peace and healing. Every time this happens, I think, "Why don't we do this more often?" One of the limiting factors to this type of ministry is that I am one person in the midst of about 500 to 600 people leaving church after each Mass. But we found a solution. We trained teams of lay people to offer this kind of ministry at the end of each Mass while I am at the door of the church shaking hands.

A key moment of the Alpha experience takes place when team members pray over the guests, that they may experience God's love, the Holy Spirit and healing. The model we use at Alpha is non-intrusive, gentle and respectful. Two team members will ask permission to place a hand on the person's shoulder, then gently pray for them by name. Prayers do not need to be long or eloquent, as God does not only answer the prayers of those with theology degrees. Several things happen in this encounter. First, many, many more people are ministered to in this highly personal way than could be if it were just up to the priest. Second, the team members get to experience the joy of being used by God in this way, and model to others that it is not complicated or difficult to minister to one another like this. At Alpha, teams of men pray with the men, and teams of women pray with the women. This alignment reduces the risk of complications.

In 2011, we brought this experience of praying upstairs to the weekend Masses. Once a month, we have two to four trained teams available after every Mass, and each week we have teams available in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel to pray for those who may need prayer. While I am greeting people at the door, an average of 60 to 70 people each weekend are receiving prayer ministry that has a huge impact on their lives. On weekends when I preach a more evangelistic message that invites those present to offer a response and a decision, I will invite members of the congregation who may have responded in their hearts to the invitation to come forward and receive prayer to take the next step in their Christian lives.

Gallup

The value of belonging is, in many ways, the key to the transformation of culture that needs to happen in our parishes. A key exists not for its own sake, but to open a door, a door that needs to be walked through. If belonging is the key, then it opens the door to faith. Behaving, which is discipleship, takes place when the person walks through the door. We must be clear that we are not advocating belonging for its own sake. That is mere socialization. We are advocating the move towards meaningful community so that the end game of making missionary disciples may be achieved. If the issue of belonging is so central to the process of renewal, surely it is to our advantage to be able to measure it in some way. As Fr. Bill Hanson of Saint Gerard Majella Parish in Long Island is fond of saying, "You cannot manage what you cannot measure." The issue of belonging and the transformation of our parishes can and ought to be managed, so it ought to be measured.

Several years ago, my diocese's stewardship team introduced tools that the Gallup organization had developed for assessing the health of churches. The core philosophy of these tools is outlined in the book *Growing an Engaged Church*, by Al Wiseman. Through research that began in the corporate world, Gallup sought to identify the factors that contributed to excellence in an organization. After great success using these tools in the corporate sphere, they turned their attention to the life of the Church and tried to determine whether the same factors were at work. Gallup found that they were. With some adjustments, they were able to apply these tools to assist churches and church leaders in measuring the health of their churches. Unless something can be measured, it cannot be managed.

For Gallup, a healthy church is a community where people grow spiritually, where people serve others and share their financial resources sacrificially. These are the outcomes that define success, and they are the behaviours so often desired by pastors all over the world. So often we seek to bring about these outcomes

by directly focusing on them. We call people to take programs for growth and get the same 20% of parishioners. We endlessly request volunteers to sign up for ministries, with the same rate of success. In terms of financial giving, in spite of appeals, Catholics still give the least out of all other Christian groups. In spite of our enthusiastic efforts, the results have been very limited.

Gallup research indicates that we are looking and working in the wrong place. Rather than focusing on the branches and beseeching them to bear fruit, the research tells us that we ought to focus on the condition of the soil. If the soil is good – and we know the seed is good – then a harvest will be brought forth, thirty, sixty and a hundred fold. The greatest indicator of good soil is what Gallup calls *engagement*. Engagement is not to be identified as busyness or even involvement. Engagement is a sense of *belonging*, a psychological connection to the local church and its mission, and a sense of ownership of what is happening and of where the Church is headed. Engaged parishioners are far more likely to commit to spiritual growth, serve others and give sacrificially. This is the belong-believe-behave paradigm in action. In Gallup's vocabulary, engagement (belonging) drives spiritual commitment (believing), which, in turn, drives the outcomes (behaving) of growing, serving and giving.

Gallup tools enable a church to survey its membership and discover the percentages of 1) engaged members, 2) non-engaged members, and 3) actively disengaged members. Engaged parishioners are described as those who are wildly enthusiastic about their parish. There is a deep sense of ownership and alignment with where things are going. Engaged parishioners serve more, give more and are much more inclined to invite others to their church. Unengaged parishioners are generally happy with their parish, but tend to be passive and uninvolved. The last category is the actively disengaged. They are the parishioners who are deeply unhappy with the way things are, resist any kind of change, and tend to be a negative and destructive presence. I recently saw these categories of human beings summed up by three drawings. The

first showed a man building a brick wall, the second showed a man with his feet up on his desk happily snoozing, and the third picture showed a wrecking ball knocking down the wall that the first man had built. The survey developed by Gallup is called the ME 25; it assesses 25 indicators of membership engagement.

In January 2011, over 1,330 parishioners participated in the survey at Saint Benedict for the first time. The results of this survey showed that our parish was composed of 24% Engaged, 47% Unengaged, and 29% Actively Disengaged. Based on Gallup's data from U.S. Catholic churches, these results are slightly better than the average Catholic parish in the U.S. that first uses these tools. Our main area of weakness seemed to be related to our sheer size and our failure to be a parish in which meaningful relationships are built between the people and the leaders of the parish. This placed a demand on us to reshape the perception of leadership within our parish, as one priest cannot have a meaningful relationship with almost 2,500 people. The satisfaction of finding out that we were slightly better than the average Catholic parish at the beginning of this process was short-lived when we learned Gallup's definition of organizational health. For Gallup, a healthy soil condition that will allow a growing spiritual commitment, that will eventually produce the fruit of the Kingdom, is a staggering 4:1 ratio of engaged to actively disengaged parishioners!

This was a sobering insight. It would take four engaged parishioners to neutralize the acidity of every actively disengaged parishioner, and we were only at 0.83:1. More alarming than this was the realization that we were still healthier than many other parishes. I remember having inklings of this when I was at my previous parish. Visitors would remark on how uplifting our liturgies were and how alive our parish seemed to be. My personality is such that I am always focusing on how we can be better and healthier, and I was aware that we were nowhere near being the healthy church that we were called to be. I would often think to myself at these moments that when you visit the hospital, the

patients in the intensive care unit look really healthy compared to the people in the morgue.

Many people are reluctant to use tools like those offered by Gallup, and many shy away from anything to do with comparison, but if we do not have a vision for what a healthy church looks like, how will we ever become healthy ourselves? If our lack of health, decline and palliative condition is simply not as bad as in the churches around us, we will still all eventually be dead. Gallup measures essential organizational health. What can be measured can be managed, and if health can be managed, why not measure it?

The results of the 25 questions posed in the ME 25 survey were a significant factor in determining our strategy in the first years at Saint Benedict Parish. We were committed to this process of analysis, and the results have confirmed our experience. Since that time, we have undergone the ME 25 survey twice more, and the results tell us that our management efforts are paying off. As seen in the table below, our latest results have us still short of full health, but we are getting very close.

ME 25 SURVEY

	FEB 2011	MAY 2012	OCT 2013
Engaged	24%	33%	41%
Unengaged	47%	48%	44%
Actively Disengaged	29%	19%	15%

What about those outcomes, those changes in behaviour? Three years after implementing this engagement-based strategy at Saint Benedict, the number of adults in programs of evangelization and faith formation has tripled. The number of parishioners in ministry has doubled, and our weekly collection has gone from an

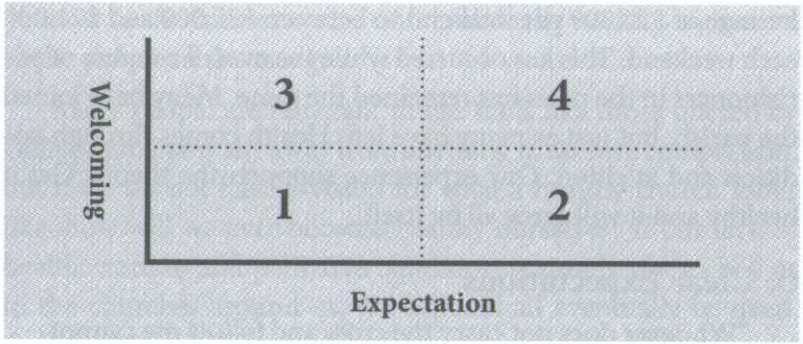
average of $10,000 per weekend to between $20,000 and $21,000 each weekend. This has occurred while the overall number of parishioners in the pews has remained the same. Many have joined the parish, but just as many have left. Health comes through addition and attrition. Our experience supports the theory. Get it healthy and it will grow all by itself.

6. Clear Expectations

> "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:27-28)

Have you ever noticed that most ex-Catholics who have joined another community generally join a church that expects more of them than the one they left behind? This seems counter-intuitive, especially in the face of a secular critique that is continuously telling us that the key to attracting people to the Church is to ask for and expect little. Nevertheless, churches that are healthy and growing are clear about their expectations of members and are not afraid to communicate them. Gallup has affirmed the importance of expectations to organizational health. In the ME 25 survey, the first of the twelve items that directly deal with engagement is to rate one's agreement with the statement "As a member of my parish, I know what is expected of me."

As important as expectations are in any role or organization, well-meaning Catholics start getting nervous when you throw around the "e-word" too much. There is a palpable fear that by communicating in any way that there are expectations to being a member of the parish, we will turn people off. There is a sense that to have clear expectations as a value will clash with the opposing value of hospitality or welcoming. The key is to see them not as opposing values, but as two important values that will have a certain amount of creative tension between them. There are four possible ways that a parish can combine these two values. They are represented below as four quadrants.



The first option is for a parish to have low welcoming and low expectations. Sadly, this does describe the state of affairs in too many of our parishes. The second option, low welcoming with high expectations, would be terrible. I do not believe that this would exist in any church, as it says, "We do not want you, but we will use you." Option three is found in many parishes that are striving to do the welcoming thing correctly: high welcome, but low expectations. This was the situation when I became pastor at Saint Benedict Parish. Welcoming was a declared value, and the parish was doing a better job than most in living it out. There were, however, no expectations being communicated to actual or prospective parishioners (I distinguish here between those seeking to become members of the parish and those who were simply attending the parish). How could these two things possibly co-exist? Well, they can.

High welcome and high expectation is in fact a more respectful way of responding to people, as what we are saying is, "We believe that God will work in you and work through you; we expect it, and you should, too." This is so much better than saying, "You are most welcome here, and, by the way, we don't expect anything from you at all. You don't have to do anything, give anything, heck, you don't even need to show up if you don't want to, but please know that you are welcome to be a member of our parish." This is but one step removed from saying that we have no expectations of new members because we don't expect God to do anything in and

through them. I am fully aware that no welcoming team would ever wish to communicate such things, but is that not what we are saying when we shy away from the subject of expectations?

Jesus

No one has been able to model this interrelationship between welcoming and expectation more than Jesus. He was the epitome of welcome. Just glance through the Gospels. The outcast shepherds at his birth, the lame, the lepers, the sinners, the tax collectors, the rich, the poor – all received the invitation to come to him. He welcomed the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, Samaritans, Romans and Gentiles. Even when children interrupted his break, he told the Twelve to let them come to him. At the same time, this Jesus was clear about what he expected of those who would follow him. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:27) He would go on to exhort the crowds that followed him to "sit down first" and calculate the cost of being his disciple before choosing to do so. He was the one who could look into the eyes of the rich young man with love and issue an invitation saturated in expectation: "go sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor … then come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21-22)

The expectations of Jesus were not limited to the commitment of becoming his disciple. Once that decision was made, he continued to expect more. He said that "from everyone to whom much has been given, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48) Jesus has unreasonable expectations of the fig tree, and curses it for its failure to produce its sweet fruit, even though "it was not the season for figs." (Mark 11:13) Jesus tells us in John's Gospel, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." (John 15:1-2) Not only does the Father expect fruit – he expects even more from those already producing it. Our God is a demanding God who expects much from us.

In the Parable of the Talents in Matthew's Gospel (25:14-30), we hear again about what God expects of us, individually and corporately. The master who goes on a journey gives his slaves his wealth to manage in his absence. The first receives five talents; the second, two talents; and the third, one talent. I used to imagine this parable as the master giving each man a bag of coins. A talent, however, was a unit of weight – 130 lbs., to be precise. It came in silver or gold. The first point of the parable, which we often miss today, is the sheer value of the treasure that he has entrusted to his slaves. Even the man with the one talent (presumably silver) had, in today's value, about $600,000. His boss was not fooling around. The response of the master when he finds out that the man buried it in the ground because of fear, instead of multiplying it, is harsh. He tells the man that at least he could have invested his money in the bank so he could have collected interest. The point seems to be that God does not expect a moderate return on his investment in us, but a kind of spiritual venture capitalism, even if it means taking a risk.

Parish Expectations

Clearly, Jesus embraced the values of welcoming and expectation, and so they must be part of the life of the Church. How we communicate expectations is paramount. At Saint Benedict, we speak of five expectations of parishioners and clergy alike. All are expected to worship, to grow, to serve, to connect and to give. Our expectations brochure is given to all who show an interest in becoming a member of our parish. It introduces the concept of expectation in these words:

> *Saint Benedict Parish is a Catholic Christian community of disciples of the Lord Jesus. We believe that everyone is called to be on a spiritual journey and what matters is not where a person is on that journey, but that they are actually on the journey itself. Therefore, we seek to welcome all people regardless of the stage of their spiritual life, their struggles and failures. We are a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for Saints. We simply ask that you walk with us and be open to what God is calling you to.*
>
> *To be a member of this parish is to enter into relationship with the other members of the parish who are also on this spiritual journey. We do this together. Clear expectations are at the heart of every healthy relationship.*

The brochure then outlines what parishioners can expect from the parish before we speak about what the parish expects of parishioners.

- *Dynamic and uplifting liturgies.*
- *A place where you will experience transformation to become more and more the person God has created you to be.*
- *A place where you will be valued and recognized as having unique gifts and talents for the service of God and others.*
- *A place where you will be given the opportunity to put your God given talents to help others and to make the world a better place.*
- *A place where you will be loved and supported in your spiritual journey regardless of the messiness and struggles of your life.*
- *A place where your needs will be listened to and addressed.*
- *A place where your input is valued.*
- *A place where your financial contributions will be honored and put to work for the building up of the Kingdom of God with transparency and accountability.*

Lastly, we address the five expectations under the heading "What is Expected of you as a Parishioner of Saint Benedict Parish?" These expectations are communicated as follows:

To Worship

We gather to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday (the Lord's Day). We expect all members of the parish to gather for Sunday worship unless they are unable to do so because of illness or travel.

It is when we gather on the Lord's Day to be nourished by Word and Sacrament that we remember who we are and are given food for the journey. In this task we fulfill our call to worship the God who created us and are given the grace we need to continue to love God and one another.

To Grow

To become a follower of Jesus Christ is to be his disciple. Jesus said, "This is the will of my Father, that you should become my disciples" (John 15:8). A disciple literally means "one who is learning." We believe that learning and growing are lifelong tasks. When we cease to learn and grow we cease to be disciples and will experience stagnation in our spiritual lives. We expect every member of Saint Benedict Parish to commit to at least one program of faith formation each year. We need to remember that our commitment to growth helps those around us to fulfill their own commitment. In this way our Church becomes healthy.

To Serve

Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." (Mark 10:45) The essence of the Christian life is to serve God and one another. The Church is not healthy when it forgets this truth. We are called not just to serve individually, but to do so corporately as the Church. This way we give witness that the Church is the hands and feet of Jesus in the world. We also believe that every parishioner, without exception, has something to offer, something they do well and can do for the sake of the Kingdom of God. We expect every parishioner to serve the parish by being involved in at least one ministry each year.

To Connect

The Church is a community of believers and not simply a collection of individuals who gather for one hour a week. Christian community is one in which we are truly accountable to one another and accountable for one another. This task needs to be taken up with due diligence as the size of our parish makes it a real challenge. We expect every parishioner to contribute to the task of building community by seeing themselves as an integral part of the life of this parish and being intentional about reaching out and connecting with others.

To Give

We expect all parishioners to give generously of their financial resources in proportion to what they have received. We give not to just meet a few basic needs or to pay the costs of maintaining the Church building and a few staff. We give out of gratitude to God, and the more the parish receives, the more we can do for the building up of God's Kingdom, the more we can help the poor, the more programs we can run to help others grow. No one is excluded from this. If someone has less, they give less. If someone has more, they give more. This offering, which we make at Sunday Eucharist, is a key part of our worship.

Perhaps these expectations seem lofty, but as the great artist Michelangelo once said, "The greater danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."

Stewardship

The spirituality of stewardship has been of great assistance as we continue to chip away at the overall culture of our parish and to establish clear expectations as a value. Three annual stewardship initiatives allow us to keep the five expectations before our people and give them an invitation and opportunity to make concrete decisions around them. I have been involved in implementing stewardship in every parish I have served in. The traditional categories of time, talent and treasure addressed the basic demands of being a follower of Jesus, but I always struggled with the seeming absence of a commitment to invest in discipleship, specifically as

personal growth and development, as opposed to committing time to serve in ministry according to God-given talents.

Over the years, I had encountered two types of involved parishioners. The first, and most common, were those who constantly served. They served in multiple ministries, would never say no to anything, and just went all the time without ever taking a program that would allow them to receive. All too often, I saw wonderfully kind parishioners like this become burned out and exhausted. In the second, and less common, category were parishioners who would run from one program to another, from one spiritual experience to another, constantly receiving and never giving and serving others. In truth, both options are deadly, although the second may indeed be the deadliest. The Dead Sea is truly dead, because it only has tributaries and no distributaries. It only receives the salt water that evaporates and results in the lethal levels of salt that banish all life. As a pastor, I constantly struggled with how to help my variously inclined parishioners, and myself, find balance in our lives in the parish – to balance serving others with our own need to connect and grow.

In September of 2010, I attended the International Stewardship Conference in San Diego. I had been at Saint Benedict Parish for only four weeks and knew that I had as much of an empty canvas to paint on as I ever would. One afternoon, I wandered into a session that I had not registered for. I sat down. A team from a U.S. parish was presenting on the innovative ways they had adapted the traditional stewardship model to their pastoral reality. They spoke about tweaking the understanding of the traditional three Ts. *Time* was to be understood as a commitment to spiritual growth and discipleship. *Talent* was entirely about serving others. And *Treasure*, of course, was about financial giving. Such a simple distinction! It was a eureka moment for me. I have no idea who the presenters were, or where they were from, but I am very grateful to them to this very day. I returned home eager to share my new insights with our stewardship team.

What followed was a commitment to implement a series of three distinct stewardship initiatives each year. The first, which focused on Time (discipleship), took place in September, at the beginning of the next ministry year. By doing this, we were inviting parishioners to make a commitment to a plan for spiritual growth for the coming year. We were intentional about placing Time before Talent, as we wanted to emphasize the primacy and priority of the spiritual. Our Stewardship of Talent Initiative, focusing on the gifts we have received and the call to share them with others in ministry, took place in early January of the next year, beginning on the Feast of Epiphany, which falls on a Sunday in Canada. Our Treasure Initiative, focusing on financial giving, would take place around May, and has done ever since, depending on the liturgical calendar.

Typical Stewardship Initiative

Week 1: Letter from the pastor to all families

Week 2: Homily on the theme and overview of the initiative

Week 3: Short homily, lay witness and Stewardship Book distributed

Week 4: Short homily, lay witness and Ministry Fair

Week 5: Homily on theme and Commitment Cards brought to the altar

The Stewardship of Treasure booklet was an opportunity to bring together all the typical financial reports presented in a parish in a given year: a year-end report for the previous year, the budget for the present year, and a first-quarter report. This booklet breaks down the information into relevant and interesting facts (the cost of snow removal, toilet paper, etc.). It includes information on legacy giving, on automatic withdrawal, on second collections for the poor, and on the children sponsored by the offerings of the children of our parish on Sunday mornings. It provides a careful

breakdown of the average weekly cost of operations. It includes testimonies of changed lives under the heading "The Fruit of our Giving," as well as testimonies of parishioners who had committed to intentional, sacrificial and proportional giving. In this way, we reminded our people that the end result of financial giving, in and to the Church, was changed lives and a transformed world. Yes – we did this for all three aspects of giving, even financial giving, and I lived to tell the tale.

All of these efforts have been an immense amount of work, but they have been well worth it, as we are beginning to see the culture of our parish change. When the Stewardship Team committed to take on this enormous task, we knew from the experience of other parishes that the payload is not usually struck until about the seven-year mark. We knew this when we signed up, and we struggle to keep this before us. We need to be clear that these initiatives are not about data collection, name gathering, financial forecasting or even recruitment. These exercises are an attempt to change the very perception of what is normal in our parish. Everything else is a bonus.

We want all parishioners to see that it is completely normal to commit to spiritual growth, for everyone to serve according to their gifts, and to give a sacrificial and proportional share of household income to the Church. Now into our fourth year of initiatives, we are at about a 40% participation rate. These numbers closely parallel the numbers we have received back from the Gallup ME 25 survey. Parishes that have been down this road testify that it can take five to seven years before a parish will climb beyond the 50% range, and most will plateau in the high 50s or low 60s. This, again, is consistent with the findings of Gallup's measurement of engaged parishioners.

Something for Everyone

There have been many challenges throughout these past years. The first was to create sufficient opportunities for spiritual growth to speak to the diversity of our parishioners, who are of

different ages, spiritualities, commitment levels and availability. Opportunities to participate in faith formation activities morning, noon and evening, seven days a week, became our goal. We even presented opportunities such as the Parish Book Club Without the Club, for the really busy person. The various initiatives were so successful that our building quickly became congested, to the point that we were tripping over one another. The resultant stress on the parish infrastructure and staff was not properly anticipated. Now that we have begun to grow a culture of discipleship in the parish, we are moving away from this approach and seeking to streamline our offerings.

When it came to the Talent Initiative, we had to seek to broaden people's understanding of what a talent was, and that there were more ways to serve God than to show up at a committee meeting or sign up for a liturgical ministry. We even created a ministry for the homebound and bedridden called the Blessed Therese Neumann Society. Homebound parishioners would sign up and offer their prayers and unavoidable suffering to God as a form of intercession for the renewal of the parish. In return, a monthly newsletter keeps them informed of what is going on and highlights specific intentions for them to pray for. Other elderly parishioners could commit to pray at home for the parish, or join the parish prayer chain, as a form of service, and the Eucharistic Adoration Ministry took on a new sense of purpose as its primary identity became a ministry to serve others by interceding for them.

The Treasure Initiative was an adventure unto itself. The issue of giving is a very difficult one for us as Catholics, because it is addressed so little, at least in comparison to other Christian churches. The first year we did this initiative, many parishioners thought we were out of our minds. I received no shortage of anonymous phone messages and letters. Some were deeply offended that the subject of giving would be addressed for three or four weeks in a row. Others wrote directly on their Commitment Card that what they would give to the Church was none of our business. I made the case that if public television can ask this of their members,

why can't we? If the local children's hospital can ask supporters to pledge a financial gift so that its mission can be achieved, why can't the Church ask the same of her supporters for the mission of Jesus Christ? The second time around was slightly less painful, and the third rendered virtually no kickback. I am confident that in another 50 years it will seem entirely normal!

All of this is a work in progress. Each year, we are realizing that there are ways to improve on reaching our goal of facilitating the cultural change of our parish. The distinction between Time and Talent is still difficult for many of our parishioners to grasp, and even some ministry leaders struggle with it. The leaders of a service ministry will often tell us that their team members always pray together before they do what they do, or that they are the ones who receive whenever they serve. Our response is to remind them that this is exactly how it should be. We must always pray before we act, and "it is in giving that we receive." The question, however, is about the fundamental purpose of a particular ministry. Is it a service ministry or a formation ministry? Does it exist to serve others, or does it exist to build up and feed parishioners? Am I there to give or to receive? Am I investing in others, or investing in myself? It does get a bit confusing, but we are figuring it out, and there is a growing and healthy sense of what is expected of a member of Saint Benedict Parish.

7. Strength-based Ministry

> Whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 4:11)

It was my very first parish council meeting of my very first parish as a newly appointed pastor. We began the meeting with "a quick prayer" and passed out the minutes from the previous meeting, which had taken place under my predecessor. I glanced at the top of the page and saw the names of those in attendance. Beside each name was the number of years and months of "time" left to serve on council. I almost chewed a hole in my cheek to

stop myself from laughing, thinking that this was at least an honest depiction of how the average member of a parish council felt. I had been to a few meetings in my day and "putting in time" was exactly how it felt.

Most of the people around that table had been victims of the "warm body" approach to ministry that begins with the need rather than the person. The problem with this "anyone will do" approach is that parishioners end up in ministries that are suited to neither their strengths nor their passions, but "do their bit" out of a sense of duty or even guilt. As a result, many in such ill-matched ministries experience little fulfillment and much frustration. The ministry they serve in also receives little benefit. The experience is life giving neither for the one who serves nor for those being served. The tragedy of this is that most parishioners will never know the joy of being set free in a ministry that takes full advantage of their strengths, talents and passions.

People First

The greatest joy in the world is to know, to experience, being used by the Lord to make a difference in someone's life or in the world. Everyone wins. The one who serves wins, the one served wins, and there is even a win for the Kingdom of God. When I arrived at Saint Benedict Parish and beheld the empty canvas, I wondered what it would be like to attempt to reshape this aspect of parish culture, to begin not with a list of job vacancies or needs, but with people, with their strengths and their passions. What would it be like to not just plug holes, but to sit down first with parishioners and say, "Tell me your story. What are you passionate about? What do you love doing, and what do you consistently do well?"

I knew from my own ministry that while sitting in certain types of meetings was definitely being counted as time off from purgatory, other tasks energized and enthralled me. What if parishioners could be called forth and empowered to step into just such an experience of ministry? My first new staffing initiative, therefore, was to hire a young woman who would take on this task

full-time. To my mind, with at least 2,500 regular parishioners, our parish was a huge, unharvested field of trees laden down with fruit. A full-time staff member would barely put a dent in this, but it was a good place to start.

Strengths Finder

The Gallup organization tells us that there are twelve main contributors to organizational health. These are essentially the same whether we are speaking of a workplace or a church. Of these twelve, Gallup says that having the opportunity to do what we do best is the leading contributor to engagement. Remember, engagement is what drives spiritual commitment, which in turn drives changed beliefs and changed behaviour. Gallup employs a tool known as the Clifton Strengths Finder, which is widely used in work environments and organizations all over the world. In recent years, they have developed a Christian version of Strengths Finder called *Living Your Strengths*, and even a specifically Catholic edition.

The basic philosophy is that every person is uniquely made and gifted by God (the Gallup family were and are a devout Christian family, and so was Don Clifton, who developed this tool). They reject a popular theory today that claims that anyone can do anything if they put their mind to it. We all know this from experience. Mozart was a prodigy who was playing the keyboard with great skill by the age of three. I could dedicate the rest of my life to learning to play the piano, I could hire the best teachers and, if I work really hard, I might achieve some level of mediocrity. Although equal in dignity before God, we are all uniquely made, and we fulfill God's plan for our lives when we discover our own uniqueness. It is to our advantage to stop trying to be someone else, and allow God to use us through our own strengths and innate talents.

The traditional mindset, of course, is to identify weakness rather than strength and focus on improving that weakness. Strengths Finder philosophy says: find your God-given talents

and invest in them. When we invest in talent by practising and growing in knowledge and understanding, our talent will become a strength – something we consistently and naturally do well. Add to this natural, God-given ability the power and grace of God, and stand back and watch what happens!

Don Clifton identified over 300 unique abilities or talents across the human spectrum, rooted in how people were hard-wired. Whether this is environmental or genetic is not relevant. These talents reflect how we are and the way we generally do things. We are not bound to follow these paths of least resistance, for the human person is never static, but they do reflect a dominant disposition in the personality of every person. Clifton grouped these talents into 34 "themes of talents" and created a survey to help users identify their top five "signature themes." With uncanny accuracy, these themes help a person identify what they may already know; the faith-based Strengths theory invites each person to lean into these talents, to develop them into strengths and to allow God to use them for his glory and the building up of the Kingdom.

Many parishes in North America, including our own, have found this tool to be of great help in fostering strengths-based ministry as a real value. Online Catholic Strengths communities exist, allowing parishes that use this tool to interact and learn from one another. Since introducing this tool to our parish, our staff member who was my first hire, and is now called our Parish Director of Engagement, has been trained to facilitate workshops to help parishioners identify and learn more about their top five themes.

We feature parishioners who have taken Strengths Finder in our weekly parish newsletter, outlining their top five themes of talents and how they use these talents in their ministry. We invite every parishioner to discover their God-given uniqueness so they can truly experience the joy of being used fully by God. We have used this tool to help our staff team and ministry teams

work better together, as all 34 themes of talent fall within four broad domains: influencing, executing, relationship building and strategic thinking. The proper mix of talents in any team is necessary for it to function well. It has been an amazing tool for us at Saint Benedict – we use it to help build balanced leadership and ministry teams, even using it as a part of our marriage preparation program… but more about that in Chapter 6.

Some may object and point out that Scripture reminds us that God is more likely to use our weaknesses than our strengths. The fact that our weaknesses generally tend to be the underside of our strengths does not escape the authors of *Living Your Strengths*. The book highlights the negative aspects of each talent and offers Scripture passages and prayer points to consider. If used in a prayerful way, these traits that are called talents can be experienced as the redemption of our weakness.

In the end, this tool drives home that we are "wonderfully and uniquely made." (Psalm 139:14) It's all in the math. The chances of any two people having the same top five themes are 278,256:1. The chances of having the same top five themes in the same order are 33,390,720:1. Unbelievably, the chance of having all 34 themes in exactly the same order is an astronomical 295,232, 799,039,604,140,847,618,609,643,520,000,000:1. Literally, there never has been, nor ever will be, in the history of the world, someone quite like you. The God who has made us for himself wishes to work wonderfully through our strengths and passions. That is something to value. Once we truly value it, it will transform the Church and the world.

8. Formation of Small Communities

> When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles. (Luke 6:13)

Universally, churches that are healthy, growing and making disciples embrace a model of the local church as a "community of communities." These smaller communities gather together as one

community for Sunday Eucharist. Many distinguish between small groups of eight to twelve people and mid-size groups containing 25 to 35 people. For healthy churches, involvement in a small or mid-size group is not considered optional, but is an integral part of the life of that local church. Imagine bringing Catholic parishes to a place where this kind of community is found!

We have already examined how post-moderns experience conversion and transformation primarily through their experience of belonging. That it is not easy for us as Catholics to reach the unchurched and the fallen away through creating experiences of belonging is no surprise. This creates a challenge for those who have been brought to a personal life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, whether they were a part of the Church or outside of her. At the point of conversion or awakening, they became aware of their need for meaningful community, a place where they will be known, loved, challenged and supported. This community must be a safe place within which the good work that has begun in them can be brought to completion. (Philippians 1:6) These kinds of relationships are key to a healthy Church. Six of Gallup's twelve ME 25 statements, which measure engagement, speak of this experience of community:

- In the last month, I have received recognition or praise from someone in my parish.
- The spiritual leaders in my parish seem to care about me as a person.
- There is someone in my parish who encourages my spiritual development.
- The other members of my parish are committed to spiritual growth.
- Aside from family members, I have a best friend in my parish.
- In the last six months, someone in my parish has talked to me about the progress of my spiritual growth.

How can an experience like this be possible in an average Catholic parish? Traditionally, it was the parish priest who would give people praise and recognition, care about parishioners and encourage and ask about spiritual growth. This may still work in a small parish where there is a very small priest-to-people ratio, but this is not the case in most parishes today. The bigger a parish is, the smaller it must become. Providing opportunities to experience authentic community must be a priority.

Clerical Culture

The culture that dominates most parishes presents a challenge in making this a reality. Many Catholics place value only on ministry done by the priest, and consider themselves to have meaningful connection with the parish only if they have a strong personal connection to the pastor. If the priest is unable to be at all the gatherings of a committee, team or group, at least he should drop in once in a while. The problem is that if we remain bound to this value, then the number of meaningful communities in a parish will always be limited. This would work in a small parish, but only in a parish that was not healthy. A small parish, if healthy, will grow. If it grows and continues to grow, sooner or later it will be large, and the model will have to change. In a large parish, healthy or unhealthy, this model is already profoundly limiting.

This is a question that haunts me at night when I am trying to sleep. For me, it is not an abstract question, but one that has faces and names attached to it. Sometimes I will think of someone I have not seen in a while, and think, "What happened to her? Where is he? Who is looking out for that person?" It is just so easy for our people to get lost in the crowd and to fall through the cracks, even those who have had authentic experiences of the Lord. I think of the many participants who have come through RCIA in my different parishes, and of the high number of newly baptized and confirmed who have gone AWOL. We bring people to the Sacraments of Initiation through a small- or mid-size group experience. It is transformative and supportive. Participants experience exactly the

kind of community reflected in the statements used in the Gallup ME 25 survey, but then the Easter Vigil happens.

The culmination of a lengthy process results in most participants being released into the general population with a slap on the back, a "welcome to full membership in the Church" and a "good luck." Is it any wonder that we have huge casualty rates? The solution is staring us in the face. The very process that brings candidates to faith and to the sacraments is the process that is essential to nourishing the ongoing life of the Church. Meaningful community cannot be part of a program – it must become a normative part of the life of the Church, and the life of the Church must become the program.

"But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9)

I am also haunted by the question of how the people of my parish can be sufficiently cared for. With so many tasks and responsibilities, with so many staff to lead and guide so that some meaningful degree of ministry can happen in proportion to the number of people in the parish, how can I ensure that parishioners are cared for? I spoke in Chapter 4 about the need to expand our working definition of pastoral care to include bringing our people to maturity. If we wish to move beyond the therapeutic model of pastoral care that dominates most parishes, we will need not only alternate structures, but alternate values.

If a parish priest with just 2,000 families in his parish were to spend ten hours a week visiting families for one hour each, it would take about four years before he could return to continue the conversation. This kind of situation is an unacceptable standard of care. In reality, short of a major catastrophe hitting a family, in most parishes the priest is unable to appear at the door of his parishioners. Caring therefore needs to become the job of all, not just of the pastor. Only then will a Church become healthy. Only then will parish priests be freed from an impossible burden and be able to see it happen. A kind of surrender needs to take place for this to happen, and it is a painful one.

I have struggled so much with feeling like a "bad priest." Often on weekends, by the end of the third weekend Mass, I have seen 1,700 people in church and have greeted hundreds, and still have one more Mass. Dozens of parishioners will ask for prayers for loved ones, and many, on their way out, will say things like, "I know you're busy, Father, but just in case, my husband is in the hospital, on the 7th floor, Room 46." Parishioners give me updates on their health, and their loved one's health, and often communicate out of a presumption that I know exactly who they are and remember every detail of what they told me three weeks ago. Listening and responding is part of my job as a Father of the parish, but how can I *respond* to all of it? By 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, I feel like my brains are oozing out of my ears, and the people keep coming and coming and coming. A very real part of me wants to cry out and say, "Stop! Please stop! I cannot carry this burden. I cannot bear the burden of fearing that a moment's inattention or fatigue may hurt even one fragile person." Too often, I feel that I have been sucked dry, with nothing else to give. One day, after a weekday Mass, I came home and wrote this in my journal:

> *From the back of the church today to the vestry, grabbed a dozen times to hear about nephews' dying dogs and brothers with cancer, illness, sickness. People need to be heard, but is it my role to do so? I didn't become a priest to comfort little old ladies, but to lead people into mission to win the world for Jesus, so that every little old lady can have someone to comfort her in the name of Jesus.*

I hope I don't offend anyone by these words, which were written in anguish. It is not my intent. The truth is that if we are to become a Church where everyone is cared for as they should be, we must acknowledge that this is not the job of the priest. Priests must have the courage to communicate this to their people, and the people must have the courage to communicate this to their priests. It is my conviction that the formation of small and mid-size groups can provide the answer to this dilemma. The good news is that there are many examples of how such a system in a

church can operate, even if these examples are not always found in a Catholic context.

Connect Groups

At Saint Benedict Parish, we are trying to implement a system of mid-size groups called connect groups. The model we use comes from Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), the Anglican Church in London that created Alpha. When Alpha is done right, usually at least 50% of the participants desire to continue in some experience of community. HTB originally attempted to meet this need for community by establishing a network of small groups. Alpha small groups would become church small groups. Over the years, however, they found that small groups would ultimately get smaller and smaller. People would move away or fall away, and the intense and intimate nature of a small group makes it impenetrable to new members that allow it to be repopulated and to continue. Furthermore, when a small group was not working for a new believer, they would often be so embarrassed and self-conscious about dropping out of the group that they would drop out of the church as well.

The solution was to create broader mid-size groups of 25 to 35 people that were both small enough and big enough. They were small enough for people to be known, cared for, loved and called forth. They were big enough for people to sit at the back and not be put under the kind of pressure that might exist in a group of eight. They would be big enough to admit new members and grow. This model, used by HTB and many other churches, allows the movement of parishioners and non-churchgoers from the experience of Alpha into an ongoing community where they will continue their faith development, and, most importantly, not be lost and not fall through the cracks.

These connect groups are led by lay people. Groups meet twice a month in the homes of church members. Each evening consists of a shared meal, a time of singing and praying, a talk by a member and a time of praying for and with one another. The group does

not gather as students around a few teachers; instead, all members take a turn to present on a topic or to share their testimony. For many, it is a safe place to give their first talk or to lead prayer for the first time. In this way, members are encouraged, equipped and called forth to exercise their gifts.

The members of the leadership at HTB meet regularly with the lay leaders of the groups and invest primarily in them, equipping them to lead each group so that everybody receives the care they need. HTB has a weekly attendance of over 5,000 people (the average age is 27 years), and has hundreds of connect groups up and running in the homes of their parishioners. In the HTB model, connect groups are also the locus of missional outreach – either evangelistic outreach or work with the poor and marginalized. On the weeks when the connect group does not meet, members meet in small groups that have a specifically catechetical focus, as opposed to the caring and calling forth focus of the connect groups.

At Saint Benedict Parish, we introduced connect groups shortly after our second season of Alpha. After we had finished our first courses, many people had come to faith in Christ for the first time, many had come into personal relationship with Jesus for the first time, and many had had an experience of the Holy Spirit for the first time. But no matter where people had been spiritually before they took the course, those whose lives were touched all experienced a new form of Christian community, and once they tasted it, they wanted more. I had tried to introduce connect groups at my previous parish, but it had not been successful. This time I was determined to make it happen. We have made our share of mistakes, and are still far from getting it right, but less than four years later we now have over 300 parishioners in ten different connect groups.

We started with four connect groups and slowly added to them as we brought more people through an experience of Alpha. This is the one thing we do differently from my previous attempt in my former parish. We ask that all who seek to belong to a connect

group go through the experience of Alpha first. This is the only way that members can have a frame of reference for the degree of support and connection that we seek to establish. It was not and is not the only option for people who come through Alpha at Saint Benedict. We encourage the continuation of catechetical formation through a wide variety of adult faith formation programs. These programs, however, are terminal. The groups disband. Parishioners often move from one program to another, but are still left without an essential caring community at the end of the day. It is obvious that we need to care for people by providing temporary community-based faith formation and permanent groups where people truly belong and are cared for.

Once one of our connect groups grew beyond 35 people, our task was to identify, call forth and equip new leaders and split the group into two. Some of the current ten groups are based on age, some are mixed generations, and some are "family friendly," with children and parents gathering together. The best thing about this is that it all happens in the homes of parishioners. People often ask us how we fit everyone in, and the truth is that it is organized chaos, but a load of fun. It is no different than having a party at your house. People do it all the time.

The beauty of the model is that it works. I do not have to be there. Over the last three years, I have visited only two connect groups, but every week I meet parishioners I do not know who tell me they are in a connect group and last week gave their first talk. I love it when I have no clue about what God is doing in my parish. This is the way it should be! How can I even pretend to control the working of the Holy Spirit in a parish of this size? The Spirit blows where he wills, and the job of the pastor is to get out of the way.

At the same time, however, there is a line of accountability to me as the pastor. There has to be. Several of our parish staff meet regularly with the connect group leaders (each group is led by two couples) to coach them and care for them. They report

to our parish Director of Evangelization who, in turn, reports to me. All names for potential connect group leaders are vetted by me. Is there a risk that something may happen that may not be totally right? Of course there is, but this is infinitely more desirable than nothing happening at all. As I once heard Pastor Rick Warren say, "Leaders of a Church will either be risk takers, care takers or undertakers." There is always risk in giving up control. It may not be done properly, or, the more common fear, it may not be done as "properly" as I would do it!

But low control is a necessity if the act of caring for one another will become an embodied value and not just be the task of a few ministering to a few more. It is necessary, but it is not enough. The counterpoint is high accountability. (I will be saying more about this principle in Chapter 7, when I speak about leadership.) With regard to connect groups, however, the key is to choose the right people to lead, to trust them with real responsibility, to set them up for success and to constantly be in communication with them. I am amazed and thrilled to see that more than 15% of my parishioners are well protected from falling through the cracks. Our goal is that by 2018, five years after we started, 75% of our parishioners will belong in a connect group, and that such an experience of community will be so normal that no one will think twice about it.

9. Experience of the Holy Spirit

> "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Growing up in Glasgow (my family moved to Canada when I was thirteen), I was vaguely aware that there was another major city in Scotland called Edinburgh. There is a healthy rivalry between these two cities that could lead you to hear on the streets of Glasgow that the best thing to come out of Edinburgh is the last train to Glasgow. I visited Edinburgh for the first time when I returned to Scotland after my first year of university. I spent three

days in Scotland's beautiful capital city and even visited its world-famous zoo. There is a well-known story about the Edinburgh zoo that I would like to share.

A number of years ago, the main attraction at the zoo, a gorilla, died a week before the season opening. The management was in a panic, as gorillas were not exactly easy to find in Scotland. Well, at least not in Edinburgh. There happened to be a Glasgow man applying that day for a job at the zoo; the management hired him and talked him into donning a gorilla costume for a few weeks until they could find a new gorilla. The man, being desperate for work, took the offer and was surprisingly convincing in his role of aping the huge primate. As the days wore on, boredom allowed him the opportunity to become particularly adept at swinging on the bars in his cage. This helped him to pass the time and earned him a rather enthusiastic crowd of spectators. One day, he decided to go for the "triple swing" on the bars. He took a run at the bars, grabbed them and went round once, twice, but as he turned into his third rotation he lost his grip and shot through the air. He flew over the fence and landed with a thud in the neighbouring compound, only to realize, to his horror, that he had landed in the lion's cage. He panicked when he saw the lion slowly rise to its feet and begin to pad towards him. At this point he lost all composure and began to scream, "Help! Help! I'm not a gorilla, I'm a man!" The hair on the back of his neck rose as he felt the hot breath of the lion. Then he heard a voice. The voice said, "Shut up, you fool, or we'll both lose our jobs!"

This joke, which I never tire of telling, does ask a rather profound question. Is authenticity related to what is on the outside or what is on the inside? In the realm of faith, are we authentic Christians because of what is on the outside or what is on the inside? Surely, if faith is real and healthy, the answer is both. Faith that is interiorly authentic will also be visible on the outside, but we also know that it is possible for faith to be on the outside only, with no corresponding reality within. This is the age-old dilemma

and danger for the Christian faith, stretching back to the time of Jesus himself.

Three Mysteries

In my first days of formal theological studies, a professor told us that all of Christian theology could be contained in three great mysteries: the mystery of God, the mystery of God with us, and the mystery of God in us. The first is the study of who God is, that God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the mystery of the Trinity. The second mystery is the Incarnation, God with us, that "the Word became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14) The third mystery has to do with the theology of grace and living the Christian life. This mystery is God in us, and is founded on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said many things that would have shocked his disciples. He changed the meaning of an ancient memorial to be about himself, he washed the feet of the disciples, he told them he was leaving them, and shocked them even more by saying that it would be better for them if he left than if he remained. (John 16:7) This seems counterintuitive. I am sure many of us have often dreamed about what it would be like to go back in time and hang out with Jesus, or about if he returned and we could have him with us in the same way as the disciples did. What an exciting experience! Upon further reflection, however, we may quickly realize that this would not be as wonderful as we would think. During his time on earth, Jesus was limited in time and space. The mystery of God "with us" meant that Jesus "emptied himself" (Philippians 2:7) and embraced finitude. Trying to see or be with Jesus would have been much more difficult than trying to see or be with the pope. The best we could do would be to see him at a distance.

Jesus said that it was better for him to go, because then the Advocate, the Comforter or Paraclete, would come. This comforter (*parakletos*) is the Holy Spirit, who will abide with us and be "in" us (John 14:17), bringing about the mystery of God in us.

As great as "God with us" through Jesus would be, how much more profound would our lives be with "God in us" through the Holy Spirit? Jesus confirmed this when he said, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) These heretical-sounding words remind us that the very same power that was at work in Jesus when he preached, healed and performed miracles is given to those who believe in him. It is a great mystery, but in his humanity, Jesus "emptied himself" of his "equality with God" while existing the whole time in the "form of God."

We gain this insight from one of the earliest liturgical texts on the infant Church, found in Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:6-11). The Council of Chalcedon, one of the great Christological councils, taught that in the union of the divine and human natures of Jesus, his divine intellect and will and his human intellect and will were unmixed. This means that all of his miracles were done through the power of the Holy Spirit working through his human nature – the same Holy Spirit that he breathed upon his disciples and desires to breathe upon us. This is why Jesus can assert that those who believe in him will do the same works as he, and even greater ones. Indeed, it is to our advantage that God be in us rather than with us.

The Promise of the Father

The key phrase in these Johannine dialogues is "*when* the Advocate comes." (John 15:26) Everything waits on the coming of the promised Holy Spirit. The New Testament does not speak in one voice when it comes to the Spirit of God, nor is there anything that could remotely be construed as a systematic Pneumatology (study of the Holy Spirit), but the New Testament authors are clear about two things: promise and fulfillment. In Luke–Acts, the great two-volume work written by Saint Luke, there is, from the opening, a clear sense that the Holy Spirit is at work. John the Baptist is proclaimed to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" even before

his birth. (Luke 1:15) The Angel Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of the Most High will "overshadow" her. (Luke 1:35) Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary visits (Luke 1:41), Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:67), and the Holy Spirit rests upon the prophet Simeon and reveals to him that he will behold the Lord's Anointed. In spite of the activity of the Spirit before and throughout the ministry of Jesus, there is still a sense that the promise of God has not been fulfilled and an expectation that it will come soon. After the Resurrection, Jesus tells them, "I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49)

Volume two of Luke's great opus opens with the Holy Spirit being spoken of twice in the preface, and once the narrative of the Lord's Ascension is taken up, there is an immediate return to the promise of God: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) The fulfillment of the promise is imminent. The clouds burst on the day of Pentecost and those cowering men are transformed by a new Power that will lead to the Gospel being proclaimed to the ends of the earth. The theology of the infant Church develops around this experience of God's power. It is enunciated in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and is entirely about the fulfillment of a long-awaited promise. Peter proclaims to the assembled crowds that what they see is not a drunken spectacle, but the very thing that God has promised. Peter begins by quoting the prophet Joel, that God's promise is to pour out His Spirit "on all flesh":

> … your sons and daughters shall prophesy,
> your old men shall dream dreams,
> and your young men shall see visions,
> Even upon the male and female slaves,
> in those days I will pour out my Spirit.
> (Joel 2:28-29; see also Acts 2:17-18)

Prior to this, in Israel's tradition, the Spirit of the Lord was given to particular people at particular times for particular purposes. A specific judge, king or prophet would be so anointed. At the same time as this limited action of God's Spirit was described, there was in the Old Testament a mounting sense that God would do a new thing. God would put a new spirit in us that would transform hearts of stone into hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26), and there was the clear prophecy in the prophet Joel that the spirit of God would be poured out on all people, regardless of sex, age or status. Peter puts his finger on this tradition, standing before the gathered nations (all people) and proclaims that what they "both see and hear" is the fulfillment of this promise. Peter calls the crowds to repentance and baptism. He promises them that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, "For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." (Acts 2:39)

A Spirit of Power

What follows throughout the Acts of the Apostles is the constant proclamation of Christ, his death and resurrection accompanied with the power of the Holy Spirit. To repent and believe would lead to baptism and to the experience of being filled by the Holy Spirit – which is as tangible as going down into the waters of baptism. This encounter with the Holy Spirit is not abstract, but is truly an experience of God's power (*dunamis*), which transforms the community of believers and the individual believer. It is this same experience of power that Saint Paul speaks of over and over again as giving credibility to his Gospel.

> My speech and my proclamation [*kerygma*] were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:4-5)

> For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel

> [*euangelion*] came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

In the early Church, then, proclamation was always accompanied by demonstrations of power through the Holy Spirit. To respond to this Gospel was to receive the proclamation and be filled with this Spirit of Power, which is God in us. This experience of the Holy Spirit was fundamental to the growth of the early Church, and is essential for the Christian life today, especially in the call to the New Evangelization. It is no surprise, then, that churches that are healthy and growing facilitate and encourage their members not just to believe in the Holy Spirit, or to receive the Spirit of God sacramentally, but to truly experience the Spirit of power in their lives. The first wave of evangelization came from a realization of the fulfillment of "the promise" on the day of Pentecost, a realization that was more than conceptual – it was experiential and transformative. So, too, then will the New Evangelization be fulfilled only by a new Pentecost.

In spite of the centrality of the experience of the Holy Spirit in the early Church – and in just about any renewal movement in the history of the Church – today, amidst the calls for renewal, rebirth and re-evangelization, we continue to be more comfortable with the idea of the Holy Spirit rather than the experience of the Spirit who comes in power. In chapter 19 of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear the story of Saint Paul's visit to Ephesus, where he encounters "some disciples." The experience of "receiving" the Holy Spirit is so essential to believing that this is the first question Paul asks. They respond, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Further enquiry reveals that they were baptized by John's baptism only. They are given Christian baptism, have hands laid upon them, and "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied." (Acts 19:6)

Trinitarian, Binitarian or Unitarian?

As strange as this encounter may seem to us, it often reflects the lived reality of so many believing Christians. They may have

heard that there is a Holy Spirit, but have virtually no experience of the Holy Spirit and no relationship with the Spirit of Power. Theologically, we are Trinitarian, but too often, in practical terms, we are binitarian, or even unitarian. Some Christians have yet to unpack what the mystery of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit means. God is no impersonal force or energy. God is not even just a personal God, but a tri-personal God who yearns to be in relationship with us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These are not mere modes of being, but three distinct personal relationships. Even those who have had a personal encounter with Jesus that has brought them into relationship with the Father as Father may struggle with being in relationship with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the way to the Father, the face of God, the icon of the invisible God. (Colossians 1:15) He is the very enfleshment of God, the Sacrament of God, and so is the perfect mediator. What has been seen and touched can be encountered. He brings us to the Father, and our own relationship with our earthly fathers offer us a framework from which to begin to conceive a relationship with the God "from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name." (Ephesians 3:15) But how do we begin to form a relationship with the Holy Spirit, especially if there has been no tangible experience of the Holy Spirit in our lives?

If the third person of the Trinity has been reduced to a concept, or some abstract thing that we receive at confirmation, with no corresponding experience beyond sacramental gestures, how can we speak of truly knowing the Holy Spirit? It has not helped that it was only recently that the Holy Spirit received a name change. I remember as a child hearing about the Holy Ghost, and struggling to understand. Ghosts were something to be scared of. I had a childish image of Casper the friendly ghost with a halo over his head. I also remember struggling with the word "paraclete." I had heard of a parakeet and, knowing that the Holy Ghost was symbolized by a bird, I concluded that the avian metaphor had been extended. This may sound silly, but I suspect that many people of faith similarly struggle to make sense of this Person of

the Godhead. We have a theology that tells us we "have" the Holy Spirit and continue to receive the Holy Spirit, but in a manner that does not in any way translate into a life-altering experience of power. Indeed, this mystery of God-in-us is highly misunderstood in the Church today and remains undiscovered by many believers.

Experiencing the Holy Spirit

When Saint Peter went to speak at the house of Cornelius the Centurion in Acts chapter 10, we witness another stage in the fulfillment of the promise of God. Not only will the Spirit of Power be poured out on young and old, male and female, slave and free, but even upon the Gentiles.

> While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. (Acts 10:44-46)

Three things happened in this episode. The listeners had an experience of the Holy Spirit, which was visible to those who accompanied Peter; they prayed using the gift of tongues; and they were praising God. This narrative has a familiar ring to it, as it occurs again and again throughout the Acts of the Apostles. It drives home the point that faith in Christ, along with baptism, includes a transformative experience of the Holy Spirit. This experience of having God's love poured into our hearts is moving, it is emotional, and it provokes an enthusiastic response. (Romans 5:5)

This experience of the power of God through the Holy Spirit is foreign to many believing Christians throughout the world. This may be, in part, due to an underdeveloped study of the Holy Spirit in our theological tradition, but is far more likely a cultural intrusion upon historical, biblical Christian spirituality. Anyone who has travelled to Africa or the Caribbean will notice that the fear of emotive spirituality is not a Catholic issue per se, but a Western European Catholic issue that has been affected by post-

Enlightenment culture – in particular, idealism. To dwell in the realm of ideas is far safer and less threatening than to encounter the reality of the idea. This cultural trait seeks pastoral justification in asserting that we must be on guard against emotionalism of any kind. But in the great spectrum of human religious experience, emotionalism generally is not the danger of the North American or European Catholic Church. Compared to our brothers and sisters in the faith who dwell in the southern hemisphere, we are emotionally constipated when it comes to expressing our faith. We draw back in horror, fear or suspicion at anything that appears to be enthusiasm, and quickly label it as "charismatic."

Leaving aside the question of the charisms, which the New Testament takes for granted, the "charismatic" label is often imposed upon any expression of spirituality that touches the affect or emotions. In spite of ancient biblical instructions to raise hands, sing, clap and shout for joy, many of our churches would empty out if this injunction were to be followed. Such expressions of faith too often suffer a quiet intolerance, as people quickly get the message that such behaviours are not welcome in this place.

Enthusiasm

If there was consistency in our culture around the issue of the affect, at least our stoic spirituality would make some kind of sense, but there is not. When we go to the cinema or the theatre, we regard the movie or production to have been a great success if we were moved emotionally. When we go to sporting events, we consider it natural to enter into an almost religious state of emotional rapture. Because I grew up in Scotland, I know what it is like to experience 60,000 men getting intensely emotional at a soccer match. I once went to a Sarah Brightman concert and was fascinated by the reaction of the crowd, and of how no one seemed to mind. People were waving to her, calling out her name, telling her that they loved her at the top of their voices. They cheered and clapped enthusiastically, and no one moved to another seat because they felt uncomfortable with all the emotionalism. Being

emotional is a normal and healthy part of what it means to be human, and yet this essential dimension of our spiritual lives is checked at the doors of most churches as we go into pew mode. In church, such displays of emotion leave us fearful, disoriented and threatened. Yet, who is more worthy of our tears and cheers? Who is more deserving of our spontaneous praise and demonstrations of love and devotion than the Lord who has created and redeemed us?

Enthusiasm is the literal response to the presence of the Holy Spirit who is God "in us," as to be enthusiastic is to be *en theo,* "in God." With the Spirit of God in us, the love of God poured into our hearts and God's Spirit speaking to our spirit (Romans 8:16), we cry out, "Abba! Father!' (Galatians 4:6) In this cry we realize, with every part of our being, that we have been adopted by God into the very mystical dance of the Trinity, so that God is truly in us and we are truly in God. The heart, and not just the mind, must be touched.

In order, then, to allow our people to experience the Holy Spirit, we must name and identify this crippling fear of emotional religious experience that isolates those who do not have the cultural church baggage we have. This includes most of the unchurched, whom we are called to reach with the Gospel. In contrast to the dominant Western Catholic culture, post-moderns not only do not fear emotional religious experiences, they welcome them. Just take a look at the "spirituality" section of any bookstore to see that this culture of ours is ready to embrace the most incredible creed, providing there is a corresponding experience to validate it.

A healthy Church is one that does not discredit or exclude experiences of the Holy Spirit that touch the affect. Rather, it encourages such experiences and values authentic diversity of expression, not a pseudo-tolerance that unconsciously demands uniformity of expression. It has a robust respect for how the Spirit of Power is manifested within the community of believers and seeks to evaluate every experience according to the fruits that the experience brings with it. It is a solid rule for anyone in pastoral

of emotion connected to it, by determining whether the experience has led the person to demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit that are listed in Galatians 5:22: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These traits are the unmistakable footprint of the Spirit that blows where it will. No matter how powerful or meaningful a religious experience is, if the person involved does not become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind and generous, then the experience was not authentic. No matter how gentle and unexpressive an experience, if it translates into an increase in these fruits of the Spirit, it is surely of God.

Power in the Parish

How, then, can we introduce experiences of the Holy Spirit into the everyday life of a parish so that it becomes a value that will contribute to the transformation of parish culture? How can we minimize the chance that our own people will feel like their Christian lives are extraneous, with the internal reality absent, like the man in the gorilla suit I spoke of earlier? Pope Francis reflects on this same question in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

> How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelization full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction! Yet I realize that no words of encouragement will be enough unless the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in our hearts. (EG, no. 261)

Here are a few suggestions from my experience as a pastor of how to help our people experience this burning.

- It is that which is not understood and that which is unknown that causes fear. We need to teach about the experience of "God in us" through the Holy Spirit. We must teach people that there is no single experience that captures how God works in the hearts of believers. We must teach that an emotional response to God is a healthy part of being in relationship with God, just as it is in any other personal relationship. We must teach

people that to be Christian is to be "pentecostal." That there is no Christian life or Church outside of the pentecostal experience. We must teach that God gives gifts, including charismatic gifts for the building up of the Church, and that God gives good gifts to his children, and will never give a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of an egg. (Luke 11:11-12) Our disposition ought to be to say yes to each and every "good gift" that God desires to give us. We need not be afraid, even if we may not fully understand.

- Over the years, as I have used Alpha in my parishes, I have found it to be an excellent way to introduce an experience of the Holy Spirit to participants – both regular churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Alpha provides an opportunity to teach about the Holy Spirit and creates an environment in which each participant can have that essential experience of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of Alpha is a weekend or day-long retreat that focuses on the person of the Holy Spirit. It occurs after two thirds of the program has been completed. At this point, participants have had an opportunity to hear the kerygma and respond. Trust has been built with the team members and there is an openness to the experience of God when the invitation is given. The retreat weekend or day usually culminates with a gentle and non-intrusive time of prayer for each participant to be "filled" with the Holy Spirit.

We can argue the relative merit of the vocabulary from a theological point of view, but for the participants, this is about experiencing something: God's love being poured into their hearts. It is often life-changing. Over the years, both in my parish and when I have travelled to speak at national and international Alpha conferences, I have had the pleasure to hear many stories of transformation through the tool of Alpha. At least 90% of the conversion stories are centred on the Holy Spirit day or weekend, when each person was prayed over to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They truly experienced the power of God, and they were transformed.

As more and more of my parishioners have discovered this essential relationship with the third person of the blessed Trinity, the whole tenor of parish life slowly begins to change. Speaking about the Holy Spirit, and praying to and for the Holy Spirit, becomes more natural. We do this at staff meetings and at committee meetings. When we gather our ministry leaders at Saint Benedict Parish for our leadership summits, we always conclude the mornings together by calling upon the Holy Spirit and praying over one another to be filled again. In this we do not settle for a theological conviction that it is by the Holy Spirit that we proclaim "Jesus as Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3), but we are brutally honest that we seek an experience of God's love and that this is not a sign of spiritual immaturity. We seek God's power because without it, we can do nothing.

In our liturgies, we are conscious of invoking the Holy Spirit in song during the celebration of the Eucharist, and even take extra time after Holy Communion to ask the Holy Spirit to come. After all, as we acknowledge in Eucharistic Prayer III, being "nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit" ought to be a part of every celebration of the Eucharist. We also teach that it is important to pray the ancient prayer of the Church *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit) with expectant faith. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, long-time preacher to the papal household, often tells a story of a custom in his hometown. On Sunday morning after Mass, it is very common to hear invitations to neighbours to come and visit at some point. This invitation, however, is a form of social politeness and includes no expectation that the person will show up. Cantalamessa points out that when we invoke the Holy Spirit and ask him to come, we should do so with ardent expectation. It is only this kind of prayer that will yield the fulfillment of the promise of God in our own time for the renewal of our Church. Only the power of the Holy Spirit will allow us to not only recall our true identity as a missional Church, but to throw off the shackles of maintenance and go out. Pope Francis agrees:

> We need to avoid it by making the Church constantly go out from herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor. God save us from a worldly Church with superficial spiritual and pastoral trappings! This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit who frees us from self-centredness cloaked in an outward religiosity bereft of God. (EG, no. 97)

10. Become an Inviting Church

"Come and see." (John 1:39)

If the first nine values that we have reflected on so far come to be valued by a local church, then the last – establishing an invitational culture – will come naturally. If real effort is put into focusing on the weekend as a priority so that the liturgy is uplifting and moving, if there is great music, great preaching, a welcoming environment, then parishioners will naturally desire to invite friends, family and neighbours to come and see.

If our churches become places where there is meaningful community, clear expectations, a focus on gifts, and an intentional system of small and mid-size groups, and an environment in which the Holy Spirit is experienced, then those who come and see will be far more likely to stay and tell. Parishioners will also be more likely to extend invitations beyond Sunday Mass and invite others to experience the life of the parish outside of the celebration of the Eucharist.

Intentionally Invitational

Successful, healthy and growing churches are, however, intentional about creating an invitation culture within the life of their church. To be honest, at this point in my journey with the people of Saint Benedict Parish, we have not yet begun to be intentional in developing invitation as a real value. The key is "not yet." In spite of this, due to work on the other values, our most recent ME 25 survey shows interesting results that back up the claim that this

value can take care of itself. Asked to measure their agreement with the statement "In the last month I have invited someone to participate in my parish," parishioners were offered a range from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 meaning "strongly agree." Although we have "not yet" begun to tackle this value, we found that 23% of parishioners strongly agreed and 15% agreed to this statement. That means 38% of our parishioners have invited someone in the last month. This astonishing result placed us higher than the average Catholic response, and higher than the average response for all Christian churches in Gallup's database. What might happen when we become intentional about this?

The first principle to keep in mind when creating an invitational culture is to remind people that it is God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:7) This means we are responsible for inviting, but we are not responsible for the response to the invitation. In Church circles, it usually takes five invitations to produce one yes, and in spite of the "no, thank you," we will never know how God will work in someone's heart even after the invitation has been turned down. When communicating about inviting others, we need to be clear about this.

We also need to be clear about what success looks like. Anyone who will invite needs to know that they will get a "no" much more often than a "yes." Every time we begin a new Alpha experience at Saint Benedict, we joke about who can gather the most "no"s (conversely, the person who gets the most "no"s is always the person who brings the greatest number of guests with them to the celebration evening at the end of each course). In spite of this, we must be clear that success is in the number of people being invited, and not the number that show up. We cannot be responsible for this. We are called to sow the seeds by invitation and must leave the rest to God.

The second principle is that we need to name and identify the primary factor that prevents 80% of the members of the average parish from inviting others: fear. The fear is real. Fear of rejection,

fear of being considered odd, fear of creating discomfort in a relationship, fear of being considered "one of those" people is what most often keeps our lips sealed. There is no shortcut when it comes to fear in our lives. We need to identify it and bring it to the Lord in prayer. We need to hear his voice saying to us continuously, "Do not be afraid."

Awkwardness can also be a factor in preventing invitations being extended. The truth is that many parishioners who do not invite may want to invite others, but do not know how. The key is for the invitation to be natural, as natural as any other invitation to something wonderful that has been discovered. In John's Gospel, this is the exact dynamic that takes place when Andrew, after spending the afternoon with Jesus, goes to his brother Peter and brings him to Jesus. This is the dynamic when Philip goes to Nathaniel, the cynic, and says, "Come and see." Communicating something wonderful and inviting others to it is never awkward, but is often unself-conscious. "Try some of this – it's amazing." The person may say, "No thanks," but the invitation has been made.

The third principle is that nothing inspires people to action like a compelling vision of what can be. For instance, on an average weekend at Saint Benedict Parish, we have 2,000 people in church. If half of them invited one person to church every week, there could easily be 200 new visitors on any given weekend. If even one quarter of these visitors were touched in some way to begin to take another step in their spiritual lives, that would be 50 people each week. The numbers are astonishing, and, best of all, they are realistic. If this ever started to happen, our problem would no longer be about inspiring an invitation culture, but in responding to the people who have taken a step in faith to show up, and even to return again.

A Working Model

Every call to action needs a workable model if it is to be successful. We need to be clear that we are not encouraging parishioners to extend invitations to strangers on street corners. This usually

does not work. We wish to begin within the relationships they already have: friends, family, neighbours and co-workers – those already known to parishioners. We need to invite parishioners to take to prayer the question of whom should they invite, to ask God to place names and faces on their hearts. Before the invitation is made, parishioners should be intentional about praying for each person on their invitation list. God's work in our lives is mysterious, and we need to be convinced that the Lord is already doing something in each person's life. We ought to pray for each person before we extend an invitation and afterwards, whether they say no or yes. Depending on the nature of the "no," it may be appropriate to invite again after a certain amount of time, especially if the decline was in the form of a "not right now."

We need to pray for courage before we invite, and then act. We may be as nervous as a high school kid in the cafeteria asking a girl out for the first time, and we may be just as shocked when the response is a yes. Lastly, we need to assist them in following through with their "yes." This will involve laying on extra hospitality, perhaps picking up a guest and driving them to church, inviting them to a coffee social after Mass, and being intentional about introducing them to other parishioners or to the pastor so they can begin to experience a sense of belonging. Lastly, we should assume that they will be open to coming again.

As Catholics, we need to be mindful of the "fit" when we invite non-churchgoers to a parish event. Depending on what Sunday morning is like in your parish, it may not be the best place to begin. If we can be reasonably certain that it will be an uplifting, warm, welcoming, positive experience, we can easily accompany an unchurched person to Mass. At the same time, we must keep in mind that the liturgy is, in many ways, inhospitable to the uninitiated. It presumes a certain level of comprehension of a specialized vocabulary, gestures and symbols that may be foreign to those without a Catholic background.

We have already spoken of the need for non-churchgoers to experience a sense of belonging through meaningful community so they can begin to believe. It is imperative, then, that parishes begin to have a semblance of Christian life outside of the celebration of the liturgy – various events to which the unchurched can be invited and at which they will hear the message of the Gospel. At Saint Benedict, the most obvious place to invite others to is Alpha, but we also have prayer breakfasts for men and women, concerts and events with speakers in a non-liturgical setting.

Alpha

Of all of these opportunities, our Alpha events are the most accessible and the easiest to invite others to. I like to speak about Alpha as "Evangelization for Dummies." We invite people to dinner and movie, and the invitation is always to come and see. The invitation makes explicit that there is no commitment beyond the first week, and that the participant can take the course one week at a time. We are clear that if they decide not to come back, no one will contact them. Alpha is structured so that each process ends with a celebration event to which the "graduates" can invite friends and family members to come and see what they have experienced. Again, it is the most natural thing. Many wish to attend just to see what has affected their spouse, friend or colleague so significantly.

Alpha is designed to run as a rolling program in a church, so that each graduation evening is the first week of the next Alpha. Each "Come and See" event concludes with an invitation to sign up for the next Alpha, which usually starts a few weeks later. After doing Alpha in parishes for more than eleven years, I have learned that it is most common for 80% of the guests who attend a "Come and See" night to sign up for the next time Alpha is offered. Sadly, many churches that run Alpha don't get the invitation momentum going. Rather than having significant numbers of unchurched people attending their courses, each course is mostly made up of active parishioners. This will be of benefit to a parish, as most of these participants will experience renewal and even conversion,

but the link to the outside is often lost. Typically, a parish that does not get the invitational dimension of Alpha will experience a plateau after about 60% of its members have taken the program. It will slowly die out, and the committed will say, "That was great! What should we do next?" In many ways, such a parish never really started to run Alpha.

Although we have not yet been intentional about an invitational culture around our weekend liturgies, we have been intentional when it comes to running Alpha. Over the last year, we have seen an increase in the numbers of people taking Alpha at Saint Benedict. We have parishioners who, after experiencing conversion through Alpha, have invited dozens of people to a "Come and See" event. One woman in our parish invited every co-worker in her office: fallen-away Catholics, unchurched people, non-Catholics, atheists, agnostics, Muslims and Hindus. A man who is very involved in our parish and constantly invites others was originally invited by this same woman. After saying "no" four or five times, he eventually said yes to a "Come and See" night, just to make her go away. His life was changed, and through him, the lives of others have been changed.

It is important in every venture in parish life to celebrate our wins. We can do this by telling stories. If invitation is to become a value in any parish, we need to celebrate it. Stories are powerful, but too often we focus on the extraordinary. There is nothing like an amazing story to help us marvel at the way God works, but God most often works in the ordinariness of life. Simple invitations lead to changed lives. The extra spring in the step of a man returning from Alpha each night led his wife to check it out. This curiosity led to an encounter with Christ and entering the RCIA to become Catholic. A co-worker who attended an Alpha "Come and See" just to "shut up" her colleague came to faith and returned to the Church of her childhood. Indeed, there are countless numbers of small miracles, all because someone had the courage to whisper the invitation to come and see something wonderful that they themselves had discovered.