

Unlocking Your Parish: Making Disciples, Raising up Leaders with Alpha

Ron Huntley

Ch 1 by James Mallon

Chapter One Setting the Stage

As a priest engaged in parish ministry for nearly two decades, I have longed to see the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of parishioners. Like any pastor or anyone involved in pastoral ministry, I have also wanted to see the good news of the gospel draw the lost and the searching into the life of the Christian community. Two questions have influenced my thinking: Can Catholic parishes become communities of missionary disciples that bear lasting fruit? If so, what does it take to move them in that direction?

In my book *Divine Renovation: Bringing Your Parish from Maintenance to Mission*, I answered the first of these questions with a resounding yes—Catholic parishes can indeed become missionary and fruit-bearing. I answered the second question—how to accomplish this—by describing the renewal in my own parish, Saint Benedict in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I mention that book here because Alpha played a role in Saint Benedict’s transformation, and I believe it can help other Catholic parishes too. *Unlocking Your Parish: Making Disciples, Raising Up Leaders with Alpha* aims to provide insight into what Alpha can offer the Catholic parish interested in becoming a mission-focused community.

Globally, over the past several years, we have seen parishes rediscover the call to “go ... and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19), but as a universal Church, we have barely begun to respond to the Lord’s call of renewal. If it were simply a matter of tweaking our processes and changing our activities as we continue to live out our current models of parish life, we might be further along. But our present situation requires far more than minor course corrections and better programming. It calls for a fundamental change of culture—a change in how we understand the world around us and how we understand what it means to be Catholic.

Living in a Change of Age

Throughout the course of history, there have been watershed moments that have shifted the direction of civilizations and profoundly affected our physical, intellectual, and spiritual lives. These moments—such as the inventions of the printing press and the steam engine—have often displaced or greatly altered the self-understanding and cultural underpinnings of what came before. Currently we are at another watershed moment that is radically altering secular culture and the assumptions people make about themselves, the world they live in, and the meaning of life.

Recognizing this profound shift, observers have said we are no longer living in an age of change; rather we are living through the change of an age. This new age has a number of names. Some call it the age of secularism; others use the term post-Christian or postmodern. Whatever its name, the reality is that this age is very different from what has come before.

Throughout much of its history, the Church in the West has existed in the cultural soil of Christendom, where the dominant cultural forces supported Christianity and even gave it a privileged place. There was, in the culture of Christendom, a sense of the transcendent importance of hierarchy, an appreciation for the natural law, and a deeply held belief in the universality of truth.

Our current culture, however, embraces a kind of scientific materialism that claims that all truth is relative. In other words, there is nothing objective about truth; it is entirely subjective. What is true for me is true for me, and what is true for you is true for you—even if our truths are mutually exclusive. This has obvious implications for the Church, which claims that there is, in fact, objective truth that serves the good of all peoples.

And so the question becomes: how should the Church respond to this new age and its very secular outlook?

Vatican II: The Church's Prophetic Response

This isn't the place for a historical retrospective, but briefly, we can see that the seeds of the cultural shift we are living through can be found early in the twentieth century. World War I cast a shadow over Europe; the resulting geopolitical instability set the stage for World War II and the horror of the Holocaust. Other wars and genocides followed, shattering the myth of the progressive improvement of human nature. Cultural forces converged around this time to accelerate social change on a massive scale: the sexual revolution, a growing drug culture, the reach of television into every home—all of these things created a kind of perfect storm that sent shock waves through Western culture.

In the midst of all this, the Holy Spirit inspired Pope John XXIII to call an ecumenical council of the Church. The documents that came out of the council's discussions contained the building blocks for a renewed engagement with the world and a framework for sharing the gospel message with contemporary societies. Fifty years later, we are finally beginning to understand more broadly and implement locally the Vatican Council's call to holiness and mission.

And therein lies the crux of our current situation. As dioceses and parishes, we continue to live and act as if we are still planted within the soil of Christendom. In the past, within the supporting cultural framework of Christendom, parishes could be communities of maintenance, where people passively received the sacraments and some religious formation. As I wrote in *Divine Renovation*,

Culture supported faith and church attendance.... We just had to build it and people would come.... As long as we would go and open churches, there were always new communities of migrants and new babies. As long as we baptized and taught in our

schools, we pumped out good “practicing Catholics.” In a sense, we got away with not making disciples, because the culture propped it all up.¹

This is why Catholic parish life in the fifties, sixties, and even to a certain extent in the seventies seems so vibrant to us in retrospect. The culture supported religious practice. Furthermore, in North America, Catholicism was still very much a religion of immigrants. Living away from their families and the traditions of the various countries from which they came to North America, these immigrant Catholics clung together. The parish became the center of social life, and participation in Catholic life helped reinforce a sense of belonging and familiar cultural and ethnic traditions.

In addition to reaffirming and deepening cultural and social bonds among Catholic immigrant groups, one of the goals of the Church was to help Catholics integrate into the larger North American societies where they lived. Churches built structures, like schools, to accomplish this kind of mainstreaming. The problem was that the larger culture was changing radically. With the unravelling and end of Christendom, the pastoral tools and approaches that we had previously employed became ineffective. Unfortunately, we haven’t replaced them with much that seems to bear fruit.

The numbers bear this out. The Pew Research Center undertook a sociological study in 2015 and determined that 50 percent of millennials who were raised Catholic have jettisoned any connection to the Catholic faith, and for every person who enters the Catholic Church at Easter, six leave.² But we don’t need statistics to see this reality—the faithful in North America are living it. Fewer and fewer Catholics are attending Mass, and sadly, the Sacrament of Confirmation has become ritualized apostasy, with most young people leaving any practice of their faith right after receiving the sacrament. In addition, most dioceses are in a process of retrenchment—combining multiple parishes into new administrative structures or placing the responsibilities of multiple parishes on the backs of lone priests.

This is a true moment of crisis but one of tremendous opportunity as well. If our primary reaction is to respond administratively and create new structures to slow our decline, then we might as well hang it all up now. We can’t keep doing what we have always been doing and just doing it in more efficient ways. But if we see in this crisis an opportunity to let go of our previous pastoral models and embrace new approaches that place our structures and processes at the service of evangelization and mission, we will see new life.

Pope Francis seems to be calling the Church to this vision. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), he writes,

I dream of a “missionary option,” that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.³

[A Kind of Dying](#)

Embracing this kind of change may mean letting go of many of the cultural hallmarks that have characterized Catholic parish life over the past decades. It may mean taking a hard look at our image of the priesthood and of pastoral ministry and also reexamining our

fundamental assumptions about the ministerial work that we do. This is not easy stuff; it is a kind of dying. Walking this path toward a missionary culture is a clear embrace of the paschal mystery.

It is an essential surrender. Paul talks about this paradox of ministry in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (4:11).

We must intentionally enter into this lifestyle of surrender, not only personally, but communally. We must be willing to sacrifice to the Lord even that which may seem integral to our parish life—our buildings, processes, ministries, and ways of doing things. Our goal is not simply efficiency or keeping our parishes viable but rather freeing us to respond to the needs of men and women today. In this way, the life-changing power of the gospel can be unleashed through us.

Jesus told us we would experience the knife: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit” (John 15:1-2). When we become connected more to our model than to our mission, we need this pruning so that more of his life can be manifested through us.

The Church’s missionary impulse lies within the very nature of God, who is love. Love always pours itself out for others. This is why the Word of God left the glory of heaven and pitched his tent among us, choosing to live through our human nature, to suffer, die, and rise from the dead. He did it all so that we might be freed from the power of sin and be filled with God’s own life.

Essentially, we are a missionary people because we belong to a missionary God. The question becomes: How can we, who have received the very life of Jesus, authentically manifest that missionary identity?

The Frozen Chosen

Part of our challenge in answering that question is the reality that many Catholics, including some within our leadership, have not encountered the love of the Father in Jesus Christ. They do not see themselves as beloved sons and daughters of God, and they may not have made an intentional choice to follow Jesus. In fact, many Catholics today see faith not in terms of their relationship with God and others but primarily as something that places moral demands on them. They adopt an almost servile mentality, focusing on the things they must do for God rather than responding in gratitude for the things that God has done in and for and through them.

This can make it difficult for parishes to live out their mission, since the overwhelming focus becomes how do I get to heaven. Many of our people don’t see themselves as being part of a larger story—the story of salvation. They don’t see themselves as being part of a Church that Jesus sent out on a mission, a Church that the Lord empowered by pouring out his Spirit. The idea that baptized Catholics are loved and are able to be channels of God’s supernatural healing, mercy, forgiveness, providence, and justice or that they have an

essential and unique role to play in the Church's mission—these are foreign concepts to many Catholics.

This truly is an issue of identity. Jesus explicitly rebuked the image of slavery in relationship to God when he told his disciples, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15). There is a new intimacy with the Father that comes with life in Jesus Christ and the promise of his Spirit. That is why, when his disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he gave them the words of the Our Father. The apostle Paul affirms this reality in his letter to the Church in Rome:

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.
(Romans 8:14-17)

Part of the work of evangelization and mission, then, is to help our people experience and embrace who they are as sons and daughters of God. The depths of their identity can be unlocked only in an encounter with Jesus Christ. Fostering such an encounter and supporting their journey toward Christ will, in turn, propel them out on mission.

[The Right Tool for the Job](#)

When Ron Huntley told me about Alpha, I was curious. But when I found out that it was not a Catholic initiative, I was hesitant and skeptical. When I played the VHS tape (remember those days?) and heard all the English accents, I immediately had to deal with another natural bias: the fact that I had been born and raised in Scotland. Through God's grace I was able to move past these biases within my own heart as I heard the gospel articulated in a simple and compelling way. The proof, however, was in the pudding. From the very first time I ran Alpha in a parish, even though we made lots of mistakes, we saw God work through it in a powerful way. We saw transformed lives and soon began to feel that our parish was being transformed. Here, clearly, was an effective response to the challenging times in which we live. The current situation within the Church, the state of secular culture around us, and the urgent call to mission that we have received from Christ demand a response. The Second Vatican Council and our last four popes have reiterated that call to mission. We have found Alpha to be one of the most powerful and effective tools for responding to it, both in reaching those who are far from the Church and in helping Catholics discover their identity in Christ. Moreover, Alpha can be a tremendous catalyst for changing the culture of a parish and helping transform the fundamental model of ministry.

But a word of caution: if Alpha is just one parish program among many that the pastor is encouraging people to attend, it will not bear as much fruit as it could. Alpha's potential to change culture is unlocked when the parish uses it as the foundation for a larger strategy. That strategy should focus on adult evangelization and connect with other activities that foster discipleship and mission. I often find myself saying this when I speak to priests and pastoral leaders: evangelization is the pump that drives everything, and Alpha is a powerful evangelizing process. You can't ever let go of that pump if you truly want to foster renewal

and transformation. If you evangelize, it will change your parish's weekend experience—not only how people participate in the Mass but also how parishioners handle everything from hospitality to managing the parking lot. If you evangelize, you will build up your Alpha team and raise up leaders. If you evangelize, people will become hungry for community and service. It has been my experience that people who come through the Alpha process clamor for community!

The time has come for us to stop using pastoral models that try to feed people who don't even know they're hungry. Instead we need to use evangelizing methods that allow God to stir up the hunger for him that already exists within every human soul. In the following chapters, we'll share with you some of the ways we have used Alpha to make disciples, raise up leaders, and foster renewal in the parishes where we work.