



GREAT CATHOLIC PARISHES



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Great Catholic Parishes

How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive

In 2012 I started Parish Catalyst, an organization devoted to supporting the health and development of Catholic parishes. Our goals were to: 1) identify pastors across the country who are leading vibrant parishes, 2) gather them together to collaborate with one another, and 3) challenge them to grow that vibrancy in order to have an even greater impact on their own community and on the Church as a whole. In short, we wanted to connect church innovators together to fuel further innovation.

We began by reaching out to diocesan offices, ministry leaders, pastoral professionals, and people we personally knew across the country. We asked them to name pastors and parishes they viewed as models of healthy, vibrant parishes. Our research team, myself included, conducted a total of 244 interviews with pastors from every state in the United States. Once transcribed, the interviews

amounted to more than 3,600 pages of information on life in exceptional American Catholic parishes.

Based on their thoughtful, candid responses to our open-ended questions, we were able to ascertain the most prevalent strengths and most persistent challenges experienced by these pastors. In *Great Catholic Parishes: How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive*, we share the wisdom gleaned from these interviews, presenting both descriptive statistics and quotes from the pastors themselves that exemplify the trends we observed in this rich dataset.

Behind each of the 244 pastors we interviewed, there are 244 parish communities with their share of challenges and concerns but also their own wonderful stories of vibrancy and engagement. There is no single thread by which we can connect all these parishes; there is no “silver bullet” for parish ministry in the modern Catholic Church. However, our research uncovered four essential qualities that these communities have in common.



Essential Practice Number One: Great Parishes Share Leadership

One thing that came through loud and clear in our research is that shared leadership is fundamental to the success of today's flourishing parish. Indeed, four out of five of the pastors we interviewed said they used some form of shared leadership. Leadership in ministry that is truly shared does not happen simply because people work together or cooperate with one another in some way. It is a gradual and mutual evolution of new patterns. The shift to shared leadership represents a marked change from the traditional Lone Ranger model of pastoring. Teamwork and communication between clergy and lay leaders become essential to decision-making processes. The pastors we interviewed who share leadership take pride in their strong, professional staffs and volunteers and are intentional and creative about how they go about it. We identified three styles of leadership sharing among them: Collaborative, Delegative, and Consultative. Many pastors combined these styles, using one style over another depending on the situation, but most had a dominant tendency toward one of them.

THREE MOST COMMON LEADERSHIP STYLES



Collaborators

Fifty-two percent of the pastors we interviewed expressed their style of leadership as that of a Collaborator.

These pastors value teamwork, cooperation, and consensus, working together with their staffs as a cohesive unit.



Consulters

Twenty-four percent of the pastors in our study function as consultative leaders. They see input, discussion, and deliberation as crucial to clarifying the parish's vision and securing buy-in from the leadership team and the broader parish community. But rather than delegate, they gather many perspectives and opinions to form their own decision-making.



Delegators

Forty-nine percent of our pastors were delegators. These pastors empowered others to lead by delegating responsibilities and offering support, encouragement, and freedom. They avoid micromanaging and enable their staffs by supporting staff decisions.

Essential Practice Number Two: Great Parishes Foster Spiritual Maturity and Plan for Discipleship

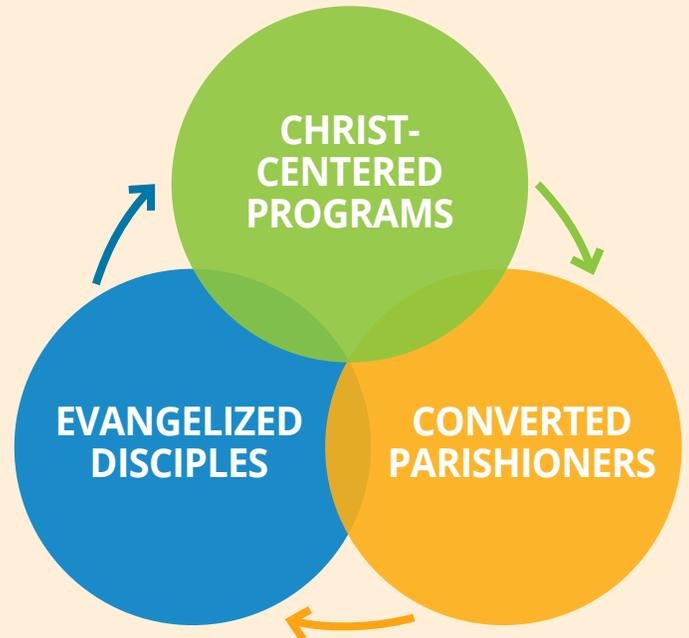
Our second foundational practice has to do with the spiritual formation and discipleship of parishioners. Over ninety percent of our pastors considered the spiritual growth of their people to be the strongest characteristic of their communities, while at the same time, seventy percent saw a need for continued improvement in this area. This is not a contradiction. Spiritual growth is a journey, not a destination, and it was of paramount concern to the pastors we interviewed. They set spiritual growth as an explicit goal for the parish community, and actively look for ways to address the spiritual hungers of their people. Most importantly, they understand that spiritual growth, or disciple-making, requires dedicated resources as surely as raising a new building does. So they allocate both the financial and the human resources required to implement spiritual growth initiatives.

The initial step in disciple-making is the decision to align all programming and training in such a way that every parish opportunity begins and ends with encountering Christ. For some pastors and their catechetical teams, success began through reimagining and overhauling traditional religious education programs. Other pastors began with small groups.

But the goal of nurturing discipleship development is not a set-it-and-forget-it kind of goal. A parish culture that revolves around inviting individuals to take the next step in their relationship with Jesus Christ requires a certain amount of patience and flexibility on the part of parish leadership because, once articulated, the goal of encouraging discipleship must continually be revisited and adapted to address the various and evolving stages of faith developing in their parishioners.

One side benefit to leadership's strategic commitment to the ongoing spiritual growth of the community is the strong impact these deepened disciples have on their parishes. They develop a greater connection to the parish, are more committed to its spiritual health, more likely to invite outsiders to parish events, and more inclined to give generously of their time, talent, and treasure.

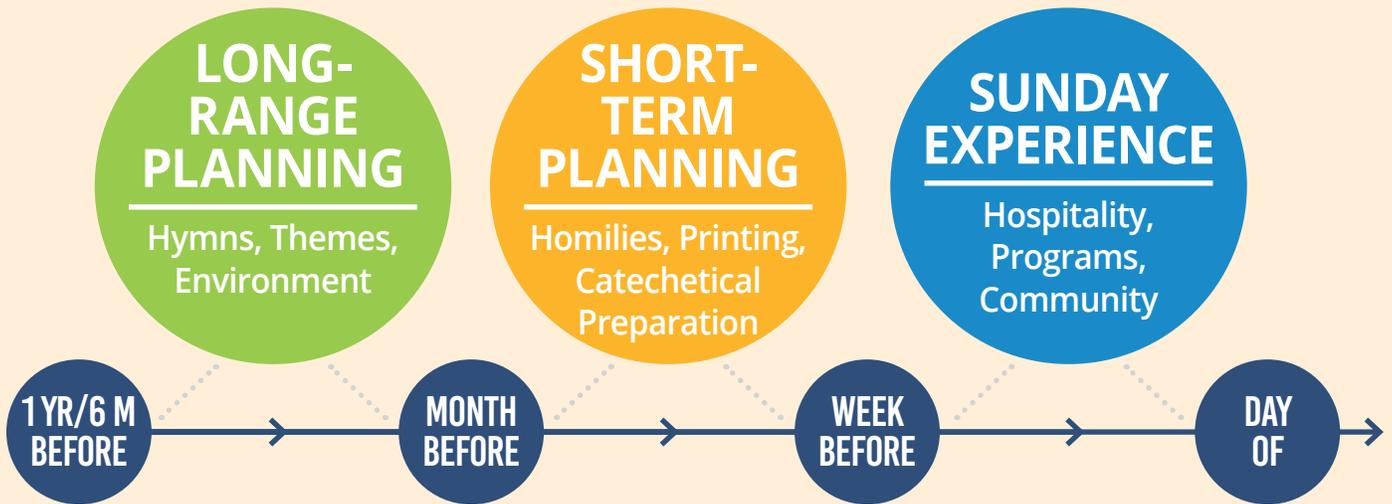
SPIRITUALLY MATURE PARISH



“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth... the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.”

—St. John Paul II,
Catechesis in Our Time, 5

PLANNING THE SUNDAY EXPERIENCE



Essential Practice Number Three: Great Parishes Excel on Sundays

The third area that came up in many of our interviews is the experience a church attender has when he or she comes to Mass on Sunday.

In *Great Catholic Parishes* you will find data and quotes from pastors describing the importance of good music, well-crafted homilies, and a warm welcome to all. One of our pastors referred to this as: Hymns, Homilies, and Hospitality. Here are some of the highlights.

1 Hymns: When it comes to music there is no optimal style. It varies from place to place. Good music requires financial investment in both equipment and the best musicians a parish can afford.

2 Homilies: This is the most critical piece of all. Our pastors are disciplined and carve out large chunks of time to prepare their homilies. One standard we heard in our interviews was that every minute of preaching required one hour of preparation. One experienced pastor interviewed remarked that he could now prepare his homily in about half that time.

3 Hospitality: Sunday morning hospitality begins long before the weekend. You might say it begins with the parish website where people feel welcomed and drawn by an active, vital community. For many parishioners it begins when they pull into the parking lot, where someone in the parish welcomes them. Young children are invited to a separate Children's Liturgy of the Word and friendly people are clearly present to welcome and answer your questions.

In today's vital parishes the Sunday experience is more holistic than it used to be. Still centered on the Eucharist, of course, but including many moving parts. For the homebound or those who are traveling, the Sunday experience doesn't even happen at the church building. It happens online, when they participate in their home Mass via Internet.

“The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open.”

—Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 47

Essential Practice Number Four: Great Parishes Evangelize

There are approximately eighty million Catholics in the United States, of which sixty-four million are affiliated with a parish. With those numbers, we pack a whole lot of potential punch. Unfortunately, historically, Catholics have been terrible at evangelization. Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but I think all Catholics can agree that we were not raised to wear our faith on our sleeves.

Whatever the reasons for our holy hesitation, evangelization has always been an explicitly stated goal of the Catholic Church, and happily we seem to be getting better at it. Almost fifty percent of the pastors we interviewed consider evangelization to be a strength of their parish. Others are beginning to take the concept of invitation beyond the door of the church to the local neighborhood and to the world at large. More than half of the pastors (58.6%) have evangelization in their sight, but reported that their efforts need further development. One of our pastors put it this way: “We can no longer leave the light on for people; we now have to bring the light to them.”

Many of the parishes interviewed have changed the culture of their parish in order to become intentional, evangelizing parishes. As it is sometimes said, they have moved from maintenance to mission. This is

not a change in doctrine; it is a change in attitude. It is extraordinarily difficult for a culture of invitation to take root if only a few scattered individuals are willing to move toward a more evangelical outlook. Scale is important, meaning that the whole parish community needs to be on board to keep evangelization afloat.

Evangelizing parishes disciple parishioners through homilies, listening sessions, small groups, Bible studies, and other opportunities that deepen discipleship as well as encourage parishioners to discuss their faith, which makes them more at ease about sharing it with others. They are also intentional about creating easy entry points for people outside of the church community who are searching.

There is nothing revolutionary about these four themes. At first glance they can appear deceptively simple. But one must admit that for some reason these particular parishes are thriving in a time and climate when many people no longer find value in organized religion. These pastors, parish leadership teams, and parishioners have developed a unique clarity of vision. With a deepened understanding of just how critical the eucharistic celebration is to the mission of the Church, they have become intentionally strategic about advancing two things: the discipleship of their own people and the Gospel mandate to evangelize.

Learning Communities

Parish Catalyst offers Learning Communities—an eighteen-month, four-session process that connects like-minded pastors and their teams in order to:

- Capitalize on one another’s experiences and insights
- Imagine new solutions to old roadblocks
- Dream bigger to discover new strategies to enliven the parish
- Develop, test, and refine workable plans to achieve parish goals

All parishes are welcome to apply to this process. You can apply to join a Learning Community online at parishcatalyst.org.



Bill Simon Jr. is the founder of Parish Catalyst, a network of pastors with demonstrated creative leadership skills. Parish Catalyst offers free online resources and facilitates Learning Community cohorts for pastors and their teams to connect, imagine solutions, and formulate workable plans. Bill is the author of Great Catholic Parishes: How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive and has coauthored Living the Call: An Introduction to the Lay Vocation with Michael Novak.



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