

PREFACE



Today, in particular, the pressing pastoral task of the new evangelization calls for the involvement of the entire People of God, and requires a new fervor, new methods and a new expression for the announcing and witnessing of the Gospel. This task demands priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life, marked by a profound communion with the pope, the bishops and other priests, and a fruitful cooperation with the lay faithful, always respecting and fostering the different roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community.

—BLESSED JOHN PAUL II¹

This is a book about the local community church that Catholics call their parish. We're two guys—a Catholic pastor and his lay associate—who have been working in a parish for a few years. That's probably our essential qualification for writing this book.

Actually, it's our *only* qualification, and to tell you the truth, for a long time we weren't even any good at it.

When it comes to the parish, we have had more than our share of minor disasters and major mishaps. Dumb doesn't even begin to describe the false starts and crash landings we've made. In the process, we've found ourselves stressed out, burned out, beaten up, and put down. There were days when we wanted to quit. There were days that stretched into weeks and months when we wanted to quit. There were times our only prayer was begging God to send us someplace else. There were other times we would have gladly given it all up to go sell hot dogs at Camden Yards. We never imagined ourselves working in a parish, and now we can't imagine working anywhere else. We want to tell you about that.

Just to let you know: We're pretty average people. If you met us, you'd know that instantly. We did not finish at the top of our classes—or even close. Neither do we bring deep wisdom or original insight to this project. We're definitely not visionaries. And yet, we've caught a glimpse of the amazing work God is doing in our parish in which we get to participate. We want to tell you about that, too.

We're writing for pastors, pastoral life directors, associates, deacons, seminarians, religious educators, youth ministers, and volunteer ministers. Even if you've just got a view from the pew but value your local church community and appreciate its fundamental and critical role in your life, then this is a book for you.

We seek to thoughtfully address all of you who are concerned that things in many parishes do not seem to be going well these days. A single, simple fact illustrates the problem: One in three people raised in the Catholic Church has walked away from it, making "former Catholic" the third largest religious designation in the country.²

There are lots of people who are ready to tell you why that is so and how to fix it. But many of the arguments we've heard tend to mistake the problem and miss the point. We think the problem is cultural.

Culture is the potent brew of knowledge, belief, and behavior, which everyone in an organization uniquely shares, and it can be the most powerful force in an organization. It affects everything: enthusiasm and morale, productivity and creativity, effectiveness and success. It's more important than vision or mission when it comes to what is going on in a group.³ *Every* organization has a culture. We think the most acute problem in the Church today is with its culture. And here's the point: It's a parish problem. It really is *the* parish problem.

There are "cultural" problems that parish churches—large and small, old and new, growing and declining, urban, suburban, and rural, northeast, southwest, and everywhere in between, Spanish-speaking, multi-cultural, Asian, African American—all seem to share. These problems will most certainly be exacerbated by the seismic changes increasingly rocking the Catholic Church in this country that, among other things, are leading in some regions to massive parish closings, consolidations, and restructuring.

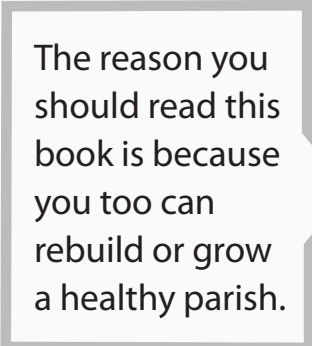
Things are no longer going as they could or should be going; and fruitful conversation about *why* that is so, or *how* it is related to the exodus of membership, seems to be largely ignored. Gabe Lyons, an author we like, puts it this way,

Cultures are like clouds. They materialize as byproducts of the prevailing conditions. They reveal the world's influential currents as they move across the landscape. And when you're inside them, it's hard to see what's really going on around you.⁴

We offer this book for people out there who have the hunch or perhaps the conviction we have that things could go better. You already know that; you're just having a hard time seeing what's really going on. We write this book to describe our story: what happened to us,

what we learned, and what we know about what works in a parish in Timonium, Maryland, at this particular point in history.

As you'll see, we have not concerned ourselves with questions of ecclesiology, canon law, and catechetical practices. We steer entirely clear of difficult but settled issues, and we've tried to tread lightly through the minefield of liturgy. What we are interested in is the "culture" of our parish. The culture is what we have worked to change through a new strategy. Increased membership is the first and obvious fruit. While our neighborhood isn't growing, our parish is. In fact, at this point we've outgrown our current facilities.



The reason you should read this book is because you too can rebuild or grow a healthy parish.

Other fruits of our new strategy are dramatically increased giving, expanded volunteerism and ministry, and added momentum and enthusiasm. Less measurable, but more important, there is much evidence of a vibrant, authentically Catholic, spiritual rebuilding of our parish. But here's the deal: The reason you should read this book is because, with God's grace, you

too can rebuild or grow a healthy parish.

We do not pretend to know anything about your church community, or what would work there. We strive to be respectful of your challenges and your efforts. Of course not every detail we discuss will work everywhere. Our strategy must be translated into *your* setting if it is to work at all. We do not presume to insist that all of our principles are transferable to your parish. But, we're guessing most of them are.

Whatever kind of parish you're in, whatever style church you're leading, whatever the culture of your community, you can grow a healthy parish. By looking beyond the people in the pews to the people who are *not* there, creating a path to help get them there, and leading both parishioners and newcomers to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, you can rebuild the culture of your parish and make church matter.

To help you along the way, we are happy to offer you web-based tools to get you started. These include “Steps You Can Take in Your Parish” hints, checklists, and other resource materials for free download and “Want to know more/go deeper?” video lessons. All of these are noted throughout part III of this book and available at rebuiltparish.com.

You can do this!

Introduction:

CONVENIENT PARKING



How solitary sits the city, once filled with people!

—LAMENTATIONS 1:1

Permit us to offer a vast over-simplification, by way of introduction. You could sum up much of the history of the Catholic Church in the United States with a twist on the famous verse from *Field of Dreams*: “They’ve come; build it.” For generations, wave upon wave of Catholics washed ashore and many proceeded to have families, not a few of them large families. When one church filled up, another was built, sometimes just up the street. This is clearly seen here in north Baltimore, specifically the York Road corridor, where a row of Catholic churches is lined up from the Baltimore harbor to the Pennsylvania border.

Most Catholics arrived in this country poor and vulnerable. Many, if not most, were marginalized in American society, as they had been in their countries of origin. The Church, to its everlasting credit, stepped up to meet many of the basic needs these immigrants had. Beyond spiritual care, the Church oftentimes provided health care, education, and networks of social support. Catholics built hospitals, schools,

and orphanages, along with churches. The Catholic faithful found themselves in the role of **needy consumers**, and the Church served them well.

As Catholics pursued the American Dream and moved up the economic ladder, these critical needs became less urgent, and people's relationship to the Church changed. They received the sacraments and spiritual guidance; they were given religious instruction and found social support. Their obedience was expected in return for these services, and obedience to Church laws and rules, even local customs, was widely given. The faithful graduated to the role of **compliant consumers** and the strategy of Church leaders became "build it and they will come."

Somewhere after the Second Vatican Council, the role of the average parishioner shifted again. Nobody really knows exactly when, but the tipping point might have been the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 Papal Encyclical restating the Church's traditional teaching on the regulation of birth. Other significant developments of this period include the rise of an educated laity, the decline in Catholic school enrollment, the universal disregard of parish boundaries, the first clouds in the coming "crisis" in vocations, and the near total collapse in the practice of confession.

At the same time, the larger culture was being reshaped by the Vietnam War, "white flight," the Civil Rights Movement, the sexual revolution, revolutionary changes in health care, communications, and travel, the questioning of all authority and dependability of institutions, and the accelerated demise of organized religion.

All of these changes within and beyond the Church ushered in the dawn of the so-called "cafeteria" Catholics or what we will be calling **demanding consumers**. This day's dawn increasingly casts light on the new reality: "They're not coming."

And that's just about where our story begins.

Timonium

The church where we serve, Church of the Nativity, was carved out of a large parish bursting at the seams in 1968. It was given birth on the eve of the end of the construction boom that had been exploding in north Baltimore since World War II. Those were also the final days of the European Catholic population expansion that had been effortlessly filling the pews for years before that.

The church was planted by a simple pulpit announcement in the mother parish by the new pastor: “If you live south of Timonium Road you now belong to a new parish. Report to Ridgely Road Middle School next weekend.” Imagine making *that* announcement today! In 1968, you could still assume a majority of Catholics in north Baltimore went to church on most Sundays, and you could also assume they would go where they were told to go.

The communities of Lutherville and Timonium, which this church was established to serve, are leafy, affluent suburbs where crime, unemployment, and poverty are rare; where minority residents are few and often more affluent than their neighbors; and where differences are measured by where you went to high school or to which country club you belonged. This is not the land of the super rich, just people with more than enough.

The church was built on a beautiful, wooded campus in the modern “International” style. Perfectly suiting the spare architecture, the talented founding pastor provided an unadorned vision of an efficient operation that got the job done. Lots of big houses were being built in those days, and young families were easily attracted to a new church in their community. It quickly grew in its early years. In many ways, it was successful and even innovative for its time. It had bathrooms, multi-purpose spaces, and accessibility for disabled individuals.

Fast-forward thirty years. We both came to Church of the Nativity unexpectedly, unenthusiastically, and without any intention of staying

very long. Neither of us knew anything about running a parish. We had little training and even less interest.

Father Michael: I had spent most of my adult years up until this point in school, studying theology, with a specialization in ecclesiology—study of the Church *itself*—which didn't seem to have any application when it came to running a parish. Except for a short tour of duty in parish work, my only real job was serving as the priest secretary to the Cardinal-Archbishop here in Baltimore. I had lots of interesting experiences in that role, but none that easily translated into parish work, as far as I could see. I was a behind the scenes kind of guy who eschewed the limelight but nonetheless liked to get things done. When the Cardinal appointed me pastor of Nativity, I was sure it was a poor fit, but did what I was told. To be honest, I was unhappy with the assignment. The problems that I discovered here initially made me want to leave, and I kept my eye out for other opportunities, should they come along.

*You say goodbye and I
say hello, hello, hello.
I don't know why
you say goodbye,
I say hello.*

—John Lennon and
Paul McCartney¹

Tom: I was just a year out of college, where I had studied and enjoyed political science. I envisioned a life somewhere in the political world of Washington; however, a brief stint there made me rethink that choice. About

that same time, I received a phone call from one of my college professors who was a mentor to me and a close friend of Michael's. Sue must have seen something in me that I didn't see in myself,

because she introduced me to Michael who eventually offered me a position as youth minister. Since I was engaged to be married, I thought it was a good idea to get a job. But my plan was to stay at Nativity for two or maybe three years, work on a Master's degree in political science (since I still believed that was where my future lay), and then move on to teach.

At best we assumed our tenure here would be a brief transition to bigger or, at least, better things. Who really wants to be stuck in a little parish in the woods? Not us.

Early Observations

Our own lack of excitement and vision about being at the parish perfectly matched the attitude we found here. What we discovered at Nativity in the late 90s was a languid community aging in place. To better assess the situation in our first year, we engaged Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate to survey our congregation. When asked what attracted them to this church, 96 percent of parishioners identified "convenient parking" as the number one reason they were here. Here are a few others things we discovered.

- Kids hated our religious education program, and it was nearly impossible to find all the volunteer teachers we needed; nobody wanted to do it.
- There was no youth ministry; teenagers and young adults were no-shows at this church.
- The music wasn't bad: It was painfully, ear-achingly, "please, please, please, for the love of God stop!" bad.
- A line-up of rotating priest-celebrants guaranteed an uneven quality of preaching and, sometimes, conflicting messages.

- The experience of weekend Masses was moribund and depressing. We wouldn't have attended this church if we didn't work here.
- The congregation's level of giving wasn't paying the bills (and we had a bare bones budget to say the least). Some recent years had actually seen small deficits. The parish had virtually no savings or reserve. In a well-heeled community we were a relatively poor parish.
- The physical plant was dirty and no longer functional in significant ways. Deferred maintenance seemed to be the maintenance plan. A surprising amount of useable space had been converted to storage space, although no one was sure what we were storing.
- The grounds were neglected and overgrown. The entrance looked as if the place were permanently closed.
- The small staff was divided and deeply dysfunctional. Their work was done in complete isolation one from another. They were a singularly unproductive group, but nearly everything that was done in the parish—from answering the phone to arranging the flowers—was done by them. Gossip and lunch were the only tasks they lent themselves to with enthusiasm. It should be noted, however, that they were paid next to nothing.
- Signs posted everywhere from some unidentified authority issued emphatic instructions always punctuated with exclamation points: “Keep these doors closed at all times!” “Do not move this table!!” “No lemons in the garbage disposal!!!”
- Bulletin boards and posters everywhere tried to attract parishioners' attention to everything from lost puppies to the latest fundraiser. As far as we know, no one ever once paused to survey these posts.
- There was a weekly bulletin, but it was widely acknowledged that “no one reads it.” So, most weekends it was read for them from the pulpit following communion. Perhaps that's why most people left after communion.
- The “volunteers” were a law unto themselves, answering to no one (except, perhaps, the former pastor). They included:

1. *The Ushers/Money Counters.* These men (there were no women) were the pastor's police force, invested with the responsibility of enforcing the pastor's house rules.
 2. *The Religious Ed Teachers.* Nobody really knew what these women (there were no men) did in their classrooms. And no one seemed to care either.
 3. *The Cantors, Lectors, and Eucharistic Ministers.* They had the job of sharing the spotlight with the celebrant and looking like the ultimate insiders.
- Clergy and staff were treated by parishioners as employees—sometimes with hostility, often with indifference, and, when we were doing what they wanted us to, with condescension.
 - Complaint was a standard form of communication. Anything from failing to announce the Mass “intention” to the temperature inside the building would bring it on.
 - Inexplicably, there was a self-satisfied, self-congratulatory attitude the congregation as a whole seemed to share. Little else united them.
 - Besides the people who had been showing up for years, out of convenience or habit, the church was irrelevant and unknown in the community. The number one comment we heard in talking to people outside our congregation was, “I didn't know there was a church back there.”
 - A new non-denominational church in our neighborhood was meeting in a warehouse. It was half our age, twice our size, and growing. By their own acknowledgement, something like sixty percent of their congregation were former Catholics, including their pastor. As such, they were drawing more baptized Catholics than any Catholic church in north Baltimore.

These discoveries surprised and shocked us. But there was another little known fact that was more shocking still: Our parish was dying.

In what was already at that point a twenty-year pattern, between thirty and fifty people a year were literally dying or moving away, and nobody was replacing them.

And given the obvious age of the congregation, we knew that pace would continue to accelerate on our watch. We were on the path of steady and certain decline. In some ways, it already had the feeling of a deserted place.

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Privately we blamed the staff for our dying parish, publically we blamed no one, because we didn't even *acknowledge* the problem. We did everything we could to *hide* the problem. Still, we knew we wanted to do something about it.

The way we saw it, our parishioners were like customers, and we were here to serve them. Obviously, since the demographics of the community were stable, and we were in an affluent, robust area (we had a new

Macy's down the street), we thought the reason the parish was losing market share was simply because our customers weren't being well served and our product line wasn't that good.

Retail Religion

So we set out to change that. We put effort and imagination into creating programs that would impress parishioners and keep them coming back for more.

For children, we updated the curriculum in the religious ed program and introduced teacher training opportunities. We also developed creative and engaging seasonal events for kids—breakfast with Santa, Easter egg hunts, puppet shows, pageants, and plays.

We started a youth *ministry* program, which was essentially a youth *entertainment* program, with an endless array of activities to “get them involved” (which just meant getting them to show up): youth days, ski trips, movie nights, lock-ins, and dances.

We recruited musical talent to provide professional quality music in a variety of styles for our worship services. We also got into the business of hosting concerts and recitals.

We offered all kinds of fellowship programs: receptions, bus trips, and lectures. We redesigned the bulletin and published a glossy annual report. We started a website (before many churches had websites). We expanded member care as far as we could dream up ways to take it, from hosting complimentary lunches for funerals to coffee service after daily Mass.

It was a waste of time. In hindsight, the situation was reminiscent of the Red Queen’s race in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*:

Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!²

The more we provided, the faster we had to run just to stay in the same place—but the more we provided, the more was demanded. Just like Alice, who didn’t pause to reflect on why she was running an absurd exercise for the insatiable Queen, we hadn’t considered why we were doing what we were doing or what we were accomplishing.

Unbeknownst to us, what we were dealing with was a consumer culture. We didn’t understand what that was. Consumer culture arose out of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of general literacy.³ It’s great if you’re a retail establishment making money from it. It’s not so great if you’re a church. In fact, consumer culture erodes the sustainability of church communities because it allows the congregant