

DIVINE RENOVATION

From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish

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1

HOUSE OF PRAYER

Remembering Our Identity and Purpose

The key to regaining the buildings of every parish I've ever led was to address the very reason they were turned over to community groups to begin with. It's all about identity.

There is much talk in our Church today about crises. We are told that we have a vocations crisis, a family crisis, a marriage crisis, a financial crisis, a faith crisis, a sexual abuse crisis, a leadership crisis and a [insert your own here _____] crisis. While there may be much valuable discussion around these issues, I contend that our deepest crisis is an identity crisis, and that these other crises are but symptoms of this deepest crisis of all: we have forgotten who we are and what we are called to do as a Church. When this happens, we soon forget not only what our buildings are for, but why we exist as a Church to begin with.

The Temple

This present age is not the first time the People of God have needed to recall their true identity. Over the last few years, I have had the pleasure of leading groups on pilgrimages to the Holy

Land. I love doing it and it is always an unforgettable experience. On our first full day in Jerusalem, we walk down the Mount of Olives, from which you have an amazing view of the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock. Before ascending to the Garden of Gethsemane, we pause at the Church of *Dominus Flevit*, the site associated with Jesus' weeping over the city of Jerusalem. (Luke 19:41-44) It is not uncommon to hear tour guides telling the story of how Jesus cleansed the temple of money changers because he was angry that commerce was taking place within the sacred precincts. This is a most common understanding of this action of Jesus, but it is misunderstood. It has more to do with card socials and Scout gatherings than we might imagine.

Fr. Robert Barron, in his beautiful *Catholicism* series, echoes the research of biblical scholar N.T. Wright in speaking about the intentionality of Jesus presenting himself as the Jewish Messiah as he enters the city of Jerusalem. Descending the Mount of Olives riding a colt and entering the city from the East through the Golden Gate, says Barron, would be the equivalent of entering Washington, D.C., in a black stretch limo, with U.S. flags mounted on the front of the car, accompanied by a police escort. The point is that everything was planned and intentional. One of the tasks the Messiah was to fulfill was the restoration of the temple. In Mark's Gospel, after Jesus enters the city to the sound of Messianic acclamations, he immediately enters the temple. Then something odd happens. Saint Mark tells us that Jesus then took a look around, checked the time, realized it was late and left with the Twelve to spend the night in Bethany.

It is not until the next morning that Jesus enters the temple and begins to drive out those who are selling and buying. He upsets the tables of the money changers "and would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple." (Mark 11:15-16) This was not a spontaneous, passionate outburst by Jesus. It was not a moment of righteous indignation at finding a marketplace in his Father's house. It was a cool and collected Jesus who intentionally made a symbolic gesture. He was not shocked at what he found in the

temple. He had been going there his whole life, and buying and selling animals was a necessary part of the worship of the people, as the temple was where sacrificial offerings were made. It is not even anger towards the money changers who added an exchange rate when changing currency from multiple nations into the unique temple currency, the only money with which the sacrificial animals could be bought. Notice that Jesus' action does not just interrupt those making money, but even those who were buying or even trying to enter the inner courts of the temple. Jesus shuts down the entire temple for a period of time and invokes the authority of the prophets. The first quote Jesus gives the astonished crowds is from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 56:7); he then makes a reference to Jeremiah's prophecy against the first temple (Jeremiah 7:11): "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:17)

The Jeremiah reference, when viewed in its original context, would seem to identify the robbers with those charging exorbitant amounts to people who had no other options, just like hot dog vendors in sports stadiums today. However, the key to understanding Jesus' actions is the first quote, from Isaiah, where God reminds the Jewish people that the temple was intended to be a house of prayer for all people, that God's exclusive choice of Israel was intended towards the most generous inclusion of all nations:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...
 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 And make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house shall be called
 a house of prayer for all people. (Isaiah 56:6)

Most scholars agree that this part of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 56–66) was written in the sixth century BC, and that this prophecy comes from the time of exile before the temple was rebuilt in 520 BC, the original temple of Solomon having been completely destroyed by the Babylonians. It is clearly God's

intention not only for the temple, but for the nation of Israel itself, to be a conduit of salvation for all people. We find hints of this great universal vocation throughout the Scriptures, but especially in the prophets and, in particular, in the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 49, in what is known as the Second Song of the Servant, was written during the exile and speaks of the restoration of the people of Israel, but goes on to expand Israel's vocation:

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
(Isaiah 49:6)

Mindful of this call, he who was declared in that very temple from the lips of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32) to be the embodiment and fulfillment of this prophecy now beheld a temple that did not reflect the radical inclusion of all nations through the exclusive choice of Israel. Rather, he beheld a people who had forgotten their vocation, who had robbed the Gentiles of their inclusion into God's covenant. They had decided that it was enough to keep it all for themselves. They were content with the status quo, they were content with their worship and ritual, and they had forgotten their purpose – their identity that the prophets of Israel had pointed out, often at their own cost.

The very architecture of the temple communicated this theology of exclusion. Gentiles could ascend to the sacred Temple Mount and be present in what was known as “The Court of the Gentiles,” but were forbidden to enter the gates of the temple. From there, access to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary, was limited by varying degrees of proscription. After the Court of the Gentiles was the Court of the Women, then the Court of the Israelites, to which only Jewish men could be admitted. Next was the Court of the Priests, and lastly the Holy of Holies, into which only the High Priest could enter once a year. The Holy of

Holies originally housed the Ark of the Covenant in Solomon's Temple, and was separated by a veil, the same veil that was torn in two when Jesus died on the cross. By his death and resurrection, Jesus allows the temple of his body to be destroyed and rebuilt so that in his person, he manifests the new temple of God, where earth is joined to heaven. In this temple there are no more walls of separation. (Ephesians 2:14) There is now no Jew and Greek, no male and female. (Galatians 3:28) All are priests and have access to the Holy of Holies. Jesus fulfills in his person the destiny of Israel. All of the ancient prophecies of radical inclusion are fulfilled exclusively by this only Son of God, the Son of David, Jesus the Messiah. The mission of inclusion is handed on to the New Israel, the ones who are called out by Jesus, his *ekklesia*, to go and make disciples of all nations. But then, we too would eventually forget this and become satisfied with keeping it all for ourselves.

Déjà Vu

The identity crisis in our Church today is not unlike the one that existed at the time of Jesus. It is said that it's not so much that the Church of Christ has a mission, as that the mission of Jesus Christ has a Church. We, however, have so forgotten our essential missionary calling that we have contented ourselves with maintenance and serving ourselves. That the Church exists for the sake of mission has been asserted by popes and theologians continuously for the last 50 years, but most Catholics perceive mission as something that a select few carry out in far-off places, and most parishes, crippled by a culture of maintenance, focus at best on meeting the needs of parishioners. Like Israel at the time of Jesus, we have become robbers of the people God has appointed us to reach, that his "salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

April 14, 2012, was the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*. My home city of Halifax was deeply affected by these commemorations, as it had played a key role in the rescue operations. As I write these words, I am aware that the cemetery that

holds the remains of those victims who were recovered is a short distance away. On the night of the anniversary, I watched the old black-and-white movie *A Night to Remember*. It reminded me that many of the lifeboats launched from the stricken vessel that night were no more than half filled. In fact, in the eighteen lifeboats that launched from the ship, there were a total of 472 unused spaces. After the ship disappeared below the water, around 1,500 people floundered in the icy waters while the lifeboats sat at a safe distance and watched. Only two of the eighteen lifeboats went to rescue survivors. They transferred passengers to maximize free space, and it is a recorded fact that some of the first-class passengers complained about terrible inconvenience. By the time those in the lifeboats had recalled their purpose and had gone among the victims, only nine people were found alive, and three of these eventually succumbed to hypothermia.

As I watched the movie, it struck me that this was a metaphor for the Church. We exist for mission. Like Jesus, we have been sent to “seek and save” those who are perishing, and there are plenty of seats available in the lifeboats. Yet, so often as a Church, we sit at a safe distance, more concerned with our own needs and comfort. Perhaps if a few people swam over to us, we would help them, but going to them? This is not just a question of our comfort zones being challenged – it is totally outside of our frame of reference, because we have so thoroughly forgotten our identity. Lifeboats exist to rescue people. So does the Church. We maintain our lifeboats, we paint them, we serve the people in them and keep them in good order and hold card socials, but we do not use them for the purpose for which they were created. Any crew member who would dare to disrupt life on the lifeboat will quickly hear a chorus of complaints from the passengers who are adverse to being inconvenienced in any way. We lament the tragedy of the loss of faith, secularization, church closures and so on, but it does not occur to us to pick up the oars and row.

The Mission

So, if we exist for mission, what is the mission of the Church? To answer this question, we turn to the last verses of Matthew's Gospel, to the passage known as the Great Commission. (Matthew 28:19-20) Here, the wavering disciples are told to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Translations of this text vary slightly, but what is obvious is that Jesus gave his nascent Church four tasks: go, make, baptize and teach. Of these four imperatives, we find in the original Greek that one of them is a finite verb and three are participles. A finite verb is always the grammatical hinge of a sentence, and participles are verbal nouns that, although they qualify a sentence, ultimately make sense only in reference to the finite verb. So it is with the Great Commission. One of these verbs is the grammatical centre of the sentence and thus, also, the theological centre. Over the years, when speaking at conferences, I have asked groups to choose which of the four verbs is the hinge of the Great Commission and, therefore, the heart of our purpose, the very task that gives us our identity. I have asked groups of lay people, priests and even bishops. I have asked large groups and small groups, and all with the same result. The right answer is always chosen by the least amount of people, and not just by a few but by an insanely small minority. Once, from a group of 600, only two people chose the right answer. Once, from a group of over 3,000 people, only about 20 people chose the right answer. These disproportionate results reflect the identity crisis that afflicts our Church and reveal a deep, unconscious bias against the very task that the Lord placed at the heart of his mandate.

Which do you choose: to go, to make, to baptize or to teach?

Here's the answer:

The finite verb is "make" – literally, "make disciples" (*matheteusate*). This task is the very heart of the Great Commission, and it is around the making of disciples that all the other mission-

ary aspects of the Church revolve: the going, the baptizing and the teaching. Think about this: in recent centuries, the Catholic Church had the distinction of being a great missionary Church. We went. We have a rich didactic tradition and are famed for our schools and universities and curricula. We teach. We surely know how to baptize and celebrate all the other sacraments, but our one pastoral weakness, the task we struggle with the most, is that which lies at the very heart of Christ's commission to the Church: to make disciples.

Making Disciples

What do we mean by making disciples? In Church culture, we often use terms such as “disciple” or “apostle” without understanding the meaning of these words, but “disciple” is so key to our mandate from Jesus that we ought to know its meaning. The word in Greek for “disciple” is *mathetes*, which, in turn, comes from the verb *manthanein*, meaning “to learn” (think of the term “math”). To be a disciple is to be a learner. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be engaged in a lifelong process of learning from and about Jesus the master, Jesus the teacher. The English term “disciple” comes from the Latin *discipulus*, and provides the connotation that this learning process is not haphazard, but intentional and disciplined. To become a disciple is to commit to such a process of growth.

But how many of our parishioners does this term honestly describe? We all have people in our churches who are passionate about their faith, committed and hungry to grow and learn, but they are, sadly, a small minority who often are considered a little odd by “normal Catholics.” When I speak to pastors, they will often admit that this designation describes about 6 to 10% of regularly attending Catholics – at most, 20%, if a parish is particularly vibrant. We have a real problem before us. It is the membership of our churches who are called to be making disciples, but most have not yet become disciples themselves. A further obstacle to this task is that being an adult learner in the faith is viewed as

entirely optional and non-essential. We value it for children and teenagers, but somehow think that adults do not need to learn, grow or mature. Catechesis in Catholic circles usually means what we do with children. Although the laity of our Church is more educated and professional than at any other time in history, the corresponding literacy in things of faith, theology, scripture and the spiritual life lags far behind.

Over the last 50 years, our society has witnessed what can arguably be called the most accelerated social change in human history. As we have moved through several paradigm shifts in the last generation, the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church in the West remains, for the most part, unchanged from what existed prior to this state of flux. Culture supported faith and church attendance. Demographics supported our pastoral development through the birth of children and the movement of migrants. We just had to build it and people would come. I do not believe we were particularly good at making disciples 50 years ago, but it was not obviously to our detriment. 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 “practising Catholics.” In a sense, we got away with not making disciples, because the culture propped it all up. Fast forward through the 60s, the sexual revolution, mass media, new media, post-modernism, materialism, relativism, individualism, hedonism and every other “ism” we can think of and all of a sudden the fault lines are revealed for all to see.

Hundreds of thousands of faithful, believing Catholics carry the enormous burden of children and grandchildren who have abandoned “the faith.” These faithful Catholics carry the extra burden of blaming themselves for this situation, unsure of what they did wrong: after all, they did for their children what their parents did for them. Pointing fingers is, well, pointless. The fact is that the rules have all changed. We no longer have the cultural props we had before, and the social current has turned against us. The only solution going forward is to return to what Jesus asked

of us 2,000 years ago: to not just make believers, or “practising Catholics,” but to make disciples. To make *disciples*. That’s it! This is the heart of the matter and the lens through which we are to evaluate all activity of the Church – all pastoral programs, all expenditures and all use of our buildings.

Evangelization

How do we make disciples? If a disciple is one who learns, who yearns to grow, who hungers for knowledge, how does this happen? We know that just because someone “believes” in Jesus or goes to church does not necessarily mean they have this hunger. Something must happen to awaken this hunger: that something is evangelization. We know that “to evangelize” literally means to announce good news, but what is this Good News? I suspect that many of us could fill pages describing the Good News of Jesus or the Good News about Jesus. It is multi-layered and complex. A part of us resists the temptation to oversimplify things and ends up giving in to the temptation of unnecessarily complicating them. We can speak of the message of “God with us,” of God’s Kingdom or Reign, of God’s mercy, of God’s unconditional love, of the forgiveness of sins, of God’s love being revealed on the cross, and of the defeat of death through the resurrection of Jesus. We can speak of the truth that we are never alone, that God desires to dwell in us, to consume us and have us consume him, but in the end it is possible to simplify the message into one word: Jesus. In Jesus, we have the very embodiment of God’s salvation presence, love, mercy and life. We know in the Gospels that he who was the proclaimer of the Good News of the Kingdom becomes the Good News and the embodiment of that Kingdom. To receive this Good News, to be evangelized, is not only to hear these wonderful truths, to know about them, but to come to know him – to not just believe in him, but to love him and to be in love with him. Only then will our hearts sing and our song be heard. Only when we come to encounter him as alive and real, he who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, do we then desire to walk his way, hunger for his truth and seek to live his life.

The difficult truth for us as pastors, leaders and people who care about our church is that so many of our people have never come to know him personally, and therefore have no hunger for him. We still have the shadow of duty and fear as a religious motivation hanging over us. Scripture tells us, however, that where this is active, perfect love has not been discovered. (1 John 4:18) It is most often not a willful reduction of faith to simple *knowledge about* Jesus, but a lack of awareness that it is even possible to know him and to be known and loved personally by him. We are often like people who live in a black-and-white world who cannot begin to conceive of the reality of colour. The fact that so many Catholics are utterly convinced that they are missing nothing shows that the weekly experience of faith and “religion” acts as a kind of vaccine to the full power of the Christian faith. Many who are no longer held in the clutches of duty, guilt or fear walk away, rejecting a hollow version of the real thing. As a result, we have all too often capitulated as leaders and formed pastoral methodologies designed to feed those who have no hunger. We give in to pressure from distracted and bored parishioners to preach shorter and shorter homilies, aware that many would be quite pleased if we just dispensed with the whole thing completely and got to the communion bit so that the mad dash to the parking lot could commence.

What is to be done? The very thing that our popes from the time of Paul VI to Francis have been telling us. There must be a New Evangelization (we will be speaking about the development of this teaching in the next chapter). Jesus Christ must be proposed anew! We must break through the invisible suits of armour that so many in our pews wear. We must labour to create spaces for people to come to know Jesus as the living Lord, awaken that hunger and then begin to form them, to make them disciples. We must rediscover our identity and place the heart of the Lord’s mandate for his Church at the heart of everything we do, so that at the heart of every parish there will be a community of growing, maturing believers who are committed to a lifelong process of disciplined

learning, who are discovering their God-given talents, who are prepared to serve and eventually to become apostles. We must labour so that a Church of disciples may eventually, someday, be considered normal.

From Disciples to Apostles

Being a Church of disciples, however, is just a part of our calling. This Church of disciples must “go” and “make disciples” of all nations, of all peoples. We are mandated by the Lord to proclaim this Good News not just to lukewarm or fallen-away Catholics, but to all who do not know Christ and his Church. We are called to go out to the fringes of society, to the poor, the rich, the vulnerable and those who hide in their gated communities. We are called to go. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (John 20:21) The Greek word that means “to send” is *apostellein*. An apostle is one who is sent. To take up the Great Commission of Jesus means that we have been sent, that we are apostles. That this sending constitutes the nature of the Church is affirmed when we speak of the Church as being apostolic. This is the earliest meaning of this term. Later it would be associated with the ministry of the Twelve and their successors, and their role in preserving the content of the Church’s faith. From the mouth of Jesus himself we see its first meaning. We are a Church that is sent. The Latin equivalent for *apostellein* is the verb *mittere*, which gives us the noun *missio* and the English word “mission.” Thus, an apostle is a missionary. That the Church is apostolic means that it is missionary by nature: it is who we are; it is our deepest identity. “How are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” says Saint Paul. (Romans 10:15) Disciples must eventually become apostles.

Several years ago, I was sitting in a coffee shop in the Montreal airport with some friends, discussing parish renewal and evangelization, when an image of the Church came to me. The Church is like a photocopier. It exists to photocopy paper, to make copies. It does this by drawing the paper into itself. This is evangelization. Then it prints, copies, staples and punches holes. This is disciple-

ship (baptized, taught, formed). Then it spits out the paper with the imprinted word that can go and change the world; after all, history has proven that the pen is mightier than the sword. This is missioning. The Church is at its best when it experiences this kind of cycle. She evangelizes and makes disciples and sends them out as missionaries to go and evangelize, to make more disciples who can be baptized and taught, and eventually sent out. When the Church is healthy, she does this. When the Church is not healthy, when she is turned into herself, she has forgotten her great calling to be *lumen gentium*, a light to the nations, just as Israel had forgotten at the time of Jesus. In this state of forgetfulness, the Church becomes like an overheated and jammed photocopier that sits in a corner, collects dust and is eventually forgotten.

Something must be done. Drastic action is required. Over the last four years, in my present parish of Saint Benedict, after overturning a few figurative card tables, we did regain control of our facilities. Since then, we have seen almost 2,000 people participate in Alpha, with 20% to 30% being non-churchgoers. We have run hundreds of different faith formation events or programs and have seen hundreds of lives changed and transformed as people encountered the person of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Through these experiences, they have come to know God as their Father and have come alive in their experience of God's family, the Church. All this through the grace of God, which has enabled us to rediscover our new identity through Pope John Paul II's call for the New Evangelization, whose roots are in the Second Vatican Council.