

FOREWORD BY FR JAMES MALLON

# Divine Renovation Apprentice

Learning to Lead a  
Disciple-Making Parish



Fr Simon Lobo, CC

  
garratt  
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## Culture Shock

While I was living in Detroit, I made it out to a couple of NHL hockey games at the old Joe Louis Arena (affectionately known as “The Joe”). The late founder of the Companions of the Cross, Fr. Bob Bedard, cheered for the Ottawa Senators as a boy in the 1930s and again when they made a comeback in the 1990s. I share his loyalties. Still, having the chance to see the Red Wings play on home ice was awesome. It was probably some of the best live hockey I will ever get to watch. The fans made it known that “Detroit is Hockeytown!” The atmosphere of that arena spoke volumes about the enthusiasm and the inner convictions of everyone present. It made you want to be a part of it.

Fr. James has spoken and written about the powerful impact of culture. He has often used the analogy of an iceberg. We are aware of the 10 percent above the surface (what we write down and profess to be our cultural values), but it is the 90 per cent that is hidden below the water that is the most dangerous—the unspoken and, sometimes, unconscious beliefs and expectations that are lived out as an organization. I recently watched a talk by Bill Hybels, an evangelical pastor from Chicago and a world-renowned leader, in which he spoke about the role of culture within a team. Similarly, the first few pages of Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran’s book *Rebuilt: The Story of a Catholic Parish* (which I would recommend to priests and lay leaders) mention the primacy of culture.

For the first five years, before I arrived at Saint Benedict, the team had been engaged in a culture war. So many things that are taken for granted in a Catholic parish are unhealthy and keep the focus on maintenance. We tend to do what we are familiar with and what will feed us, the folks who are already members of “the parish club.” This is an inevitable death sentence. For example, it’s not normal for Catholics to invite friends, family, and the unchurched to their parish. But why not?

A few years ago, the parish staff had a major revelation when they discovered that Alpha—a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith and a tool for evangelization—is not just a good course to run once or twice a year. Alpha is a culture! It is a way of being Church that can change what is below the surface. When used properly, Alpha can influence several areas of parish life: hospitality, fellowship, service, invitation, evangelization, discipleship, leadership, prayer, reading Scripture, growing in spiritual gifts, worship, and more. You will find more on Alpha in chapters 24 and 25 in this book.

When it comes to changing parish culture, a first, manageable step might involve creating a genuinely warm and hospitable environment. I love displaying an image of Clint Eastwood playing one of his gruff characters as an example of what the typical church usher looks like. At Saint Benedict, our hospitality ministry consists of dozens of joyful women and men who simply smile and shake a person’s hand as he or she enters church—maybe for the first time.

During my first week when I served as chaplain at Wayne State University, I remember walking into the lounge at lunchtime and seeing a fourth-year student (the old guard) and a brand-new student sitting with their backs to each other. I went over

and instinctively welcomed the new person and introduced her to the other student—they had not spoken until that point. It seemed so obvious to me that a Catholic chaplaincy should have a warm atmosphere where people can seek refuge and be known personally. I took it for granted that the more mature members would share this cultural value and know how to be hospitable.

### *What do I want you to know?*

In the words of management consultant Peter Drucker, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” You can come up with the greatest plans in the world, but if you do not address the unconscious and unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that exist in most Catholic parishes, very little change will occur. Keep in mind that culture is formed by what we reward and what we tolerate.

As in my experience at the Red Wings game, imagine if we could create a Church culture and an atmosphere that would cause even outsiders to say, “That was awesome. I want to be part of that.”

### *What do I want you to do?*

Come up with a list of some of the things that you and your parishioners take for granted. Plan one small cultural change. For starters, I would recommend something around welcome and hospitality.

Do not be surprised if parishioners need the priest and lay leaders to model a radical kind of hospitality in a Catholic context. For example, most Sunday mornings Fr. James and Ron Huntley, our former Director of Pastoral Ministries (he is

now the lead coach in the Divine Renovation Network), would stand outside greeting people as they arrived for Mass. This is a warm first encounter for people as they walk in. It also sets a great example for the hospitality team.

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