

## Praise for *Thriving Faith*

“Boy, do we need this book now! Fr James Mallon has given us an uplifting message for today—a book full of encouragement, resourcefulness, and hope. Drawing on Scripture, prayer, and his own life, Fr Mallon has written an engaging work that will touch countless lives and give readers the tools to face the future with faith restored and, yes, thriving.”

—Deacon Greg Kandra, blogger and author of *The Busy Person’s Guide to an Extraordinary Life*

“Fr Mallon has perfected the art of teaching through story, such that he would make the Greatest of Rabbis proud! Each chapter, an entertaining parable of personal experience mixed with key Scriptures, so captivated me that I didn’t realize I was learning profound truths of the faith. A fresh invitation to be transformed through the power of God, *Thriving Faith: Discipleship in Uncertain Times* ignites a passion in all to be attentive hearers and eager doers of the Word—no matter what the world throws at you! The perfect guide for any disciple of Jesus!”

—Kelly Wahlquist, founder of WINE: Women In the New Evangelization, Director of the Archbishop Flynn Catechetical Institute in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and author of *Created to Relate: God’s Design for Peace and Joy*

SAMPLE

# Thriving Faith

**DISCIPLESHIP IN  
UNCERTAIN TIMES**

FR JAMES MALLON





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# Introduction

Uncertainty is an accurate word to describe the times we inhabit. Throughout most of the world, the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic have been all but lifted, and we are learning what it means to live with the Covid-19 virus, which means living with uncertainty. Many of our churches are experiencing 50 to 60 percent Sunday attendance compared to pre-pandemic numbers. When will they come back? Will they return? Who will return? We are uncertain.

How will the months or years of restrictions on our behavior—including how we experience church—impact us going forward? We are uncertain. How will all these changes impact diocesan structures throughout the Western world that were already feeling the strain of the cultural and social shifts over the last fifty years? We are uncertain.

These were my questions as I returned to parish ministry in August 2020 after a three-year stretch working half-time with Divine Renovation Ministry and half-time for my archdiocese. The conviction that the Covid-19 pandemic was not simply an interruption but a disruption was one factor that led me back to parish ministry. So much was uncertain. So much had changed, so much had to be learned, and so much had to be discovered.

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The parish that I was asked to go to was one of many parishes in my diocese that had undergone a process of merging with other parishes. Like most of the parishes in my diocese, these five had been experiencing rapid decline for years and the demographic and financial outlook was not encouraging. On January 1, 2020, five communities of faith (four parishes and one mission to the Polish community) housed in four different locations became one new canonical and legal parish under the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Just over three months later, everything was shut down. I arrived on August 1 as pastor of a flock that was meager and masked, scattered and scared, confused and confounded, frustrated but faith-filled.

In the midst of uncertainty, we clung to the rock who is Christ and to that which remains unchanging in uncertain times. The invitation of Jesus to come and follow him, to be his disciples, echoes down through the ages to bring uncertainty to times of certainty and certainty to times of uncertainty. In the midst of so much change brought about by the pandemic and parish mergers, one thing I knew was certain was that the Lord was calling this new parish to become a community of missionary disciples.

This book was created from a number of homilies that I gave in my new parish in that first year. I am grateful to the editorial team at The Word Among Us for approaching me with the idea and doing an amazing job taking my reflections and transforming them into book form. The core message of these twelve chapters were initially preached to a community in the midst of the uncertainty of the pandemic, parish closures, and amalgamations. They were an attempt to cast a vision for



a different way of being Church, to inspire and mobilize for our parish to embrace its missionary calling, and to help my parishioners through uncertainty.

I know that there are many parishes that are, or will be, going through similar experiences. I hope and pray that these reflections will assist you to respond personally and communally to the call of the Lord to be parishes that care for the flock, but, most of all, are ready to put out into the deep water to let down our nets for a catch. Parishes are people. Parishes are transformed when people are transformed, and all parishioners—by their yes to becoming missionary disciples in uncertain times—can impact a parish, even a dying parish, so that it will not simply survive but thrive!

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# When Overwhelming Need Meets Underwhelming Resources

**Key Scripture: Matthew 14:13–21**

**B**eginnings can be tenuous things.

I was recently appointed as pastor for Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Previously I had spent many fruitful years as pastor of Saint Benedict Parish, launching and building Divine Renovation Ministry and later serving my brother priests in the Diocese of Halifax-Yarmouth. I began this new season of priestly ministry eager to apply the lessons I had learned over the past decade. My goal was to help Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish experience new life, new growth, and renewal. I also looked forward to learning new lessons alongside the amazing men and women of the parish.

The parish was a new community, composed of four previously separate parishes as well as a Polish mission. I decided to tour the four campuses when I first arrived. During

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that time, I met many different people and heard about the histories of each of the communities that now made up Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Normally when a priest comes to a parish as pastor, he has to absorb but one story and history; here I was trying to deal with five separate histories. I remember returning home that first night feeling overwhelmed—not only by the daunting task of transforming these separate parish cultures into one missionary focused community but also by the breadth of administrative demands. My tour that day revealed a total of fourteen buildings in various states of health across the four campuses. Fourteen!

I thought of the words of Jesus, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37). In our parish, the buildings were abundant, but the parishioners were few! I had excitedly launched into this new adventure only to come crashing into an inescapable reality: overwhelming need in a time of underwhelming resources. It presented a real challenge.

Somewhat nervously I prepared my first homily as pastor, and as I did, my apprehension started to melt away. The Gospel reading indicated by the lectionary was the story of the feeding of the five thousand from Matthew 14. You are probably familiar with that story.

Jesus, saddened by the death of John the Baptist, had withdrawn from the press of people and gone by boat to a deserted place. The crowds, however, followed him on foot. When Jesus stepped off the boat, he caught sight of the people, and his heart was moved with compassion. He spent time with them, healing their sick until late in the day. By then it

was too late for them to go to the villages to buy food, so Jesus instructed his disciples to feed the crowd. When the twelve gathered up what they had, it amounted to only five loaves of bread and two fish.

Jesus told his disciples to bring the food to him. He said a blessing, broke the loaves, and gave the food to his disciples to distribute. Lo and behold, everyone ate their fill, and there were twelve baskets of food remaining.

This was a perfect reading for our parish's situation. Why? Because this Gospel passage speaks to the very human experience of being overwhelmed by need and realising that we have an underwhelming amount of resources to deal with the need. As I reflected further, I realized that the powerful lessons in this Gospel apply not only to communities but also to our personal lives.

All of us, at one time or another, have experienced the unpleasant reality of being overwhelmed by something or someone. It might be a situation in the workplace or in the family, a broken or toxic relationship we cannot deal with, or some other challenge (or set of challenges) that life throws at us. If your heart is beating, you have faced the reality of having a need without having enough resources to meet that need.

## **Living Jesus' Response**

In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus models for us three responses we can offer when faced with an overwhelming need: (1) feel, (2) surrender, and (3) act.

### *Feel*

Why am I starting with feelings? After all, the Church often says that we should not be ruled by our emotions, right?

Most of us, most of the time—even if we think of ourselves as incredibly rational people and deep thinkers—react not out of what we think but out of what we feel. Our emotions really do guide us. Have you ever reacted poorly to something that was objectively not that big a deal? And afterward tried to figure out why you responded with such anger, disappointment, or frustration? You probably acted out of your emotions. What we feel is important. In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus acts from his feelings.

The story opens as Jesus retreats to a quiet, restful spot away from the press of people. He is probably exhausted, and he's grieving the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist, at the hands of King Herod. He has every right to be immersed in his own pain, his own questions, his own anxiety. To make matters worse, the secluded spot to which Jesus and his disciples retire is full of people. These are needy people, “intruding” on his space.

How does Jesus respond? What is his emotional reaction? He responds with compassion.

Now, I probably would not have reacted compassionately. I would have felt frustrated. I would have thrown a pity party, decorated with a bit of anger: “Poor me! I can’t even get a simple day off!”

Yet Jesus lifts his eyes from his own pain, his own needs and concerns, and he truly sees the crowd in *their* need.

Jesus confronts the reality of the crowd not with a litany of his own frustration. He goes beyond his own needs and preferences, and what he sees elicits his compassion.

The word St Matthew uses to describe the compassion of Jesus is difficult to translate into English. When we think about feeling something intensely, we associate it with the heart. The word Matthew uses, however, comes from a Greek word, *splankna*, that originally referred to the intestinal region. Although being moved in the *splankna* can rightfully be translated as “from the heart,” it has a more visceral meaning: something that is felt in the gut.

This is an important word for St Luke. He uses it to describe how Jesus is moved when he encounters the widow of Nain at the funeral of her only son (Luke 7:13). It’s the reaction of the good Samaritan as he beholds the broken man on the side of the road (Luke 10:33) and the father’s reaction in the parable of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:20). *Splankna* is God’s response to our need for salvation, proclaimed each morning in the Liturgy of the Hours when we sing about “the tender compassion of our God” (see Luke 1:78). This compassion may cause the heart to burn, but its origin is a few inches below the heart.

Compassion should be the first step for us—as parishes and as individuals. It is so easy, in these challenging and changing times, to be caught in the gravitational pull of our particular issues and agendas. We get locked in the prison of our uncertainty, pain, and anguish. But the Lord says to us, “Can you take your eyes off these things and just recognize the ‘crowd’ before you?”

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Our parishes are often big, and even those on the smaller side have problems that seem quite large. These capture our attention. If we can take our eyes off ourselves, we can be free to truly see the suffering and reality of people around us. Only then can we become free to feel the compassion of God and share it with others.

### *Surrender*

Jesus says one of the most ridiculous things in this Gospel story. The disciples are trying to be very practical. They come to Jesus and say, “Lord you know it’s getting late. We should send the people away so they can get something to eat”. Jesus responds: “You don’t have to send them away; you give them something to eat!” The disciples are rightly a little put off.

After all, there were five thousand men to feed, plus the women and children. All the disciples had were five measly loaves of bread and two skinny fish! Jesus’ command must have sounded completely absurd. The disciples knew that these provisions could never meet the overwhelming need of the crowd. What Jesus asked of them was not humanly possible.

The same is true of our communities and of our own lives. What Jesus asks of us as parishes—that we become fruitful in mission—is humanly impossible. The same is true of what he asks of us personally: that we become like him!

We do not have enough resources to accomplish these things. We could be the richest, most well-endowed parish



in the world, and we still could not do it. We could have all the wealth and power in the world, and we still would not accomplish what the Lord wants us to do. And the truth is, most of our communities are not rich, and most of us do not possess a great deal of power. We will always have inadequate resources relative to God's plan for us.

However, Jesus instructs his disciples in the Gospel story to do something specific: to bring him their inadequate store of food. Out of those five loaves and two fish, Jesus provides abundantly. For our part, as long as we consider the resources we have—our “loaves” and our “fish”—too meager to make a difference, we will fail to appreciate that the Lord can multiply them. When we hold back what little we have from the one who wants to give us everything good, he cannot work through us as he desires.

But if we surrender to Jesus what we have—our hopes, our dreams, our sense of nostalgia, our limited strength—Jesus multiplies and magnifies our simple offering, making the impossible possible. Through us Jesus feeds the multitude. He has done it before, and he will do it again.

We need to definitively declare that our parishes and our whole lives belong to Jesus. It is only through this kind of surrender that we truly experience the abundance of God's kingdom.

### *Act*

We act not simply for action's sake. We need to act *in obedience* to the Lord.

“

*If we surrender to Jesus what we have—our hopes, our dreams, our sense of nostalgia, our limited strength—Jesus multiplies and magnifies our simple offering, making the impossible possible.*

Think about this miracle. Jesus did not make the Sign of the Cross over the fish and, all of a sudden, BANG, a mountain of fish appeared. He did not make the Sign of the Cross over the bread and then BANG, an enormous basket of bread fell out of the sky. Out of such an abundance of food, the disciples would have freely fed everyone. That would have been easy. It would be easy to see the miracle first and then act.

Instead Jesus sent the disciples into the crowd with basically empty baskets. They were probably thinking that they were “dead meat”—or at least that they would look like complete idiots as they walked out with virtually nothing in their baskets. And yet as they went out in obedience, God performed a miracle: he fed the multitude.

The lesson is clear for us, as individuals and as parishes: We cannot wait for some perfect future or some perfect set of resources. We must act in obedience, believing that the Lord is going to come behind us and provide what we need.

## **Beginning the Journey**

For now I would like to focus on the first principle Jesus shows us: to feel. We explored the fact that Jesus had an emotional reaction when he saw the crowd. That is what I would like you to have: an emotional reaction. If we want to create thriving, vibrant parish communities, we must stop focusing only on our concerns and truly confront the reality of our brothers and sisters who live alongside us—not simply those whom we worship with but our neighbors,

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friends, and coworkers. I want to invite you to get out of the four walls of your church to walk the streets within the geographical boundaries of your parish.

Walk with your spouse or another family member, with a friend, or with one of your neighbors. You can spend time in areas with which you are familiar or get in your car or on a bus and range further afield, to places within your parish boundaries where you have not spent much time. I want you to see the joys, griefs, and struggles that make up the lives of your brothers and sisters. And I want you to have an emotional reaction.

This is the “homework” I gave the people of my own parish. I did it as well. I walked over six miles and tried to open myself to what was around me. As I walked, I prayed: “Lord, help me see what you see. Help me feel your compassion for ‘the crowd.’”

Friends, let us be moved in the deepest parts of our person, in our *splankna*. Like Jesus, let us be moved in our gut! If we do not care about the crowds “out there,” then what is the point of gathering “here,” in our church buildings? How will what happens inside impact the world outside?

I am reminded of something Pope Francis said:

If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures

which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37).<sup>1</sup>

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Take some time to reflect on the following questions, whether you are reading this book privately or reading it as part of a group. If you are making this journey with a group, share your answers with one another.

1. As you prayerfully read through the key Scripture passage for this chapter, what words, phrases, or images caught your attention or drew your focus? What might the Lord be communicating to you through them?
2. If you journeyed around your local neighborhood, what “moved your gut”? What situations did you witness that made you rejoice? What moved you with compassion as you paid special attention to the wants and needs of others?
3. Based on those experiences, what can you do as an individual to meet the needs of the people you encountered? What godly response to their situations can you offer? Take a moment and reflect on how your parish, as a faith community, might respond to specific needs in an individual and systemic way.