



**Re-Imagining What a
Catholic Parish Can Be:
A Destination for the
21st Century**

XXXIX
ACTS

“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:2

Introduction

Nothing happens outside of God’s providence and foreknowledge. Every event, no matter how dire or confusing it may be when it happens, no matter how unrelated it may appear to other events, is in fact at least allowed by God, if not directly willed.

This scriptural truth seems all the more necessary to remember in these unprecedented days we are living through. The personal, economic, and social fallout from COVID-19 is immense. We have witnessed heroic first responders stepping into the fray to care for the sick and dying, who are often left emotionally overwhelmed by what they have seen. Unemployment levels are approaching those of the Great Depression.¹ Stores of all kinds are having to limit the number of customers inside them, many having tape every six feet on the floor to ensure that people respect social distancing guidelines. The travel industry is posting record losses.² Countless small businesses are wondering if they will survive.³ Most importantly, we have been faced with great physical suffering and loss of life, many survivors having to say goodbye without the comfort of a funeral or being able to gather together with more than just a handful of family and friends in their time of grief.

As painful as it has been, COVID-19 has also served as a catalyst that’s forcing change in a number of significant ways. Schools have had to make the transition to online learning, and in the process are finding possible alternatives for the future that can positively transform education and bridge inequity.⁴ Many organizations have discovered that some employees can just as effectively, if not more so, work from home, and this trend is likely to grow.⁵

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Many families have re-discovered the value of time together. We are eating meals together, going for walks, playing games, and enjoying one another’s company in new ways. Even though churches have been closed, many families have gained a fresh perspective on what it means to be the first church. Stories of Holy Week celebrated at home have detailed washing one another’s feet, sharing personal reflections on the Scriptures, and renewing baptismal promises together. Many Catholics, suddenly unable to partake of the Eucharist, have discovered, or re-discovered, nourishment in the Word of God. These, and other graces, have come out of this painful time.

While COVID-19 has acted as a catalyst for various sectors of life in our country, in the Church it seems to be acting more as an *accelerant*.⁶ Convinced about the truth revealed in Romans 8:28, the purpose of

this paper is to seize this opportunity God is allowing us to rethink and re-imagine what Catholic parishes can be, even as we are rethinking how we live and do business.⁷

It will argue that now is the time to prayerfully and with utmost confidence in the Risen Lord Jesus retool our parishes so that they can become *centers of excellence* for the *priests* that serve there; the *lay staff* that serve alongside them; the *faithful* in the pews; the *fallen away*; and the *unchurched* in the community who suffer the nightmare that is life apart from God. Our experience in parish and diocesan life, as a pastor and lay staff, as well as our ministry with priests and staffs across the country, informs all that follows.

The purpose of this paper is to seize this opportunity God is allowing us to rethink and re-imagine what Catholic parishes can be.

*Imagine parishes with double and triple the number of priests.
Imagine parishes providing greatly increased access to the sacraments.
Imagine expanded parish staffs compensated in ways
that compare with secular, for-profit sectors.
Imagine Sunday Masses at full capacity.
We have. And we want to offer a way forward.*

We see these days as an opportunity allowed by God to seek the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with great confidence so as to retool our parishes for excellence! In particular, we see these days as an opportunity to face squarely the issues that are conducive to creating truly healthy parishes for this age in which we live.

Over the past number of years, many dioceses have had to deal with, or plan for, massive priestly retirements, declining vocations, limited financial resources, inadequate staffing, and a growing exodus from the Church—especially among the young.⁸ Many attempts have been made with the best of intentions to face these, and other, pressing matters. Many parishes have closed, clustered, or merged, but these actions have often caused not only great emotional and spiritual pain to the faithful but, in many cases, added to the exhaustion of priests and the staff that serve with them. In all honesty, many of these attempts have addressed symptoms rather than the root causes underlying them and have given the impression that the Church is simply managing decline. With some notable exceptions, the tendency throughout the country has been to “tweak” or “band-aid” the problems in parish and priestly life, rather than reimagine what a parish can be.

What Time Is It? A Change of Eras

Discussing the COVID-19 pandemic, a prominent columnist recently shared that “the America we stepped away from when we walked into the house, isn’t the America into which we’ll re-emerge. It will

look the same, but it will be different.”⁹ People are longing to “return to normal” after this time of social distancing, working from home and seemingly constant Zoom meetings, but it appears unlikely that is going to happen. Instead, we are going to have to adapt and adjust to a new normal. This longing for the past can often be the mindset of the Church. In our thinking about parishes, priestly life, and strategic and effective ways to share the gospel, it is paramount that we do our best to accurately assess what time we are living in, and adapt and adjust accordingly.

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The great Church historian, Christopher Dawson, wrote, “During the last two centuries the human race has experienced the greatest changes that it has known since the beginnings of history.”¹⁰ The need to re-imagine the parish is made all the more urgent by this sober and important truth: the world in which the Church lives, preaches and ministers, has changed dramatically. In many parts of our country, there is not only widespread ignorance of the faith but downright opposition to it. In his book, *The New-Anti-Catholicism*, Philip Jenkins writes, “A statement that is seen

as racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, or homophobic can haunt a speaker for years, but it is still possible to make hostile and vituperative public statements about Roman Catholicism without fear of serious repercussions.”¹¹

To be sure, there has never been a golden age of the Church, but certain significant changes are happening that make living as a Christian in the modern world challenging in ways that our grandparents would never have envisioned. To ignore this factor in making the decisions that will impact parish life, priestly life, and the life of the faithful for the next number of decades would not only be imprudent but disastrous.

St. Augustine famously wrote that Christianity had a quality that was “ever ancient and ever new.” The ancient and constant quality of the Church is her identity as the Body of Christ, the One who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” The Church is the “pillar and ground of truth.” Her continual newness is found in her remarkable ability down through the ages to proclaim the gospel in the languages and cultures of different times and places, and in devising strategies of living and preaching that gospel under many diverse circumstances. One of the paradoxical gifts of the Church is this combination of stability and flexibility; of knowing what never changes, and of understanding what needs to change so that the unchanging Lord can be incarnate in the world.

For close to 1500 years, the Church in the West has operated under what might be called a “Christendom” cultural mode. By this is meant that the Church was preaching and living in societies where Christianity had fertilized the soil from which the basic assumptions of life—the narrative of the human drama and its corresponding moral order—were prominent and for the most part accepted. At other times, though, the Church found herself living and preaching in what might be called an “apostolic” mode. In this situation, she found herself living among peoples whose basic orientation to life and societal structure was very different from Christianity. These are the two basic modes by which Christianity interacts with human societies: an apostolic mode and a Christendom mode.

Part of the great change noted by Christopher Dawson is the rapid transformation away from a Christendom mentality to a very different non-Christian, even anti-Christian one. We are seeing far-reaching changes taking root around us in understandings of morality, of human nature and human success, and in the overall cosmic narrative of life.¹² Simply put, we are no longer in a Christendom world; we have

entered a missionary era, and our witness to Jesus needs to take stock of the new apostolic situation; our way of thinking about, organizing, and equipping parishes does too.

Not surprisingly, there are many American Catholics who still have a Christendom mentality. They were raised with it, and it has become part of the assumed “furniture” of their minds. This mentality is understandable, but from a strategic point of view, disastrous. Many of our current Church strategies, our ways of organizing ourselves and interacting with the wider society, were developed during a Christendom age. They performed their work well for their time, but they have been increasingly ineffective as the cultural climate has changed. We should not be surprised, in fact we should take it as a given, that a time like ours, a time that can aptly be called a “change of the ages,” should demand significant adaptations as we continue our witness of the unchanging Truth to a rapidly changing world. The signs are all around us, and the need is urgent.¹³

Three Fundamental Convictions

This “change of the ages” informs much of what ACTS XXIX calls our three “fundamental convictions” and three “essential principles.” These convictions and principles, we think, have become even more crucial in light of the current pandemic.

The World is Crying

Before we entered into the current health crisis, extended time of social distancing, and economic shut-down, our world was crying. To be sure, the world has been crying ever since that fateful day in Eden, when our first parents unknowingly sold our race into slavery as they fell for the deception of the devil. Still, these days are unique. 2018 was the first time in one hundred years that life-expectancy in the United States of America declined for a third consecutive year—despite all of our comparative wealth, medical care, and scientific research. The last time this happened was 1918.¹⁴

Two events were responsible for the decline in life-expectancy one hundred years ago. The first event was World War I, which cost more than 116,000 American soldiers’ lives.¹⁵ The second event was the Spanish flu, which caused approximately 675,000 deaths in our country and 50,000,000 worldwide.¹⁶ However, we are not living in a time of world war, nor are we facing a pandemic that is causing the number of deaths the Spanish Flu did. COVID-19 is an incredibly contagious disease, the likes of which many in the health care profession admit they have never seen before, and the death toll is changing constantly, but thankfully we aren’t approaching the level of death caused by that earlier pandemic, at least not yet.¹⁷

What is to blame for our current decline in life-expectancy? Sociologists attribute it to what they call “deaths of despair:” suicide, cirrhosis of the liver, and the opioid crisis.¹⁸

Suicide:

- The suicide rate in the United States has increased 13 consecutive years
- It’s up nearly 30% since 1999; among rural Americans, it’s up 40%
- Suicides more than doubled the number of homicides in 2016¹⁹
- Amongst children ages 10-14, suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death
- The suicide rate in this age group has nearly tripled from 2007-2017²⁰

Cirrhosis of the liver:

- The number of 25-34-year-olds who die annually from alcohol related liver disease nearly tripled between 1999 and 2016
- There has been an average annual increase of approximately 10% each year in that time frame

The opioid crisis:

- We consume roughly 80% of the world's opioids even though we make up only 5% of the world's population

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Ours is a country that is losing the will to live, most especially among our youth—the future of our country. There are many reasons for this, but the ultimate cause is spiritual. When God is eclipsed, the creature made in His image and likeness loses any sense of ultimate meaning and purpose. Thus, the urgent and persistent call for a “new evangelization.”

The Church is Crying

It isn't only the world that is crying, though. Jesus founded the Church to be the means by which the cry of the world would and could be answered. It was and is to be through the Church, through her proclaiming the extraordinary news of the gospel and the sacramental life, through her witness to lives transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, that men and women would come to know the Father's love, their true identity as His beloved sons and daughters, and the re-creating power of that same Spirit.

The problem is that the Church is also crying right now.

The model of parish life is broken and often downright untenable.

This cry is heard in a variety of ways. One significant way is the sexual abuse crisis 2.0 and the related public disgrace of former Cardinal McCarrick. A recent Gallup poll revealed that 37% of Catholics are considering leaving the Church because of the sexual abuse crisis.²¹ We are witnessing a mass exodus of young people from the Catholic Church, and even among

those who remain, there is an increasing decline in belief in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.²² 26% of American adults now identify as “nones,” i.e., having no religious affiliation whatsoever.²³

For those who serve in parish ministry, however, whether ordained or lay, the cry is felt much more acutely. The model of parish life is broken and often downright untenable. Many priests and lay staff spend their days playing the parochial equivalent of “whack-a-mole,” with their collective heads on a swivel, going from crisis to crisis, and trauma to trauma.

The shortage of priests forces many to serve in roles for which they have neither the gifting nor the desire. Pastors are more often than not strapped for resources, both personnel and financial. This often means that the lay faithful do not have access to the pastoral care they deserve, nor the equipping to be sent out on mission to evangelize and sanctify. For those lay men and women who serve in the Church, it is a rare exception where they are paid a truly just and living wage, not to mention sufficiently surrounded by other brothers and sisters with complementary gifts who can share in the work of ministry.²⁴ All of these factors, and many more, frequently leave priests feeling exhausted, lonely, frustrated, abandoned,

living unhealthy lifestyles, and quite frankly, burned out. And the lay staff is often left feeling the same.²⁵

We Were Born for This

Yet, *in everything* God works for good. *Everything*. And we have been *called according to his purpose* to be alive *now*. Nothing is by chance, nothing is an accident, nothing is a fluke of nature.

God could have chosen us to be alive at some other time in history, but in His providence and love He has destined us to be alive now, in the midst of these cries, and He has equipped us with gifts—both natural and supernatural—for this time. As St. Joan of Arc once said, “I am not afraid. God is with me. *I was born for this!*”

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This is true for each and every one of us. We were born for this moment and these days. And God is not nervous, anxious, or fearful about the future, either the world’s or the Church’s.

Three Essential Principles

If the world is crying, and if Jesus founded the Church to be the means by which the world’s cry could and would be answered—and the Church is crying—and if most people encounter the Church through the parish—and parish life is broken—then how does the Church get well?

Nobody has *the* answer to this all-important question. There are *some* answers, though.

ACTS XXIX believes there are *three essential principles* for bringing about transformation in the Church. These three principles together form an alloy, something new. They offer us a way in which God can heal and transform the Church, and thus be equipped for the work God has for us, namely, to build *for* His Kingdom, or, as Archbishop Allen Vigneron has put it, “To get His world back.” Each of these three principles is simple.

Reacquire a Biblical Worldview

To be a disciple of Jesus is not to see *some* things differently, but to see *everything* differently—to see reality as it truly is. It is urgently required to see the world through biblical lenses.

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Revelation gives us answers to the big questions in life: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is everything so obviously messed up? What, if anything has God done about it? And how should I respond if He has done anything? These four questions lie at the heart of the extraordinary news that is the gospel. And St. Paul tells us, “The gospel is the *power* of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16).

We passionately believe that there is a desperate need in the Church (and beyond, of course) to know “the story.” And the story is what the Church calls the *kerygma* (Greek for “proclamation”).²⁶

St. John Paul II wrote that the *kerygma* is the “initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and is brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith.”²⁷ How many Catholics in the pews would honestly tell you they have been “overwhelmed” by the gospel and made a decision to “entrust” themselves to Jesus in faith?

One of the reasons for this is that most Catholics have never heard the gospel. They hear parts of the gospel, to be sure, but how often do Catholics hear the *kerygma* preached in a compelling way in the context of Mass such that they radically re-orient their lives around God?

We believe the gospel can be summed up in four words: created, captured, rescued, and response.²⁸

Why is there something rather than nothing? Because God in His infinite love freely and without any effort *created* everything that is, and the highlight of everything He created is the human person, made in His own image and likeness and destined to partake of His divine nature.

Why is everything so messed up? Because one of God’s creatures—out of envy—rebelled against God and went to war against the creature God loves the most and deceived our first parents. The consequence of this deception was not simply that we were separated from God but that they were *captured*, for by their rebellion in Eden they unknowingly sold our race into slavery to powers we cannot compete against—Satan, Sin, and Death—and there is nothing we can do on our own to escape from this slavery.

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What, if anything, has God done about this? Out of His unbounded love for us, the eternal Son of God, for whom and through whom all things came into being, became man so as to go to war against these powers, defeated them by His passion, death, and glorious resurrection from the dead, and thereby *rescued* us.

And how should we *respond* to this? First, by surrendering our lives in faith to the God who has proven His great love for us not only in words but above all in deed, and then by getting about the work of both proclaiming this extraordinary, life-changing news and of being active agents of re-creation, building *for* the kingdom, until Jesus returns in glory and finally makes all things new.

It’s Not Enough to be a Staff

The second essential principle for transformation in the Church is becoming a healthy team. Of the three principles, this one requires the hardest work, but it is also the most rewarding.

An analogy may be helpful here. The human body is not only made up of hands, ears, eyes, feet, and other visible parts; it also has a spinal cord. When the spinal cord is damaged, the body cannot function in the way it’s intended. In the analogy, the parish as a whole can be compared to the visible parts of the body; the staff (both ordained and lay) can be compared to the spinal cord. Tragically, many parish staffs are severely damaged—and oftentimes everybody in the parish and/or on staff knows this. It is common

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to find a parish staff suffering from a lack of trust among each other, with little transparent and vulnerable communication, unhealthy conflict, meetings after meetings, silos, high turnover, and low morale. In such a situation, the pastor can end up spending an inordinate amount of time on personnel matters rather than on mission.

It doesn't have to be this way.

There are a number of apostolates assisting parish staffs to become healthy teams, where there is true vulnerability, great trust, healthy conflict, accountability, a commitment to results, high morale, and low turnover. Personnel matters are thereby reduced to a minimum, and more time is available to focus on the mission of evangelization, discipleship, and worship.²⁹

This transition creates the opportunity for a team to become a family, where a culture of prayer is firmly established, and mutual care and concern for one another is active on a daily basis. In this environment, the pastor is surrounded by brothers and sisters who joyfully and collectively share in the responsibility of leading the parish.

God is the Architect

“Build according to the pattern I will show you.”

These, and similar, words are repeated by God to Moses in the Book of Exodus as he constructs the tabernacle in the wilderness. This simple and direct command from God is the foundation for the third and final essential principle for transformation in the Church.

The basic—and encouraging!—idea is this: Moses didn't have to get creative and rely on himself when it came to building the tabernacle as the Israelites made their way towards the Promised Land. God makes clear to him there was already a blueprint, a “pattern.” Moses' task was to get on his face in prayer and to discern what God already had designed and then to build faithfully what was shown him. What's more, as God showed Moses the blueprint, He also made known that He had equipped various people with particular gifts so as to help him construct the tabernacle. The job didn't fall solely to him.³⁰

We similarly believe that God already has a blueprint for every diocese and every parish.

We similarly believe that God already has a blueprint for every diocese and every parish. Our task as leaders in the Church, like Moses', is to get on our faces and earnestly seek Him in prayer, accompanied by brothers and sisters in the Lord—brothers and sisters who we trust, who are able to engage in healthy conflict—so that we can discern what God is saying to us right now about parish life and build accordingly. God was not nervous as He led the Israelites through the desert, nor is He now. Therefore, despite how daunting the situation might appear and be right now, we shouldn't be nervous either.

Our Current Situation

Most dioceses with larger cities in their boundaries are comprised of parishes that were once larger than they are now and were served by multiple priests and religious sisters, especially if there was a parish school. That's rarely the case today. Instead, many priests in these dioceses serve as pastors of multiple parishes, with inadequate resources both in terms of personnel and finances.³¹ Even pastors of a single parish more often than not struggle with inadequate resources and a congregation that is far beyond their capacity to pastor.³² The result is that many priests are often serving in roles they have neither the gifting nor the desire for, and end up exhausted, frustrated, and spending much of their day doing things that take away from rather than enhance their priestly duties.³³ The staff serving with them are often overworked and undercompensated. The faithful in the pews bear the brunt of this, often

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receiving inadequate pastoral care in large part because the priest-parishioner and staff-parishioner ratio is overwhelming.³⁴ Finally, the “nones” in the community are seldom afforded engaging, effective, shallow entry points and compelling opportunities for a life-changing encounter with Jesus.

The prospect of reinforcements for most dioceses is low, as vocations across the country are down, and most dioceses are facing the expectation of having to both care for and equip the faithful so as to reach the lost with fewer and fewer priests in the immediate future.³⁵

The current situation in parish life will not resolve itself without radical changes; it will only continue to get worse. Additionally, calling to mind again that we are in a change of the ages, any reasonable conjecture about what the Church will be facing during the next many decades needs to note that we are in the midst of an increasingly hostile culture, and that the toughest battles are still ahead of us. We need to be doing all we can to best support our priests *and* to best equip our people so that they that are able to face fierce opposition, or some degree of social ostracism of a painful kind.

As leaders in this time, we have been given the unique opportunity to make a clear choice: either prayerfully discern a way to fundamentally and courageously retool parish and priestly life, or continue to “tweak” and oversee the ongoing decline of the Church. We believe the choice is clear and that God, who is the Architect, desires to reveal His blueprint in these days. What follows is a possible solution.

Dare to Imagine This

What might God be asking us to build today?

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is calling us to see these days we're living in as an opportunity to reimage what a parish can be. A diocese with, for example, 200 parishes, could be retooled to 40 or 50 parishes, where each parish becomes a true center of excellence for unleashing the gospel.³⁶

Again, such a significant retooling is *not* at all about managing decline, but instead *is* about retooling so as to *get stronger*, retreating so as to *counter-attack*, and purifying so as to *unleash the gospel*.³⁷ It's about

taking advantage of this opportunity God is giving us to create *truly healthy parishes*—healthy for the *priests* who serve there, for the *team* that serves alongside the clergy, for the *people in the pews*, for the *fallen away*, and for the *unchurched* in the area who are waiting—even if they don't know it—to hear the gospel, to meet the God they never knew growing up, to meet people whose lives have been transformed by Jesus, and to be sent out on mission themselves.

Imagine parishes where:

- Three to six priests serve and live together under the leadership of a pastor who has the *charism* of leadership³⁸
- The other priests, who have *complementary* charisms to the pastor, are suddenly freed from the burden of serving as pastor, and are free to share their charisms and natural talents in a way that most are unable to do now, so as to pastorally care for the faithful and to unleash the gospel to the unchurched
 - This community of priests would be a protection from and remedy for many of the ills that plague priests today
 - ◆ Loneliness
 - ◆ Frustration
 - ◆ Discouragement
 - ◆ Burnout
 - ◆ Various addictions brought on by the above
- Two to three deacons assist the priests and lay staff in the work of mission and outreach
- Access to the sacraments, especially Mass and confession, is available at times most helpful for the lay faithful in the 21st century
 - Perhaps as many as three to four daily Masses
 - ◆ Two in the morning, one at noon, and one in the evening
 - Confession offered daily by two priests who have the charism of mercy and who delight in being available as often as possible for the faithful
 - Eucharistic exposition and benediction could more easily occur every day of the work week
- Because of the number of priests and deacons, the sick, homebound, imprisoned and others who are suffering, are regularly visited by those clerics with the appropriate charisms, thereby ensuring that nobody is forgotten or abandoned in their time of need and sickness
- Pastors have sufficient resources to move from maintenance to mission, both in terms of
 - Personnel and
 - Finances³⁹
- The team that assists the clergy could be composed of people to lead all of these critical ministries, *all* of them paid a just and living wage, for going out on mission:
 - Chief of Operations
 - Worship
 - Evangelization
 - Discipleship
 - Marriage and Family
 - Christian Service

Significant retooling is *not* at all about managing decline, but instead *is* about retooling so as to *get stronger*, retreating so as to *counter-attack*, and purifying so as to *unleash* the gospel.

- Business Manager
- Religious Education
- Youth Ministry
- Facilities
- Hospitality
- Technology
- Media
- Prayer Ministry
- Charisms
- Small Groups⁴⁰
- Because of the number of people on the team assisting the clergy, there are more brothers and sisters with whom to collaborate to unleash the gospel and to rally around and support each other when the “apostolic” era in which we live leads to moments that range from discouraging to threatening
- In addition to greater availability of the sacraments, the lay faithful regularly experience the following:
 - The best of pastoral care
 - The best of liturgical worship
 - The best formation in equipping them for their unique task of evangelizing and sanctifying the world
 - ◆ Great catechesis, both for youth and adults
 - ◆ Excellent pre-marriage preparation and ongoing care for the domestic church
 - ◆ Small group ministry and so many other things
- Sunday Masses are full or near capacity, significantly buoying up the clergy and lay faithful
- More diverse parishes are a natural outgrowth, offering opportunity for much-needed healing where the Church has acted more like the world than the Body of Christ
 - This diversity and unity would be a most powerful witness especially among younger people, who are often scandalized by our all too often lack of diversity and unity
- Those who have not yet encountered the One who alone can rescue the world from the powers of Sin and Death would be in proximity to a thriving parish family where the best of shallow entry points are available so that Jesus can be met, the power of the Holy Spirit can be received, and the nightmare that is life apart from God can be ended

What we have offered above is not intended to be a roadmap but a *destination*; a glimpse of what could possibly be in every diocese. We firmly believe that if we can see *what* it is that God is asking us to build, He will not only show us *how* to build it, but also *provide* the resources and people needed to build it.

What Can We Begin to Do Now?

For such a radical proposal, and by “radical” we mean one that is focused on the roots of healthy parishes, much will be needed on the part of clergy and the lay faithful. The Church has known for many years that there are serious issues needing to be faced eventually, with courage and boldness. This current crisis is affording us an opportunity to face these issues, addressing not symptoms but root causes, and discerning creative ways to enter into this next age of the Church.

Some suggested next steps:

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Establish a New Team Around the Bishop to Pray and Vision the Destination

This retooling will require entrepreneurial leadership to envision and actualize such a dramatic shift.

It will be of utmost importance for a small, healthy team to be gathered together around the bishop to pray and to seek God's blueprint for His diocese.

This team has as its sole purpose the retooling of parishes.

The team would be responsible for helping to cast and oversee the execution of the vision, reminding the faithful of the urgency of the task and the benefits to be received, while not ignoring the challenges the transition will create.

Bishop and Priests Gather Together

It will be crucial for the bishop to gather together with his priests. This gathering would give the bishop an opportunity to first and foremost be a shepherd for and to his priests, loving and pastoring his brothers, speaking to the crisis and challenges before them, and inviting them to a time of deep prayer together. In this gathering there would be a need to continually return to the facts—the need to retool is going to come whether we want it or not, due to the priest shortage and fewer financial resources. However, we don't have to be controlled by these things, and we can't give in to a spirit of defeatism—Jesus is LORD, after all! We can act now with confidence in the One who created us for these days. In these gatherings, the stress would be placed again and again on the fact that this is not about managing decline, and it's not about band-aids for the problem. It's about retooling our parishes and getting truly healthy and stronger so as to unleash the gospel.

Discernment

A diocese can help its priests gain valuable self-knowledge, if this hasn't happened already. Tools like *Called and Gifted*, the Myers-Briggs personality type indicator, the DISC profile, *StrengthFinder* assessment, and other related instruments can be administered so as to prepare for the work of retooling.

It would also be beneficial for a bishop to meet with every one of his priests to hear their desires and better discern the gifting and concerns of his priests.⁴¹ This opportunity would also allow for authentic feedback and understanding of the unique challenges and circumstances that priests and the faithful will encounter. It could also strengthen relationships and trust, which are essential for the task at hand.⁴²

Identify and Coach Leaders

Subsequent to discernment, a diocese can identify those priests who have visionary leadership and the desire to pastor such centers of excellence as imagined above, and to identify clergy who have comple-

mentary charisms and talents who want to come around those pastors to support the mission. For the purpose of future growth, it would be wise to include in this team men who could subsequently lead other centers of excellence in the future.

There are outstanding Catholic leadership and executive coaches who would be eager to assist the clergy in being the leaders we need to pastor these centers of excellence. This coaching would be particularly helpful in fostering organizational health and leading such a large parish.

Community Life as a Diocesan Priest

There are a number of reasons diocesan priests did not enter into religious life. Those reasons include not feeling called to a community way of life. However, though most diocesan priests have not lived in community in recent years, it is still true that the human person is made for communion and living alone, especially in the era in which we now live, is not a way of life that is conducive for a priest to thrive in his vocation and pursuit of holiness. With this in mind, it would be valuable to gather priests together in a given diocese to discuss and flesh out what realistic expectations for living together should look like for diocesan priests serving in these new centers of excellence.

Communication

Excellent and consistent communication is, of course, essential in all of this. This time of retooling will provide a bishop and the priests of a diocese an incredible opportunity to not only preach on, but to host gatherings—both live and through technology—to explain why the Lord is calling us to build these centers of excellence. Themes that would be worth addressing in this communication include the current state of the priesthood; the choice to act proactively not react to the shortage of priests; wanting to offer the best of care for the lay faithful; a desire to justly compensate those who work for the Church; the mission of the Church and why evangelization is so urgent; how this retooling could be a means by which great and necessary healing can come to the people of God in a given community where there is still great woundedness caused by past sins of disunity and injustice; and more.

Transition Management

Transition is always messy, and all too often is not done well in either Church or the secular world. Change is hard and unnerving for most people. A diocese should start now, therefore, to identify and meet with consultants who have expertise in transition management. Having leadership focused on this process before, during, and especially after the retooling is key to prevent the potential fallout and miscommunication of why the overhaul is necessary, keeping everyone's eyes fixed on the destination.

Best Practices for Staying Small in a Big Parish

No one wants to belong to a parish where people feel like a number and not a person. There is a desire to be known and part of a community. There is much we can learn from both larger parishes where this has been accomplished as well as from non-Catholic communities. Those places where small groups, small communities within the larger community, or other related means have successfully been established should be sought out so as to learn best practices for going forward.

A Special Note on Catholic Schools

Catholic schools provide a unique opportunity for our youth to encounter the person of Jesus Christ and be formed through a personal relationship with Him in and through the Catholic Church. The complete impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the health of Catholic schools is yet to be totally understood, but the unfortunate reality is that many Catholic schools will be forced to close.

The re-imagining of Catholic schools must be viewed as a responsibility of the entire diocese, not just parishes with schools, let alone school families within the parish. Diocesan schools should be led by priests and principals that are committed to the key principles of Catholic education and access should be made available to all who seek it. Funding models based on tuition and parish subsidies could be supplemented or replaced by education funding that comes into the diocese from the faithful and philanthropic communities.

As the parish model is re-imagined, we should seize this opportunity to re-imagine as well Catholic schools, focusing on providing access to an outstanding Catholic education and making disciples of young people.⁴³

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Conclusion

At the heart of our ministry's name is the firm conviction that the same Holy Spirit who was active in the lives of the saints is active now in ours. As He animated them to respond to challenges and problems pertinent to their day, so He is doing now.

This time could truly be “the finest hour” of the Church in our country.

In the 13th century, St. Francis of Assisi heard the Lord speak to him from the cross in San Damiano. “Francis, go and rebuild My church, which, as you can see, is obviously in ruins.” Thus, began one of the greatest revivals in the Church's history. Is God saying something similar to us?

The world is crying in a particular and unique way, a cry that is ultimately caused by the eclipse of the God who created us out of love, rescued us from the powers of Sin and Death, and made us for abundant life. At the same time, the Church, both her people and her priests, is also crying. To be sure, what is proposed here is “radical,” but so was Francis. And something that straightforwardly addresses the roots of the crisis in our parishes is what we need right now, so that we may become healthy, so that the world's cry can be answered.

We have an opportunity right now to act courageously and boldly, with unshakable confidence in the God who created us for this moment. This time could truly be “the finest hour” of the Church in our country. Indeed, we were born for this.

How will we respond?



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Notes

1. As of May 1, 2020, jobless claims had exceeded 30 million.
2. With passenger traffic down 95% during the height of the pandemic, airlines have all but given up on trying to salvage the lucrative summer travel season. The global industry expects to lose \$314 billion this year, and airline executives say it could be two to three years before air travel recovers to pre-crisis levels <https://www.axios.com/future-air-travel-coronavirus-bcee181c-1d3a-4305-992d-053d5c80a909.html>.
3. As of April 15, 7.5 million small businesses will shut permanently if the disruption caused by COVID-19 continues unabated. For more, see <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/14/7point5-million-small-businesses-are-at-risk-of-closing-report-finds.html>.
4. Gloria Tam, Diana El-Azar, "Three Ways the Coronavirus Pandemic Could Reshape Education," World Economic Forum, March 13, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/3-ways-coronavirus-is-reshaping-education-and-what-changes-might-be-here-to-stay>
5. Many are saying working from home is likely to become a more prominent part of many businesses. Mike Thomas, "What COVID-19 Means for the Future of Remote Work," BuiltIn, April 5, 2020, <https://builtin.com/remote-work/covid-19-remote-work-future>.
6. The data on offertory contributions is still coming in. One large diocese, however, has reported a 62% decrease from last year at this time. The impact of parishes being closed for prolonged amounts of time, the economic fallout nationwide, no collections being taken up, and low numbers of parishioners set up to give electronically, will mean that many parishes which were struggling before will simply not be able to survive for long in the future.
7. There is no one way to do this. Reasonable men and women will come to vastly different ideas and solutions. We desire to put forth a set of necessary outcomes to inform whatever solutions are decided upon.
8. A Pew Religious Landscape survey from 2014 showed that 50% of young people raised in the Church no longer identify as Catholic today; 79% of young people raised Catholic leave the Church before the age of 23; and for every person who joins the Catholic Church 6.45 leave. Please see <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
9. Peggy Noonan, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-comes-after-the-coronavirus-storm-11587684752>.
10. Christopher Dawson, *The Gods of Revolution* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 3.
11. Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 4-5. The examples have only grown more extreme since Jenkins wrote this, even to the point where the Eucharist has been publicly desecrated on YouTube with little to no outcry from the media or the public. Such a public attack without any fierce outcry by the media on, say, the most sacred object of Islam or Judaism is virtually unthinkable.
12. This far-reaching change is perhaps summed up most succinctly in the remark made by Justice Kennedy in what is commonly referred to as the notorious "mystery passage" found in the Supreme Court's 1992 Decision, *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" (*Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505, U.S. 833, 29 June, 1992). Few people, if any, would have shared such a remark this publicly in a Christendom mode.
13. For a thorough and outstanding elaboration of the Christendom and apostolic eras, and the need for the Church to adopt effective strategies accordingly, we refer the reader to *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age*, (University of Mary, 2020)
14. Mitch Albom, "Why is Living Shorter, Dying Sooner a New Trend?," *Detroit Free Press*, March 31, 2019, <https://www.freep.com/story/sports/columnists/mitch-albom/2019/03/31/mitch-albom-us-life-expectancy/3319933002/> hereafter Albom. Anne Case, Angus Deaton *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

15. The number for American casualties in World War I is disputed. This number comes from “The Great War,” https://www.uwosh.edu/faculty_staff/henson/188/WWI_Casualties%20and%20Deaths%20%20PBS.html.
16. There are not exact figures for the number of deaths attributable to the Spanish Flu. This number comes from <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>. A worldwide estimate of infections is 500,000,000, resulting in 50,000,000 deaths.
17. As of April 22, 2020, there are roughly 2,614,040 infections and 182,004 deaths worldwide. In the United States there have been 840,625 infections and 46,996 deaths.
18. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*. More than 150,000 people die annually in the United States from these.
19. Albom.
20. Samuel Smith, “Suicide Rate for Kids Ages 10-14 Nearly Tripled in Last decade: CDC.,” *The Christian Post*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/suicide-rate-kids-ages-10-to-14-nearly-tripled-last-decade-cdc.html>.
21. Jeffrey M. Jones, “Many U.S. Catholics Question Their Membership Amid Scandal,” March 13, 2019, Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247571/catholics-question-membership-amid-scandal.aspx>.
22. Gregory A. Smith, “Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ,” August 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>.
23. From 2009-2019 there has been nearly a 16% drop in the number of Christians among American adults and a 53% increase in the number of “nones.” “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” October 16, 2019 <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>. Overall, 35% of adult Millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) are religiously unaffiliated. Far more Millennials say they have no religious affiliation compared with those who identify as evangelical Protestants (21%), Catholics (16%) or mainline Protestants (11%). Michael Lipka, “Millennials increasingly are driving growth of ‘none,’” May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.
24. According to a CARA 2012 study, the median ministerial salary for lay personnel is \$31,000, or \$40,000 if the person has a doctorate. Nicole Sotelo, “The Church’s wage gap,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 19, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/young-voices/churchs-wage-gap>.
25. We have heard the following from bishops, priests, and lay people on retreat: “They’re screaming for healing” (a bishop in the US about his priests); “I don’t have what I need to help with the loneliness and isolation I experience” (a priest); “We are on our own out here” (a priest); “I’m only four years ordained and I want to quit already” (a priest); “I’m isolated, lonely, and battle fatigued” (a priest); “I’ve worked in the corporate world for thirty years and I’ve never seen dysfunction like this” (a lay person recently employed by a diocese); “I feel like I’m hanging in a noose, and people in the parish are throwing stones at me...I’m going back to corporate life” (a lay staff member describing her experience of how parishioners treat her).
26. In the words of Fleming Rutledge, “In the final analysis, specialized theological analysis can take us only so far; we need to know the story. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 7.
27. Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), 25.
28. Please see the videos from a 2019 retreat breaking open these four words found at <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFrDE6SHbHqVbDTdi3vAgvBrrVPMATH>.
29. For some excellent resources on becoming a healthy team, we highly recommend Pat Lencioni’s works, especially *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012) and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002).
30. Exodus 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8 detail God’s instructions to build according to the pattern or plan God already has. Exodus 31:1-11 makes clear that God has entrusted particular gifts to particular people to assist Moses with all God has asked him to build.
31. According to a Cara survey, the number of active diocesan priests has declined from 29,444 in 1985 to 16,668 in 2018,

a 43% drop. Meanwhile the number of parishes has declined only 12% from 19,244 in 1985 to 17,007 in 2018. The discrepancy between the decline in priests and parishes is one example of the stressors put on parishes that makes it untenable. “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>. Furthermore, in 1985 there were 1,051 parishes without a resident pastor; in 2018 that number had grown to 3,363 parishes.

32. Some have argued that a pastor, whether Catholic or Protestant, can reasonably pastor 150-200. Dr. Timothy Keller, “Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth”, <https://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf>.

33. There are approximately 96 dioceses with rural parishes. The tale is often even harder for these priests. Many rural priests are not only dealing with inadequate resources but are often caring for multiple parishes, frequently many, many miles apart. Additionally, they are usually far away from any priestly fellowship, thus leaving them not only lonely but even more susceptible to the same dangerous and sinful habits their urban brothers face.

34. According to Cara, in 1985 there were 1,776 Catholics per active diocesan priest, in 2018 there were 4122 Catholics per active diocesan priest. This means the number of Catholics per active priest has more than doubled since 1985. “Frequently Requested Church Statistics,” *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.

35. To offer one concrete example, a large diocese currently has 276 total diocesan and religious priests serving just over 200 parishes. The average age priests in the diocese is 57.3. 127 of the priests are 60 years of age or older; 200 are over 50. And based on current projections there will be nearly 100 fewer priests in nine years, a decrease of 32.3%.

36. This retooling need not impose any burden on the lay faithful trying to access a parish. In one diocese with more than 200 parishes currently, it would be possible to retool the entire diocese to 40-50 parishes and no one would have to travel more than fifteen minutes to get to church. That might vary from place to place, of course, but this process can be done in such a way as to make sure geographical location is a critical factor in establishing centers of excellence.

37. This expression comes from Archbishop Allen Vigneron’s Pastoral Letter to the Archdiocese of Detroit, *Unleash the Gospel*, the best combination of pastoral wisdom and theological insight on evangelization we know of. See <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/the-letter/>.

38. The number will vary depending on the diocese, of course. Leadership is a nebulous term. For this conversation we mean: someone who has the capacity to catch a vision from the Lord, win others to that vision, raise up and surround himself with the people necessary to execute it.

39. Fewer parishes would mean less competition for the best resources and more people in any given parish who are giving to that parish. Too, the potential sale of unused buildings and property could provide further resources to be shared among the centers of excellence.

40. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. Other positions might be deemed vital, depending on the parish or diocese.

41. St. John Chrysostom wrote, “The most basic task of a Church leader is to discern the spiritual gifts of all those under his authority, and to encourage those gifts to be used to the full benefit of all. Only a person who can discern the gifts of others and can humbly rejoice at the flourishing of those gifts is fit to lead the Church.”

42. As Steven Covey, Jr. often repeats, “Trust is the thing that changes everything.” *The Speed of Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

43. For more insight, see Covington, Erin; Moore, Charles; Potter, Michael; & Snyder, Abigail. “The Covid-19 Crisis: A Catalyst for Change in Catholic Education.” 2020, Alvarez & Marsal, New York. https://www.alvarezandmarsal.com/sites/default/files/111058_pss_covid_catholic_education_tl_-_one_pager21.pdf