

THE GREAT CATHOLIC PARISHES

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR PARISHIONERS, SMALL GROUPS, AND BOOK CLUBS



PARISH
CATALYST

A platform for pastoral excellence

AVE MARIA PRESS  AVE Notre Dame, Indiana

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012 and 2013, Bill Simon and the team at Parish Catalyst studied 244 thriving Catholic parishes to determine what made them exceptional. The study found all the parishes shared four foundational practices that led to a profound sense of belonging within their parish communities and a deepening commitment to discipleship. Each parish:

1. *shares leadership* by being very intentional about hiring talented lay staff who work with collaborative clergy to direct the community;
2. *fosters spiritual maturity and plans for discipleship* by providing a variety of formation opportunities, recognizing their parishioners are at different stages of spiritual development;
3. *excels on Sundays* by dedicating significant time, energy, and money to liturgical celebrations where parishioners and seekers alike find both a sense of belonging and a motivational call; and
4. *intentionally evangelizes* by challenging insiders to look outward and by providing service programs, social events, global mission opportunities, and pastoral care at key sacramental moments that focus on inviting outsiders into a deeper relationship with Christ and the Church.

Great Catholic Parishes offers practical ideas and strategic advice that can benefit everyone in the parish as well as welcome to the conversation those interested in the Catholic faith. Separate guidebooks have been developed for three distinct groups:

- Pastors
- Parish Leaders
- Parishioners, Small Groups, and Book Clubs

This discussion guide has been developed to help parishioners unpack some of the material in the book. It is an ideal guide for book clubs, small groups and other parish groups. Each guide contains excerpts from *Great Catholic Parishes* that are followed by discussion questions. Although the excerpts and questions are directed to a specific audience, we invite you to glance through the other guides. Perhaps you'll find a question or two there that will also enhance your group's discussion.

No two parishes are the same. No two pastors or staffs are the same. We hope this guide will jumpstart conversations about what you have read in *Great Catholic Parishes*, lead you to a better understanding of how valuable you are to your parish community, and help ignite the flame of new possibilities for your parish.

This discussion guide is divided into four sessions—one for each of the four essential practices outlined in *Great Catholic Parishes*. We suggest that you schedule four times to gather. The discussion should take about ninety minutes. It is best if a leader is assigned to coordinate the group.

May God continue to bless you and your parish,
Your Friends at Parish Catalyst



A FRANCISCAN BENEDICTION

May God bless you with discomfort

At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,

So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger

At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,

So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears

To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,

So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them

And turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness

To believe that you can make a difference in the world,

So that you can do what others claim cannot be done

To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Amen.



PARISH CATALYST PRAYER FOR PARISHES

Loving God,

Architect of our world, and our lives;

we ask your blessing

on the heart of your Church,

the parish communities

throughout the world.

Bless the people of each parish.

When their faith is strong

May they share your Word with others.

When they struggle in life or faith

May they find peace and consolation.

When they reject faith all together

May they sense that a

Warm welcome is awaiting them.

Bless the priests, deacons and laity
who lead each parish.

May they turn to you in prayer
when they are burdened and busy.

Give them your sacred energy
and clear-eyed vision,
so they may remain
steadfast and compassionate
as they shepherd your people.

Bless each Eucharistic community
that gathers around your Word and table.

May each be a teacher of your Truth
and a witness to your Love.

We ask this
through Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

GREAT PARISHES SHARE LEADERSHIP



I. Personal Preparation

In order to prepare for the conversation, please take a few moments of silence and privately answer the following questions honestly.

I believe that a Catholic parish has one leader only—the pastor. The lay staff and volunteers are doing God’s work, but should not consider themselves church leaders.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The parish is a community of believers and each member is responsible for the life and growth of the community.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

If I need to speak to someone about my spiritual life, personal issues or about a parish concern, my pastor is the only person on staff I would approach.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

It seems to me that the same volunteers are always doing the same things at church.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



II. Turning to the Word

When everyone has finished their personal inventory, the group leader should open with a prayer then read the following scripture passage aloud.

“And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ep 4:11–12).

Sharing Question: Do I see myself in the list of ministers in Ephesians? Which gift(s) of the Spirit mentioned above are my strengths?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Collaborators, Delegates, Consulters

In *Great Catholic Parishes*, 80.3 percent of the pastors interviewed said that the leadership of their parishes is one of its greatest strengths. Eighty percent also said they had some form of shared leadership structure in place. Although, canonically, pastors are held responsible for all decisions made in a parish, these pastors were quick to admit that they do not lead their vibrant parishes on their own. See page 20 of *Great Catholic Parishes* for more information on collaborators, delegates, and consulters, as well as an image of the three.

Discussion Questions:

- President John Quincy Adams once said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.” Given President Adams’s description, would I say that our parish has strong leadership?
- If you volunteer in a parish ministry, what leadership style do you experience in your pastor? Is that the best style of leadership to support your ministry/parish? If you are not currently involved in volunteer ministry, which leadership style would you want to experience from your pastor?
- Do you have any interactions with parish staff members? What are their leadership styles like?

2. Lay Leaders

The Second Vatican Council prepared the way for change in the Church. One of the first issues considered by the council concerned laypeople and the greater role they could play in parish life. Ultimately, many of the roles that had been exclusively performed by priests before the council, became the pastoral work of the laity: parish administration, sacramental preparation, liturgical planning, spiritual direction, faith formation, catechesis and even limited preaching. In most parishes today, it is a lay person who is the point of contact for a parishioner who comes to the church with a pastoral need. The importance of this is hard to understate when describing the changing reality of the American Catholic parish. In 2005—fifty years after the Second Vatican Council—CARA (Center for Applied Research on the Apostolate) reported 39,651 lay ecclesial ministers were working in Catholic parishes. Read pages 24–26 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about listening to lay voices.

Discussion Questions:

- When someone volunteers to do something in the parish, do I see them as a leader? If not, why? If yes, in what ways?
- What holds most parishioners back from taking on a greater role in the life of the parish?
- What first steps could the parish take to ease people into contributing their time and expertise to the parish?

3. Volunteers

Not all leadership is professional or requires wages. Building up leadership capabilities within the parish may require a change in the mindset of both the staff and parishioners. During the Parish Catalyst interviews, numerous pastors expressed a desire to help their parishioners see their primary role in ministry as disciple making, no matter what that ministry was. They want to develop leaders who see their work in the Church, first as a way to bring others into a deeper relationship with Christ, and secondarily, as a specific ministry. Read pages 37–39 in *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn about the importance of volunteerism in your parish.

Discussion Questions:

- If you already volunteer in a parish ministry, what has your experience been when it comes to invitation, training, and mentorship in your parish? How could that be improved? If you are not currently involved in volunteer ministry, what would make you more interested and more involved in the life of the parish?
- Do you agree with *Great Catholic Parishes* when it states that the primary role of ministry leaders is disciple making? What does that mean exactly?
- What skills do I possess—or do I see in a friend—that if applied to the parish, would make it more welcoming and contribute to its overall vitality?








IV. Closing

As a group, fill in the chart on the following page with thoughts that have arisen from your discussion.

session one:

GREAT PARISHES SHARE LEADERSHIP

	<p>WHAT ARE WE DOING THAT WE NEED TO STOP DOING?</p>		<p>WHAT ARE WE NOT DOING THAT WE NEED TO START DOING?</p>
	<p>WHAT ARE WE DOING WELL THAT COULD BE BETTER IF WE REFINE IT?</p>		<p>WHAT LOW-RISK, OUT-OF-THE-BOX IDEA COULD WE EXPERIMENT WITH?</p>



PARISH CATALYST



Spend some time in group prayer for your parish and personal petitions.

Close with the Parish Catalyst Prayer for Parishes. (See page iii.)

GREAT PARISHES FOSTER SPIRITUAL MATURITY AND PLAN FOR DISCIPLESHIP



I. Personal Preparation

In order to prepare for the conversation, please take a few moments of silence and privately answer the following questions honestly.

It's important to me to belong to a parish community.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I grow more and more as a disciple of Jesus through the preaching, spiritual experiences, and programs I avail myself of at my parish.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

When I have doubts about my belief in God or parts of my Catholic faith, my parish is a place I can turn to for non-judgmental discussion.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I have at least one friend from church that I see outside of church.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



II. Turning to the Word

When everyone has finished their personal inventory, the group leader should open with a prayer then read the following scripture passage aloud.

“. . . like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk so that through it you may grow into salvation, for you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1Pt 2:2–3).

Sharing Question: Do I feel myself growing in faith at this stage of my life? If yes, how? If no, what are the roadblocks?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Yearning for More

Ninety percent of the pastors studied consider the spiritual growth of their people to be the strongest characteristic of their communities. Read page 58 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about the relationship between pastors, parishioners, and spiritual growth.

Discussion Questions:

- Are faith and religion the same thing? Explain.
- What does it mean to me personally to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- What opportunities has your parish provided that impacted your own spiritual development? What new opportunities might the parish offer to help you continue your spiritual development?

2. Deepening Faith

See page 69 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to understand the benefits of being involved in a Catholic parish and spiritual growth opportunities.

Discussion Questions:

- What experiences in my life were very important to the development of my faith? Name one or two.
- Would I consider my parish an especially prayerful parish? What would make it more so?
- Does being a member of a parish have any effect on my private spiritual growth? If yes, in what ways? If no, why is that?

3. The Power of Belonging

Nearly three out of every four pastors interviewed (73.2 percent) talked about the strong sense of community that existed in their parishes. The takeaway here is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. A strong sense of community is associated with parish identification, bonds of friendship, interdependence, and occasions for parishioners to nurture as well as be nurtured in spiritual growth. Read page 73 of *Great Catholic Parishes* for more information about expanding the parish community.

Discussion Questions:

- Is my parish a primary community in my life? How do I feel about that?
- Are my closest friends people that share my faith? How does my answer affect my own faith development?
- Research indicates that young adults are searching for meaningful communities. How could the Church be a more meaningful community for them? If you are a millennial, does your church feel like a meaningful community to you? Why?








IV. Closing

As a group, fill in the chart on the following page with thoughts that have arisen from your discussion.

session two:

GREAT PARISHES FOSTER SPIRITUAL MATURITY AND PLAN FOR DISCIPLESHIP

 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING THAT WE NEED TO WE NEED TO STOP DOING?</p>	 <p>WHAT ARE WE NOT DOING THAT WE NEED TO THAT WE NEED TO START DOING?</p>
 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING WELL THAT COULD BE BETTER IF WE THAT COULD BE BETTER IF WE REFINE IT?</p>	 <p>WHAT LOW-RISK, OUT-OF-THE-BOX IDEA COULD WE OUT-OF-THE-BOX IDEA COULD WE EXPERIMENT WITH?</p>



PARISH CATALYST



Spend some time in group prayer for your parish.

Close with the Parish Catalyst Prayer for Parishes. (See page iii.)

GREAT PARISHES EXCEL ON SUNDAY



I. Personal Preparation

In order to prepare for the conversation, please take a few moments of silence and privately answer the following questions honestly.

Mass is a personal and private experience for me.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am a valued member of a community of faith.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The homilies I hear are relevant to my life and challenge me to grow in faith.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am aware of ways that I can be trained and participate in ministries in my parish.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



II. Turning to the Word

When everyone has finished their personal inventory, the group leader should open with a prayer then read the following scripture passage aloud.

“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Sharing Question: How devoted am I to the teachings, communal life, breaking of the bread, and the prayers? Are they all important to my spiritual well-being?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. A Welcoming Place

Society is becoming more individualistic, which must also affect a parish’s orientation toward welcoming. People speak of *my* space, *my* time, *my* agenda, and even *my* church. Welcoming the stranger, the poor person, or the person with a radically different perspective can require a change of heart in a parish’s welcoming culture. Read the section “Orchestrating the Welcome” on pages 101–106 in *Great Catholic Parishes* to understand more about this topic.

Discussion Questions:

- Do I agree with Pope Francis that the parish must be capable of self-renewal and constant adaptively, or do I see the parish as a stable, unchanging rock of faith?
- Has our parish made changes that I didn't understand or didn't care for? If yes, what was my reaction and why? If no, how would I react to a change to the Sunday music, preaching, or liturgical space at my favorite Mass that I didn't like?
- When was the last time I made a friendly gesture or reached out to someone I didn't know at church? (Not counting the Kiss of Peace!)

2. More than Sound and Words

Vibrant music is essential to vibrant liturgies. Anyone who has been moved while singing a hymn, a psalm, or praise music knows at an intuitive level that something more than sound and words has touched them. Read pages 120–122 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about worship music and styles.

Discussion Questions:

- There's an old saying, "When you sing, you pray twice." Is that true for me? Why?
- Does the music at our Masses unite the community gathered? Do the songs selected reflect and enhance the readings of the day?
- How could the music at our parish improve?

3. Preaching God's Word

Pope Francis offers a lot of guidance for pastors on how to communicate the truth of Jesus' love. First, the homilist must know and love the people. He must be attuned to their joys and sorrows, hopes and dreams. He must show that he is happy to be among the people to whom he preaches. To do that he must be attuned to the culture—not compliant with it—but attuned so that he can preach the Gospel in a way that "hits home." Pope Francis would also say that the Gospel is most effectively preached when a loving, welcoming, atmosphere prevails in our parish communities.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do the homilies I hear at Mass "hit home" for me? If yes, how so? If not, what not?
2. How important are the readings to my overall experience of Mass? Do the homilies usually give me a deeper understanding of the readings of the day?
3. If I were asked to write homilies for one month (four Sundays), where would I start? What would I want the community to hear? Where would I look for inspiration?








IV. Closing

As a group, fill in the chart on the following page with thoughts that have arisen from your discussion.

session three:

GREAT PARISHES EXCEL ON SUNDAY

 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING THAT WE NEED TO</p> <h2>STOP</h2> <p>DOING?</p>	 <p>WHAT ARE WE NOT DOING THAT WE NEED TO</p> <h2>START</h2> <p>DOING?</p>
 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING WELL THAT COULD BE BETTER IF WE</p> <h2>REFINE</h2> <p>IT?</p>	 <p>WHAT LOW-RISK, OUT-OF-THE-BOX IDEA COULD WE</p> <h2>EXPERIMENT</h2> <p>WITH?</p>



PARISH CATALYST



Spend some time in group prayer for your parish.

Close with the Parish Catalyst Prayer for Parishes. (See page iii.)

GREAT PARISHES EVANGELIZE



I. Personal Preparation

In order to prepare for the conversation, please take a few moments of silence and privately answer the following questions honestly.

I have a deep, personal relationship with Jesus Christ that directs my life.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I question and doubt a number of things about Catholicism.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am comfortable and proud to admit to others that I am a Catholic.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The Catholic faith is complicated and I don't feel equipped to talk about it with others.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree



II. Turning to the Word

When everyone has finished their personal inventory, the group leader should open with a prayer then read the following scripture passage aloud.

"Rather, we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us" (1Thes 2:7b-8).

Sharing Question: How generous do I feel about sharing my faith with others? Why?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Mirror People and Window People

The mirror people/window people metaphor appears in many places, both religious and secular. "Mirror people" look at the glass and see only themselves reflected there. In contrast, "window people" can look through the glass and see others. Evangelizing people are the parishioners who see beyond their parish community and share their enthusiasm for the parish with outsiders, encouraging them to join in. They see the needs of the world and make room in their lives to provide for others. Read page 141 in *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about window and glass people.

Discussion Questions:

- The Franciscan benediction at the beginning of this discussion guide says, “And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in the world so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.” How much foolishness and how much courage would I need to really put myself out there and share my Catholic faith with others? Is it worth the risk?
- When a person has questions and doubts about faith or religion, what do I think is the most important response(s) a Catholic can give them? Why?
- How can I make room in my life to be more open about my faith?

2. Reaching the Millennial Generation

Read pages 159–174 in *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn about the millennial generation and how to reach them.

Discussion Questions:

- What attitudes do I have about the millennial generation in general? Why? If you are a millennial, which attitudes does society today have about your generation that you find to be true, and which do you find to be off base?
- The millennial generation is eager to dialogue with people who are genuine and transparent. They want the freedom to doubt and to ask the hard questions. What experience do I have with millennials in my life? Am I willing to have transparent conversations about faith and religion and let them ask me hard questions? If you are a millennial, what could the parish do to make your generation feel more at home?
- Millennials enjoy mentors. According to a study taken by the Barna Group, millennials who have remained in a Christian church beyond their teens are twice as likely to have a close personal friendship with an older adult in their faith than those who left church after their teen years. How might I, or members of my parish, mentor millennials? What areas of expertise might we offer to them?

3. Entering the Mission Field

When you think about the times in your life when you have been very enthusiastic, you realize that sharing your enthusiasm for something you really love is easy and spontaneous, and takes very little effort. At its core, evangelization should be more about passion and joy than it is about a job to do. And you don’t even have to be very good at it. Read chapter 7 in *Great Catholic Parishes* for more encouragement about entering the mission field.

Discussion Questions:

- We don’t have to look far to share our enthusiasm for our faith. There is a church in New Jersey that has a sign over its exit doors that reads, “You are now entering your mission field.” What part of the Catholic faith am I most enthusiastic about? Who can I share that with?
- What is the mindset change I would need to fully realize my potential for spreading the Good News? What are the first steps to reaching that goal?
- Have I ever gone to God in prayer about how I can best share the message of mercy and love of Jesus Christ? If yes, what has been your experience of direction? If no, what would that look like for you?








IV. Closing

As a group, fill in the chart on the following page with thoughts that have arisen from your discussion.

session four:

GREAT PARISHES EVANGELIZE

 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING THAT WE NEED TO STOP DOING?</p>	 <p>WHAT ARE WE NOT DOING THAT WE NEED TO START DOING?</p>
 <p>WHAT ARE WE DOING WELL THAT COULD BE BETTER IF WE REFINE IT?</p>	 <p>WHAT LOW-RISK, OUT-OF-THE-BOX IDEA COULD WE EXPERIMENT WITH?</p>



PARISH CATALYST



V. Moving the Parish Forward

In this final activity, work as a team to develop a common understanding of where you see your parish stands in light of the four essential practices described in *Great Catholic Parishes*. Begin by giving your parish a letter grade in each of the four practice areas. Next, develop the big ideas/takeaways from your discussions for each practice area. Lastly, write down what next steps you need to take in order to make your parish even more vital and welcoming.

WRAP UP

GIVE YOURSELF A LETTER GRADE (A, B+, C-, ETC.)	GRADE	BIG IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
<p>GREAT PARISHES SHARE LEADERSHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COLLABORATORS, DELEGATORS, CONSULTERS • LISTENING TO LAY VOICES • GUARDING THE PASTOR'S TIME & WELL-BEING 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>GREAT PARISHES FOSTER SPIRITUAL MATURITY & PLAN FOR DISCIPLESHIP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YEARNING FOR MORE • PLANNING FOR DISCIPLESHIP • THE POWER OF PRAYER 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>GREAT PARISHES EXCEL ON SUNDAY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HOSPITALITY BEGINS ONLINE • PREACHING TAKES A LOT OF TIME • NO ONE STYLE FITS ALL 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
<p>GREAT PARISHES EVANGELIZE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ENTERING THE MISSION FIELD • OPENING DOORS • CONNECTING WITH MILLENNIALS 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •

OUR NEXT STEPS



Spend some time in group prayer for your parish.

Close with the Parish Catalyst Prayer for Parishes. (See page iii.)

"Begin anywhere."
—John Cage



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A platform for pastoral excellence