

THE GREAT CATHOLIC PARISHES

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR PARISH LEADERS



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.

My ministerial role and the roles of the other staff members is/are clearly defined.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The pastor trusts me to do my job.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Staff communication is open and healthy.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The staff works as a team.

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.

“For lack of guidance a people falls; security lies in many counselors” (Prv 11:14).

Sharing Question: Do I see my role as a ministry of guidance? Am I mentoring anyone in the parish to take on some form of parish leadership?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Collaborators, Delegators, 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. Read page 20 of *Great Catholic Parishes* for more information on collaborators, delegators, and consultants, as well as an image of the three.

Discussion Questions:

- When it comes to your position at the parish how do you personally experience your pastor's leadership style? Do you feel like his leadership style is effective for your staff and for your parish? Why?
- How do you use shared leadership styles in your own ministry?
- Many of the pastors in the study use different versions of shared leadership depending on the situation at hand. Which style(s) makes the most sense for your staff at this time? Why?

2. Listening to Lay Voices

Lay leadership matters in the American Catholic parish. Team work and communication have become essential to the decision-making processes. Listening to advice from lay leaders means opening up a lane for dialogue, making communication a two-way street. Read pages 24–26 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about listening to lay voices.

Discussion Questions:

- Does my job description adequately describe what I actually do? Is it clear to the whole staff who does what?
- When does the staff work best as a team? When do we work poorly as a team?
- If I were made pastor for six months, I would . . .

3. Guarding the Pastor's Time and Well-Being

Refer to the graphic and section titled "Guarding the Pastor's Time and Well-Being" on pages 29–32 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about growth in this area.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the elements of parish leadership that are exclusive to the pastor, the leader of leaders?
- How much is currently on the pastor's plate that could be handled by others?
- How can the staff better support the pastor?








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.

The primary goal of my ministry is disciple-making.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Everyone on staff sees making disciples as our primary objective.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

It is my job to continually look for members of the community to mentor and into deeper commitment to Christ and to parish life.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am a member of, or wish to be a member of, a small faith group.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

As a staff we pray together on a regular basis.

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.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Sharing Question: *When did I last feel the power of the Holy Spirit in my life?*



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Yearning for More

A total of 90.4 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 the members of our staff growing deeper in faith? If yes, how? If no, why not? If you don't know, what does that say about the team's connections?
- Because there are a large number of people attending a parish program does it naturally follow that they are also developing a deeper spiritual life?
- What are some new ways we might help our people grow as disciples of Jesus?

2. Planning for Discipleship

Read page 59 of *Great Catholic Parishes* for suggestions of practical steps to grow in strategic planning.

Discussion Questions:

- Is our parish planning focused primarily on developing the spirituality of our people?
- How do we surface the current spiritual needs of our parishioners? How many kinds of needs are there? Which should we focus on first?
- How much of our budget is earmarked for discipleship development?

3. The Power of Prayer

Read more about the power of prayer in the section titled "A Culture of Prayer" on pages 75–76 of *Great Catholic Parishes*.

Discussion Questions:

- Engaging the spiritual hunger of parishioners increases their participation in parish community life and outreach. But the converse is not true: involvement in parish activities does not necessarily equate to growth in a person's spiritual development. What "activities" can we set aside in order to have more time and energy to develop opportunities for deepening spirituality?
- Offering Eucharistic Adoration at some parishes has proven to effectively nurture parishioners' spiritual development. If your parish has adoration, how important is Eucharistic Adoration to our people? Are there ways it might be revitalized? If your parish does not have adoration, is Eucharistic Adoration something we should consider establishing to deepen the spirituality of our people?
- Discipleship flourishes where people experience a deep sense of belonging. What could make our parish more of a spiritual home to more people?








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.

Preparing the liturgies and activities for each Sunday is the central focus of the pastoral staff.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our communication (bulletin, website, social media etc.) is continually updated and welcoming.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

We have a plan in place for greeting and follow-up with visitors and seekers.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

As a staff person, I make it my responsibility to be visible on Sunday.

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.

“Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy. We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works” (Heb 10:23–24).

Sharing Question: Do we as a staff rouse one another to love and good works?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Hospitality Begins Online

Read about hospitality and its connection to technology in the section “Hospitality Begins Online and in the Architecture” on pages 106–111 of Great Catholic Parishes.

Discussion Questions:

- It has been said that the Internet can be a great disciplining tool. Are we taking full advantage of this tool?
- How effective is our parish website as a welcoming and communicating engine?
- What would we need to do to have a greater digital impact on our parishioners and beyond?

2. Preaching Takes a Lot of Time

Parishes that excel on Sunday have pastors who enjoy preaching and spend a lot of time preparing to preach. Developing a homily takes prayer, preparation, and practice. One rule of thumb suggests that every minute of a homily takes an hour of preparation. By that measure, a ten-minute homily takes ten hours to develop. Read page 114 in *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about the time it takes to prepare to preach.

Discussion Questions:

- Does our pastor have the time that he needs set aside for homily preparation?
- What meetings, opening prayers, drop-in visits, etc. could the staff take over for the pastor in order to allow him more time for homily preparation?
- Some parishes plan homily series that follow a theme over a number of weeks. Is this an idea that works/might work at our parish?

3. No One Style Fits All

Worship music has become diversified. Along with the traditional hymns, chants, and classical Latin Mass settings, contemporary liturgical music aims to provide a direct and meaningful style of worship music. Striking a balance between the various styles of music and the various musical sensibilities of parishioners has become a tricky prospect for many parish teams. Read pages 120–122 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about worship music and styles.

Discussion Questions:

- Music is central to the Sunday experience. Do we allocate enough time, talent and equipment in our budget to deliver the best liturgical music we can afford to offer?
- At which of our Masses are the parishioners most engaged in the music? Why is that? At which are they least engaged? Why is that?
- Do we have opportunities for various ages and stages of people to participate in our liturgical music? Who is missing?








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 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.

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.

Our parish makes a concerted effort to invite the local community and seekers in general to parish prayer services and social events.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

We have a strong mission program.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

We are committed to finding ways to encourage young adults to participate in liturgy and in parish life.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our people have learned to reach out and greet the stranger among them.

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.

“The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I might know how to answer the weary a word that will waken them. Morning after morning he wakens my ear to hear as disciples do” (Is 50:4).

Sharing Question: What do I do for myself when I am the weary one who needs a word to rouse them?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Entering the Mission Field

Read chapter 7 in *Great Catholic Parishes* for encouragement about entering the mission field.

Discussion Questions:

- To many people the word “evangelist” brings to mind door-to-door, in-your-face people or television personalities—people most of us try to avoid. If the Gospel calls me to evangelize, what am I actually being called to do? How am I currently evangelizing?
- When was the last time I invited someone who is either a lapsed Catholic or a non-Catholic to join me at Sunday Mass? Could the staff plan an occasional Sunday that would be geared to welcoming strangers? What would that look like?
- Are we a “maintenance parish” or a “mission parish”?

2. Opening Doors

In the end, the purpose of evangelization is not to “make converts” or “fill the pews,” but simply to open doors—to let others know the Good News that the Catholic faith has made a positive difference in our lives and that God’s love is available to others as well.

Read the pages 146–149 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about opening doors and evangelization.

Discussion Questions:

- If you are in a small group: How has my small group informed my faith? If you are not in a small group: How do I feel about the idea of joining a small group at this time in my life?
- What opportunities does the parish offer that help people feel more at ease sharing their faith? How can we grow these?
- What is it about Pope Francis that makes him so appealing to Catholics and non-Catholics alike? How can we emulate that more in our parish?

3. Connecting with Millennials

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

Discussion Questions:

- What is it about our parish that may appear uninviting or even scary to an outsider?
- How can we provide opportunities for open dialogue about faith and culture in our parish?
- How many young adults are on the payroll of our parish? How many young adults are on parish committees? How could these numbers both increase by one?








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





PARISH CATALYST



VI. 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 to make your parish even more vital and welcoming.

WRAP UP

GIVE YOURSELF A LETTER GRADE (A, B+, C-, ETC.)	GRADE	 BIG IDEAS & TAKEAWAYS <small>WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?</small> 
GREAT PARISHES SHARE LEADERSHIP <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"> • • •
GREAT PARISHES FOSTER SPIRITUAL MATURITY & PLAN FOR DISCIPLESHIP <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YEARNING FOR MORE • PLANNING FOR DISCIPLESHIP • THE POWER OF PRAYER 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • •
GREAT PARISHES EXCEL ON SUNDAY <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"> • • •
GREAT PARISHES EVANGELIZE <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.

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

"Begin anywhere."
—John Cage

