

THE GREAT CATHOLIC PARISHES

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR PASTORS



PARISH
CATALYST

A platform for pastoral excellence

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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 staffs 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 priest groups unpack some of the material in the book. 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 have a competent staff that I trust to do their jobs.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The right people are filling the right jobs on my staff.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I make of point of resolving conflict on my staff.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I do not micromanage.

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.

“Jesus summoned them and said to them, ‘You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many’” (Mk 10:42–45).

Sharing Question: What aspect of parish leadership am I most drawn to?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Collaborators, Delegates, Consultants

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:

- Which of the three shared leadership styles best fits my overall philosophy of leading a parish? What other ways do I lead and when?
- With what aspect of pastoring a parish do I need the most help? Is that support currently built into the parish's staffing and budget?
- It has been said that stability is like an iceberg in warm water. It melts unnoticed below the water line, and before anyone notices it is too late. What area of parish life needs most to change? Am I prepared to lead that change?

2. Discerning Lay Potential

When the role that a person assumes makes use of their person strengths, efficiency and harmony are more likely to exist in an organization. It is imperative to take the time to place the right volunteer or staff person in the right role, and not let the temptation to quickly fill a need find you living long-term with an inefficient staffing structure. Read pages 24–26 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about lay potential and listening to.

Discussion Questions:

- Parishes have creative, talented, energetic individuals in their pews who have much to offer but don't step forward. What approaches have I used to plumb this undervalued asset of talent in my parish? When is it better to hire from the outside? Why?
- Hiring and compensation are two sources of the financial concerns that kept 28 percent of the pastors in the Parish Catalyst study up at night. Are our hiring practices and compensation policies current, fair, and competitive? How could they be improved?
- Which staff person is my most valued asset? Is he/she in the position where his/her talents are best put to use? What about others?

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:

- The pastor's self-care is crucial to the long-term vitality of strong leadership. How disciplined am I about my prayer life, and my physical and mental health? How does that make me feel?
- Am I disciplined about taking time off? Do I have hobbies that I enjoy during leisure time? What are they? What do I wish I had more time for?
- The pastor's presence is always valued, always wanted. Am I willing to let staff members take the calls, field the questions and fill in at non-critical functions in order to have balance in my life? How will my parishioners react? How could I make them better understand?








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.

I share my own faith journey (warts and all) with my parishioners.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

In my parish I see people from all walks of life growing deeper in faith.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Having a large number of people attending youth group or young adult ministries means that the young people are growing in their faith.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I experience God's spirit working in our 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 scripture passage aloud.

"So you, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:1).

Sharing Question: Have I experienced a deepening of my own spirituality recently? If yes, what has been the key factor to that deepening? If no, what roadblock am I dealing with at this time?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Planning for Discipleship

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

Discussion Questions:

- Parish Catalyst found that engaging the spiritual hungers of parishioners increased their participation in parish community life and outreach. But the converse was not true: involvement in parish activities did not necessarily equate to growth in a person's spiritual development. What are the spiritual hungers that I experience in the various constituencies in my parish? What is a first step to addressing one of them?
- How much of the parish's human and financial resources are currently allocated directly toward developing disciples?
- Is there a driving force in the parish that should take a back seat for a while in order to make room for deepening the faith life of our parishioners and growing disciples?

2. Use What's Out There

Read pages 64–68 to see how *Great Catholic Parishes* highlighted fourteen current spiritual development strategies and programs that many of the Parish Catalyst pastors used with success in their parishes.

Discussion Questions:

- What spiritual growth/discipleship development programs and strategies have worked before at our parish? What would I like to try? What would it take to get it off the ground?
- *Great American Parishes* highlighted some innovative Religious Education programs. Some rely heavily on digital materials to accommodate schedules and busy lives. What are the merits and drawbacks of online religious education?
- Active and tight-knit small groups came up in 61.5 percent of the Parish Catalyst interviews. Most of the parishes with successful small groups have a staff member dedicated to the ministry. This person not only helps parishioners find groups but also encourages groups to get together and provides resources for them. Can small groups be sustained in a parish without a dedicated staff person to oversee them? How important are/could small groups be to your parish's faith development?

3. The Privileged Place of Eucharistic Adoration

Nearly one-third (32 percent) of the pastors interviewed by Parish Catalyst mentioned the importance of Eucharistic Adoration to the spiritual development of their parishioners. Read pages 76–78 in *Great Catholic Parishes* for more information about engaging parishioners in Eucharistic Adoration.

Discussion Questions:

- If you have Adoration in your parish, what has your experience been with Eucharistic Adoration in your parish? If you do not have Adoration in your parish, do you believe that the people in your parish would gravitate to Adoration if it were made available in your parish?
- Does Adoration speak to multiple cultures?
- Is Adoration a personal devotion only? Could it also include prayers for parish concerns, parish missions, parish intentions that could be shared with the larger community?








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 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 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.

I consider preaching each Sunday to be my most important role and I take the time required each week to do it right.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

The invitation to parishioners to participate in a Sunday ministry is continually extended.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our welcome extends beyond the greeters right down to the people in the pews.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our music program is the strongest it can be.

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 are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1Pt 2:9).

Sharing Question: Is our Sunday liturgy an experience of God's wonderful light? What would make it more so?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Preaching God's Word

In his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of good preaching. He insists that the preacher must be in touch with the people he serves. He challenges those charged with preaching the Gospel to continually improve their homilies. He challenges them to prepare better for preaching by listening more prayerfully and carefully

to the living Word of God as it comes to us in the teaching and worship of the church. Read the section titled “Orchestrating the Welcome” on pages 101–106 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about spreading the Gospel message.

Discussion Questions:

- Do I consistently take the time I need to pray over, develop and practice my Sunday homily? What can I do to improve the content and/or delivery of my homilies?
- Where do I look for inspiration for my homilies? Do I have a system for feedback about my homilies?
- What is the most important message that my particular community needs to hear the most?

2. Orchestrating the Welcome

Pastors interviewed by Parish Catalyst that exhibited strong hospitality and an overarching community spirit, spoke about the behind-the-scenes strategic organization required to create that warm welcome. They have an organized team of volunteers, staff, and clergy welcoming people to Sunday Mass. Read more on this topic on pages 101–106 of *Great Catholic Parishes*.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the highlights and the areas that need improvement in our Sunday hospitality?
- How important/effective is our website and social media to the parish’s communication of hospitality?
- Does our church building (inside and out) exhibit a welcoming presence? How might it be tweaked to convey and even greater hospitality?

3. Strong Liturgical Music

Strong parish music programs are populated with singers, instrumentalists, and directors who are strong musicians and strong worship leaders. Read pages 120–122 of *Great Catholic Parishes* to learn more about worship music and styles.

Discussion Questions:

- How is the music program at my parish a boon and how is it a hindrance?
- At which Masses does the assembly fully participate in the music? Why is that?
- Is it important to me that the music is something that I personally like? If yes, would I be willing to adapt to music that engaged the assembly more even if I didn’t personally care for it?
- Is there a Mass that is limping along musically? If yes, what are the first steps needed in order to revitalize the music at that liturgy?








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 and personal petitions.

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 preach on how to share faith with others.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I have a good relationship with local community leaders and associations.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our digital media has an evangelical emphasis.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

Our budget reflects our need to evangelize.

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 scripture passage aloud.

“As face mirrors face in water, so the heart reflects the person” (Prv 27:19).

Sharing Question: What is the most challenging aspect of evangelizing so many different kinds of people?



III. Discuss the Following with Your Group

1. Evangelizing Parishes are Mission Focused

In order for a parish to become an evangelizing parish, the people who call that parish their spiritual home may need to reframe their understanding of the purpose of a parish. Read chapter 7 in *Great Catholic Parishes* for encouragement about entering the mission field.

Discussion Questions:

- What percentage of the Mass-attending people in my parish understand their/our mission to evangelize? What has made these individuals Catholic evangelizers? Could they be trained to mentor?
- Is our parish currently known as a refuge for the doubter, the seeker or the stranger? What first steps could we take to grow a greater sense of that kind of hospitality?
- Do I have my life structured in such a way that I have the time and energy it takes to increase the evangelical culture of our parish?

2. Involving the Whole Parish in Evangelization

Read pages 144–146 in *Great Catholic Parishes* for information about involving the whole parish in evangelization.

Discussion Questions:

- One pastor interviewed by Parish Catalyst commented that evangelization was the area where his parishioners are most challenged. In a perfect world, what would be the ideal approach to make your parish a more evangelizing parish?
- *Great Catholic Parishes* highlighted books and established evangelization programs that were helpful to the pastors interviewed (pages 64–68). What is on your radar right now that you might like to try, or try again, in the area of evangelization?
- How often do you preach directly about evangelization?

3. 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 is my personal attitude toward the millennial generation and faith? How am I concerned? How am I hopeful?
- Does our parish have a place where people feel free to ask hard questions about God and the life of faith? How might we be more amenable to that?
- Do we have a digital strategy for evangelization?








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



VI. Moving the Parish Forward

In this final activity, work as a team to develop a common understanding of where 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 for your parish and personal petitions.

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

"Begin anywhere."
—John Cage

