

TIM GLEMKOWSKI

MADE FOR  
**MISSION**

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RENEWING YOUR  
PARISH CULTURE



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## FOREWORD

I'm a science fiction nerd. (Bear with me, this will be relevant in just a few sentences.)

That's why one of my favorite quotes from any movie comes from the title character of the 1984 cult-classic movie, *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*. In a moment of intentional profundity, Buckaroo lays down the following wisdom: "No matter where you go, there you are."

It's an axiom that is so self-evident it almost acts as a caricature — and yet it has stuck with me through all these years as a reminder to be present to whatever geographical, social, cultural, or historical context in which I find myself.

That's a lesson the Church needs to learn today.

The Church currently occupies a particularly fraught and changing sociocultural space in the twenty-first century. Books like *Forming Intentional Disciples* and sociological studies from Gallup and the Pew Research Center have brought these realities to our attention, but more urgently, we are living them out in parishes all across North America and Europe.

Certainly, the news isn't all doom and gloom. Life in the twenty-first century — with global instability, the breakdown of former superpowers, and a growing persecution of Christians across the globe — is more like life in the early Church, which was one of the greatest and most accelerated periods of Church growth not fueled simply by "birthing" new Catholics. Post-modernity, while resistant to truth claims, has a

particular heart for stories, and we believe in a God who has invited us into his very story — the story of an unending and triumphant love.

In such a time as this, the last thing the Church needs is another program, another canned response, or a structural process that purports to do the hard work of accompaniment and disciple-making. The crisis the Church faces today *is* one of discipleship, and that crisis extends to almost every layer of leadership in the Church. Discipleship and evangelization cannot be understood from the outside. Without a personal relationship with Christ and practical experience in helping others encounter Christ, walking with them into relationship with him, forming them as mature disciples, and equipping them as missionary focused men and women eager to share Christ with others, parish and diocesan leaders will be unable to create cultures and structures that support evangelization and mission. In short, they will be unable to bear the particular fruit that Jesus expects.

That’s what excites me so much about this book.

Tim Glemkowski is a personal friend and a colleague. He is passionate, knowledgeable, and articulate. But more importantly, he possesses the kind of experience that Church leaders need today. *Made for Mission* breaks open the hard-won wisdom Tim has gained by laboring in the trenches and “doing” the work of renewal alongside dozens of parishes. In this book, he presents a very Christ-centered approach to cultural change and parish transformation.

But be warned.

What you have before you is not a silver bullet, or a detailed playbook that you can use to check off the right steps and simply glide into the new reality of your parish. Rather, it is a masterclass in the application of critical principles through which our parishes, in cooperation with the grace of God, can truly be transformed.

The hard work — the blood, sweat, and tears — are all

yours.

This book, however, provides a clear path.

In my work with almost a hundred parishes and dioceses over the last twenty years in the area of parish transformation and renewal, I would have been blessed beyond measure to possess a resource like this.

God bless you as you dive into its pages and continue on your journey of parish renewal.

Deacon Keith Strohm  
Author of *Ablaze: 5 Essential Paradigm Shifts  
for Parish Renewal*  
Executive Director, M3 Ministries

## CHAPTER 1

# Changing Culture in a Changing Culture

The very last Blockbuster video store in the United States can be found in the town of Bend, Oregon.<sup>1</sup> The franchisee who proudly operates this last bastion of a key 1990s cultural touchpoint said in an interview: “It’s very nostalgic. We have a bunch of 19-year-olds working here; it’s fun explaining to them what a floppy disk was.”<sup>2</sup>

Personally, it is strange for me to believe that a Blockbuster store can already be considered “nostalgic.” I do not feel old enough to have such vivid memories of something that is now of a past era. Nothing defined my middle school years more than riding my bike down to our local Blockbuster store to rent the latest video game (I found that a five-day rental period was enough time to finish a game ... if you didn’t eat or sleep) or a Chris Farley movie.

The glory of Blockbuster was in the experience of visiting the store itself. People would spend twenty minutes combing through the various aisles looking for a movie, finally whittling their decision down to one or two options before just taking the plunge. Often, the movie you came in to rent was not the one you ended up getting because you stumbled on an old favorite or saw that fresh-out-of-theaters title you had

been meaning to see. Then, as you reached the counter, you found yourself surrounded on either side by aisles of candy and popcorn, a perfect complement to your movie-watching experience.

Blockbuster eventually crashed up against the stark reality of the convenience of Netflix, founded in 1997. How could Blockbuster compete with a flat fee, unlimited rentals from the comfort of your own home, and no late fees? Netflix began to boom as DVD players became cheaper, starting around 2002. By the time Netflix began streaming movies on-demand on its online platform in 2007, whether Blockbuster knew it or not, it was dead in the water.

As Blockbuster's death spiral began, they tried to copy Netflix in an effort to compete with them. First, they introduced their own DVD mailing businesses. My family, as loyal Blockbuster customers, switched from Netflix to their mailing service for a while. They even tried out some online streaming of their own. Nothing worked. By 2013, all corporate-owned Blockbuster stores were shuttered, and the DVD-mailing business was closed down. Why did nothing work?

Experts disagree on why exactly Blockbuster's attempts to compete with Netflix did not save its business. I think it comes down to one thing: Netflix had a vision and Blockbuster did not. Netflix understood that the entire culture was fundamentally changing. They launched their streaming service in the same year that Apple announced the iPhone.<sup>3</sup> Both Netflix and Apple knew that just tweaking their business model was not enough; they had to understand the cultural moment and propose simple and bold solutions that could meet that moment head-on. Blockbuster, weighed down under so much infrastructure from building a business for a different era, was not agile enough to compete. Instead of responding boldly with new initiatives that would inspire the marketplace, Blockbuster reacted defensively and ended up just slowing their decline.

What does this have to do with the Catholic Church and

our parishes specifically? It provides a cautionary tale as we discern the best way to tackle the current situation of decline in many of our parishes. It is no secret that the Catholic Church in the West today is hemorrhaging members. Most of us have heard some the dire statistics, but it helps to look briefly at the current situation and the numbers.

From 2007 to 2014, the share of Americans who identify as Catholic dropped from 24 percent to 21 percent. Of those who still identify as Catholic, 35 percent belong to the “Baby Boomer” generation (born between 1944 and 1964), while only 22 percent are Millennials — currently the largest generation in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This means that the dire condition of many Catholic parishes will only worsen over the next couple of decades, if nothing changes. This is why it seems that every few months we hear of new parish closings in what were formerly bastions of Catholic life and culture.<sup>5</sup> According to CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate), which is affiliated with Georgetown University, the number of parishes in the United States peaked in 1990 at 19,620 parishes. By 2018, even with parishes continuing to open in certain parts of the country, that number was down to 17,007.<sup>6</sup>

Granted, there are still many committed, faithful Catholics who love the Church and continue to be active members of their local parish, and signs for hope exist across the country. Yet too many Catholics are simply walking away.

Our cultural moment is changing, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that we are entering into a secularizing age. With respect to this secularization, the United States just passed a critical threshold this year, with the “nones,” or those who claim no religious affiliation at all, surpassing Catholics and evangelicals as the largest religious group in the United States.<sup>7</sup> In the early to mid-1970s, only about 5 percent of the U.S. population called themselves “nones.” By 1995, that number was still just below 10 percent. In the last twenty-five years, the number has shot up to over 23 percent in the United States.

In a country of around 325 million people, that means about 75 million of them no longer claim a religious affiliation. We are living in an era of *rapid* secularization and cultural change, unlike anything this part of the world has ever seen. For the Church, this means that renewal — both at the highest level and in every parish — is not just a nice idea; it is imperative. What we need is a new apostolic age.

With my apostolate, L'Alto Catholic Institute (laltocatholic.com), I have worked personally with dozens of parishes who are seeing these discouraging trends played out in real

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time. The leaders in these parishes recognize that their membership is declining and aging but feel overwhelmed and at a loss for what they can actually do about the problem. This on-the-ground experience has proved to me that, given the

macro changes that are taking place culturally, parishes can no longer view themselves as gathering places for the faithful. Rather, they must see themselves as missionary outposts in a new and strange land. We, as a Church and as parishes, no longer operate in a Christian culture. In this post-Christian moment, we are called to be radically on mission.

Working with parishes, I have become convicted that while the increased conversation around parish renewal happening in the professional Church world today is encouraging, a greater emphasis on helping parishes change *their* culture to meet *the* culture head-on needs to be diffused more widely. The result is this book.

To put it plainly, I have personally seen too many parishes trying to stem the tide of declining membership by simply tweaking tactics. Too often, unsure of what else to do, parishes seek to fix a much deeper problem with surface-level solutions. “Let’s try a new program! A different curriculum! That new

Bible study! A few more greeters at Mass! A new mission statement!” The problem is that none of these solutions addresses the core problem. When parishes focus their renewal efforts around things like “engagement,” they are putting Band-Aids on a much deeper wound.

It is up to us to ensure that the Church does not respond to this cultural moment like Blockbuster, by just chasing the trends, always a step behind, desperately hoping to cling to some of her membership and manage decline. My hope is that the Church takes this difficult cultural moment and uses it to boldly lean in to her perennial vocation: to be on mission to save souls.

This is what Pope Saint John Paul II called for when he proclaimed the New Evangelization. This phrase “new evangelization” has come to mean all kinds of things in the Church, including in some contexts especially the use of new media in sharing the Gospel. Yet John Paul was calling for more than that. He was inviting the Church to dramatically reorient herself in the present age, given the cultural trends. Prophetically aware of the challenges already facing the Church and those to come, this great pope proclaimed that he saw “the dawning of a new missionary age, which will become a radiant day bearing an abundant harvest, if all Christians . . . respond with generosity . . . to the calls and challenges of our times.”<sup>8</sup>

## THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF THE PARISH

The parish is the Church’s great missionary opportunity. Think about it: All of our “church planting” has already been done! We have outposts of Catholic faithful set up throughout the world, ready to encounter the broader community and culture in which they are placed. Yet too often, especially in the United States, the parish experience is not mission-focused at all. For many Catholics in the United States, the parish experience could be summed up in one word: comfortable. The familiar culture of far too many parishes involves polite

suburban people gathering together socially on Sunday mornings and mumbling their way through common prayers before returning to the “real world.” We are seeing the results of this culture all too clearly.

To understand how we got here and what we can do about it, it helps to look more closely at what a parish is, and what it is supposed to be. Did you know that the parish itself is not a building but an area of land? They still call counties “parishes” in the state of Louisiana, a traditionally Catholic area, and this is itself instructive. When we are talking about a parish, we are not referring only to a building owned by the Catholic Church and the Catholics who choose to become members, we are also referring to a geographic region.

Over the centuries, the Church has divided up the entire world into these parishes. By doing so, she has planted outposts of her mission in local communities around the world. Each parish is a local instantiation of the universal Body of Christ. The reason for this is not just to have a place for Catholics to gather, but to show the community of Catholics in any particular area the extent of their shared mission field. Within a given parish’s boundaries, the priests’ job is to sanctify the baptized faithful. The baptized faithful also have a job within those parish boundaries: to sanctify one another within the Body of Christ, and to reach out to those not in full communion with the Church. It is that simple.

For the vast majority of Catholics, almost their entire experience of the Faith will be mediated through the parish. Yet too many of our parishes are clinging to ways of functioning that could not be more out of touch with the presently demanded apostolic moment. So many of our modalities of functioning have been crafted for a cultural moment that no longer exists, one that was much more supportive of religious practice in the wider culture. Even if it does not reach the fullness of the parish’s mission, maintenance of the parish structures is all that a Christian cultural context requires to keep

the doors open.

Though this shift has been happening for hundreds of years, the second half of the twentieth century saw this cultural revolution toward a post-Christian society fully mature. We now operate as a Church in what is called a “post-Christian society.” The Christian worldview and praxis are no longer the dominant forms of life in Europe and North America. Traditional morality and religious belief are seen, not just as optional, but as outdated and even repugnant.

Art and entertainment tend to reflect the underlying culture. To take one stark example, consider the Colosseum and the pagan culture of ancient Rome, which it represents. Then consider our own entertainment culture today. In 1953, a Catholic bishop standing in front of a blackboard talking about the moral issues of the day pulled in ten million viewers a week and won the Emmy for “Most Outstanding Television Personality.”<sup>9</sup> In 2018–19, the runaway top TV show among adults 18 to 49, *Game of Thrones*, frequently featured graphic nudity, extreme violence, and various forms of assault. When John Lennon famously remarked in a 1966 interview that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus”<sup>10</sup> and that rock ‘n roll would outlive Christianity, maybe he was not only being arrogant, but pointing to a seismic shift in culture that was already taking place.

In our post-Christian society, there has been a rapid and significant breakdown in the family. This is an issue for parishes because we have based many of our parish realities on the strength of the domestic church. As a Church, we have relied on the family unit to support and sustain most of our initiatives. In an ideal world, the parish in all of its structures would exist to support the strong formation that is already taking place at home. In reality, the sacramental numbers alone testify to a weakening of the domestic church in our parishes. While there were 420,000 Catholic marriages in 1970, in 2018 that number dwindled to a generational low of 143,000.

It should be no surprise, then, that while there were almost 1.1 million infant baptisms in 1970, in 2018 that number was 615,000.<sup>11</sup>

When the overall culture supports religious practice, churches get to do ministry as if it is “bumper bowling.” As long as we throw the ball toward the pins, it is going to get there. We may not have a strike every time, but we will at least hit a couple of pins by default! In our current day, the bumpers have been taken off completely. There are almost no cultural pressures to guide current or future generations back into the Church. On the contrary, increasing social pressures are drawing people — including many baptized Catholics — away from the Church Jesus founded.

Clearly, we live today in a very different cultural moment, but many of our parishes are still operating in a “maintenance” mode that would only make sense in a Christian cultural context. In the face of this mounting secularizing shift, many parishes in the United States and other parts of the world are simply not structured to turn things around.

It is crucial that we understand the challenge that now faces our parishes. If we consider our problems to be temporal and shallow, then we might be tempted to think that simply tweaking things will produce the desired results of a renewed Church. Yet maintenance solutions alone cannot turn things around. Only a radical recommitment to our Church’s missionary identity is a fitting response to the revolution taking place in the world. Too often in parishes, we are “playing not to lose” rather than “playing to win.” Today, more is required. What is needed to meet the challenges today’s parishes face is not just a more effective form of maintenance, but a complete transformation into continually operating on mission, like the first apostles who burst out of the Upper Room on Pentecost.

Until now, to make a broad generalization, the New Evangelization that Pope Saint John Paul II called for has been carried out largely in ecclesial movements and ministries. We

have not done enough in our parishes, and thankfully, we are beginning to make this a priority. We must figure out how to transform these communities whose structures are often built only for maintenance, and repurpose them for mission. If we do not, we will miss our key advantage for re-Christifying our post-modern world. In the end, the fulfillment of the call

*The fulfillment of the call to the New Evangelization will depend on the parish, because the parish is the place where salvation history and people's individual lives meet.*

to the New Evangelization will depend on the parish, because the parish is the place where salvation history and people's individual lives meet.

This means that in order to renew the whole Church, we have to first renew the parish.

That is the whole point of this book. My full-time work for many years has been to accompany parishes through a process of renewal focused on discipleship. Through that work, and by encountering parishes of all sizes, I have learned a few key principles about what works and what does not.

Each parish is unique, with a rich history and pastoral context that changes the tactics that might work at ground-level. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to parish renewal simply cannot work, and there is no quick and easy process for renewing a parish, so this book will not seek to propose one. What it does propose is a map of sorts for long-term cultural change. I am convinced that, if each parish takes seriously the challenges of this moment, and proactively works to meet them head-on, the new missionary age prophesied by Saint John Paul II will come about. To me, creating this kind of momentum requires that parish leaders focus singularly on four simple keys, which we will discuss in more detail in a moment.

It is incredibly important that these keys be simple. Parish leaders today are often discouraged and overwhelmed. They have been trying to do well and to effect change for so long,

with so much resistance and inertia, that they are burned out. They feel overworked and underappreciated. Many feel cynical about the possibility that their parish culture can ever really change. The to-do list is already full and the thought of trying to drive such change feels like a thousand new tasks that they just do not have the time or energy for.

If this is your situation, I come bearing good news. Parish renewal is not about running off in a thousand directions like chickens with our heads cut off. This scattershot approach to renewal leaves parishes disorganized and parish leadership burned out. My vision for parish renewal involves, not multiplying our efforts and doing more, but doing *less*. And who doesn't love doing less?

Really, renewing a parish and creating a culture of missionary discipleship is about doing less because it is about prioritizing a few things and doing them really, really well.

Take a secular example. In-N-Out Burger, a fast food restaurant chain found in the western part of the United States, particularly California, has long had an almost mythical relationship with its loyal customers. In-N-Out does not have the huge menu of a McDonalds, but lines are out the door at all times of the day. Recently, one Los Angeles newspaper referred to their drive-thru lines as a "public menace" due to their length.<sup>12</sup> Their secret? They do a few things incredibly well using fresh ingredients. They focus on a small number of food items, but everything they do is top quality. Because they have a smaller menu, they have the ability to be intentional and expert in everything they attempt.

Now consider your parish. Each parish is unique, so it is difficult to propose a top-down, one-size-fits-all model for parish renewal. However, through personal experience, through analyzing the very best missional parishes, and through pulling from the magisterial teachings of the Church, we can come to some definite principles that can be universally applied to any parish situation to begin the movement from

maintenance to mission.

To effect such a change will not be the work of a moment, or even a year or two, but will be the work of the next ten years. We need to begin with this big-picture vision of a complete cultural overhaul, from focusing inward on maintenance to moving outward toward mission and forming disciples. Only a goal that big will inspire the work that will be required.

Below are four strategic goals that can focus your efforts and break down the massive project of parish renewal into more achievable steps. I call these the four keys to parish renewal, as they lay out, not a step-by-step, one-size-fits-all path for any parish, but the four main drivers that inspire and propel our efforts to renew the culture in our parishes. As we seek to build our parishes into missionary outposts of the New Evangelization, these four keys help us determine simple and actionable ways we get there.

They are as follows:

- 1) **The vision is clear.** We want ours to be a missionary parish aimed at introducing parishioners and non-parishioners alike to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.
  
- 2) **There is a clear path to discipleship.** We want our parish to be equipped and formed to help people grow into the fullness of mature Catholicism and missionary discipleship.
  
- 3) **Leaders are well-formed, empowered, and sent to bear fruit.** We want our parish to form leaders who are fruitful both within the parish and in the larger community in their day-to-day lives.
  
- 4) **Nothing in the parish operates in maintenance mode.** We want everything our parish does to be

aligned with the mission to form disciples who can make disciples.

This book is written to guide you through these four keys to parish renewal and give you practical strategies for implementing them. With the conviction that the renewal of the Church depends on the renewal of the parish, and the renewal of the parish depends on forming missionary disciples, we will be unpacking these four keys to show you how to move your parish from a culture of maintaining decline to one that is radically on mission and forming missionary disciples.

While the “meat” of this book will focus on how to implement these four keys in your parish context (chapters 4–8), we first have to pause to lay some groundwork. Before we throw up the walls of the house, we have to lay the foundation. Like we said earlier, unless we properly diagnose the problem, we will not know what the right remedies are or how to contextualize them appropriately in our parish. So first, we will look at the four types of parishes in the United States and take a moment to diagnose where your parish may be. Second, we will propose the antidote and this book’s overall vision for cultural change: forming missionary disciples.

## TWO IMPORTANT NOTES ON RENEWAL

Before we move on, I also want to stress what we mean by “renewal.” There are two important things to note as you read this book and consider renewal in your own parish.

### **First: Renewal is not something we do.**

Jesus is abundantly clear about this: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

As we are going to talk about, real parish renewal depends on changed lives and new disciples. You and I do not have the power on our own to form a single disciple. At the end of the day, it is God alone who makes this happen through his grace.

The power of the Holy Spirit brings about renewal. We cooperate through what we do, but we cannot do it alone.

If we believed that truth more fully as a Church, we would pray and act differently, and we would start to see real change.

If I could point to a single reason why we have not seen more wide-scale renewal in our parishes, it is because we as leaders do not really believe that God is

fully in control. The best way to start renewal: pray consistently, intentionally, over time, with others for God to bring about change. We have to actually believe and act like it is God alone who can do the work that is required. Plans are great; prayers are better. We need both for renewal to happen.

Saint John of the Cross puts it better than I can:

Let those then who are singularly active, who think they can win the world with their preaching and exterior works, observe here that they would profit the Church and please God much more ... were they to spend at least half of this time with God in prayer. ... They would then certainly accomplish more, and with less labor, by one work than they otherwise would by a thousand. ... Without prayer they would do a great deal of hammering but accomplish little, and sometimes nothing, and even at times cause harm. ... However much they may appear to achieve externally, they will in substance be accomplishing nothing [without a deep life of prayer].<sup>13</sup>

You are our only hope, Lord.

*The best way to start renewal: Pray consistently, intentionally, over time, with others for God to bring about change.*

## **Second: Authentic renewal is always authentically Catholic.**

Many faithful Catholics in our time are wary of the concept of “renewal.” This is not without reason. Too many watched as the excited language about renewal following the Second Vatican Council amounted to little more than watering down the Faith and adapting to modernity. Often this left the Church looking more like the world, and it did not help the Church reach and transform the world as she is called to do. Rather than authentic renewal, the reforms following the council often looked more like revolution.

This is not what I am proposing. What I do propose is in line with the helpful hermeneutic for renewal George Weigel provides in his book, *Evangelical Catholicism*. He claims that authentic renewal always asks of each reality, first, “What is the truth of this thing?” Authentic renewal should never fundamentally change the objective reality of any teachings or practices of the Faith. At the same time, authentic renewal also asks, “How can this best be approached in light of mission?”<sup>14</sup> *Both* of these questions need to be posed to all that we do in our parishes as we seek renewal. Authentic renewal will pull from our rich heritage as Catholics and will change nothing about the deposit of faith, but it will be bold in prioritizing mission. Authentic renewal is not just about changing the Church, it is about unleashing the Gospel.

It is the aim of this book to pose those questions with you and seek out answers together. Drawn from the experience of working with real parishes, with an acute eye and respect for the differences in the pastoral situations found within each community, we will try to propose some solutions for those of you who want to embark on cultural change in your parish but are still looking for more meat on the bones in terms of how. The purpose of this book is not just to convince you that cultural change is necessary. This is for anyone who is aware of the present difficulties in carrying forward the Church’s mis-

sion, and who wants to start wrestling with how we are going to focus our parishes on mission.

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