

GENESIS

COMPASS



The Fifth Theme

Enhance Your Sunday Experience

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Enhance Your Sunday Experience

1. Current Parish Reality

Introduction

²⁰And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” ²¹So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²²God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” ²³And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day. Genesis 1:20-23

On day five of the creation of the universe, creatures begin to multiply on the face of the earth. We see extraordinary abundance and diversity among the animals, fish, and birds that God creates. One day a week – Sunday – the entire parish gathers for the celebration of the Lord’s Day, and your church is ‘teeming’ with the living Body of Christ – human beings of every kind. As we consider the renewal of your parish, we will use this day of creation to explore how to enhance the Sunday experience at your parish.

In Day Five, we will consider,

- the current experience of gathering on Sundays,
- a theological reflection on this reality, based on Genesis 1,
- practical application suggestions as your parish takes concrete steps.

Reality Check: Sunday Experience

A great opportunity lies before us in the western Church. As decades of secularization take their toll and people increasingly experience the bland, flatness of a Godless life, a new spiritual openness is awakening. In the secularized UK, you are now more likely to attend any Christian church if you are 21 than if you are 51. 62% of 18-24-year-olds describe themselves as “very” or “fairly” spiritual (compared to only 35% of those over 65).¹ 37% of Australians say that, were they invited to church by a friend or family member, they would likely say yes.² After Pope Francis died, the search term ‘How to become Catholic’ was trending upward by 373%.³ It seems that our neighbourhoods are swimming with people curious about or open to faith.

Yet, despite the considerable opportunity facing them, many Catholics would be hesitant to extend such an invitation. Part of the puzzle is owing to Catholics’ low confidence in invitation (we explored this in the Day 3 module on Evangelization). But another part of the puzzle is what we now turn to in this module: if you knew that your friend or family member would likely have a positive experience at church, would you feel more confident about inviting them?

What Are We Inviting People To?

¹ See The Quiet Revival report from the Bible Society in the UK.

² 2020 Australian Community Survey, by NCLS Research.

³ See <https://zenit.org/2025/05/13/how-to-become-a-catholic-google-reports-increase-in-searches-after-pope-francis-death/>

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We need to preface this question with a caveat about what the Mass *is* in the first place.

At one and the same time, the Mass is a memorial, a meal, and the re-presentation of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Not only does it bring to mind Jesus' sacrifice, but it also actually *makes it present*. The Lord celebrated the Last Supper,

“... to perpetuate the sacrifice of the cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a Paschal banquet...”
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1323).

If this is what the Mass is, it has profound implications for its place in our lives as Catholics. It is the “source and summit” of our whole Christian life (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). It is the central event of our parishes. In the words of the constitution of Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10, the liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.”

Being the “summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed”, we know that the Mass is also for the fully initiated. In the early centuries of the Church, these sacred mysteries were held to be so holy that they were kept secret, only participated in by those fully sacramentally initiated. Profoundly rich catechesis by the early Church Fathers unfold to catechumens the meaning behind the mysteries that they will witness and experience for themselves only upon being baptised.

Centuries have passed, and today, anyone can walk off the street into a Catholic Mass. And yet, it is a liturgy that is not designed to be accessible as an entry-point to the uninitiated.

Fr James Mallon has spoken about how the pendulum swings back and forth across the decades and centuries between what is most emphasised in the Mass. In the decades following the Second Vatican Council, there was a swing away from speaking about the Mass as a sacrifice and rather as a meal. Part of this swing was an attempt to make the Mass more immediately understandable to those taking part, to demythologise it somewhat. Fr James comments,

“I remember in the seminary our liturgy professor never referred to the chalice and the paten but spoke about cups and plates. We did not “purify the vessels.” Instead, we “washed the dishes.” The altar was rarely described as such, but was almost, exclusively, “the table”.”⁴

As we shall see through this module, the authentic Catholic approach embraces both/and. While the Mass is not designed for the uninitiated, many are likely to attend. How do we *both* safeguard the authentic nature of the Mass, *and* foster an attractive and compelling experience?

⁴ Fr James Mallon's unpublished paper, *The Keyring*.

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It is worth also noting at this point that there are different models of parish renewal, with varying approaches. Some models – especially in cultures where high proportions of identifying or baptized Catholics live in our neighbourhoods – it might make sense to use the Sunday Mass as an entry-point.⁵ In such a milieu, a basic understanding of and familiarity with Catholicism can be assumed, so creating an evangelistic Sunday Mass experience makes sense as the main gateway back into Christian discipleship.

But, the Divine Renovation model of parish renewal has been implemented in numerous milieus around the world that are aggressively secular, and in which no cultural understanding of Christianity can be assumed. In such contexts, parishes have experienced that it does *not* work to treat the Sunday Mass as the main gateway into evangelisation and conversion. It is much more fruitful to use Alpha, or a comparable evangelisation initiative, as the entry-point.

Should we invite people to Mass at all? The key is to know your audience! For some, it will be the best invitation you can offer them; for most, Alpha or a pre-evangelistic event will be the best starting point. This is where we as inviters need to be sensitive to those we invite, not assuming any religious experience.

The reality is, though, that people of no faith, strong faith, and everything in between, are sitting in your pews on a Sunday.

Fr James Mallon writes,

“The only time we see 80% of our people is on the weekend, yet only 20% of my time in any given week was invested in planning, preparing and executing weekend Masses. It is the classic 80/20 rule.”⁶

While we are not treating Sunday Mass as the main gateway into the life of the parish, it represents an unmissable opportunity to start shifting the culture of your parish into a disciple-making community. Increasing the percentage of time you spend each week on the weekend experience will prove enormously worthwhile.

Why Focus on ‘Experience’?

We define the Sunday experience as, *“The experience an individual has at a parish on Sunday. A person’s experience at Mass (beyond the objective offering of the Sacred Liturgy) is vital because it determines the fruitfulness of the Eucharist in his or her life.”*

Each Sunday we participate in the heavenly liturgy, the eternal offering of the Son to the Father made present in time (cf. Hebrews 8:1-2). It is a reality we only know by faith. Like the deepest mysteries, we walk by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7) and will not know the full reality through our senses until we experience the beatific vision. St Thomas Aquinas has a profound line in his hymn, *Tantum Ergo*, often sung at Benediction in our churches.

⁵ The Rebuilt model, for example, takes this approach.

⁶ *Divine Renovation*, p. 95.

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“Praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui.”

Literally, it means that our senses are defective – they do not tell us what we are truly present at – and so faith supplements them. At every Mass, we do not see, hear, smell, taste or touch the heavenly banquet, but our faith tells us that this is precisely the reality at which we are gathered, together with countless angels and saints.

If the Mass is such a heavenly reality requiring faith to know what we participate in, why are we concerned with ‘experience’? Why is there any need to ‘enhance the Sunday experience’ at all? Isn’t it enough that we are present at the one, eternal Sacrifice? At the unsurpassable moment of heaven touching earth?

Maybe this would be true if we were bodiless angels, but we are not: we are composite beings, soul and body. God created us to learn through our senses. While the senses of our body do not lead us to fully experience the heavenly reality of the Mass, God engages each of our senses to entice and speak to us at every level of our being. He engages our bodies to reveal who he is, his longing for us, and to awaken a response of faith.

The Mass, therefore, is not just a timeless event at which we are present; rather, it is a communication of love between God the Father with his People, mediated by his Son. God reveals himself through sacred words and actions that communicate, that convey meaning (cf. CCC 1118). Not only does he reveal himself, but his communication of himself in fact draws us, his People, into himself, assimilates us into the Paschal Mystery of his Son. In the liturgy, God appeals to our human freedom by communicating to us in all the ways natural to a human person: through words, deeds, gestures. We see, hear, touch, taste and smell signs in the liturgy that reveal the realities he desires for us not only to know but to possess.

All of this should make clear that our *experience* – far from being irrelevant – could not be more important to God.

He longs for our response, the movement of our hearts to him in faith and love.

Reality and experience: the two vital dimensions to the Mass. The objective and the subjective.

Of course, how easy it can be to overlook and be negligent about ‘experience’ when the ‘reality’ is present. As Fr James Mallon writes,

“The Mass is still objectively offered even when the subjective experience may leave much to be desired. The Church, in all the sacraments, has always distinguished between these two, the objective: *ex opere operato* (out of the work worked), and the subjective dimension: *ex opera operantis* (out of the work of the one doing the work). The

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sacrament is celebrated validly, regardless of how it is experienced, or how much fruit it bears.”⁷

The Sunday Eucharist is rightly at the heart of every parish. It is validly celebrated – that is, the once-for-all offering of Jesus to the Father is made present again for the salvation of the whole world – thousands of times a day. And yet, while the (objective) reality is being offered, the (subjective) experience often is not visibly bearing fruit. Every Sunday, hundreds of thousands of Catholics receive the Eucharist and for many no evident transformation of their lives takes place.

This is why, when we consider the renewal of our parishes, we are less concerned with validity (which hopefully can be taken for granted) and much more concerned with *subjective fruitfulness*.

What would it look like if the grace received by those attending Mass in your church became unleashed in missionary zeal?

How might a person experience the Mass in a way that awakens faith and stirs a response of love?

How Does the Mass Bring About Subjective Fruitfulness?

It is helpful to step back here and dig into the sacramental theology of St Thomas Aquinas. When a sacrament is performed, it can be effective on three levels.⁸

The first level is the performing of the sacrament itself. If the words and actions (form), the matter and the minister are correct, the sacrament is validly performed.

The second level is the effect of the sacrament on the soul on whom it is conferred. Sacraments such as Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders confer an indelible spiritual mark (character) of belonging to Christ, and that seal is unrepeatable and independent of the receiving person’s disposition.

The third level of the sacrament is where the subjective fruitfulness comes in. This is when the sacrament achieves its full purpose in the life of the believer. For example, in Baptism, it is the purification of sins and new life in the Holy Spirit (CCC 1262). This is the level at which sacraments truly transform a human being and make them holy, like Christ.

What is needed for this deepest level of a sacrament to be unlocked? St Peter gives the answers when he preaches immediately after Pentecost to a large crowd in Jerusalem. Some people approached him, hungry for what he spoke of, and asked, “What must we do, brothers?” St Peter responded, “You must repent, and every one of you must be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

⁷ Fr James Mallon’s unpublished paper, *The Keyring*.

⁸ Fr James unpacks this in more detail in *Divine Renovation*, pages 201-204.

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Repentance – that is, an authentic movement in the heart – is required before Baptism, in order for a person to receive the fullness of the gift of the Holy Spirit. If it was enough just to be baptised, St Peter would not have mentioned repentance!

It is clear that the receiving of sacraments is not enough. When there is conversion of heart – repentance, belief, and hunger for the Holy Spirit – the full effects of the sacraments blossom in our lives (see CCC 1072). Sacraments are received according to the mode of the receiver. The human disposition is critical. And experience at Mass shapes our disposition.

The subjective fruitfulness of the Sunday Eucharist, therefore, is a vital component to the renewal of our parishes. Fr James Mallon writes,

“...in the Divine Renovation model, when we speak about the Eucharist as the Keyring (in addition to its being the source and the summit because it is the very paschal mystery of Jesus ...), we also mean the importance of the work of the ones doing the work: the presider and the key ministers, including the assembly. Not for the sake of validity, but for the sake of fruitfulness. For this reason, we speak about the three H’s: hymns, homilies, and hospitality. It is what some would consider the “merely human” dimensions of the Eucharistic celebration. They take on great importance and urgency in the great quest for parish renewal.”⁹

Experience for the Sake of Fruitfulness

We are holding a number of realities in a creative tension when we think about Sunday experience.

Both: People’s experience is critical for the sake of fruitfulness of grace in their lives...

And: The Mass is the Mass, and we cannot alter it substantially for the sake of the uninitiated.

Both: The Mass is not the primary entry-point for people who are not already disciples...

And: We take for granted that people with no or little faith are sitting in the pews on a Sunday.

Bearing these in mind, what are people experiencing when they come on a Sunday to your church?

It is notoriously difficult to put yourself in another person’s shoes. At Divine Renovation, we define culture as, “*The patterns of behaviour that reflect our deeply held assumptions about what we create, allow, celebrate, and tolerate.*” The problem with culture is that it is deeply ingrained in us. The “patterns of behaviour” we fall into are subconscious, habitual and automatic. We don’t notice them unless someone points them out.

Think through what you do as you arrive at your church on a Sunday. You walk into the porch, smile or exchange a few words with the greeters, automatically reach for the holy water and make the sign of the cross, take a hymn book and bulletin, genuflect as you enter your pew. All of these

⁹ Fr James Mallon’s unpublished paper, *The Keyring*.

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actions take place via well-worn neural pathways in your brain – you have repeated them thousands of times. In our parishes, we “create, allow, celebrate, and tolerate” these repeated, familiar actions.

Part of enhancing the Sunday experience in our parishes is to do our utmost to experience it in another person’s shoes. Let’s consider seven personas that we will continue to return to throughout our exploration of enhancing the Sunday experience.

Seven Personas

- Grace, 14, cradle Catholic; completely bored at Mass and cannot wait for the day she no longer has to attend.
- Joe, 22, non-religious; has spent several months exploring Catholicism online and is growing in conviction, but terrified about attending an actual Catholic Mass.
- Elma, 28, doubting Catholic; alone in a big city she feels anonymous at Mass and is desperate for friends.
- Kristy, 38, cradle Catholic, divorced; struggling to bring her two small children to Mass alone and feels judged and unsupported by her parish.
- Sean, 42, drifted away Catholic; is same-sex-attracted and believes the Church rejects his lifestyle but something is drawing him back.
- Barbara, 65, cradle Catholic; angry about many Church teachings, her attendance is becoming sporadic as she finds her faith is holding her by a thread.
- Jose, 82, devout widower with no children and little community around him; his mobility issues mean it is getting harder and harder to attend.

According to sociologist Edgar Schein, the deep forces of culture mean you are “maximally comfortable with others who share the same set of assumptions” you do, but “very uncomfortable and vulnerable in situations where different assumptions operate because either [you] will not understand what is going on, or, worse, [you] will misperceive and misinterpret the actions of others.”¹⁰

While you may rejoice in coming to Mass each Sunday, feeling comfortable among others who share much of your worldview and assumptions, there are likely hundreds around you who do not. Each of the people listed above may find themselves “uncomfortable and vulnerable” in your church, afraid of not understanding, of misperceiving or misinterpreting.

Imagine someone with these sensations of discomfort, uncertainty and vulnerability coursing around their body. How likely are they to be able to be present to open their heart to God?

This is the essence of crafting a Sunday experience that is conducive to encountering God. What do I want this person’s experience to be? What do I want them to know? How do I want them to feel? How will they best be able to relax, to open their hearts to receive God, lovingly communicating himself to them in this Mass?

¹⁰ Edgar Schein, 2010, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, p. 29.

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Ten Ways Your Parish Makes It Hard to Encounter God at Mass

If the essence of the Mass is God's self-communication to us, how tragic when human barriers (easily removed) get in the way. Think of the seven types of people listed above. Each will have a unique experience walking through the doors of your church. While an individualized approach to evangelization and discipleship is important, there are certain universal experiences that will shape most people in one way or another.

We list below ten ways your parish (may!) make it hard to encounter God at Mass.¹¹ We categorize them into four sections: 'before', 'the first seven minutes', 'during' and 'after'. In his book, *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully-Engaged Members of Your Church*, Nelson Searcy describes the 7-minute, pre-service period as the time when first-time guests decide if they will ever return. This is the critical time "from the street to the seat." Throughout, we reference testimonies from people who have fallen away from their parish for experiential reasons related to the Mass.¹²

Before

1. It's impossible to check out what the experience will be online first.

The First Seven Minutes

2. Crossing the threshold is chaotic and unwelcoming.
3. There is no provision for children or families.
4. The church building is tired, cluttered and confusing.

During

5. The music or sound system is poor quality.
6. The preaching does not inspire.
7. The culture feels anonymous, isolated and joyless.
8. It is unclear what to do and how to do it.

After

9. It's not clear what happens next.
10. There is no program for evangelization.

Before

1. **It's impossible to check out what the experience will be online first.** When was the last time you visited somewhere new without checking it out online first? You probably read reviews, worked out what you needed to bring with you, what the logistics would involve. That's right, a first-timer's experience doesn't begin when they arrive at the site of your church: it begins when they check out your online presence. Is your website easy to use and seeker friendly? Does it give a sense of what to expect? Is it possible to watch the liturgy online first, before coming in person?

¹¹ See also Carey Nieuwhof, [How to Lose a First Time Guest in 10 Minutes or Less](#)

¹² These are taken from Bullivant, Vaughan-Spruce, et al, 2019, *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return.*

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The First Seven Minutes

- 2. Crossing the threshold is chaotic and unwelcoming.** Ever abandoned a trip because you found nowhere to park? What is the parking situation like at your church? Do you have a parking team? If it's a frustrating experience, you won't know how many people you lose, because it is unlikely they will try again. And what happens when someone walks through the doors of your church building? Many parishes will say how friendly they are, but are they friendly to the first-timer? One woman who stopped attending her parish said, *"No one was very friendly, and it felt very cliquey."* A well-trained hospitality team who love people can do a world of good. In Carey Nieuwhof's words, "First-time guests need an appropriate welcome, clear directions to what's next, and the sense that there are people there who knew they were coming and are able to help them."
- 3. There is no provision for children or families.** One 33-year-old mother who tried to take her child to Mass alone said, *"I have an inquisitive young girl with whom I have loved sharing the joy of the Church... [However, in the Mass] she cannot see or hear what is happening but only the person's back in front of her, where the liturgy is spoken in a language that means nothing to her, and in which she as a person is totally ignored... So, why should I take her, what is the point?"* If our parishes have not considered the experience of the Mass through the eyes of parents and children, it is possible you have no children's program (or maybe minimal or disorganised provision), no space for families to feel at home in when their children are more audible than usual, and maybe a culture that frowns and raises eyebrows at noise from families. Helping families feel "maximally comfortable" is critical for the future of the Church.¹³
- 4. The church building is tired, cluttered and confusing.** Like deeply ingrained culture, we become blind to the tired paintwork, cracks in the walls, and dirty washrooms. Maybe the physical environment is uncomfortable, for example, the parish has not invested in sufficient heating or air conditioning. Universally, Catholic parishes seem to have a collective blindness to clutter in the church foyer or porch and lack of clear signage. No signage indicates that the church does not anticipate newcomers and assumes that everyone is comfortable and familiar with the way things are. We have a spiritual gift for noticeboards crowded with posters from every Catholic organization imaginable. And we love to confuse people! Often, it's unclear where to go, where to sit, or where the washroom is. We hand people a pile of hymn books and loose-leaf sheets of paper assuming they are completely familiar with what to do with them. We are unattuned to signs that people may feel lost or confused.

During

¹³ It is also worth considering families with children with special needs. Studies indicate that many of these families eventually stop attending Mass, for example, [https://church4everychild.org/2016/02/09/what-are-the-stats-on-disability-and-church/#:~:text=More%20than%2060%25%20of%20special,child%20could%20participate%20\(55.3%25\)](https://church4everychild.org/2016/02/09/what-are-the-stats-on-disability-and-church/#:~:text=More%20than%2060%25%20of%20special,child%20could%20participate%20(55.3%25))

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5. **The music or sound system is poor quality.** Regardless of what style of music, quality is the key. One 30-year-old woman described the Masses she attended as, “*somber and joyless. And if we are coming together to worship, surely it should be the opposite.*” Another person who no longer attends her parish described the “*dreary, cranky hymns.*” If your parish has not suffered from choirs that have not updated their repertoire since the 1970s, or from cheerless, plodding music, you are likely in the minority. We tend not to tackle some of these issues because of our fear of conflict (see the Day 4 module!), and because resistance to change can be powerfully entrenched. At the same time, how critical it is to remember what a deeply personal reality music is. It is likely that a particular song loved by a parish music minister was profoundly impactful in their own conversion. When something is so personal, it can help us understand why music can be challenging to change. However, we must tackle situations where music of poor quality has become entrenched. What is at stake are long-term, significant barriers to people’s encounters with the living God. Furthermore, your music is only as good as the sound system that amplifies it. Fr James Mallon recalls how in a previous parish, “the sound system was the very same one that was installed when the church was built in 1959. You could not even plug a single acoustic guitar into the system without overloading it.”¹⁴ How little we value the quality of our worship of God, and the encounters he wants to have with his people.

6. **The preaching does not inspire.**¹⁵ In *Evangelii Gaudium* 135, Pope Francis quipped that both priests and laity suffer from homilies, “the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!” One 18-year-old who stopped attending Mass at his parish said, “*Mass is dull, lifeless and completely unrelatable. The homily at my local church is a lecture for very intelligent and indulged Catholics on theory and other things. It goes way over my head and is not of interest.*” Ouch. While comments like this can be painful, it reminds us too how much those sitting in the pews are longing for hearts as well as minds to be engaged; for truth that nourishes the intellect, and for a message that relates to and brings life to their daily existence. We long for words that are “Spirit and Life” (John 6:63). Every week, the storms of life buffet us, shake our faith, and threaten our commitment. The homily is an immensely powerful tool to awaken or build faith that the priest or deacon has at his disposal every single week. And yet it is a tool that is wasted when insufficient preparation is given (that is, when a preacher chooses to “wing it”), when there is a sense that the preacher does not believe what he is sharing or has deep enough conviction, or when the homily meanders without a clear sense of what the preacher wants a listener to know, to feel or to do. This is an opportunity that is tragically squandered when the homily does not lead people to encounter God.

7. **The culture feels anonymous, isolated, and joyless.** A 2023 Gallup study found that 1 in 4 people worldwide feel lonely.¹⁶ Our culture has never been so technologically advanced, and never so emotionally lonely. That is why, when people come to our

¹⁴ *Divine Renovation*, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Divine Renovation* has an entire book on preaching. See *Preaching on Purpose*.

¹⁶ See: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx>

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churches, they are desperate for something more real, deep and satisfying. Being in a church where no one speaks to you feels maybe even more isolating than being in the wider secular culture where you would not expect much more. One 60-year-old man who stopped attending his parish commented, *“When my marriage broke up, everyone knew. One week we were sitting together as a family; the next, we were sitting apart. We were in pain and it seemed like everyone just looked away. It is hard to ask for help, but the church community I thought we were a part of could have helped.”* Parishes are often not as friendly as they think they are.

What is more, they can lack a sense of joy. One middle-aged man said, *“We have tried to continue attending Mass regularly, but it is not a pleasant and friendly experience... the liturgy is tedious and dreary.”* In *Divine Renovation*, Fr James Mallon analyses how a “get it over and done with” mentality, an unspoken value of convenience, and the fast-Mass addiction have created a culture of minimalism and mediocrity.¹⁷ When those sitting in the pews are bored, desperate to leave after they have received Holy Communion, the spiritual atmosphere of the whole gathering is changed. Any spiritual reality of hunger, anticipation, or expectation of encounter with God is drained from the atmosphere. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27, teaches that, “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself,” and yet, an uninspiring and tedious experience of Mass can tragically suck desire for God from the human heart, and instead make us long for it all to be over. What a lamentable situation, when the privileged place on earth where God most wants to encounter human beings instead becomes a place where desire – precisely the prerequisite for an encounter with God – is sapped from our hearts.

8. It is unclear what to do and how to do it.

Engage in a thought experiment. Imagine showing up at a synagogue or a temple for a Jewish or Hindu service. You instantly feel anxious about entering, not knowing how to behave, what is expected, or even if you are welcome to walk in the building at all. Throughout the service you feel like you stand out. You do not know when to kneel, stand, or sit. You try to follow along, but you're a few seconds behind. You wonder if people are watching you. You worry you're doing something “wrong.” You do not know what to do at the end of the service. This imagined experience is similar to what a newcomer may feel like coming into your church where everyone else knows the “script”—when to stand, kneel, respond, make the sign of the cross, what to do at communion or the offertory. Even those who are sincerely seeking faith may avoid coming back simply because the experience made them feel exposed or “other.” Most of us have had moments in life where we've been the outsider: a first day at a new job, attending a wedding in another culture, or walking into a class where everyone else seems one step ahead. That mix of anxiety and self-consciousness can easily drown out any openness or curiosity we had at the start.

¹⁷ See pages 95-101.

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The same thing happens at Mass—only it's magnified by the sacredness of the space and the vulnerability of seeking God. When someone doesn't know what to do, and no gentle help or instruction is provided, it's easy for them to internalize the idea that they don't belong.

After

9. **It's not clear what happens next.** Imagine having newly arrived at a parish. You come to the end of the Mass, and you wonder what happens next. How do you get connected with people? What is going on and how do you get involved? The likelihood of someone spotting you, guiding you, and making a few introductions is probably slim. The likely existence of a new parishioner pathway is even slimmer. As a visitor, you'll need to do the heavy lifting yourself: make your own way to coffee after Mass and try to introduce yourself in ready-formed groups; trawl through parish bulletin notices and noticeboards for information about what is going on. Whether or not you end up connected into social groups of parishioners of similar age and state of life to you with whom you might make friends is highly hit-or-miss.

10. **There is no program for evangelization.** Let's state the obvious: the Mass is not the place where you can grow in your understanding of what's going on around you. Unlike any other event on the face of the earth, we have seen how crucial faith is to begin to grasp what our senses do not tell us. But faith in these unseen mysteries is not automatic. Like the Ethiopian eunuch responds to the apostle Philip who asks if he understands the scripture he is reading, people will say, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:30-31). It is clear, then, that enhancing our Sunday experience needs to take place in an entire ecosystem of change in our parish. Quoting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1072, states: "The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church": it must be preceded by evangelization, faith, and conversion. It can then produce its fruits in the lives of the faithful: new life in the Spirit, involvement in the mission of the Church, and service to her unity." In other words, you need a whole lot more going on outside the Mass if people are really going to experience the *fruits* of the Mass! **The spiritual temperature of your Sunday Masses will rise in direct proportion to the rising discipleship of your parishioners.** And you will 'feel' it. If you are a priest, it will not feel like looking out at a zombie convention anymore. People won't leave at the first available opportunity. There will be a spirit of faith, joy, and expectation in the air. Your own faith as a priest will be strengthened by your people's faith as you celebrate the sacred mysteries.

What Can't Be Changed?

So far, we've described a creative tension between certain realities that are fixed and ones that are changeable. At the outset, be at peace about what you can't change:

- You cannot (or are unlikely to be able to) change the architecture of your buildings. Especially in European countries, churches were built for a Christendom era. In cultures where everyone was Christian, Sunday church attendance was at one time almost

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universal, and the church was an integrated hub at the heart of a tight-knit community. Often, you would walk straight off the street through the doors into a church. Winston Churchill famously commented that, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” Church buildings with minimal community gathering spaces do tend to foster anonymity and disengagement in our communities. Today, if we could build buildings for the post-Christian era, we would do it differently. We would build large gathering spaces for hospitality and welcome before entering the church. We would create family-friendly spaces and easy access for all. You would walk off the street into a welcoming space rather than directly into a church nave. But unless you are fortunate enough with resources to redesign your buildings, you likely must work with what you have.

- Sunday Mass is the one time each week when everyone gathers. If you were evangelizing a pagan culture with no previous knowledge of Christianity, you might initiate a different approach. Maybe the main gathering each week would be evangelistic and community focused, rather than sacramental and liturgical, reserving the sacramental liturgy to the initiated. But, after centuries of Christendom living, the weekly gathering is the Sunday Mass. There is an inbuilt inflexibility to the Mass, and we have seen how we cannot shape it primarily to the experience of the non-believer. Unlike evangelical churches, we cannot create the ultimate seeker-friendly experience with coffee as people walk through the door and social exchanges throughout the liturgy! Remembering CCC 1072, that the Mass does not “exhaust the entire activity of the Church” we need to resist the temptation to use the Mass to fulfil every pastoral and community need, simply because it is the only time each week everyone gathers. Rather, we are called to stay faithful to the true reality of what the Mass is.

In this module, we will focus on what we *can* change, and it is surprising just what a difference these three aspects of Sunday experience can make to the culture of your parish. We call them the three Hs: hymns, homilies, and hospitality.

Finally... It Is All About *Sending*: The Danger of the Attractional Church

As we dive into exploring how to enhance the Sunday experience in our churches, we want to avoid a potentially serious pitfall. The Mass is not about *staying*, or *seating*, it is about *sending*. Some of the most important words in the Mass are at the end: *Ite, Missa est*, ‘Go, the Mass is ended.’

There is a danger about starting to reflect on people’s experience at Mass: we get carried away! We generously want to create an incredible, memorable, beautiful experience. We want people to encounter with God through their experiences at Sunday Mass. If we do not approach this with a mentality of “sending” from the outset, we are at risk of inadvertently forming highly expectant consumers.

Fr Stephen Langridge, a parish priest in London, UK, has spoken of the importance of parishioners seeing themselves as “hosts”, not “guests.”

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Guests complain when there is no soap in the dispensers in the washrooms; hosts work out how to refill them. Guests wait for others to initiate conversation with them after Mass; hosts are intentional about spotting who is new and engaging them. Guests write letters of complaint if they don't like the homily; hosts prayerfully consider how God is challenging them through the homily, or look for ways to support the priest and enrich his preaching. Guests arrive at the last minute and are the first to leave; hosts take their role on the hospitality team, arriving early and leaving late.

It has been said that the message of an attractional church is "Please come!" – and that is good. We want to foster a parish culture that is inviting and welcoming. But, even better is the message of a sending church: "Please go!" In other words, "Don't get too comfortable around here: God has a unique mission for you, a call on your life, and it is outside the walls of this church."

Your parish is not a cruise-liner with menus for religious consumers to select from and feed themselves. Rather, it is a launch pad for sending each lay person to fulfil the particular mission of evangelization to which God has called them. By transforming the barriers to people encountering God at Mass, and making the right changes to hymns, homilies, and hospitality, your parish can achieve this.

We conclude part 1 with the inspiring vision of Pope St John Paul II for the parish as "village fountain":

*"If indeed, the parish is the Church placed in the neighbourhoods of humanity, it lives and is at work through being deeply inserted in human society and intimately bound up with its aspirations and its dramatic events. Oftentimes the social context, especially in certain countries and environments, is violently shaken by elements of disintegration and de-humanization. The individual is lost and disoriented, but there always remains in the human heart the desire to experience and cultivate caring and personal relationships. The response to such a desire can come from the parish, when, with the lay faithful's participation, it adheres to its fundamental vocation and mission, that is, **to be a 'place' in the world for the community of believers to gather together as a 'sign' and 'instrument' of the vocation of all to communion**, in a word, to be a house of welcome to all and a place of service to all, or, as Pope John XXIII was fond of saying, to be the 'village fountain' to which all would have recourse in their thirst."* (Christifidelis Laici, 27)

2. Theological Reflection Based on Genesis 1

We read Genesis 1:20-23 to allow God to shed light onto the Sunday experience in your parish. We encourage you to do your own *lectio divina* knowing that God will speak into your context.

²⁰ And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful

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and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day. Genesis 1:20-23

We began this journey of renewing your parish in an uninhabited mass of matter “without form and void.” Five days later, the reality could not look more different! Here we glimpse a picture of abundant life. Does it remind you of your parish on a Sunday?!

Every Inch Inhabited “According to Its Kind”

In these verses, we glimpse utter abundance and extravagance in the way God fills the earth. There are swarms of living creatures in the seas (v20), and the skies, too, are inhabited. The vault that separated “the waters from the waters” (v6) is now full of birds flying “above the earth across the vault of the sky” (v20). Every inch of the universe – once “without form and void” – is now abundantly inhabited. Indeed, it is estimated that 8.7 million species live on earth – only 1.2 million are identified and named!

In these verses we might see a metaphor for the vast diversity of people who gather at the “village fountain” of our parishes on a Sunday. A rich characteristic of the Catholic parish is how it draws people together by geography, not by any particular ethnicity, age, spirituality, or style. There is universality in the Catholic parish:

“The parish offers an outstanding example of the apostolate on the community level, inasmuch as it brings together the many human differences found within its boundaries and draws them into the universality of the Church” (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10).

Just as there are numberless species in the waters and in the air, so our parishes are intended to gather every kind of person. We think of the event of Pentecost, when pilgrims were staying in Jerusalem “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5): “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians” (Acts 2:9-11).

Pope Benedict XVI, in a homily on the feast of Pentecost, comments on how the nationalities listed here by St Luke go *beyond* the number twelve, a number which expresses universality.¹⁸ He says,

“[St Luke] looks beyond the horizons of Asia and northwest Africa, and adds three other elements: the ‘Romans’, that is, the Western world; the ‘Jews and proselytes’, encompassing in a new way the unity between Israel and the world; and finally ‘Cretans and Arabians’, who represent the West and the East, islands and land. This opening of horizons subsequently confirms the newness of Christ in the dimension of human space, in the history of the nations. The Holy Spirit involves individuals and peoples and, through them, overcomes walls and barriers.”

¹⁸ Homily of Pope Benedict XVI, Feast of Pentecost, Sunday 23 May 2010.

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Think about the “walls and barriers” that might be overcome in your parish on a Sunday: between cultures, races, languages, ages, sexes, political stances, socioeconomic statuses. The miracle at Pentecost is that these devout Jews heard the apostles preaching each in his own language. Pope Benedict XVI says,

“The unity of the Spirit is manifest in the plurality of understanding. The Church is one and multiple by her nature, destined as she is to live among all nations, all peoples, and in the most diverse social contexts.”

In other words, the “miracle” of the Sunday Mass is how the Holy Spirit enables a “plurality of understanding”: God self-communicates powerfully to a person “according to their kind” – in unique and exquisite understanding of their origin, language, background and experience. In an age of intense divisions and culture wars, the Sunday Mass is a place where those of supposedly unsurmountable differences can in fact experience unity. Pope Benedict goes on to say,

“Where there are divisions and estrangement the Paraclete creates unity and understanding. The Spirit triggers a process of reunification of the divided and dispersed parts of the human family. People, often reduced to individuals in competition or in conflict with each other, when touched by the Spirit of Christ open themselves to the experience of communion, which can involve them to such an extent as to make of them a new body, a new subject: the Church. This is the effect of God's work: unity; thus unity is the sign of recognition, the ‘business card’ of the Church throughout her universal history.”

It is significant that the authors of Genesis refer to “great creatures of the sea” (v21) (or sea monsters as other translations have it), distinct from the small sea creatures with which the waters “teem”. In other ancient near eastern traditions, such as Canaanite mythology, the sea monsters are symbols of evil, representing primal forces of chaos. They suggest pre-existent dark powers that rival the power of the gods. In Genesis, however, there is an insistence that God created these mighty (even terrifying) creatures. However seemingly threatening, “God saw that it was good” (v21). These monstrous creatures are intentionally created and needed in the vast ecosystem of Creation, just as the tiniest creature – not even visible to the human eye! – is uniquely needed in the ecosystem.

The powerful sign of the Mass is our standing, shoulder to shoulder, with those whom we cannot understand, with whom we have profound differences, or whom we cannot even bring ourselves to like! The algorithms behind our online lives tend to see those who are different from us as “other”, maybe even as monsters. Yet, here at Mass, each is a beloved child of God, needed and wanted in the ecosystem of our parishes.

The desire in every human heart for oneness and unity is an echo of the nature of God himself. The Eucharist creates this unity, which is why Pope St John Paul II saw in it a remedy for the divisions of the world:

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“The seeds of disunity, which daily experience shows to be so deeply rooted in humanity as a result of sin, are countered by the unifying power of the body of Christ. The Eucharist, precisely by building up the Church, creates human community” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 24)

“The gift of Christ and his Spirit which we receive in Eucharistic communion superabundantly fulfils the yearning for fraternal unity deeply rooted in the human heart; at the same time it elevates the experience of fraternity already present in our common sharing at the same Eucharistic table to a degree which far surpasses that of the simple human experience of sharing a meal.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 44)

What is more, the unity of the Church expressed at Sunday Mass is not only in the visible and present congregation, but far greater than that: the universality of the entire global Church is made present (in Pope Benedict’s words, “the universal Church precedes the particular Churches”), and we are united not only with the entire Church on earth, but also with the communion of saints in heaven, and the suffering Church in purgatory.

We need to let this sink in for a moment, because it is a glorious and mind-stretching reality, with great implications for the Sunday experience.

The abundance and diversity of creatures across the face of the earth in Genesis 1 is only a dim sign and foreshadowing of the abundant diversity of the universal Church, united in Jesus Christ.

We think here of the traditional four marks of the Church¹⁹ – what we have been reflecting on is the Church’s *oneness*.

What are the implications?

Firstly, unity is not something we create, rather it is a work of the Holy Spirit. Once again, there is an important balance to be struck, the classic Catholic ‘both/and’. We want to recognise *both* the vast diversity of the congregation, *and* that only the Holy Spirit can create true unity. We cannot achieve this through careful liturgical planning, ensuring that all languages and cultures are ‘represented’ in the liturgy. This would be a reductive way of thinking that risks missing the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work in the liturgy.

Secondly, unity is not the same as uniformity, where we try to achieve a common style or culture adopted by all. Pope Benedict warns,

“...when a person or a community limits itself to its own way of thinking and acting, it is a sign that it has distanced itself from the Holy Spirit. The path of Christians and of the particular Churches must always coincide with the path of the one, catholic Church, and harmonize with it. This does not mean that the unity created by the Holy Spirit is a kind of

¹⁹ See CCC 813-870.

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egalitarianism. On the contrary, that is rather the model of Babel, or in other words, the imposition of a culture characterized by what we could define as ‘technical’ unity.”

Technical unity involves insisting on one style for the celebration of the Mass, maybe one particular style of music (after all, it is Babel – not Pentecost – where everyone spoke the same language (Genesis 11:1-9)). *True unity* involves transcending our particular preferences for the sake of the authentic catholicity of the Church.²⁰ *Technical unity* involves well-meaning, egalitarian attempts to ensure everything is understood, everyone is represented, and every particular need is catered for. *True unity* involves a balance between taking reasonable steps to remove barriers but recognizing that Mass is not primarily ‘our’ work – rather, a heavenly liturgy, impossible to fully comprehend, and never completely accessible to our human senses.

Returning to the four marks of the Church, we can say *your parish is One*. The experience a person has in your church on a Sunday needs to express the mysterious unity of your parish community. Your parish is a unity in diversity, created by the Holy Spirit: one since the Source of each believer is the same one God, while manifold differences among all the members are maintained.

We can also say *your parish is catholic* (from the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning “universal”). The experience a person has in your church on a Sunday needs to express the mysterious catholicity of your parish community – meaning, “in keeping with the whole.” In other words, the entire universal Church is mysteriously present in the “instance” of your local church.²¹ While your parish will express itself in local culture and customs, its catholicity will be experienced, too, when personal preferences and styles are transcended.

From the ‘Zombie Convention’ to *Koinonia*

“The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

1 Corinthians 10:17

“For what is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ – not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made of up many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ.”

– St. John Chrysostom

We have already understood in part 1 that *knowledge* of the reality of the liturgy is not enough for God; he wants us to *experience* it in some way, however poor, through our bodily senses. In this way, physical things in the liturgy – like the incense we smell, the music we hear, the water we touch – are visible signs, or gateways, into the invisible mysteries they point to.

²⁰ Read *Divine Renovation*, pages 112-113 for Fr James Mallon’s comments on what this looked like in his parish.

²¹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

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Just as the elements of the liturgy point to the reality of the heavenly mysteries, the gathering of people itself is a sign pointing to a deeper mystery. Remember Pope St John Paul II's words that the parish is, "a 'place' in the world for the community of believers to gather together as a 'sign' and 'instrument' of the vocation of all to communion" (*Christifidelis Laici*, 27).

In other words, our physical gathering in the same location – our community – is a visible sign pointing to a deeper, invisible reality – "the vocation of all to communion."

The word 'communion' is from the Greek word *koinonia* used often by St Paul and St John. It refers to the divine life within the Blessed Trinity that we humans are called to participate in. It is what takes place when, in St John Chrysostom's words, we are "mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ."

Koinonia has two dimensions to it: vertical and horizontal. Vertically, it is the individual and personal communion that you have in your relationship with God, the Blessed Trinity. You have been inserted into this communion of love at your Baptism, and your personal life of prayer, sacraments and formation all contribute to sustaining and deepening your communion in God. This is your growth in holiness.

Koinonia also has a horizontal dimension: it unites you with the other members of the Body of Christ, and it propels you out on mission to those not yet in the *koinonia*.

When the baptised are vertically in personal relationship with God, and horizontally in relationship with one another, the beautiful, yet invisible, spiritual reality of *koinonia* is lived out.

This is when you experience the rising spiritual temperature in your congregation as we described in part 1. It's an experience of *koinonia*!

Describing the Church as communion, or *koinonia*, has been emphasised since Vatican II (see especially *Lumen Gentium*, 8). The *Catechism* describes the Church as, "the sign and instrument of the communion of God and men" (CCC 780). The Church is both a *sign* of the triune love of God participated in by the baptised, and an *instrument* of it: that means, she doesn't just point to *koinonia*, she actually brings it about.

The visible sign of *koinonia* is important. If people walk into the foyer of your church and no one greets them but rather speak in huddles among themselves, the 'sign' of communion is impaired. The visible, human reality fails to express the divine reality. Think of the examples of anonymous, fragmented and 'zombie-like' congregations shared in part 1, the 'Ten Ways Your Parish Makes It Hard to Encounter God at Mass'. The 'sign' is broken. These congregations fail to express the divine reality of overflowing love and joy which is communion with God.

Often, the visible, broken, human sign does not reveal *koinonia* because people have not experienced the vertical, personal dimension. Here, the Church is the instrument of *koinonia*: she brings it about as people experience conversion to Christ through evangelisation. When the

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vertical dimension of *koinonia* is experienced by a person, the visible human sign is repaired. Experiencing joy and peace in the communion of the Holy Spirit, they are now able authentically and naturally to display the true reality of the Church as *koinonia*: a most joyful and bountiful experience of love.

The then-Cardinal Ratzinger, addressing ecclesial movements in 1998, observed something similar when he said,

“The formation and upbuilding of community does not exclude the personal element but calls for it. Only when the person is struck and opened up by Christ in his inmost depth can the other also be inwardly touched, can there be reconciliation in the Holy Spirit, can true community grow.”²²

And when a person is “struck... in his inmost depth”, it is infectious! People experience it in the community and want it for themselves.

When Pope St John Paul II wrote the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* in 2003, he made an intriguing remark.

“The celebration of the Eucharist, however, cannot be the starting-point for communion; it presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection.” (§ 35)

His comment reminds us again of the line in the *Catechism* 1072, that the Mass, “does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church’: it must be preceded by evangelization, faith, and conversion.”

It is very hard for *koinonia* to grow in your parish if the only time people get together is the Sunday Eucharist. For the Body of the Church to be healthy, different dimensions need to work together. Acts 2:42 describes the early life of the Christian believers: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” They didn’t just assemble for the “breaking of bread”. They gathered for “apostles’ teaching”, “fellowship” and “prayers” too – all involving both vertical and horizontal elements of *koinonia* (personally with God, and communally with one another).

Each of these four Acts 2:42 dimensions are indispensable if the gathering on a Sunday is going to be an ever-deepening experience of *koinonia*. When a person lives their Christian life one-dimensionally (Sunday Mass only), they do not participate in the fuller reality of *koinonia*: our hearts need to be set on fire and nourished by the other three dimensions. The Mass does not do everything.

²² Address given at the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements, sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Rome, 27-29 May 1998.

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All of this shows just how interdependent evangelization, community, liturgy and conversion are: the spiritual temperature only rises in the Sunday liturgy when all of these dimensions are working in sync. But when they start to move the dial, the ‘zombie convention’ – that is, the culture of minimalism and mediocrity – can be consigned to history! People have ‘tasted’ the sweet goodness of the Lord, personally and in communion with one another, and they are not rushing to the parking lot.

The River of the Water of Life

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” Revelation 22:1-2

When we think back to Day One, when “darkness was upon the face of the deep”, water was a destructive force, threatening, and bringing chaos. Now that God has caused dry land to appear (Day Three), these destructive waters are contained, and now the seas are waters created by God and so pronounced “good”. Indeed, they give life. In verse 11, we noted God’s words, “Let the earth put forth...” suggesting that the earth itself was generative of new life; now we see that the waters, too, are life-giving: “Let the water teem” (verse 20).

The natural waters of the seas, teeming with creatures, prefigure the supernatural waters pouring forth from Jesus’ Paschal Mystery. St John tells us that, after Jesus’ death, “...one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). “The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus”, in the words of *Lumen Gentium*, 3.²³ Not only is water life-giving, in the New Covenant of Jesus, water now symbolises the Holy Spirit, released into the world: “the Spirit is also personally the living water welling up from Christ crucified as its source and welling up in us to eternal life” (CCC 694).

At our Baptism, “just as the gestation of our first birth took place in water, so the water of Baptism truly signifies that our birth into the divine life is given to us in the Holy Spirit” (CCC 694) – and now the Holy Spirit is *personally* “welling up in us”.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *ekklesia* is used by the evangelists and St Paul for “the Church”, which literally means, “to be called out of.” In other words, the Church is the gathering of those who have been “called out of” the world “into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). It is the gathering of those “born of water and the spirit” (John 3:5). It is the gathering of those saved by water, being united to the Passover of Christ.

If the Spirit is “welling up” in those who are being redeemed, in those who make up the *ekklesia*, then the “the river of the water of life” in St John’s vision in Revelation can be seen not only as a beautiful symbol of the Holy Spirit, but also as the living Body of Christ itself, as within each

²³ See also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5.

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member is “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Spiritual writer, Jean Corbon, writes:

“If we let the river of life permeate us, we become trees of life, for the mystery that the river symbolizes takes hold of us. ... This river is love, but a love that does not arise in the human heart. This river is life, but a life that does not flow from the human heart. That is because this river, this energy, is wholly other: it is the self-opening of our thrice holy God.”²⁴

When we think of the parish as “village fountain”, it is a place, not only where we come to drink from the “fontal liturgy” (in Corbon’s words), but also the place where we ourselves become conduits for the “river of life.” The “spring” of the Holy Spirit is increased in us at the Mass, so that the “river” of our parish may flow in us. As we leave our church on a Sunday, the river flows – like in the Revelation vision – “through the middle of the street of the city” (Revelation 22:1).

This vision of the Sunday liturgy as the “source” of the life-giving river that flows through the streets of our cities is prefigured in Ezekiel’s prophetic vision, centuries before Christ. Ezekiel saw a river flowing from the east side of the Temple, and as it flowed, it became deeper and deeper.

“As I went back, I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. ⁸And [the angel] said to me, “...when the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh. ⁹And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, and there will be very many fish. ... ¹⁰Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets. Its fish will be of very many kinds, like the fish of the Great Sea. ... ¹²And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47: 7-10, 12)

This surely is a prefiguring of the “river” of the Body of Christ filled with the Holy Spirit, flowing from the “fount” of the Sunday liturgy. Everywhere the river goes, it brings life: living creatures swarm, fish abound, leaves grow on trees alongside the banks that are nourishing and healing. In other words, the liturgy touches even those who are far from the “fount” of grace itself, who may never be present at the “source.” The “river” of God’s people in your parish brings life and healing in your neighbourhood, to the places where it is most needed.

Returning again to the four marks of the Church, we can say *your parish is holy*. The experience a person has in your church on a Sunday needs to express the mysterious holiness of your parish community. United to her Bridegroom, Christ, your parish is holy with his holiness. The “river” of your parish flows from the “source” of the Eucharist, bringing healing, life and sanctification wherever it flows. Your parish as a source of healing comes about where there is *koinonia* – where

²⁴ *The Wellspring of Worship*, pp. 29, 31.

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people's personal conversions to Christ are experienced together with others in the parish community. This *koinonia* is a deeply attractive and healing spiritual reality.

“A place for the spreading of nets...” (Ezekiel 47:10)

The prophecy of Ezekiel reminds us that the “river” of our parish flowing from the Sunday Eucharist at the words, “Go, the Mass is ended” is the moment at which the “spreading of nets” begins. Like the fishermen standing at the edge of the river catching fish, so it is the calling of every person leaving Mass.

We think of the post-Resurrection episode where the apostles went back fishing. After a full night with no catches, Jesus appears, telling them to cast the net on the other side:

“...they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish”
(John 21:6).

Later, we are told:

“...Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn” (John 21:11).

St Jerome, in his commentary on Ezekiel 47, explains that there are 153 known species of fish.

*“One of each of these kinds was caught by the Apostle, and more remained uncaught. For noble and ignoble, rich and poor, all sorts and conditions of men, are drawn out of the sea of this world to salvation.”*²⁵

Back in Genesis 1, “*God blessed [the creatures] and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas...’*” It is in the nature of creatures to reproduce themselves, to multiply and increase in number. Likewise, it is in the nature of disciples to go from the Sunday Mass where they have been replenished with divine life, and to “reproduce” themselves, to give life, to increase in number. To “fill” – not the seas – but their church! Imagine your church filling to the point that another building is needed.

Of course, it is also in the nature of created beings that they can reproduce only themselves. In other words, it is easier for a father of young children to “cast a net” to catch other dads; it is easier for a newly-retired empty-nester to “cast a net” to reach other women similar to herself. It makes us ask ourselves: are there any species at danger of “extinction” in our congregations? Who are the demographics missing from our church on a Sunday? The ecosystem misses something without them! And who would be the apostles best placed to cast nets to reach them?

Returning, finally, to the four marks of the Church, we can say *your parish is apostolic*. The experience a person has in your church on a Sunday needs to express the mysterious apostolic nature of your parish community. As the apostles continued Jesus’ mission, so does your parish,

²⁵ St Jerome’s Commentary on Ezekiel 47:6-12.

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to the ends of the earth. The “river” flows to reach every type of person without exception in your neighbourhoods, as you leave the Eucharist to cast your nets and catch fish.

As we reach the end of part 2, we recall again the definition of the Sunday experience: *“The experience an individual has at a parish on Sunday. A person’s experience at Mass (beyond the objective offering of the Sacred Liturgy) is vital because it determines the fruitfulness of the Eucharist in his or her life.”*

Our theological reflection has shed insight onto the current experience we outlined in part 1. We have seen that your parish is called to live, in human expression, the four marks of the Church – one, holy, catholic and apostolic. While each of the marks are present in your parish in mystery, they can only be experienced if the human expression of them acts effectively as a sign to the deeper reality. Counter-signs or anti-signs – where there is lack of oneness, holiness, catholicity or apostolic mission – can be deeply damaging.

For the sake of the fruitfulness of the Eucharist in a person’s life and in our community, we want to do what we can to ensure that someone *experiences* a human reality that will bring about true *koinonia*.

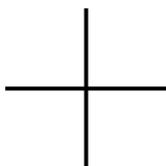
3. Practical Parish Application

So far, we have seen that crafting the Sunday experience in our parishes is a delicate balancing act. There is divine and human, objective and subjective, reality and experience. In a truly Catholic approach, we are often embracing two dimensions simultaneously (the classic Catholic ‘both/and’). In Fr James Mallon’s words,

“They are not extremes, they are constitutive dimensions, like the horizontal and vertical bars of the cross. They cannot be separated. In each Eucharistic celebration we have a foot in both worlds.”

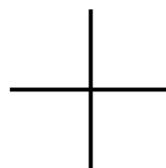
Using this image of the bars of a cross, let’s recap some of the inseparable dimensions.

Formality, reverence,
transcendence



Informality, expressing
humanity, immanence

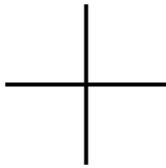
Holy Sacrifice



Sacred
family
meal

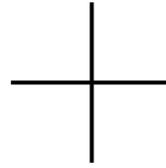
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Gathering of the fully initiated



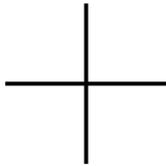
Gathering of “here comes everybody”

Incomprehensible Mystery



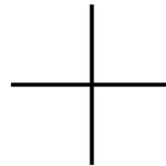
God’s Self-communication to his children

Personal, vertical relationship with God



Communal, horizontal relationship with others

Objective validity of the sacrament



Subjective fruitfulness of the sacrament

Commenting on two of these, Fr James Mallon writes,

“This pendulum swing between dimensions of the full mystery of the Eucharist have impacted how priests celebrate the Eucharist and how our people experience their participation in it. This is usually experienced as the tension between formality, reverence and transcendence versus a more informal, seemingly less reverent celebration of the Eucharist that is more aware of God’s immanent presence in the midst of the gathered assembly rather than the transcendent presence in the act of worship or the consecrated elements. I believe that the truly Catholic understanding embraces both.

“It is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass before the altar, but it is also a sacred family meal around the table. There are moments when we should all gaze in the same direction and not at one another. There are also times when we are to turn towards one another and in this gaze recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst. In every celebration of the Eucharist there are times of intense solemnity, and moments when we can take a deep breath and allow our humanity to be expressed, to smile, to laugh before we plunge once more into our encounter with the mystery of the living God.”²⁶

One, Beautiful, True, and Good

“That his creatures should share in his truth, goodness, and beauty – this is the glory for which God created them.” CCC 319

By now, it is clear that, on any given Sunday at your parish, the experience of the liturgy should create conditions as far as possible for each person to, “Be fruitful” – to offer a response of love and praise to God the Father, and to be united in communion with the whole Body of Christ,

²⁶ Fr James Mallon’s unpublished paper, *The Keyring*.

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thanks to the Holy Spirit. The Mass should be a powerful spiritual fountain, propelling people, like a river, to share Good News, life, and healing with all they meet.

Of course, in the post-Christian context, you will have lifelong atheists with the first stirrings of curiosity sitting in your pews. Daily-Mass-attending Catholics who may be doubting God exists at all. Remind yourself of the seven personas listed above to think about the people who may be present. In the words of Sherry Weddell, everybody is in “spiritual motion”, and we can never accept a label in place of a story. Those who come to Mass long for healing, encounter, meaning and belonging – regardless of their sacramental initiation status.

God is the answer to all that people long for – he is one, he is beautiful, he is true, and he is good. The human heart is oriented to these four transcendentals, or attributes, of God, as they fulfil their deepest longings. Their longings, too, can be fulfilled in your parish itself – your parish is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, and these marks of the Church, too, correspond to longings in the human heart.

We’ll consider the human experiences we can shape on a Sunday at our parish and how they meet people’s longings for healing, encounter, meaning and belonging. Each longing is fulfilled by one of the transcendental attributes of God, and by a ‘mark’ of the Church.

	Mark of the Church	Transcendental	Sunday Experience
An Experience of God’s Oneness Brings Healing	One	Unity	Participation
An Experience of God’s Beauty Leads to Encounter	Holy	Beauty	Hymns
An Experience of God’s Truth Brings Meaning	Catholic	Truth	Homilies
An Experience of God’s Goodness Brings Belonging	Apostolic	Goodness	Hospitality

1. An Experience of God’s Oneness Brings Healing

“May they all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us.”
John 17:21

“Christ and his Church thus together make up the ‘whole Christ’ (Christus totus)” CCC 795

We have seen in part 1 that people arrive at Sunday Mass from a culture that is divided, fragmented and anonymized. The Holy Spirit fosters an experience of oneness in the liturgy: oneness with Christ the Head (vertical) and with the members of his Body (horizontal).

In the experience of *koinonia*, we experience participation in something greater than ourselves, but that nevertheless is incomplete without our contributions. This is where the Eucharist bears fruit in a person’s life – when his or her subjective, human work in the liturgy participates in the

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objective, divine work. In other words, it is the work of both Christ the Head *and* the members of the Body:

“In Christian tradition [liturgy] means the participation of the People of God in ‘the work of God’ (Jn 17:4).” (CCC 1069)

Fr James Mallon writes,

“The council fathers sought to mobilize the laity of the Catholic Church for mission, and so they began with a call for full, conscious and active participation in the eucharistic liturgy, knowing that, if successful, this would lead to the full, conscious and active living out of the Christian life.”²⁷

Three Principles to Increase Participation

The active response in the members of the Body is the activation of faith. It is when the vertical and horizontal dimensions of *koinonia* are activated, and the liturgy comes alive. This is the “full, conscious and active participation” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14) of all present. This is much to be said on this topic. What we share here are three basic principles.

a. Begin outside the Mass

In parts 1 and 2, it became clear that there is a danger when the Sunday Mass “exhausts” all the activity of the parish and we expect it alone to achieve everything. For the Mass to come fully alive with faith, experiences *outside* the Mass are needed. Think back to barrier #10 in part 1 above. Like the systems of a body, the worship in your parish cannot exist without the other systems working in sync: evangelization, discipleship, service and fellowship. As Alpha starts changing culture, as community life and friendships start blossoming around the parish, as you start embedding a discipleship pathway, Sunday Mass will start to feel different.

Remember, *the spiritual temperature of your Sunday Masses will rise in direct proportion to the rising discipleship of your parishioners.*

Disciples behave differently at the Sunday liturgy. Disciples understand that they are present at Mass to make their own interior offering of the sacrifice of Jesus to the Father – including their whole lives. This is naturally expressed in gesture, word and song. Yes – disciples sing! (Choice of music can also encourage and enable participation in song, and we will explore this below.)

The first principle can be summarised as: get all the other systems in your parish moving, too (while acknowledging that getting all these systems moving is a multi-year endeavour).

b. Focus on the Interior

²⁷ Reference

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Our description of *koinonia* in part 2 made clear that while this is certainly an uplifting and even infectious reality that can be experienced, it is ultimately spiritual and invisible. It is created by the Holy Spirit, not by us. It is the spiritual communion that is unlocked when individuals are personally in relationship with God and therefore in a new, spiritual communion with each other.

Therefore, we should avoid promoting an active participation at Mass that is primarily external, as if this is going to foster the spiritual reality of *koinonia*. Pope St John Paul II wrote,

“...full participation does not mean that everyone does everything, since this would lead to a clericalizing of the laity and a laicizing of the priesthood; and this was not what the Council had in mind. The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical and polyphonic, respecting the different roles assigned by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise.”²⁸

In other words, “full participation” does not mean everyone needs a ministry in the liturgy. Imagine an individual who has no “role” in the liturgy and yet makes a deep but interior, contemplative offering of themselves during the Mass. Now, imagine someone who serves at the altar, and proclaims the reading, but who does not open their heart personally to God during the Mass. Which of these people is “actively” participating? John Paul II reinforces the meaning of true participation when he says,

“Active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active.”

The Mass turns upside down the noisy paradigms of our secular world where “participation” means making ourselves seen and heard. No, on the contrary, in the liturgy, active participation means allowing *God* to see and hear us. Interior silence and stillness are not just for shy introverts: they are profoundly active, full participation. St Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans,

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

Liturgical ministries are useful to the extent that they enable someone to offer themselves as “a living sacrifice.” They are not about “doing a job” but rather intended to foster “spiritual worship.”

Along these lines, it is worth going back to part 2 to remind yourself of the distinction Pope Benedict made between ‘true unity’ and ‘technical unity.’ ‘Technical unity’ is the kind of unity that

²⁸ Discourse of the Holy Father to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of the United States of America (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska) at their *Ad Limina* Visit October 9, 1998.

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we calculate and create. It is a way of ensuring in an artificial way that everyone is represented, and no one is excluded. True unity is created by the Holy Spirit, with our discerning cooperation.

c. Resist Formalism

In the west, we have become intellectualised to the extent of sometimes feeling like disembodied minds. While your participation in Mass is primarily an interior offering, this doesn't mean it should not be expressed in your body. It is inspiring to experience Christian churches (often not Catholic ones) where the congregation is overtly responsive to the preaching: people take notes of memorable points, lean forward to listen, nod, smile, laugh and even audibly respond. Contrast that to the standard Catholic parish zombie convention!

This is where we need to balance the reverent, transcendent dimension of the Mass with the informal, joyful one. Pope Francis once shared in a homily about the value of,

“...praising God, getting out of ourselves to praise, wasting time praising him. ‘This Mass, it’s getting long!’ If you do not praise God, you do not know that gratuitousness of wasting time praising God, and the Mass is long. But if you go with this attitude of joy, of praising God, how wonderful it is! Eternity will be that: praising God! And that will not be boring: it will be wonderful! This joy makes us free.”²⁹

Consigning the zombie convention to history means chipping away at the stifling and rigid culture of formalism in our pews and sanctuaries. It means encouraging greater freedom and spontaneity in worship and in responding to preaching. The freedom of our bodies starts to awaken a new freedom in our souls.

2. An Experience of God’s Beauty Leads to Encounter³⁰

Mark of the Church	Transcendental	Sunday Experience
Holy	Beauty	Hymns

God is “*the author of beauty*” (Wisdom 13:3)

²⁹ Pope Francis, Homily, May 31, 2013.

³⁰ This section is written in partnership with One Hope Project Worship Academy and the Vigil Project. One Hope Project Academy is a six-month online worship school for aspiring worship leaders, musicians and songwriters who want to grow in their relationship with Jesus and their practical gifting in order to serve in their context. Over the last four years, numerous parish worship leaders in parishes coached by Divine Renovation have been mentored through the Worship Academy. See <https://www.onehopeproject.co.uk/ohpacademy>. The Vigil Project has served musicians and musician formators all around the world, with recent highlights including the US National Eucharistic Congress, leading music for Pope Leo’s first address to youth at White Sox Stadium, and much more. See www.TheVigilProject.com. They also have an online training platform for Catholic musicians – a big and still-growing library of courses and short videos that aid musicians in understanding the Church’s mind and heart on music, leads them in restorative experiences of prayer, and offers them a community to share ideas and further resources. Try it out for 30-days: use the code ONEMONTHFREE at www.CatholicMusician.org.

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This section is addressed to those responsible for leading music at your parish. You may decide to read this together with them.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2084 states that, “God’s first call and just demand is that man accept him and worship him.” God’s *first* call is to worship. We are all created to worship God. Every human heart comes into the freedom it was made for by turning its affection and love towards the God that made them.

Because it is in our very DNA to worship, the track record of humanity has shown a constant giving away of love and praise to “little gods” or idols. It is so easy to make good things into ultimate things, but an effort needs to be made to call humanity *back* to worship God alone, as this is the only way any person will truly experience life in all of its fullness (John 10:10).

We have noted how God intends the life and healing available at the “source” of the Mass to flow out in the “river” of our parishioners. But worship precedes sharing the good news of our faith. When the disciples are called up the mountain by Jesus to receive the Great Commission to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19-20), this almighty assignment begins *first* with worship. St Matthew states in verse 16 that when Jesus’ followers saw him, they “fell down and worshipped him.” First, they worshipped, and then they were sent out.

God is calling the Church to fuel her witness to his Gospel with worship of his beauty. We long to see praise of his name fill the earth and of course, it starts with us. So how do we begin?

Beauty Short-Circuits Rational Scepticism

The experience of beauty can impact a person whatever the stage of their spiritual journey. Thanks to the Enlightenment, our postmodern minds are wired according to a rationalism that seeks evidence for belief and is, by default, sceptical about the possibility of the spiritual and sacred realm. This is true even of believers – we have to fight for belief – since the world is structured to make us doubt the transcendent. Where rational arguments for belief might fall short, God uses other powerful ways to touch the heart. One of these is beauty, and the *via pulchritudinis* – or way of beauty – has been considered extensively as a tool for evangelisation. Experience of liturgy, and particularly music, that is beautiful, that moves us deeply, can be a way into, or deepening of, relationship with Jesus.

Indeed, in our deeply broken and wounded culture, music has the power to communicate love even to the person who cannot allow themselves to be loved by another person. To this extent, music has healing powers. Along these lines, Pope Francis had a vision of the Church as a “field hospital”, binding wounds.³¹

Andrew Goldstein of the Vigil Project shares the following encouraging story:

“A middle-aged, unchurched gentleman ... bought a ticket to see some classical musicians play at our church, and saw that we sing Vespers each Wednesday night. He

³¹ From “[A Big Heart Open to God](#),” America magazine Sept. 19, 2013.

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didn't know what that was, and thought it would be cool to just come check it out anyway. He walked into the church that Wednesday night, I greeted him by name (having met him at the concert, too), and we got to talking about his story. He heard the psalms being chanted, and described the experience as opening a window to his heart. He then began to come every Wednesday, asking "Do I have to be Catholic to be here?"... "NO!" I would answer. Eventually after a year of coming, he asked if he could join our Sunday choir, and within a few weeks asked if I would sponsor him as he received the sacraments at the Easter Vigil. This, for me, was a profound joy that started with utilizing secular beauty to open the window of the heart and mind to the goodness of the Church."

The ultimate Beauty who heals is Jesus himself: "in Jesus we contemplate beauty and splendour at their source" (*Sacramentum caritatis*, 35). In other words, the externals, or human elements, of the liturgy, serve to reveal the divine reality, Jesus himself, "the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love" (*Sacramentum caritatis*, 35). The experience of beauty in our music, then, has the power to draw – perhaps at the subconscious if not conscious level – even the most convinced atheist in our congregation into an experience of God's love. They might not recognise it at that moment as God's love, but they notice perhaps that something is stirring in their hearts.

Of course, what one person experiences as beautiful and what another does may not coincide. How we perceive beauty itself requires a formation of our hearts and minds. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger recognises that, "The beauty of music depends on its conformity to the rhythmic and harmonic laws of the universe. The more that human music adapts itself to the musical laws of the universe, the more beautiful it will be" (p. 152). In other words, there is an objective quality to beauty in music. Ratzinger recognises that a person needs education and formation in beauty. The average postmodern person is formed in the secular culture in which God, and therefore true beauty, is eclipsed. We are therefore formed in a culture that is not beautiful. We may not recognise true beauty when we see it. It may take time, healing, and formation for us to resonate with what is objectively beautiful. As our parishes gather "all the living creatures" on a Sunday morning into the celebration of the liturgy, we are gathering people to experience the love of God in Christ – and we recognise the diversity of experiences and backgrounds. God's love is experienced by some through sacred, and by others through more contemporary, forms of praise.³²

Have You Fallen in Love with Him Who is Beauty?

We worship when we encounter something deeply beautiful and life changingly good. It is easy to worship other things because we can experience *many* things as beautiful and good. But, there is nothing that satisfies the human soul more than the beauty of God. Have you experienced and encountered God's beauty recently? When was the last time you encountered him in a way which led you to worship?

³² In *Divine Renovation*, pages 112-3, Fr James Mallon advocates for using both old and new styles in liturgical worship.

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We want to encourage you, before you begin anything with a communal group, to personally experience the Lord again, and invest in your daily rhythms of prayer and worship. A personal relationship with Jesus will always be the foundation of our worship. Encountering the beauty of Jesus' presence is what will keep you going when leading worship in your parish gets tough. It will keep you grounded when you feel like you have not played "well enough". You can lay down your judgement of yourself or others and ask, "was Jesus encountered tonight?" Your encounter with Jesus' beauty will be the force behind the commitment, it will be the fire in your veins and the reason for the decisions you make.

Build Your Faith as a Foundation for Your Calling

Repeatedly in the Gospel Jesus commends people's faith. He responds to faith. Often, our expectation that God can move through music is pretty low. If it is true that God dwells in the praises of his people (Psalm 22:3) and that he is with us when two or three are gathered in his name (Matthew 18:20), then we truly can meet with the living God in the opening hymn of the Mass – as well as in the deeper encounters, in the proclaimed word of God and in the Eucharist. We can encounter his presence through music as full Healer, Restorer, Grace-giver, Saviour, Redeemer.

As we build our faith, it is from this place we can build faith in others. It is said that faith is not *just* taught, it is caught – so let your faith in what can happen during worship, be catchable.

What is more, the calling of a musician, when lived well, is a complete creative and spiritual emptying of oneself for the sake of communal prayer. Considering this aspect of a musician's calling is critical because it can be a vulnerable place to work, day in and day out. Think of a situation where a parishioner comes up after Mass to say that she did not like a certain song, and that you need to pick "Go Make a Difference" next week or she is leaving for good. These can be experiences of spiritual desolation that weigh on hearts and minds. There is a strong need for musicians to protect and fight for a close relationship with the Lord despite the tumultuous environment of parish life.

How Does the Music and Worship at Your Parish Fit with the Vision for Your Parish?

As you consider music at your parish, it is a great time to circle back to your parish vision that you may already have worked on in the Day 2 module on vision. What role does the music and worship at your parish play in pursuing the vision you have for your parish?

Start to think about:

- how worship fits into your plans for Alpha,
- what opportunities there are outside the liturgy to lead people into deeper encounter with the Lord through music,
- how you can teach music in a way that includes newcomers as well as long-standing parishioners.

It is a great time to pray about and write down a mini-vision for worship in your parish. Start sharing it with a few close collaborators, get their feedback and hear their dreams too.

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Building a Team: Who Do You Need to Invest in to Reach Your Dreams?

God's plan is always for teamwork. The most critical relationship at the heart of music in your parish is the one between the pastor and the choir leader/Music Director/or whoever stands in this role. Is there a common vision between these two critical people? A unified vision and a strong working relationship is essential for a strong foundation for music in the parish and it pays to spend time investing here first before any team is built.

Furthermore, before building up a team, never lose sight that the people in the pews are the most essential part of the team. The purpose of instruments in the Church – be that organ, guitar, or anything else – is to support the voice of the people. The primary instrument of liturgical worship is the robust singing of the faithful, a sign of their interior active participation. Do not neglect to consider how you communicate this role of the congregation and even, to a limited degree, involve them in the conversation about the music and worship team.

So, what about the team? Who are the people God is raising up around you?

If you've already got a worship team / group / choir at your church:

Gather with your team, outside of a rehearsal time or before or after Mass on a Sunday. Share a meal together and share the beginnings of your vision with them. What are the things should celebrate about how God is working through the music and worship at your parish? Hear others' dreams for how more people can encounter God through worship.

If you don't have a team but see potential for one:

Start to build a music and worship team. Invite any musicians and singers from the congregation to join you for an evening, with food, if possible, to discuss the vision and values for being part of the music and worship team at your parish. Host a time where you play through some hymns together. You can use this time as a sort of 'audition' for people who might like to be involved. If someone is less strong, or simply can't sing, try to be gracious when either asking them to practice a bit more before joining the team on a Sunday or suggest that they could join another team in the church.

If you're on your own and there is no potential for others to join you:

Still spend time thinking and praying about how the music and worship fits in with the overall vision for your parish. Spend some time in prayer asking the Lord to bring people alongside you to help with the music and the worship. You will be amazed about how God provides. Finally, never forget that, the *people are the instrument*. When you have that consciousness, it becomes a different task to draw song out of the people's hearts and orient it to the Lord. This can be done effectively by a single musician using his or her voice together with their instrument, and a prayerful disposition around how he or her encourages the voices of the people.

Ten Steps to Enhance Music on a Sunday

Planning

Together with the existing music group or choir, or with a new, potential group, consider the first three steps.

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- 1. Identify the talent:** God guides the music we offer in our parish through the people with talent sitting in our pews. Rather than limiting ourselves to those we are already serving in this area, we can make wider enquiries around the parish to uncover the untapped gifts. Some people need to be called forth to offer their talent. What support or formation do they need? Even if they have never led music in a liturgical setting before, there is formation available, for example, the One Hope Project Academy, or the Vigil Project.
- 2. What is the particular context of your parish?** When determining the styles of music you adopt, it is important to consider the congregation and what attracts them. This is a sensitive point, because we identified above that there is an objective quality to beauty. Having acknowledged this, however, it is important to recognise that we want the hearts of as many people as possible to be touched, which means not limiting ourselves to one style. Considering those who do not yet have a relationship with Jesus requires us to ask, what will be an experience of beauty *for them*, rather than the style you prefer, or are most comfortable with, or even what is more objectively beautiful? It is an important apostolic mindset to develop, acknowledging that while the Mass is for the initiated, the whole world can be sitting in our pews. Reaching them is more important than our own preferences.

Time and again that young people are being drawn to the Catholic Church both by contemporary praise and worship music and by sacred plainchant and polyphony. How we connect with music is deeply personal, and therefore, offering more than one style allows people to encounter the Lord in the way that comes most naturally to them. These styles are not in opposition but display the unity of the Church. Parishioners might be moved by music by Matt Maher or Bethel music, at the same time as cherishing the Gregorian propers of the Mass or the Missa de Angelis. There can be a beautiful integration between heart and mind, emotion and intellect.

So, as people come forward with musical ability, be discerning about where they are being called. Be open to unexpected developments. Is there the possibility of forming a small choir who will develop their ability to lead the congregation in plainchant?

- 3. Excellence:** Whatever style of music you adopt, excellence needs to be a guiding principle. The experience of poor music, an ancient sound system, and dreary singing is precisely the opposite of the experience of beauty and will have the opposite effect. It will repel the very people you want to attract. Are the singers in tune, well-timed, and confident? Resourcing musicians, singers, and sound systems adequately is all part of ensuring excellence. Is there a possibility for musicians to watch or listen back to music during the Mass? Like preaching, this brings a fresh perspective and an opportunity for self-awareness. At the same time, do not prioritise excellence at the expense of authenticity or of investing in musicians for a deeper encounter with the Lord. Paying non-Christian musicians, for example, in order to achieve excellence, is counterproductive, and not in line with developing true worship in your parish.

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From Week to Week

Now you have selected the style and the members of the group, here are steps you will need to action week by week.

4. Choose music wisely:

- a. First, pray. Pray with the antiphons and scripture readings for the Sunday and see if the Lord highlights any particular music for you. Pray with the texts and melodies of the Mass setting, infusing them into your own daily prayer so that they are far more efficaciously drawn out of the people on Sunday.
- b. Know the order of priority of what is normatively sung in the Mass. The dialogue between the priest and the people is desired to be sung before anything else: consider how the priest stands *in persona Christi* as the Bridegroom singing to his Bride. These dialogues are God's song of love for us. Following this, the Mass setting is sung – that is, the ancient prayers of the Kyrie, Gloria, Memorial Acclamation, and Agnus Dei. Find a Mass setting that works for your parish and introduce a different part of the setting over a number of weeks.
- c. Following these, the hymns take priority but consider that these can be the antiphons given at the different moments of the Mass, sung either as chant or as praise.
- d. Look up any suggested songs for that Sunday/Season using your parish hymn book. There are also some helpful websites for choosing hymns including Song Select, Liturgy.net, WorshipTogether.com and WorshipNowMusic.com (where hymnbooks are available for contemporary music which can be a game-changer). At the same time, do not be constricted to the hymnal suggestions. Why not choose music that is related to the nature of the Mass itself, not necessarily tied to the scripture readings of the day? See the Church's 1967 document *Musicam Sacram* for teaching on this. Or choose music that is related to the liturgical season or to a current season in the life of the Church, for example, the Jubilee Year.
- e. Go through your hymnal and mark the 25 hymns that are your "golden hymns" – the ones you cannot question in terms of lyrical quality, theology, and timelessness. Next, go through it again, marking the 15 hymns that have meant a lot to your parish over the years. These might be your devotional hymns that you know move parishioners' hearts.
- f. Hymns of praise are transformative because they are prayer itself. As we sing words of praise, we express the greatest truth about who we are (creatures) in relation to who God is (Creator). Even if a person has not acknowledged these truths consciously, singing the words places them in right relationship with God, and may stir in them desire for him.
- g. The hymns for communion and offertory are often more reflective and slower than an opening and final hymn.
- h. Hymns addressed *to* God are even more powerful than those *about* God. Why? Because, as we see in Day 3 of the Genesis Compass on evangelisation, all our efforts of parish renewal are ultimately to bring people into personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Song words that speak directly *to* God can place in someone's

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mouth the words of a personal cry to God. They can express sentiments and attitudes towards God that a person may not be able to articulate themselves. While hymnody is mostly written in the first-person plural (we) rather than the first-person singular (me), there is a strong argument to be made for selectively using songs in the first-person singular. Our culture is hyper individualistic, and, while this doesn't express the full truth of the human person, it means that singing words that address God directly in a personal, individual way will resonate for the postmodern person.³³ Furthermore, many of the Psalms are written in the first-person singular.

- i. Consider hymns that are easy to sing and encourage participation.
- j. Mine the treasury of the Church. Having some understanding of chant and timeless hymnody allows us to inform even our modern music selection. Consider the Brebeuf Hymnal, for example. It is a collection of ancient hymns set to common melodies.
- k. Be open to new treasures in the storehouse. Gifted musicians are being used by the Holy Spirit to create new music for the Church, new and yet in line with the ancient tradition.
- l. Teach any new songs before Mass starts. This also give some encouragement for the congregation to sing out.
- m. Vary the musical approach, not the hymn diversity. Repeat musical selections week by week. Persevere in allowing the words and melodies to be repeated week-by-week enough such that they seep into the subconscious of the faithful and pour over into the daily valleys of devotion. Allow the faithful to reclaim their heritage of memorized songs again. If you as a musician grow tired of a hymn and feel that it is stale, you can utilize your musical gifts to breathe new life into it. A hymn like "Holy God we Praise Thy Name" might feel stale after a week or two. But imagine taking it from the key of D major into a more sombre B-minor, and suddenly there is something new to behold in the very old and ancient.
- n. Invest in helping many team members understand the importance of song selection and how to do it well. Don't risk that skill set being focussed only on a small few. By teaching others, you will both apprentice them and allowing more members of the team to understand more fully how things all fit together. This is not something to gatekeep!

5. **Pray with expectant faith:** The Lord can powerfully meet with people through the hymns and songs at Mass on a Sunday. Pray with your team before Mass for the anointing of the Holy Spirit on the music and the worship and for the Lord to encounter people with his love as they listen and sing along.

Organization

6. **Rotas:** If you have a team of musicians, rotas are so important. This gives people the chance to serve and to give but also ensures they have time off from serving to look after

³³ These points are expanded more fully in *Divine Renovation*, pages 110-122.

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themselves and just attend Mass. Don't risk low-level burnout in your musicians by expecting them to minister every Sunday. Prioritize people taking time off to rest and receive, even if it means that one week at Mass the hymns are sung *a cappella* (without accompaniment).

- 7. Rehearsals:** Rehearsals are important to offer the best we can to enhance the prayer and worship of the liturgy. Find a time that works best for you. Many churches meet before Mass on a Sunday. Try to meet with enough time to rehearse as well as leaving some time before Mass for people to come and pray quietly before Mass starts, so you are not rehearsing right up to the start of Mass.

Changing the Culture

- 8. Prioritize a healthy music team culture:** As with any ministry team in your parish, making use of the best of leadership principles is critical. Being coached in these principles as you form the team will pay dividends. A healthy team culture will display the four non-negotiables of a team (unanimity of vision, balance of strengths, vulnerability-based trust, and healthy conflict). The team will have clear purpose, expectations, and well-led meetings. It will encourage an apprenticeship culture where musicians are intentionally raising up new team members. It will develop leadership pipelines, gradually initiating new team members into roles with increasing levels of responsibility and influence. Prioritizing this team culture will guard against what can often happen in music teams: a tight-knit clique which is hard for newcomers to join; the management of egos and stubborn preferences. It will pay off to have your music team coached through the Day 4 module of Genesis Compass on leadership teams.
- 9. Develop a parish culture where musicians come forward and constantly develop:** God's calling to musicians in your parish is more than showing up once a week to rehearse (although that is important). Leading people to encounter with God through music is a calling to mirror the Creator, to reveal his identity more clearly (see Pope St John Paul II's Letter to Artists, 1999). To create a culture where musicians come forward and discover this calling can be developed in many ways in the life of the parish. This is where it is important to consider where music plays a role outside the liturgy. Consider devotional music nights, regularly offered praise and worship nights, parish household gatherings around music and worship, or concerts covering the whole range of music from choral to bands. These non-liturgical settings are also excellent places for musicians to practise and grow. Think of the low-stakes opportunities where they can grow in ability without the pressure to be excellent (staff meetings, small worship gatherings, leadership summits, or kids' ministry). Building an environment like this will allow musicians to emerge, to develop, and to discover their calling and possible charisms that accompany it.
- 10. Invest in the spiritual growth of your musicians:** While your musicians will pray together before the Mass (see #5), culture change happens when musicians pray and worship together outside of the liturgy as well. Gathering in someone's home to pray and

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worship together can foster community, build confidence in new members, and keeps everyone focused on the main thing. It allows you to worship God for his own sake – not because you are rehearsing. This allows worship to be what it truly is: for God alone. What is more, such time together contributes towards avoiding the burnout mentioned in #6 and recognises the vulnerability and potential for spiritual desolation in the life of someone who ministers with music. As with any aspect of the renewal of the parish, we need to take time to “work on” it, not just “work in” it.

3. An Experience of God’s Truth Brings Meaning

Mark of the Church	Transcendental	Sunday Experience
Catholic	Truth	Homilies

“God is Truth itself, whose words cannot deceive” CCC 215

Even the most fully committed disciples in your parish may, on any given Sunday, feel adrift, somewhat lost, anxious, and searching for meaning. Where music touches us at the subliminal level, the homily is the supreme moment of engaging the intellect, the heart, the conscience, and the will, with a proclamation of the Gospel that comforts, convicts, and challenges.³⁴

The book, *Preaching on Purpose: A Divine Renovation Handbook for Communicating the Gospel Today*, expands in great depth the role of preaching in renewing a parish. It defines missional preaching as,

“Strategic preaching that pierces hearts, inspires personal conversion to Jesus, unleashes missionary disciples, and helps the entire parish break out of maintenance to ignite the world through the power of the Gospel.”³⁵

Preaching on Purpose goes into greater depth than we are able to here, but here are ten steps to get started on the road to missional preaching. It is important to note the first word: “strategic”. This means that missional preaching is planned – it happens on purpose. As priests and deacons develop their preaching as a tool to renew their parish, they start approaching it practically in new ways.

Ten Steps to Missional Preaching

- 1. Invest time:** Increasing the number of hours spent per week on homily preparation is indispensable to develop missional preaching. This can grow incrementally until a large proportion of the preacher’s week is spent on preparation. The homily is the most

³⁴ For an introduction to the role of homilies in the renewal of your parish, read *Divine Renovation*, pp. 123-135.

³⁵ *Preaching on Purpose: A Divine Renovation Handbook for Communicating the Gospel Today*, p. 11.

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significant opportunity to capture the attention of the largest weekly gathering of the parish. It deserves considerable time and requires pastors to create space in their calendars by letting go of other responsibilities that have taken priority – and release them to someone else.

2. **Build a preaching team:** The most significant preaching opportunity of each week deserves the collaboration of more than one mind, heart and set of eyes. Even the most talented preacher can improve with the collaboration of others. The Divine Renovation model for preaching proposes a team-based effort that includes a weekly rhythm of planning, content creation and feedback. Find people you trust that can help generate fresh ideas; edit, refine, clarify the content; help with delivery, presentation and fostering engagement; help you with post-homily analysis. Preaching team members help shoulder the burden, shore up blind spots and weaknesses, help to draw out and leverage strengths, inspire when things get ‘dry’, hold the preacher accountable, and celebrate wins together. This is outlined in detail in chapter 8 of *Preaching on Purpose*.
3. **Plan long term:** A priest’s default is likely a week-by-week approach to homily preparation. However, preaching is too important to have such a short time horizon. Parishes moving towards mission identify a number of principles that help them be truly strategic in their preaching. These include: ‘One Church, One Message’ (an approach to preaching where the same homilist preaches across a weekend) and preaching series (a strategically planned series of homilies across multiple weeks). More details can be seen in chapter 8 of *Preaching on Purpose*.
4. **Preach the kerygma:** We know that the kerygma, the central kernel of the Gospel message, cannot be proclaimed enough – both to fully initiated, committed disciples and, especially, to those who stumble into our parishes on a Sunday having never heard the Gospel message. Pope Francis writes, “[We] have rediscovered the fundamental role of the first announcement or kerygma, which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. The kerygma is trinitarian. The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father’s infinite mercy” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 164). Assuming nothing about the beliefs of the congregation, the missional preacher proclaims the kerygma each Sunday, since every Gospel reading connects ultimately to the purpose of God in becoming man in Jesus, dying for our sins, and rising on the third day.³⁶
5. **Preach to the sceptic:** Assume that there are ‘new’ and unchurched people present, and that you have sceptics in your midst. Imagine the sceptic who replies to everything you say with, “Yeah? So what? Why should I care?” Make sure that you answer that question! Avoid any statements that could carry assumptions (“As we all know...”) and be rigorous in avoiding any insider language or humour.

³⁶ Read more on preaching that articulates the kerygma in *Preaching on Purpose*, pages 95-7.

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6. **Be relatable:** People need to ‘feel’ what you are preaching: it needs to come from your heart. Preach about what you know personally, tell stories about what excites and inspires you. Bring the passion! Don’t assume anything and include brief descriptions of terms, concepts, or people that would otherwise only be known to ‘insiders’. Use humour! Humour goes a long way towards trust-building and relatability. Address difficult current affairs. This, too, builds trust with the preacher – we all live in the same world.
7. **Invite a response:** Every homily needs an application: how does the passage apply to me. You can think of it in three parts: *What?* What is God’s message for me today? *So what?* Why does this matter to me? And, *Now what?* What am I supposed to do with it? Faith is activated by response: whether that is the internal response in the heart, or the external response through an action. In answering the ‘Now what?’ we move from the vague to the concretely practical. Always be very clear on the *one* thing you want people to take away from the homily. Bearing in mind the audience, we might need to have different responses for, e.g., the seekers, the stumblers, and the saints. Read chapter 5 in *Preaching on Purpose* for more details.
8. **Preach vision:** Telling people what to do is not enough: they need to feel inspired to do it. This is where vision comes in. Every homily should have some element of vision, of where the parish is heading. Paint a visceral description of what God wants for his people in your context, a picture of where you are going. This will unify and galvanize the congregation, inspire them to get on board and contribute to making that picture of a better future into a reality. Use homilies, too, to celebrate the wins of the parish that bring the vision closer. Celebrate the individuals – publicly – who live out the values and culture you are trying to build. Celebrate lives transformed by Jesus with testimonies and witness stories. You will use your homily frequently to re-cast vision for the parish because ‘vision leaks’. *Preaching on Purpose* recommends the Me-We-God-You-We structure to a homily (borrowing heavily from Andy Stanley) (see chapter 6). The final ‘we’ part of the homily is a mini-vision that uses language such as, “Imagine if...” or “What would it be like if...” This is the moment when missionary disciples are “unleashed” into action.
9. **Preach into culture:** Improving your preaching is never an end in itself but rather for the sake of the renewal of your parish. The homily is a powerful tool for preaching into the culture change you are bringing about. Tell stories of changed lives in your parish; preach about Alpha, the discipleship pathway offered in your parish, your parish’s expectation of parishioners to grow, serve and give. A powerful way to celebrate the new culture you want to see is to take part in the Pentecost Challenge. Every year at Pentecost, many parishes around the world using Divine Renovation principles celebrate this challenge. Culture is formed by what we celebrate, and the Pentecost Challenge celebrates disciples. The homily focuses on the Holy Spirit, his role in changing the human heart and what discipleship is. Then, those who have encountered Jesus for the first time over the past year are invited to come forward to the front of the church. It is a powerful and visible celebration of discipleship that confirms new disciples in their response and awakens

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curiosity and desire in the hearts of those witnessing.³⁷ Sometimes there is a follow-up call, and those who desire change in their heart or to encounter Jesus are then invited to come forward to be prayed over. Don't miss the powerful opportunity of the Sunday homily to catalyze culture change in your parish.

10. **Record and watch your homilies:** Maybe this sounds terrifying to you, or indulgent, or a use of time that you do not have. But think of any professional musician or sports player who wants to perfect their art or their game. They will spend time watching back and critiquing their performance, as well as inviting others to do so too. Improvement comes with multiple, miniscule adaptations that combine to enhance the overall effect. The feedback of others here is critical, because you may find that you are harsher towards yourself on a certain aspect of your preaching than someone else is. Working with someone else on your homilies allows a more objective perspective and gives you the accountability you need to take intentional steps to develop your preaching.

4. An Experience of God's Goodness that Brings Belonging

Mark of the Church	Transcendental	Sunday Experience
Apostolic	Goodness	Hospitality

"Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good" Matthew 19:17

The final dimension to the Sunday experience relates to people's experience of goodness. As they are attracted by the beauty of the music and the truth proclaimed in preaching, radical hospitality is an opportunity to draw them into an experience of God's goodness. In part 1, we discovered that 1 in 4 people worldwide feel lonely.³⁸ An overly automated, transactional approach to many human interactions anonymizes people who are desperate for belonging.

One Christian commentator observed that some restaurants are more hospitable than churches. He used the example of Chick Fil A, a customer-oriented American fast-food chain. Chick Fil A, he said, gets things right that lots of churches do not. You can guarantee you will be: *Greeted*. There is enormous power in a smiling face as you walk towards or enter a building. *Directed*. You will simply and politely be shown where you need to go, both by people and by signs. *Treated*. You will feel respected and welcome, and that people are happy you are there. *Seated*. You will be shown to comfortable, appropriate seats.

Greeted. Directed. Treated. Seated. Imagine if guests arrived at your church on a Sunday to an extravagantly hospitable welcome. Such an experience of unconditional goodness and kindness could stop them in their tracks. If a restaurant can manage it, so could your parish.

³⁷ Read more on pages 100-103 of *Preaching on Purpose*, as well as chapter 14 in *Divine Renovation Apprentice*.

³⁸ See: <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/512618/almost-quarter-world-feels-lonely.aspx>

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Hospitality that Leads to Belonging

In *Divine Renovation*, Fr James Mallon writes about how, in the postmodern milieu, we need to move towards a ‘belong – believe – behave’ paradigm. You will also have explored this in the Day 3 module of the Genesis Compass on evangelization. People need to feel like they belong before they can be invited to believe. Pastor Doug Fields remarks, “People will not become theologically aware until they are socially comfortable,” or in other words, “People will not care about how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Belonging is still a ‘pre-evangelization’ stage, but it is critical if people will be open to hear the Gospel message. Hospitality that leads to belonging has a great biblical basis: no less than 10 meals are recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Meals were the places where Jesus drew people into relationship with him. Nelson Searcy writes,

“The Church—your church—truly is a family expecting guests. And you should be ready to show them intentional hospitality when they arrive. While they are in your company, they need to feel comfortable and valued, no matter where they are in their spiritual development. When they leave, be proactive in giving them a return invitation they’ll be hard pressed to refuse.”

Hospitality is essential for the process of evangelization. Here are three principles for creating hospitality that leads further and deeper:

- **Hospitality is not just about being friendly.** Steve Rice comments, “People are not merely looking for a friendly church; they are looking to make friends at church.” This is where your parish is different from a restaurant – you do not go to Chick Fil A to make friends! A friend is someone with whom you share a much deeper connection than surface-level friendliness. And our desire for real friendship points to a deeper desire for friendship with God. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you” (St Augustine). For someone to experience *koinonia* in your parish they need to be in relationship with others. Smiling and kindness are not enough. We need to take interest in each person’s lives, introduce them to others who may foster connections, offer opportunities for deeper fellowship.
- **Hospitality is not just for Sunday.** The experience needs to spill over into hospitality in every part of the parish’s culture. If people experience fantastic hospitality on a Sunday but then arrive at a Bible study during the week and are treated suspiciously as an outsider, this will be an incongruous experience of the parish. It takes time, and it will never be perfect, but our goal is to build a seamless culture of radical hospitality across every part of parish life.
- **Hospitality is not just for belonging.** We’re not supposed to stay at ‘Belong.’ We show hospitality because we want people to enter the relationship most worth having on the face of the earth: one with Jesus. We explore in Day 3 of the Genesis Compass how hospitality is not evangelization itself; it prepares the way for evangelization.

Ten Steps for Creating a Culture of Hospitality

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First, prepare. You need to build a team if you want to create an unforgettable experience.

- 1. Develop your hospitality ministry:** Most parishes have people who will hand you a hymn book as you walk into the church. But what would it look like to have a dedicated hospitality team who see their role as a ministry of sharing God's goodness? A hospitality ministry prays before and after their ministry. They stand outside the church building and welcome people as they approach. They smile, express their joy at seeing people, remember their names, and anticipate if someone is new. They engage in conversation and give helpful information. They put themselves in the shoes of the newcomer and anticipate what they might need, be looking for, or questions they may have. Good signage supplements the personal touch of the hospitality minister. When it comes to first-time guests, Searcy says the real estate axiom "location, location, location" should be replaced by "signs, signs, signs." Signs are an indicator that you expect newcomers. Clear signs can be the single best way to ensure that guests can find what they need.

Inside the church, a hospitality minister helps people find a seat. It might be awkward to find a seat on your own. Where the hospitality minister will feel comfortable asking someone to slide over, the first-time guests probably will not do so.

After Mass, they greet people as they leave, direct them to where coffee is being served, and may staff an information point with helpful information for newcomers. If they met someone new before Mass, they would reconnect with them again, introduce them to other parishioners, and show where they can find a new parishioners' pack. Just like a gracious host at a party, we are called to become hospitality experts, introducing people to each other thoughtfully, connecting people, helping – but not overwhelming them!

Your best hospitality ministers are likely to be those who are immersed in the DNA of Alpha. Those who have experienced the hospitality shown at Alpha are likely to be passionate about wanting to show the same level of hospitality on a Sunday.

Many parishes use the hospitality ministry to build a leadership pipeline as a simple way into leadership in the parish. A good leadership pipeline is one where a person is apprenticed in an easy-entry role for a period of time (e.g. as a greeter), before they move into a more responsible role (e.g. coordinating a part of the Mass). The Day 4 module on Build Your Leadership Team has important guidance for developing leadership pipelines in your parish.

- 2. Invest in sound equipment:** This point is listed underneath hospitality, rather than worship, because it affects the whole experience of the Mass: not just the music. The sound equipment for many churches is designed for speech only. If there is an electric organ, that will often have a separate amplifier and speakers. For singing and instruments, invest if possible in sound equipment that would work better with choirs, soloist singers and instruments. You could even look into fundraising for sound equipment and there are some grant-giving bodies and trusts who may be willing to help

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churches fund new sound equipment. Other ministries can advise on sourcing new sound equipment for your church. Try talking, too, to non-Catholic churches around you. Often they have the technical know-how and could even have old gear they would be willing to part with for a more affordable rate. Talking to local AV companies will also give good insight. It is critical to get this right and get experts in to do a good job.

- 3. Train your parishioners to be hosts, not guests:** Hospitality is not just the job of the ministers. If the first-time guest is the “guest of honour,”³⁹ to what extent will we put ourselves out, for the sake of the guest of honour? Even if our name is not on the rota that week! In some parishes, where there is limited parking, parishioners park further away in order to leave spaces for those who are new close to the church. Rather than sitting in their preferred spot at the end of the pew, parishioners sit in the middle of a pew, leaving the ends available to latecomers. Likewise, it can be hospitable in some parishes to sit in the front pews (rather than the preferred back ones!) saving a newcomer the spotlight of filling a front pew if they are late.

Remember, though, that intensity is not a fruit of the Holy Spirit! At the other end of the spectrum, radical hospitality can be overdone. If we hover over people, are overly insistent in our invitations, and don’t give people space, our hospitality can backfire. The call of a disciple is to grow in emotional intelligence. We have seen that “every living creature” walks through our doors on a Sunday morning, each with different hopes, expectations and needs. Can we pick up social cues which indicate people would rather be left alone? Our goal is to show that we are friendly and an attractive community to be a part of – not needy or intense!

- 4. Consider how full your church is:** Research shows that people develop favourable or less than favourable perceptions of your church in relation to how full your church building is. In short, if your building at Sunday Mass is over 80% full, you have a problem: it is likely off-putting to the visitor.⁴⁰ How full your church tends to give different impressions. 0 - 25% feels uncomfortably empty. Your community doesn’t have critical mass. It is unlikely your parish is still open if it is this empty! 25 - 50% feels comfortably empty. It has critical mass, and is full enough to be energized, with lots of seats available. 50 - 75% is comfortably full. It feels full but there is still room for newcomers. This is probably the ‘sweet spot’ you want to aim towards. 75 – 100% is uncomfortably full. Newcomers may come, but they won’t stay. Struggling to find a parking space and a seat will leave them less excited to come back.

If you are serious about evangelization, your congregation will grow which will give you new problems (although good problems!) to deal with. It is worth being prepared for these. Will you need a new Mass time over the weekend? What are the logistics of this? Will you even consider the possibility of expanding into a new site? These are all questions that mission-focused parishes should have on their horizons. The worst

³⁹ *Divine Renovation*, p. 105.

⁴⁰ Read more here: <https://www.breezechms.com/blog/what-to-do-when-your-church-service-is-full>

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attitude is to allow the fullness of your parish be a source of complacency: “We don’t need to try; people keep coming to us!” This is not the mission-minded attitude of a parish whose identity is defined by Jesus’ Great Commission.

- 5. Make use of your online presence, your greatest front door:** Carey Nieuwhof writes that online church is one of the key reasons people might show up at your church at all.⁴¹ People who are interested in Christianity or your church have already checked you out long before they stepped through the front doors. This does not mean necessarily watching Mass streamed online. But what about a “what to expect” section on your website, or a video explaining what will happen? We recommend not being too concerned that streaming Mass online will enable people to treat it as a substitute for attending in person. Think of the vast decline in attendance by cultural Catholics over the last decade, and the myriads of digital options that have been available for years. Anyone who saw church online as an easy out is already gone.

Next, consider the first seven minutes. We saw in part 1 how this is the most critical time-frame for a visitor, “from street to seat.”

- 6. Know what it is like for a first-timer to walk into your church:** Fr James Mallon writes, “The question of how the marginalized feel when entering our churches is one that haunts me.”⁴² Does it haunt you, too? We saw in part 1 that, culture means we feel safe, relaxed and at home when we are with others who share our deeply-held assumptions. This means that, by definition, first-timers do *not* feel at home! In an unfamiliar environment, where people’s assumptions are different from your own, you automatically feel uncomfortable and vulnerable.

Consider the experience of guests from the first moment that they park or walk onto the parish property. Is there space to park? What signage do they see? Who do they see waiting to greet them? Is the front entrance to the church clear? What is the experience of walking into the front porch or narthex – is it cluttered? When they walk into the church, is it clear where to sit or what to do? What do they hear? Beautiful or less-than-beautiful music?! Having someone unfamiliar to your parish walk through these steps and giving you feedback is very worthwhile.

The Vigil Project speaks about the “Hospitality of Music.” Imagine that, during the 15 minutes prior to Mass beginning, the church building is infused with beautiful, prayerful, praise-oriented music. Even playing instrumentally can add so much to this time. Andrew Goldstein comments that, when they tried this in his parish,

“...the church actually felt like a place to pray rather than a lobby to gather until Mass began. (Our gathering space remained a social space, but it helped quell

⁴¹ Read more here: <https://careynieuwhof.com/3-reasons-church-online-isnt-actually-killing-in-person-church-attendance/>

⁴² *Divine Renovation*, p. 104.

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conversations in the church and begin to draw people into a time of relationship with Christ prior to the Mass).”

Think through the experience in the shoes of each of the seven personas we considered above. What is like to arrive early and anxious, or hurried and late?

Nelson Searcy says we should memorize the sentence “everything speaks to first-time guests – everything.”

- 7. Find ways to break down anonymity:** ‘Name Tag Sunday’ is a custom developed at St Benedict Parish and adopted by parishes around the world. To break down the culture of anonymity, once a month the parish set up a station outside the church where parishioners could write themselves a name tag. This has been instrumental in many parishes in parishioners learning the basics about each other: their name!⁴³ Discern if this will work in your context or imagine another creative way of intentionally calling people to engage with each other.

Hospitality does not end once Mass begins. It continues during the Mass too. Another custom developed by Fr James Mallon at St Benedict Parish in Halifax was “Prayer Partners.” This has since been adopted around the world. It is a practice designed to break down the culture of formalism that often infects Catholic parishes, and to help parishioners grow to know and pray for each other. Towards the beginning of Mass, the presider invites people to briefly engage with a person close to them, asking their name. They are invited to take that person into their heart to pray for their intentions during Mass. Fr James Mallon explains this powerfully in an episode of [Coffee with Fr James](#).⁴⁴

Finally, what happens in the crucial moments, days, and weeks after a first-time guest has been to Mass at your parish?

- 8. Follow the 3-Minute-Rule:** What do you do, as a lay leader, immediately as the Mass ends? Maybe you have a few moments of prayer in thanksgiving. But after that, try and practise the 3-Minute Rule. Spend three minutes talking to guests, newcomers, or a person you do not know *before* speaking with your friends. (Maybe even sacrifice your thanksgiving prayer after Mass for the sake of the person who is new in the pew behind you.) You might also try the 2-Person-Rule. Decide to speak to two people you do not know at Sunday Mass each week. This is the behaviour of a missionary disciple, one who places themselves last, and is concerned above all else for the growth of the Kingdom in their parish.
- 9. Create an Unmissable Post-Mass Experience:** Those who run out to the parking lot will soon wonder what they are missing out on! Dream about what an incredible post-Mass

⁴³ Read more in *Divine Renovation*, p. 145.

⁴⁴ Also read more in *Divine Renovation*, pp. 146-147.

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coffee experience would look like. Guests are personally accompanied into the post-Mass venue. They are engaged in conversation and introduced to someone new. They refuel on great refreshments. Searcy says, “Don’t skimp on food. This is not the area to try to save a nickel. Don’t halve foods to make them stretch. Don’t glare at the person who takes three donuts. Good food lets your guests know that you care enough to offer them something for free that will meet a need.” Think about the quality of your coffee. Make other beverage options available. Think about the atmosphere – background music and the physical environment. Parents will feel relaxed if their children are happy.

- 10. Map out a Pathway for First-Time Guests:** While being sensitive to creating the impression of “targeting” newcomers, draw visually the steps they go through: from parking, to friendly greeters outside, to the hospitality ministers outside, to coffee after Mass, to filling out a visitor card with information, to a follow-up email or text. Even more than an email or text, how about sending something in the mail to welcome them? Or invite them to a new parishioner gathering? Whatever you do, make sure you have a clear pathway, with clear responsibility and ownership for the different steps in the pathway. People coming to your parish for the first time is not an opportunity to miss.

To conclude, as you take steps to enhance the Sunday experience in your parish – increasing participation and improving the 3 H’s, hymns, homilies, and hospitality – know that you are engaged in a work that is at the same time human and yet, eternal. You are working to invite and make welcome at the Sunday Eucharist every person with whom Jesus wants to share the eternal Banquet in the Kingdom of Heaven (see Matthew 22:1-14). We are working to create a human experience that leads to a deep communion of each person with the Blessed Trinity, and with one another in the *totus Christus*. What we are preparing for is nothing less than the heavenly Jerusalem:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”” – Revelation 7:9-12

EXTRA RESOURCES

Leading Sung Worship Outside Mass

- 1. Consider the space you’re leading in:** If you are leading a worship time that isn’t within the liturgical context, think about the space that you’re leading in. Whether you’re in your

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church building or another site, think about making the space as comfortable and atmospheric as possible. Background music playing as people come in, some nice lighting, perhaps a welcome team on the door. When people feel comfortable, their hearts are more open to God and he can do incredible things with open hearts.

- 2. Pastor your people through the time of worship:** Many people think when playing music in the church it is almost like a performance. But in the context of church, it is not a performance – it's an offering of love and praise to God. So firstly, it's important to be authentic and yourself. But because this isn't just about singing songs – the congregation will often need encouragement to engage with God. Leading spontaneous prayer between songs can be helpful for this or encourage people to lift their hands if they want to or to open their hearts afresh to the Spirit. Don't be afraid to do this! But remember it doesn't have to be a monologue: short and heartfelt prayers are better than long drawn-out ones. We want to help people engage with God, not just listen to us on the mic. So, speak out, but don't over speak.
- 3. When leading open your eyes but engage your heart:** Be attentive to how the congregation is engaging with the session. Depending on the setting this can be more difficult, especially if people are facing away from you towards a worship focal point (like an altar for example). However, it is possible to gain an insight as to where the hearts and minds of people are with a simple glance outward. What is the overall body language like? Do people seem engaged? Are they singing? This can help you shepherd people well. But remember, your personal connection with God is so important too. As we are leading God's people in song, we want to ensure that we are offering God our love too, so allow yourself to do that.
- 4. Are you leading on your own?** Build the atmosphere of a worship set by getting some synths gently playing in the background. This will increase the feel of the music if it is just you and your instrument. There are lots of resources out there to provide this. [PADS series from Worship Tutorials](#) are a good example of this. They play out a gentle synth tone (in all major and minor keys). You can download the PADS to your iPad, laptop or mobile phone as a music file and play it through bluetooth speakers. It helps provide an unobtrusive, background melody that fills the room. Please note, though, that using synths in this way should generally be avoided in a liturgical setting. The Church calls for liturgical music to be as authentic as possible. By their nature, pads create the false effect that there is more than the eye can see and can cheapen the experience of the liturgy.

This is, of course, just the starting point of developing the experience of music and worship in your parish. If you desire deeper training, do explore The One Hope Project Academy.