

Praise for *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish*

“Fr. Mallon provides his usual unsparing and brilliantly honest analysis of the very grave situation we are facing as the Church in the West declines in virtually every measurable area. At the same time, he vigorously presents the case for hope and our ability to do something about our current crisis if we utilize the wisdom that is available, of which this book is abundantly supplied.”

—**Ralph Martin, S.T.D.**, president of Renewal Ministries and director of graduate theology programs in the New Evangelization at Sacred Heart Major Seminary

“In this book, Fr. James not only bolsters his reputation as a genuinely visionary leader in global Catholicism, but he bequeaths to us a genuinely viable model for the renewal of the church as transformative mission agency, as well as some really practical tools that will enable leaders to implement real and lasting change.”

—**Alan Hirsch**, author of award-winning books, including *5Q*, and founder of the Forge Missional Training Network, 100 Movements, and The 5Q Collective

“Fr. James Mallon’s new book, while filled with passion and zeal for the mission of the Church, is also incredibly practical and helpful for laypeople, priests, and bishops seeking new and better ways of bringing Jesus Christ to others. I have seen for myself the transformation of priests and parishes on the Divine Renovation Network and am confident that this book will lead to even more abundant fruit in the lives and ministry of all who read it.”

—**+Wilfrid Cardinal Napier O.F.M.**, archbishop of Durban, South Africa

“Theory is one thing, and making fresh approaches work in the real world is quite another. I am so excited for this latest book by Fr. James Mallon because he takes parish renewal further than he ever has before, showing you exactly how to make renovation work in the parish and diocese. Perhaps the only danger in reading this book is that it will remove all your excuses for change and renewal in the name of Jesus, which is exactly what the Church and the world need.”

—**Carey Nieuwhof**, founding pastor of Connexus Church and bestselling author

“Fr. Mallon’s new book raises challenging questions that, if taken seriously, will explode complacent attitudes, outdated paradigms, and dysfunctional structures. It is the strong medicine we need to follow the Church’s call for a “missionary conversion”—a radical evangelical turn outward, in fidelity to Jesus Christ. This book is not for the faint of heart. It is for those who long to see parishes and dioceses flourish as places of vibrant spiritual life and missionary dynamism.”

—**Dr. Mary Healy**, professor of Scripture at Sacred Heart Major Seminary

“Perhaps no one has a better perspective on the structural and systematic obstacles that prevent the Church from fulfilling its mission of making disciples as Fr. James Mallon. Read this book for a better understanding of those problems and to discover practical ways to solve them no matter where and how you serve the Church.”

—Fr. Michael White and Tom Corcoran, coauthors of *Rebuilt* and *Churchmoney*

“Strategies and structures which served the Church well in the past are no longer working. *Beyond the Parish* provides a combination of vision and tactics which can change culture. Any parish or diocese would benefit from what Fr. James Mallon offers here—his diagnosis of the problem and his proposal of a way forward. It is a timely word also to the universal Church.”

—+Mark Coleridge, archbishop of Brisbane and president of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference

“In *Beyond the Parish*, Fr. James Mallon weaves biblical theology, Church teaching, leadership principles, and reflections from his own pastoral experience into a challenging narrative that offers hope for the renewal of the Church. Priests, bishops, and laity eager on becoming and forming missionary disciples will find in it material that is richly rewarding. Highly recommended!”

—+Terrence Prendergast, SJ, archbishop of Ottawa

“This exciting book is the fruit of relentless hard work and scientific research based on extensive factual data and grounded on Scripture and theology. I am very happy to recommend it to all my brother bishops.”

—Oswald Cardinal Gracias, archbishop of Bombay and president of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in India

“Fr. James knows how to portray the present situation of the Church not only as a storm at sea, but he also shows, with great sensitivity, how this divine ‘why’ can also motivate us today to bring hope into this storm. For all those who dream of a living community of faith, this book will help to make that dream a reality.”

—Urban Federer, abbot of the Territorial Abbey of Einsiedeln and member of the Swiss Bishops’ Conference

“Fr. Mallon understands what it takes to transform a mediocre parish into a dynamic, missionary one, and he understands that parishes need diocesan leadership to transform the Church as a whole.”

—Patrick Lencioni, cofounder of The Amazing Parish and author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*

DIVINE RENOVATION

Beyond the Parish



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What impairs our sight are habits of seeing as well as the mental concomitants of seeing. Our sight is suffused with knowing, instead of feeling painfully the lack of knowing what we see. The principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see rather than to see what we know.

—Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*¹

To my father, Ronnie Mallon (1946–2019),
who never settled for the status quo.

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Preface

“Why?”

That word rang out in the small room in the center of Paris, amplified by just a tinge of frustration. My companion, a fellow priest from the south of France, had been telling me about the state of his parish. Clearly, he loved his people, and they loved him. More importantly, however, he was *effective*—at creating a vision, as well as structures and processes that were starting to bring people to life in Jesus Christ. All of that could change though, for as he had just informed me, he was getting ready to wrap things up at that parish and head to his new assignment.

Thus, my question.

Why?

“Why do you have to leave?” I pressed on.

He looked at me with mixture of surprise and confusion. “Because my assignment at this parish is coming to an end, and I have to move on to my next assignment.”

“But why?” I asked again.

More confusion—and then some hesitation.

“Because that’s what the bishop wants,” he replied at last.

I asked once more, “Why?”

“Because that’s the policy in my diocese.”

My brother priest looked back at me blankly, as if he did not even understand what I was asking. That blank look was not caused by a lack of intellectual firepower. The man sitting with me was intelligent, articulate, and exceptionally accomplished. He was, however, partially blinded by the current model that his bishop (and the diocese) were working from. His diocesan culture, and the structures of governance which flow from that culture, made it almost impossible for him to consider any other alternative than for a pastor who is bearing fruit in a parish to leave that parish because his assigned time was up.

And that kind of cultural blindness is present throughout the Church.

Universal Principles for a Universal Church

Perhaps you have come to *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish* after reading my book *Divine Renovation* or some of the other material published by our Divine Renovation ministry. Maybe you have listened to a few of our podcasts, watched some YouTube videos, or heard one of the Divine Renovation ministry team members speak at an event. Some of you may have attended an open house sponsored by a parish that we coach; or maybe you belong to a coached parish or subscribe to our Divine Renovation Network.

As important as parish renewal is in this present time, we recognise that the parish does not exist by itself. Catholics do not have a Congregationalist ecclesiology. In other words, we are not independent community churches governed solely by local leaders. In fact, for Catholics the Church in a local area is not the parish, but rather the diocese. If the Apostle Paul could somehow write a letter to those of us at Saint Benedict Parish in my home community, he would begin it like this: “Paul, an apostle of Christ, to the Church in Halifax—Yarmouth” and not like this: “Paul, an Apostle of Christ, to the Church of Saint Benedict Parish.”

This is so because a church is gathered around a bishop who is the chief Shepherd. This is why the *cathedra* (or chair) of a bishop is the symbol of his authority and why the bishop’s cathedral holds primacy of place within a diocese. Parishes, then, are communities of faith that are gathered in union with their bishop. In the years since the publication of *Divine Renovation*, as we have been blessed to accompany and work with so many ordained and lay leaders throughout the world, we have been convicted of one thing—*the success and long-term fruitfulness of a parish as it moves into a missionary posture is absolutely dependent on diocesan leadership*. The Achilles’ heel of a missionary parish is a maintenance-minded diocese, and the Achilles’ heel of a missionary diocese is a maintenance-minded apostolic nuncio (no offense to any apostolic nuncio who may be reading this). In truth, this principle goes even further, encompassing structures beyond the diocese—not just the nuncio, but even conferences of bishops and Vatican congregations.

Remember my priest friend from the beginning of this chapter? He was not necessarily looking forward to this change of assignment. Priest changes can be disruptive both for the priest and the parish.

The incoming pastor often has a different (or worse, no) vision. The parishioners watch as all that they had invested in begins to atrophy and, eventually, die, and the outgoing pastor sees the fruits of his leadership wither and disappear. It is difficult to build across generations when we move our pastors every six to eight years—just about the time it takes for real, lasting fruit to start emerging from a renewal effort. We are basically training both our people and our pastors not to bother thinking missionally. Why invest in a vision when in six to eight years, someone else will come along and everything gets knocked down?

Here is the tragedy: this same dynamic is present at the episcopal level as well. If parish priests are sometimes moved around every half a dozen or so years, many bishops are moved around as frequently, or sometimes every ten to twelve years. Just as a diocese is beginning to mobilise and do something, the bishop may be removed and replaced with someone who may have no buy-in to the diocese's current vision. Perhaps this new bishop arrives and lets everything fall apart or actually dismantles it because he has a very different vision. Or perhaps he is a different kind of leader than the previous man and is simply unable to work with the leadership culture in place. Just as at the parish level, we soon find ourselves back at maintenance.

Sixty years ago, this would not have been much of a problem. In the world of Christendom, maintenance sufficed. Today, however, Christendom is gone. Like the early Church, we find ourselves living in an Apostolic age, a time period that requires a missionary mindset. If we do not make this turn from maintenance to mission—not just at the parish or the diocesan level, but universally—our very future will be at stake again.

That is why we have created *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish*—to take what we have learned over the past several years at Divine Renovation ministry and through my role over the last three years working at the diocesan level in the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth, and place it at the service of the Universal Church. We want to help you navigate the delicate balance between helping parishes become healthy and maintaining our Catholic identity as a communion of parishes gathered around the person of the bishop. We also want to be a resource for the global Church as together we ask the question: what does it mean for us to be a missionary Church in our various places while remaining a

communion of Churches who are, in turn, living in communion with the successor of Peter?

Just as the original *Divine Renovation* book struck a nerve and helped transform a conversation at the parish level, our hope is that *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish* will join with so many other voices from great leaders, prophets, and teachers in wonderful ministries throughout the world to transform the conversation at a diocesan, international, and global level.

The world is hungering for the fruit of a Church that has embraced her missionary identity—and so am I.

INTRODUCTION

Uncovering the Framework

God is richly blessing many ministries and leaders who are working for the sake of parish renewal today with many ways to communicate with one another about what is being discovered. With that blessing comes the opportunity to create a common language around transformation and renewal. The central purpose of these efforts is to equip the Church, in its varied organizational expressions, to move from maintenance to mission. What do we mean by these terms?

Maintenance and Mission: A Deeper Dive

When people speak of maintenance, they are often referring primarily to structures, processes, systems, and practices. To a certain degree, that makes a lot of sense based on the experience of the Church in many areas of the world. Over the years, however, as we have traveled and connected with leaders of parishes, we have witnessed firsthand that the major struggle of dioceses and parishes is not with maintenance but with decline—decline in membership, finances, buildings, cultural influence, and so forth. When caught in a spiral of decline, it is natural for communities to clutch on to administrative realities that have worked in the past, in hopes of stemming the tide.

Maintenance has a dimension that is essential and positive. Authentic maintenance is fundamentally about people—about maintaining the

flock. This is Peter's message to the Church in his first letter: "Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly" (1 Peter 5:2).

This quote recalls Jesus' conversation with Peter chronicled in the Gospel of John. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter responds, "Lord, you know that I love you." In reply Jesus offers a gentle command to Peter: "Feed my lambs;" "Tend my sheep;" "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

Maintaining the flock that God has entrusted to us means feeding the sheep. According to Jesus and his apostles, feeding the sheep occupies a high pastoral priority; it is something that we *must* do.

And it is not easy work.

If you are seeing some success in maintaining the flock, then congratulations. We live in a decidedly anti-faith culture. Wolves are circling the flock, and people are being picked off left, right, and center. Keeping the flock together in any way is a real accomplishment.

While maintenance focuses on feeding the sheep we do have, mission focuses on reaching those outside the flock. A mission-focused Church is concerned with the needs, hopes, sorrows, joys, and eternal destiny of all men and women—especially those furthest from Christ and his Church. The posture of a mission-focused Church is fundamentally outward, toward the world.

Integrity and the Church's Identity

Though we have contrasted maintenance and mission in order to better understand their respective emphases, we cannot pit one against the other—both are essential if the Church is to live out her identity in Christ. There is great danger, however, in focusing primarily on maintaining the flock. Even if you do that perfectly, the sheep will eventually get older until they start to die off—and then you will be left with no flock at all.

Think about a few of the other images Jesus used in speaking of the Church's mission: harvesting crops, for example, and catching fish. Among several references to the harvest, he said, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). Jesus also

said, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). To catch fish is to live out the Great Commission that we find in the Gospel of Matthew: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

We must maintain the flock, but we must also “harvest” and “fish,” expanding the flock by going out to encounter and accompany those outside the boundaries of the parish.

Jesus uses another powerful image to speak of the Church’s life: bearing fruit. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit” (John 15:5). In working with parishes, speaking to priests, and at Saint Benedict Parish itself, we have learned that a community’s fundamental posture—maintenance or mission—greatly impacts its ability to bear that fruit.

In other words, when parishes or dioceses see their primary purpose as feeding the sheep, most never quite get around to the evangelizing mission of the Church—to reach those on the outside—even if they know this mission is central to the Church’s identity. Pope Paul VI reminded us of this in his ground-breaking 1975 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (On Evangelization in the Modern World) when he boldly stated that “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity” (14). The demands of the flock are unending and consuming. These parishes and dioceses never find enough time to do what they know they are called to do—go on mission.

On the other hand, communities often do a pretty good job of both caring for the sheep *and* evangelizing their broader communities when they act as if their *primary* purpose consists of reaching the people *they do not have*. Through the grace of God, their outward-focused posture generates new believers who are passionately in love with the Lord, his Church, and the Church’s mission. In short, these mission-oriented communities bear fruit; they make disciples. Pastoral leaders harvest their gifts, channeling them both into the parish community and outward, beyond the parish, as they send out these new disciples.

In this way, the fruits of the kingdom multiply and spread.

Bearing Fruit That Remains

We all want our parishes to bear fruit.

Jesus said, “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:8). Sometimes, however, we desire fruit so much that we rush and try to make things happen right away. That is what happened to me as a leader working toward parish renewal. I was not particularly interested in changing structures, systems, or cultures; I did not know anything about that. I just wanted fruit.

I will never forget the first Mass I celebrated in my new parish when I became a pastor for the first time. My heart sank. As I processed in, it became apparent that I was the only person in the church singing the hymn. The only person. As we continued with the Mass, people looked miserable. There seemed to be no joy in the place. The congregation barely responded to the prayers, and at the end of Mass, when I said, “Go, the Mass has ended,” you would have thought I pulled a fire alarm. They bolted. No one seemed to want to be there.

In addition, the parish had no adult faith formation, no discussion of discipleship, no study, no evangelization, and very little ministry. Maybe 2 percent of parishioners were involved in something. For the most part, the parish felt dead—and with good reason.

I remember having such pain in my heart. I wanted to see fruit, not in order to boast or point out what a great priest I was. I did not want something *from* people; I wanted something *for* them. I wanted them to experience the fruit that comes from a relationship with Jesus and his Church: the fruit of transformation, healing, wholeness, restored identity, forgiveness, intimacy with God, a growing capacity to love others unconditionally, and so much more. Jesus came to transform lives, and he still wants to do so today. That is what I wanted for my parish.

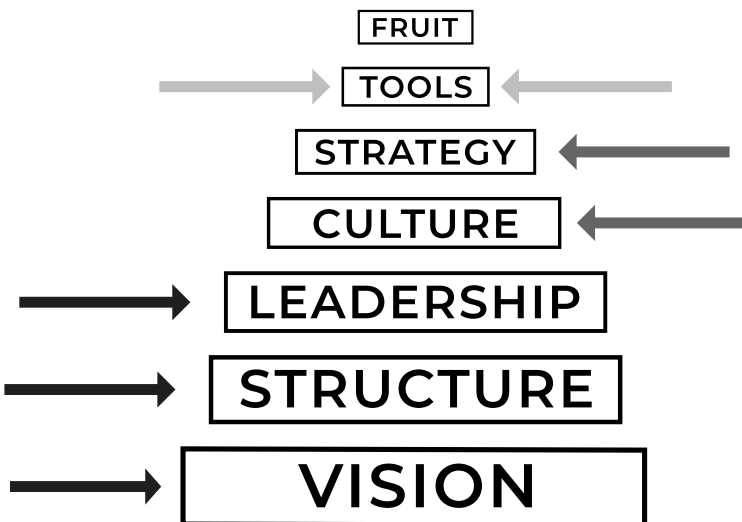
Over the years, as we have been living through this renewal at Saint Benedict and working with parishes and leaders throughout the world, we have focused on fruit in two major areas—holiness and mission. Parishes and dioceses that experience authentic renewal grow in holiness and mission. If pastoral leaders can feed the sheep well, the community grows in holiness, and if pastoral leaders attend to the missionary priority and focus on those outside the parish walls, others will come to know Jesus and join his Church. The beautiful thing about these movements of maintenance and mission in the Church’s life is that if

we get it right, they can be mutually reinforcing: the better we feed the sheep, the greater desire the community will have to go out on mission.

As we labor for these fruits of holiness and mission, we might try to rush things—searching for silver bullets, loopholes, programmatic shortcuts, and the latest trend in ministry that will leapfrog us to where we want to be. That is what I tried to do in my first parish, and I learned the hard way that there are no shortcuts. Humanity is, in some sense, difficult “soil” in which to cultivate fruit. By the grace of God, however, over the last few years we have uncovered several foundational elements that build on one another. These elements must be present and functioning well in order to produce fruitfulness in its fullest sense at the parish level.

Not a Pyramid Scheme

As the Divine Renovation team identified these foundational elements and their relationship to one another, we created a simple pyramid schematic to show the elements in the proper order. These elements must be present and applied *within* a parish in order to produce fruit. The pyramid’s true power, however, lies in using it *beyond the parish*. That is how we will use it throughout this book. In fact, the structure of this book mirrors the structure of the pyramid, allowing us to demonstrate the interrelation between the parish, the diocese, and the universal Church.



The three dark arrows toward the bottom of the pyramid have everything to do with leadership at the (arch)diocesan level—and even beyond that, since so much of what a diocese can or cannot do comes from the reality of living within a global Catholic structure.

We begin with vision. What is the vision of a diocese? What is the vision of the bishop? Does he have a vision for his church to become a missionary people?

Then comes the critical question of structure. Beyond even the canonical regulations as to what structures a parish must have in place, bishops and their curia, over time, create particular structures within dioceses that need to be examined in light of mission.² These structures either facilitate or hamper the essential task of leadership of pastors within their parishes.

Finally, the diocese can truly hamper the exercise of leadership, not only through structure, but also through policy and procedures. These diocesan decisions will impact whether pastors and leaders within the diocese will truly be able to function in a missionary mode or not.

The middle arrows represent collaboration between the diocese and the parish. By unleashing their own leadership and structural resources in conjunction with an overarching vision, dioceses can come alongside parish leadership to help parishes transform their cultures and develop strategies.

Finally, the arrows at the top of the pyramid call for the implementation of concrete tools at the parish level, so that fruit can ultimately emerge.

As we have worked through this essential pyramid across the world, we have seen this blending of diocesan and parish responsibility, and it has strengthened our conviction that we cannot multiply the number of missionary parishes unless we can also multiply the number of missionary bishops and dioceses. Again, that is what we hope to do with this book and with the work of Divine Renovation ministry.

So let us attend to the journey at the most critical of places: the beginning.