

## *Praise for this edition*

“This is a gem of a book which has stood the test of time. It gives vision and strategy for parish renewal, delivered by an experienced parish priest who is passionate and realistic about parish growth and transformation. This tenth-anniversary edition is a fruit of Divine Renovation. First-time readers will be able to catch the vision and be inspired. For people and parishes on the journey there are many useful insights shared from experience. This shows that it is possible for ordinary parishes to become dynamic communities of missionary engagement.”

*Michelle Moran, Co-Founder of Sion Community for Evangelism*

“I arrived at Saint Benedict ten years ago to be apprenticed by Fr. James—shortly after *Divine Renovation* was released. This book wasn’t theory; it was the fruit of dramatic conversions, shared leadership, and a bold, Spirit-led vision for parish renewal. Fr. James and a gifted team helped shift an entire culture, and only after seeing real transformation did he put pen to paper. The wisdom in these pages remains as practical, inspiring, and theologically grounded today as it was then. If you are beginning the journey of renewal, *Divine Renovation* is a trustworthy roadmap.”

*Fr Simon Lobo, CC, Pastor of Saint Benedict Parish, Halifax*

“No book on parish renewal has shaped my understanding and practice more than *Divine Renovation* by Fr. James Mallon. With a masterful blend of theological depth and pastoral wisdom, Fr. James draws on his own lived experience of the messy, demanding, and grace-filled work of transforming the culture of a parish to make it a true centre of missionary outreach and authentic community. The book’s original publication gave birth to a movement of parishes committed to renewal, and I commend this tenth-anniversary edition to a new generation of priests and parishioners who long for communities that are alive with missionary disciples of Jesus.”

*Fr Christopher Ryan MGL, Director, Areté Centre for Missionary Leadership; Pastor, St Declan’s Peshurst, St Joseph’s Oatley, and Our Lady of Fatima, Peakhurst, Archdiocese of Sydney, Australia*

“In 2018, parishes in our diocese discovered *Divine Renovation*. Parishioners, who once felt that ‘after us there is nothing,’ found in this book a realistic alternative: it doesn’t have to stay as it is now; it can be different. When I read it, I felt, ‘This is authentic. This is a conversion not of the mind but of the heart. This is really going back to Jesus Christ and him building up his Church: this is what we need.’ The focus then shifted to becoming a missional diocese, and the more we did it, the more enthusiastic we became. Amid the struggle, a flame was being birthed for renewal in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands.”

*Msgr. Jan Liesen, Bishop of Breda*

### *Praise for the 2014 edition*

“A bracing call to move every parish community from a maintenance model to a mission model... or die! I heartily recommend it to every parish priest and his parish council.”

*Terrence Prendergast, S.J., Archbishop emeritus of Ottawa*

“Fr. Mallon has ‘walked the walk’ and is now sharing with all of us the frustrations, the victories and the humour in transforming sleepy Catholic parishes into places of dynamic encounter and mission. Well worth reading for anyone interested in more dynamic parish life.”

*Ralph Martin, President of Renewal Ministries and author*

“A book that transmits extremely well the passion for the New Evangelization at the heart of parish life. Truly inspiring, practical and challenging! I believe that this is where the Lord is leading his Church.”

*† Gérald C. Cardinal Lacroix, Archbishop of Quebec,  
Primate of Canada*

“This is a book for Catholics who want to bring the full power of the Christian faith to bear in their parishes. With a keen understanding of the Church’s true missional identity, Fr. Mallon sets forth a transformative yet very practical vision for outward-focused parish renewal. This book will inspire you to expand your own vision of what can be, and will energize and equip you to turn your parish into a place where God makes new disciples every day.”

*William E. Simon, Jr., Founder of Parish Catalyst*

“*Divine Renovation* is not a comfortable read: this radical book points to a daily reconversion and rebuilding. It comes from real-life experiences as a pastor. As the author states in the book, the mission of Christ has a church, not the other way around!”

*Peter Togni, composer*

“*Divine Renovation*, rooted in our fundamental identity in Christ, and packed with stories, ideas and practical initiatives for creating healthy and vibrant parish communities, is certain to inspire. The fresh vision and approach carved out challenge parishes to break free of the status quo and engage the whole community in missionary discipleship.”

*Edith Prendergast, RSC, Director of the Office of Religious Education, Archdiocese of Los Angeles*

“Thank you, Fr. Mallon, for your scholarship and synthesis, honesty and guidance, rooted in clearly articulated Catholic theology and effective parish leadership and practice. *Divine Renovation* is a must-read for all who hope to build up the Church.”

*Leisa Anslinger, author and Co-director of Catholic Life and Faith*

“Fr. Mallon has acquired an immense amount of experience in renewing struggling parishes. His book is an essential guide to defining the identity of one’s parish and changing the culture.”

*Fr. Michael White, Pastor and author of Rebuilt*

“Fr. Mallon is a gem in the Church, a true blessing to all of us. He presents here a powerful, practical and real-world call to action that can transform parishes, lives and souls. Buy one for yourself and another for your pastor.”

*Patrick Lencioni, President, The Table Group and bestselling author of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team and The Advantage*

“Fr. James Mallon is a gifted communicator with a passion to help build vibrant Catholic parishes, which spread the good news of Jesus and grow ‘missionary disciples.’ He is also a friend and I wish him every success with this book.”

*Nicky Gumbel, Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton and Pioneer of Alpha*

“This book is a tour de force – a must read! Fr. James speaks from experience: vibrant parish renewal is not only essential, it is possible!”

*Very Rev. Scott McCaig CC,  
Bishop of the Military Ordinariate for Canada*

# DIVINE RENOVATION

*From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish*

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FR JAMES MALLON





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Nihil Obstat: Most Rev. Anthony Mancini  
Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth  
18 June 2014

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My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 273)

# Foreword

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It is a great privilege for me to write this foreword for the tenth-anniversary edition of *Divine Renovation*. I count it as one of the blessings of my life to have known Fr James Mallon since his days as pastor of Saint Benedict Parish, when by God's grace he began to see the crisis of identity at the root of the dramatic decline of the Church. I believe the Holy Spirit filled Fr Mallon's heart with a holy restlessness, a grace from which the wisdom in this book emerged.

Two vivid and contrasting memories come to my mind. The first was a late-evening conversation with Fr Mallon following an event at Saint Benedict, when he expressed his deep frustration with the status quo and his commitment to pursue real change. It went something like this: "We're working hard, but at best we're simply managing decline. Something has to change. We can't keep doing what we're doing and expect different results." At that point, he had already begun to gather a team around him that was ready to face the challenge and the difficult reality of leading change. It was this sober honesty and the courage to pursue real change that inspired me in that moment and left me convinced that the Lord had begun something beautiful at Saint Benedict.

A few years later, I was back at Saint Benedict for a conference. The church was packed, with a palpable experience of joy and new life. At one point, a man in his mid- to late 40s stood up to give a testimony about having been far from the Church most of his adult life. He proceeded to describe a life-transforming encounter

he had with Jesus during the parish Alpha Course. As he spoke of the encounter he began to weep, saying he was overcome by the love and mercy of Jesus. With the team's help, he had made a decision to follow Jesus and come back to the Church. Most surprising to me was that he said he had never read a book in his life, but following the Alpha Weekend he had such a hunger to know more about Jesus that he began reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and he was just a few pages away from finishing the entire book!

This story is one of hundreds of testimonies that have come from Saint Benedict Parish. It's a story of not just one man but of a parish that has found its identity and become a community on mission. Once stuck in institutional decline and deeply resistant to change, it has become a community of disciples who have found a passion to commit their time, talent and treasure to making disciples. Over the years as I've visited the parish, I have been most struck by the culture of invitation that has emerged. Ordinary, everyday Catholics reaching out, inviting friends, neighbours, disengaged Catholics and unbelievers to come and see and discover new life in Jesus and his Church. That is rare; it is real transformation.

The transformation that began with Fr Mallon has continued over the past eight years under the leadership of its pastor, Fr Simon Lobo. The transition of leadership was an important step, a test that has demonstrated the soundness of the foundational principles laid out in *Divine Renovation*. In the summer of 2020, after serving for a number of years at the diocesan level, Fr Mallon was assigned to a new parish, one that was facing enormous challenges. A few months into his tenure, I called him to see how things were going, and his answer was inspiring: "I feel invigorated and blessed by the opportunity to bring transformation to a new parish." And it is working, because the principles are sound and built on the command of Jesus to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

Fr Mallon has done us all a great service in writing and then updating *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Missional Parish*. This book is filled with a sound theology of mission and a deep assessment of the cultural and theological obstacles that undermine mission. It contains tested, practical insights into the critical role of leadership in establishing a healthy culture animated by the values of the Gospel. It's no surprise that this book has made its way around the world, having now been translated into twelve languages. The book has also given birth to Divine Renovation Ministry, which has ministered to thousands of parishes and dioceses in over one hundred countries.

The Psalmist reminds us of an important truth: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1). Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of parishes around the world have been strengthened and renewed by the teaching in this book because the blueprint presented in *Divine Renovation* is consistent with the principles the Lord uses to build his house: the person of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Parishes are being renovated in part by the application of practical wisdom, but the foundation of it all is the shared conviction, from the leadership of the parish to all parishioners, that the Church exists to make disciples. This begins by bringing people into a life-transforming experience and personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The Church reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the first agent of the Church's mission, animating and empowering the Church to go and make disciples (Acts 1:8). Beginning with Fr Mallon, the leaders of Saint Benedict Parish – ordinary people like you and me – welcomed and followed the Holy Spirit and taught others to do the same. They embraced the priority of the Great Commission and gave the Lord permission to build the house his way.

As you read this anniversary edition, I encourage you to approach it not simply as a book about parish renewal but as a call to personal conversion and mission. The stories and principles contained here testify that when leaders and communities sur-

render to the Holy Spirit and embrace Jesus' command to make disciples, renewal is not only possible, it is inevitable. My prayer is that the same holy restlessness that stirred in Fr Mallon and bore fruit at Saint Benedict Parish will be awakened in you, and that through it, the Lord will bring about a new springtime of evangelisation in your parish, your diocese and the wider Church.

*Peter Herbeck  
Executive Vice President and Director of Missions,  
Renewal Ministries*

# Introduction to the Anniversary Edition

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I originally said no to the idea of creating a tenth-anniversary edition of *Divine Renovation*. It was early autumn of 2022, and I was meeting for supper with the very person who first approached me about writing a book ten years before.

A book has a context, and that context can never be recovered. The world is a different place, and the author is a different person. Ten years of living the principles outlined in the original book had yielded deeper insights, as had almost ten years of coaching other pastors and parish leaders. Divine Renovation Ministry, which was born from the book, had faced the task of discerning what was at the heart of what we came to call a model of parish renewal. It was not a method or a program but a *model* based on particular principles being lived *in situ*. I still remember when someone asked if they had to do everything in the book to implement the model. The answer, of course, was no, but this begged the question: What was at the core? Finding the answer involved discerning what came to be known as the Three Keys: The Power of the Holy Spirit, The Primacy of Evangelisation, and The Best of Leadership. Each of these three keys was a world unto itself, the contents of which had to be codified if they were to be transferable.

The truth is that I simply wouldn't write the same book ten years later. A facelift, which I thought was being suggested, would make no sense. It was over two years later that I and the publishers came to an agreement of what a new edition of *Divine Renovation* would be. What came to be this book was the result of over a hundred small edits and a few larger ones, the clarification of a few ideas and the removal of a few paragraphs that just were not relevant anymore. The retrospective issue was solved by the addition of the occasional commentary box within the text, like a director's commentary in a movie. A foreword by my friend Peter Herbeck and new chapter featuring stories of impact and implementation from five different contexts make this volume truly distinct.

One large part of the original context was the looming presence of the newly elected Pope Francis to the Chair of Peter and what was the newly released *Evangelii Gaudium*. These elements remain relatively untouched in this anniversary edition, as this encyclical presents one of the most compelling visions for an evangelising Church that has ever been written. *Evangelii Gaudium*, which was published when I was writing the book in 2013, seemed to confirm and validate what we had experienced in our parish. It would later provide us with theological and pastoral guideposts when working with parishes so that we came to say that the Divine Renovation model of parish renewal was simply *Evangelii Gaudium* in action. So, whatever the legacy of Pope Francis may be as you the reader now engage this book, I hope and believe that *Evangelii Gaudium* will be a part of it.

Before I leave you, dear reader, with this new version, I want to give some bad news to those familiar with the original: chapter 5 is still more than 100 pages long! I know. We tried to break it up, but it would not yield. As a consolation, all I can say is that at least you know in advance.

Finally, I wish to apologise for the tardiness of this “tenth-anniversary” edition, which missed the outward edge of ten years in print by several months.

In conclusion, I wish to offer my gratitude to Novalis Publishing; to my editor, Anne Louise Mahoney; and, in a special way, to former Novalis publisher Joe Sinasac, who asked me on January 26, 2012, to think about writing a book and on October 2, 2022, wouldn't take no for an answer and asked me to think about its renovation.

*Fr James Mallon*  
*September 28, 2025*  
*26th Sunday of Ordinary Time*

# Introduction

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## HOUSE OF CARDS

“**W**e don’t need to know about Jesus. What we need is cards!” With this, she pounded the table and a hush fell over everyone in the hall. Jaws fell open and hands still clutching the next card to be played hung suspended, frozen in the air. In addition to looking shocked, people’s faces held a look of righteous appreciation that she had voiced what they had all wanted to say themselves.

The week before, when it became public that I was indeed going to sequester the parish hall on Monday nights to run a ten-week program of evangelisation called the Alpha Course, the uproar was so great that an emergency meeting of the parish council had to be called. In spite of words of advice to back off, I, as a 31-year-old priest pastoring my very first parish, stubbornly pushed ahead. There was no other option. Little did I know that this would be the first of many matches I would have with the game of cards over the next ten years of my priesthood.

God blessed our small parish immensely in those early attempts to run Alpha and reach out to the unchurched in our community. Within a year, this small parish would be hosting

evenings with over a hundred people gathering in the hall on a Monday night to listen to a presentation of the Gospel message with an invitation to respond. Lives were being transformed. The Lukewarm were catching fire, and people who had been away from church were encountering Jesus in a powerful way, experiencing the Holy Spirit and returning to the community of faith. The great card confrontation had been worth it.

Although we had offered the card social group the first pick of any day or hour other than Monday nights, they opted to vacate the premises and go somewhere else. Not a few heads turned at this: after all, the social had been going on since the fourteenth century, and included some of the original members, or so it seemed. The mystery of why they could not switch to another night was solved one year later.

During my second summer at this parish, I was given a second, smaller parish in a community about 8 miles down the road. It was a church in decline. Attendance was waning. There was no outreach, no ministries other than liturgical ones, and a few generous members who looked after the buildings. They were barely making ends meet by hosting community suppers in the church hall. The first task was to address the catechetical program, which required about 30 kids ages five to sixteen to be stuffed into an overcrowded area and sit through classes that scrambled each week to find a babysitter/catechist. We wanted to separate the junior high kids into their own group and make it more of a youth group experience rather than a classroom one. The only night that worked was Tuesday, and Tuesday night was card social night ... with the exact same crowd I had evicted from Monday night at the other parish. The mystery was solved: the reason they could not change their night was that they played cards in a different place every night of the week!

From 2004 to 2010 I was pastor of a relatively well-to-do parish in the well-to-do part of town. It had traditionally been the jewel in the crown of the diocese and had always housed the

Archdiocesan Vicar General and a gang of curates. Until very recently, it was still viewed by pre-retirement priests as the place to be before you hung up your hat. As a result, nothing new had really taken place there for 30 years. Buildings were crumbling due to deferred maintenance, and the church of living stones, the people, was not in much better shape. No adult faith formation, no development of ministries and no development of leadership had taken place. In many ways, it was living off the fumes of the past. The one saving grace was that there were no card socials. However, there were Beavers, Cubs and Scouts who used our building four nights a week, and had been doing so for 30 years.

Once again, we began a series of discussions with the community groups that were using our buildings at no cost to see if we could get even one night to use our hall to run Alpha. Over the six years I was there, we eventually regained control of our buildings and would go on to run over a dozen multi-week faith formation programs for 70 to 80 people at a time. Needless to say, this dozy parish began to wake up, and amazing things began to happen.

In 2005, one year after I moved to this new parish, once again I was given a second parish. This parish, a mile away, could be described in exactly the same way as the other, with the exception that 90% of its facilities had been leased to a boys' school, in addition to hosting a community basketball league that had no real connection to the parish except that one of the teams played under the name of the parish. Whatever space was not used by these groups was jealously guarded by, you guessed it, two afternoon card socials.

Finally, I moved to my current parish of Saint Benedict three months after the building of the brand new, state-of-the-art facility. This parish had been formed from an amalgamation of three previously existing parishes, and the people, some willingly and others not so, had just moved under the same roof and had been together for a few months. I was to be in place as pastor before the first "ministry year" would get under way. "Great," I thought,

“a clean slate. No community groups using our buildings. Lots of space to initiate programs of evangelisation and adult faith formation so that we can build a church of living stones to fit the beautiful physical structure.”

To my horror, within a week I realised that verbal promises had already been made to community groups to have our available space. I had to move quickly. We tried to compromise, we tried to do both, but we could not. Although we would not launch any initiative for another four months and would use this time to prepare, the Scouts needed a long-term commitment from us, so they decided to move. The other group was ... a very large card social. We compromised. We would share the space until December, but in January, when we launched the Alpha Course at Saint Benedict, they would have to move to another time or location. The first time we gathered to share the space, there were a few shocks in store. The first was that 160 people came forward to be trained as leaders for Alpha. The second was that when I walked into the hall, I met angry glares from the 60 to 80 sixty- to eighty-year-old card players, many of them the very same people I had “evicted” from that small country parish ten years earlier.

In the chapters that lie ahead, I will be proposing that much of the confusion within our Church today, including confusion about the purpose of our buildings, is rooted in an identity crisis. We are an essentially missionary Church. I will be laying a theological foundation for this identity and proposing a model for a renewed parish life. I pray that Church leaders and anyone who cares about the future of our Church will find here a blueprint for a process of Divine Renovation of this Church we love so well.