

Eleanor Sauers

# Beyond Brick & Mortar

## Great Catholic Parishes How Four Essential Practices Make Them Thrive

William E. Simon Jr.  
Ave Maria Press, 224 pp., \$17.95

At a time when many Catholic parishes in North America are faltering or failing, William Simon has set out to analyze ones that are thriving. How exactly does a parish thrive? Simon (son of the late William E. Simon Sr., Treasury Department chief under Nixon and Ford) focuses on parishes recommended by the Leadership Network, or by local dioceses, and led by pastors seen as innovators. His organization, Parish Catalyst, specializes in providing support to parishes and

priests, and his effort to help struggling parishes adopt more salutary practices is based on far-reaching and comprehensive research, using data from parish surveys along with testimony from various pastors.

*Great Catholic Parishes* begins with an historical review of the American Catholic Church, enumerating the challenges it faces today, from the fallout of the sexual-abuse crisis to the church's failure to attract millennials. Simon remains hopeful that the church can survive, and even thrive, despite these difficulties. As he reports, thriving parishes exhibit four common characteristics: leadership is shared between clergy and laity; spiritual maturity and discipleship are fostered; Sunday liturgies are a constant focus; and evangelization is

a priority. Each of these dimensions of parish life is discussed in detail, with special attention given to the challenges that parish staff face.

I applaud Simon's research and goals, and embrace his list of best parish practices. In some respects, however, his approach seems based more on a business model than a faith model. Take, for instance, his emphasis on the importance of cathedrals, beginning with his allusion, in his introduction, to Saint-Exupéry's remark about how in the eyes of an imaginative person, a mere pile of rocks is the beginning of a cathedral. Now, while building cathedrals is a great testament of faith, it should not be our first priority; stirring peoples' hearts and souls is the Gospel's first demand. The life of a parish is much more than bricks and mortar, or programs and offerings for that matter. It is essentially about the soul of the place, that mysterious coming together of shared vision, collaborative leadership, engaged people, and generous and intentional outreach, all of it with Christ at the center. If I were choosing something from Saint-Exupéry, it would be these famed words from *The Little Prince*: "it is only with heart that one sees rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." The importance of the role of the Holy Spirit, and of reading the signs of the times, cannot be overstated. Parishes live in the intangibles.

Writing about shared leadership, Simon credits Pope Francis as a model, and indeed Francis's welcoming pastoral approach generally plays well in the contemporary American parish, with its emphasis on collaborative teams that draw on the strengths of different participants. Allocating responsibilities broadly among parishioners and staff produces a more balanced and effective ministry, and keeps the burdens (and privileges) of leadership from concentrating on any one individual. In discussing spiritual maturity and discipleship, Simon points to the necessity of meeting parishioners where they are and encouraging them to progress in the spiritual life. He presents a good review of the many programs available



Worshippers at a Mass in New York City

for building discipleship, and advocates small groups as the best means of fostering a sense of belonging in a parish community.

These are positive points, though overall there is a hint of the formulaic about them as they are presented in Simon's book. In contrast, I think about the passage in C. E. Morgan's novel *All the Living* where a country preacher sermonizes on how discipleship often unfolds, recalling that "grace hammered me, it was like my bones breaking." Grace, he continues, "doesn't always feel like something good. It cut up my heart...my innermost heart was exposed, facing the world and not my own self." It is precisely this action of hearts breaking open, of our seeing and hearing and recognizing for the first time the Christ among and within us, that invites and enlists disciples. All the formation, classes, and programs in the world—all the magnificent cathedrals in the world—cannot compete with an experience of grace as a catalyst for discipleship.

**H**ow then do we create an environment that can facilitate such experiences? God is mystery, and mystery cannot be defined or contained or even effectively spoken about in concrete terms; but it can be approached through symbol and metaphor. One such symbol is the Communion line, a visual representation of humility before God, of acceptance of sacrament and grace to garner strength for the journey. Symbol and metaphor inspire and engage people's imaginations, giving rise to wonder, awe, and belief. It is the sound and the feel of five hundred congregants belting out "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" that lifts the spirit and opens up hearts, and in doing so makes the mystical tangible. Our faith is caught as well as taught. Combine this with a warm welcome, a well-thought-out and well-executed liturgy, a scripturally grounded (and brief!) homily, plus plentiful opportunity to be of service within and outside the parish, and you have the makings of a successful parish. And when a parish



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succeeds in creating an environment that invites, empowers, and inspires, it makes community outreach much more effective.

*Great Catholic Parishes* is a good resource for any parish seeking ways to thrive in a time of straitened circumstances. If parishes are to teach as Jesus did, and to lead as Francis does, this resource should be combined with a healthy respect for the unique culture of each parish, and for the challenge of

building structures that draw on, and showcase, the essential wonder and joy of Christian faith. Creating an environment that moves from a sense of obligation to one of celebration is the job of a thriving parish's leadership team; what happens next is up to the Holy Spirit. ■

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