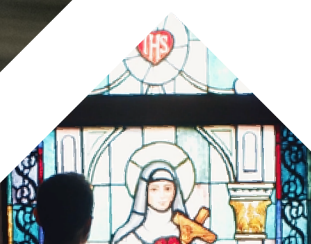




**AMAZING
PARISH**

REBUILD MY CHURCH

A call for Renewal



Introduction

Thirteen years ago, the founders of Amazing Parish, John Martin and Pat Lencioni, two men of great faith and influence, gathered together to pray and discern how God was moving in this time to renew His Church.

Since that meeting, what began as two conferences in Denver, CO, gathering some of the most engaged pastors in the country and their teams, has become an international movement of leaders in the Church passionate about seeing the Church set up for our apostolic time.

Amazing Parish has had the distinct privilege of walking personally with 1100 pastors as they have worked to renew their parish.

In each of these relationships, as we prayed and wrestled with these leaders on how to invite revival in a local parish, God worked equally in the lives of leaders in those parishes and in our own hearts.

Over time, we recognized that each of these relationships honed and sharpened something in Amazing Parish as a movement. Accompanying this many pastors created not just a craft, but a charism.



Many leaders tell us Amazing Parish—simple in method yet profound in effect—has deeply impacted their ministry. We attribute this entirely to the Holy Spirit.

As we embark on a new decade of ministry, one that will include the Great Jubilee, the two-thousandth anniversary of the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, as well as the birth of the Church at Pentecost, Amazing Parish is set to expand that charism in several ways while focused on leadership for renewal in the Church.

It seemed timely, then, to gather in a manifesto how the team at Amazing Parish, as stewards of a charism, would articulate that gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church.

Neatly summarized, we can best express it in Core Beliefs, essential statements that guide everything we feel we have been asked to do for the Church.

These are not an exhaustive list of every principle of renewal in our time - they are, however, the ones we hold most centrally.

After much prayer and discernment, the team at Amazing Parish has come to realize that what God has given us to be and do for the Church can best be summarized in Six Core Beliefs that inspire us daily to get into the trenches with pastors and their teams. These are those principles found in all we do, what guide and focus our efforts.



Core Belief #1: The Church Exists to Evangelize

The Church exists to carry on the mission of Jesus - to evangelize people in every time and place.

After the Resurrection, Jesus says to the apostles, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

What did the Father send Jesus to do? He created his children in love, for love, to rest in his love. When what he had created them for had been lost, taken from them through their own personal cooperation in Hell’s conspiracy against the Father (what better way to attack a Father than through his kids?), Jesus was sent to bring his younger sisters and brothers home. To free them from all that held them captive; Sin, the World, and the Devil, and restore them to full reconciliation with God.

This is not mere memory—it is the defining story of every human life.

Will we cooperate with the Father’s invitation home or continue the cycle of ushering in the reign of evil into the world through our own sin?

This is what it means to “evangelize.” To be sent into the Father’s work in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, to every person, in every time, and in every place. This is why Pope St. Paul VI famously wrote, “The Church...exists in order to evangelize,” (Evangeliis Nuntiandi 14).



The Church does much, teaches much, celebrates much. But the life and activity of the Church exists for a singular purpose: because every person, in every time, and in every place, has only one answer to the aching questions and insatiable longings of their heart and that is the “life and life to the full” only found in Jesus Christ, through the Catholic Church.

Think of a parish like a shoe factory. Everything the factory does—its meetings, systems, and hiring—exists for one purpose: to make shoes. If efforts to improve how the factory operates doesn’t actually produce more shoes, then all the improvement was for nothing.

This is why we believe strongly that all activities in the Church, and all activity we undertake to build healthy cultures in parishes, ultimately have to be ordered to this mission.

If not, we are a terrifically run shoe factory that, for all of our activity, accomplishes very little of what we are meant for.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this work. It is ultimately God’s to accomplish, through our faithfulness and focus on mission. Alone, we do not have the power to make a single disciple. With surrender to the active power of the Holy Spirit in our parish, we will see far more happen than we ever thought possible.



Core Belief #2: The Church is Living in a Change of Era

Our culture has changed significantly in recent decades, demanding a renewal of vision and mission across the Church.

It is no secret that the Church is encountering many difficulties today. Fewer priests, fewer Catholics, fewer parishes, increasingly hostile political situations for Christian communities.

Explanations abound for this decline, many with some merit. However, there is a broader trend.

Pope Francis explained the overarching problem this way to a national gathering of Italian Catholics in 2015, “We are not living simply in an era of change but in a change of era.”

The initial evangelization of the early church, carried out in a cultural context that was substantially not Christian through courageous suffering and, even martyrdom, was so dramatically successful that it baptized, not just individuals, but entire cultures. These predominant cultures, where the dominant ways of considering human lived experience, including how we govern and organize ourselves, what the human person is for, what is love, were what we call “Christendom” - a catch all term meaning any place where a Christian worldview has deeply suffused the world and institutions.

Venerable Fulton J. Sheen foresaw Pope Francis’ sentiment, when he said,



“We are living at the end of Christendom – not the end of Christianity. By Christendom is meant the political, economic and social order pervaded by the Gospel ethic. We no longer live in a Christian civilization.”

In 2019, for the first time in a very long time, Catholics were no longer the single largest religious denomination in the United States. That distinction was given to the “nones” - those who, despite having broad stories of their own personal religious engagement, profess no religious affiliation. Other formerly overwhelmingly Catholic places - from Quebec, to Belgium, to France, to Ireland - are seeing strikingly similar rates of disaffiliation. In some, Catholicism has become a tiny minority in only two generations.

It is understandable for Catholics today to grieve what has been lost. But we also have to recognize what God is doing now.

God chose us for these times, and not another, for a reason. The mission of advancing the Gospel is urgent in every cultural situation. This means that all leadership in the Church today, however, must be engaged in some change management: a response that is inevitable because of how the world is evolving and our call to still reach out with the message of Christ

As leaders in the church, we need to help the church undergo a missionary conversion of all of its institutions and activities, but, first, and foundationally, its ways of thinking and seeing, so that it can operate apostolically, as it did in the early church.



Core Belief #3: Renewal has to take place in the Parish

Revitalization is especially urgent at the parish level, where most people experience the Gospel.

The Church's response to this "change of age" has been going on for decades. It is the reason for the Second Vatican Council and the through line of the last seven papacies. It was the motivation for what Pope St. John Paul II called the "New Evangelization" or a new "springtime of evangelization."

This New Evangelization has seen the proliferation of many incredible fruits: lay apostolates, new religious orders, media efforts and more.

All of these are good and helpful, even necessary.

But the parish remains the most important locus of this push for renewal because it is where most people have an opportunity to encounter the power of the Gospel and live in a transformative community.

The parish remains the foundational, grounding reality of the Church's mission. It is where Jesus' mission from the Father crashes into the everyday lives of people. We have been a uniquely local church since Paul was writing letters, not just to individuals, but also to churches: in Ephesus, in Philippi, in Colossus, in Corinth.

Today, a call to renewal is echoing across local churches throughout the country. In the United States alone, more than 17,000 parishes already have Catholics coming to them and a mission clearly entrusted to them—they need only to respond with renewed faith and zeal.



A parish is not a building and a group of people who come on Sundays. It is a geographical territory, a boundary, and every soul who lives in that boundary is the mission territory given to the parish. The “parishioners” are not just those on the parish registry; it is everyone who resides in that boundary.

The Gospel has always been advanced through relationships. If our mission is to evangelize, a local parish will always be able to do that with uncommon ease, if they change their culture to focus on it. The furthest mission territories are not about those places that require airplane rides but the human hearts that are most wounded, and farthest from Christ. Many of them may never bump into a lay apostolate, visit a Catholic website, or listen to Catholic radio. But they probably live in a neighborhood filled with Catholics.

The earliest apologetic work for Christianity is the Epistle to Diognetus. There, the unnamed author writes, “What the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.”

The parish uniquely sends its parishioners to be the “soul of the world” where they live, work, go to school, and recreate every day.

This is why the missionary conversion of the church will never be its’ pervasive reality until every parish, or at least an overwhelming majority of them, have undergone this transformation.

There is no broad brush approach to renewal. Each parish has been entrusted by God to leaders who are responsible for this renewal, this transformation. With dedication, consistency, and support, this challenging calling is the same for all leaders in the Church at this time.



Core Belief #4: The Pastor's Leadership is Irreplaceable

The pastor's leadership sets the course and ignites renewal in the parish.

In the work of renewal, the pastor plays an essential and irreplaceable role.

We are of the opinion that any evangelization initiative which denigrates or avoids the essential role of the pastor in that renewal, more than practically ineffective, risks theological inaccuracy, by denying the spiritual fatherhood of the pastor and the authority of the church in assigning him there.

In full candor, we find that often this attitude comes from frustration parishioners feel with their pastor and his leadership. Many attempt, as a result, to “work around” him.

After coaching 1,100 pastors, we've seen that most aren't indifferent to mission; they're overwhelmed. The demands on pastors amid parish life have never been greater. Many pastors are leading multiple church sites and their focus is often waylaid by the daily grind of administrative tasks.

The issue is not laziness or lack of desire. Pastors often just don't know what is possible in renewal or how to get there.

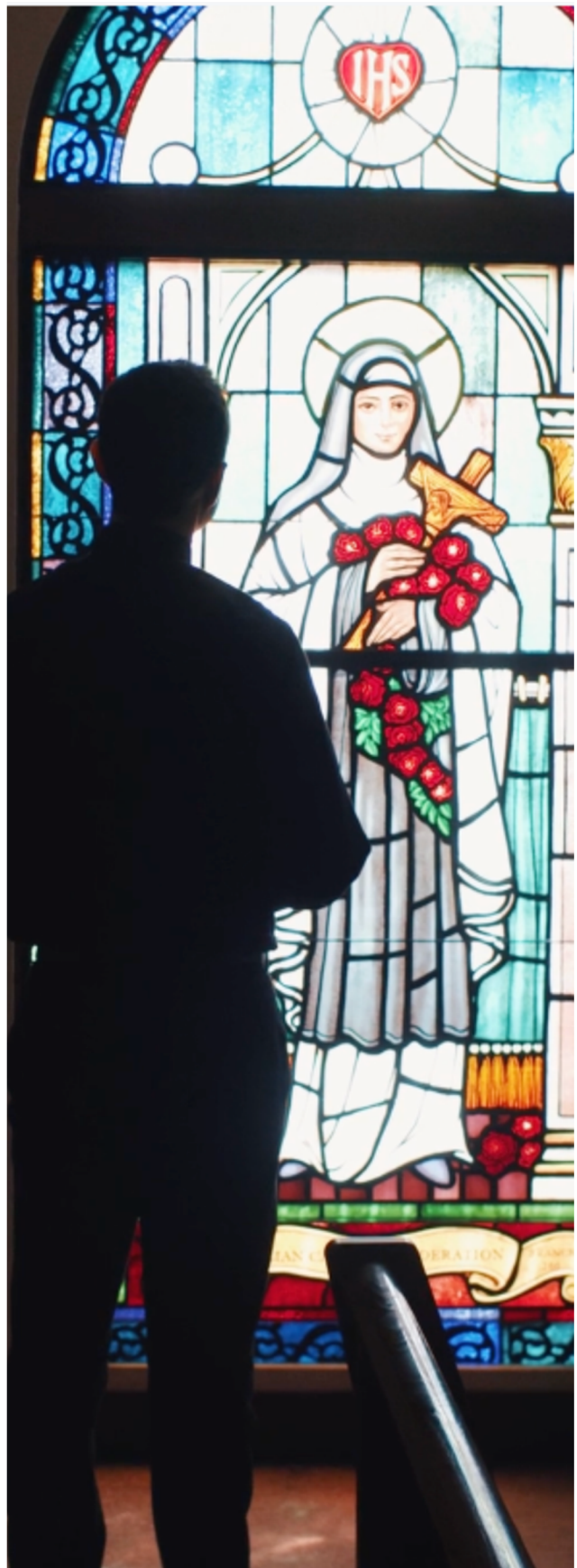
Again, overwhelmingly, we have found that when pastors are given a vision for radical ownership of the leadership of their parish, along with the mindsets, attitudes, tools, and support to accomplish it, almost always they find a new joy in their ministry and a new fruitfulness.



Is it possible for some good things to happen in parishes, to begin to see some pockets of renewal without the pastor? Of course. There are many great retreat programs, evangelization initiatives, or even lay families sharing community and mission that see the spark of grassroots renewal take place. However, just like the pervasive renewal of the Church is not possible without the renewal of the parish, the pervasive renewal of a parish is only possible if the pastor is actually the one driving that renewal and leading it, not just blessing it or staying out of the way.

Pastors have to be freed up to play the role that only they can play. If, in a family, the Father is busy and stressed, that doesn't mean that he is no longer important to his family being healthy.

It means he needs help.



Core Belief #5: Leadership is a Team Sport

Pastors need a team around them to lead effectively.

Leadership is a team sport. Great leaders, in religious and secular contexts, know they are only as strong as their teams.

Sadly, many pastors were trained in or modeled visions of priestly ministry that encourage either a lone wolf mentality or the abdication of their ultimate responsibility as leader.

They are often given images of priestly life where the best priests are those who are able to take everything on their shoulders. They can be at every meeting, lead every group, celebrate every sacrament, and so on. If they cannot do that, then they simply allow pockets of parish life to exist where they delegate, not just responsibility, but ultimately their own authority.

Both of these paths open pastors to two of the Devil's favorite tactics: inadequacy and isolation. If they cannot live up to the standard of perfection set by, say, the Cure of Ars, then they must not be "sacrificial" enough. They realize that they are surrounded by well meaning and, even, gifted staff and volunteers who all want something from them but don't see the whole playing field the way the pastor does, the constant balancing act between different groups and stakeholders.



With presbyterates stretched thin, there are few opportunities for more experienced pastors to mentor younger priests as associates. All begin to be tempted to isolate themselves, recognizing that no one really sees the big picture the way they do and wants to yoke in with them and help them shoulder their leadership load. The result, over time, is frustration and burnout.

True co-responsibility of the laity means that a pastor can invite a small group of 4-6 people around his leadership to collectively share accountability with him for the results of the entire parish.

These people will be Humble, Hungry, Smart with People and will have an evident relationship with Jesus and his Church. Able to be in the trenches week-in and week-out with the pastor thinking broadly about the mission of the entire parish and its direction.

This team will trust each other, because they have vulnerably shared who they are with each other. This lets them engage in real healthy conflict, not the two extremes of a “Yes, Father” culture or personal criticism and attacks. This lets them commit and hold each other accountable to their mission, clarity, and plans, over time, seeing real results and transformation instead of just putting out fires.

Of all of the things Amazing Parish does, helping pastors build healthy leadership teams is consistently the most impactful for pastors.

This is where we hear the feedback that their work with Amazing Parish has not just changed the parish but *saved* their priesthood.



Core Belief #6: Culture is the Soil of Mission

Together, pastors and parish leaders must work to change the culture of the parish so that every person can have a thriving place to encounter Jesus.

Many leaders rush to focus on programs and events before addressing the parish's culture. While these are good, we encourage parish leaders to first spend at least a year engaged in building a healthy culture in the parish.

This is the method encouraged by Jesus in the parable of the Seed and the Sower. In that parable, the greatest obstacle to sustained fruitfulness in mission is the condition of the soil. The weeds that choke out new growth; the rocky soil or the shallowness. This parable is about the condition of the human heart but it can also be true of parishes when they try to do the work of mission without first tending to their culture, their "soil."

A few years ago, we encountered one Midwest diocese that had done a big media campaign to encourage Catholics to come back to church, leading to an almost 25% increase in Mass attendance that year. The following year, the numbers of Mass attendees in the diocese returned to their previous levels.

Why is that? We invited these Catholics back through our doors and reminded them why they left. We weren't prepared to receive them & we didn't help them prepare to receive the grace offered to them in the sacraments.



Parishes that first renew their culture experience faster and more lasting transformation. Having this culture in place makes all of our efforts for mission, whatever we discern them to be, more effective and easier.

In a corporate setting, a healthy culture might just be about people working effectively, honestly, and respectfully together. In a parish, that is part of it, but a truly healthy culture is about three pillars.

A culture of **Healthy Teamwork** is about minimal politics, minimal confusion, clear expectations, all focused on one mission together. For too long, we've accepted too much dysfunction internally in the church. We cover up the ugly internally so we can keep a good face externally.

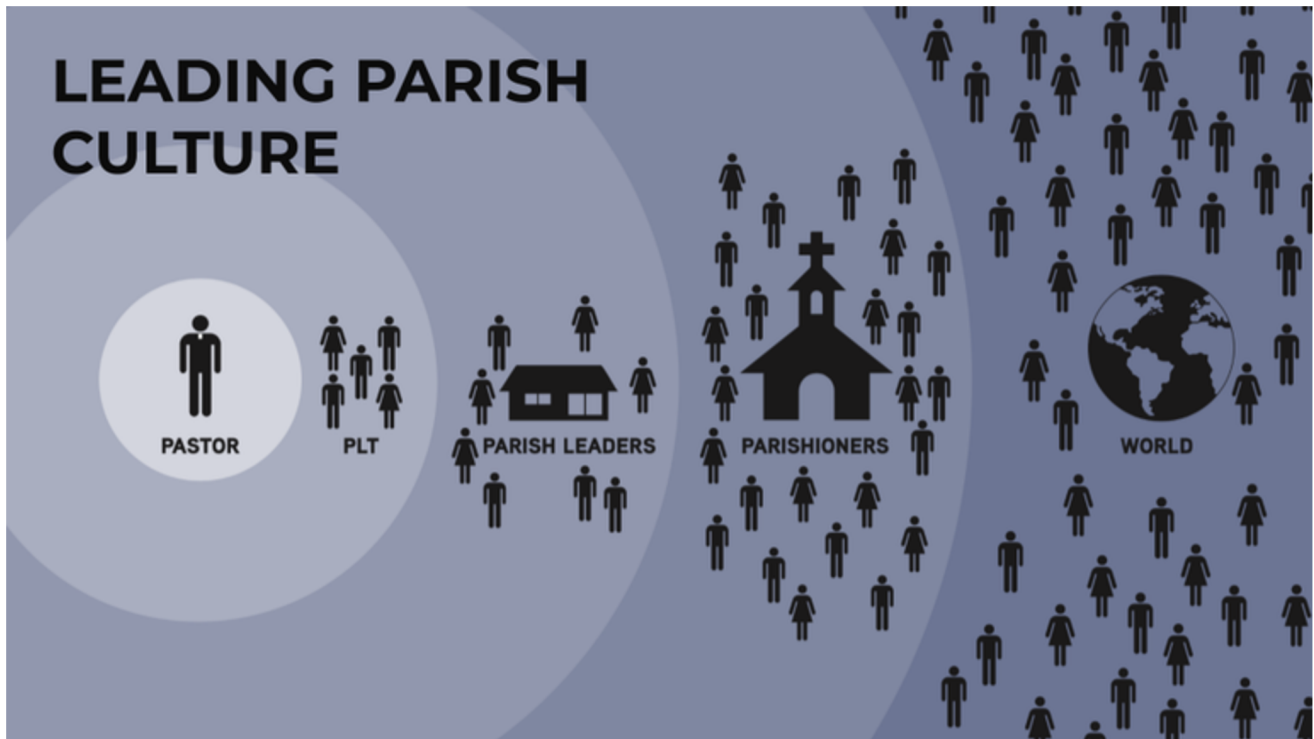
A culture of **Unceasing Prayer** is about praying like God is real, active, and the one actually leading renewal in our parish. It keeps God at the center of all of our efforts, requiring personal prayer, communal prayer, especially spontaneously praying with each other, and intercessory prayer so that all of the success of our efforts belongs to God.

A culture of **Active Discipleship** is about living as Jesus and the apostles did. Why have we accepted a state of affairs in the church where internally we don't look and act much like the image of the early church? Every person engaged in our parish should be trying to live from a place of (1) daily conversion (2) transformational community and (3) missionary action. This is how Jesus lived among his apostles and our parishes should look that way.

Sustained transformation, for us, is about parish leaders working through five circles of influence to replace dysfunction with this healthy culture.

The Pastor doesn't worry about the pews first. First, he works to build a Team who share collective accountability for the parish with him.





That team doesn't worry about the community first, it goes to the **Key Parish Leaders**, the staff, councils, volunteers, anyone with influence in the parish to engage them in the culture they are trying to build. Through this work, they are trying to communicate the clarity they have come to as a team and hold everyone accountable to that clarity.

Then, together, the leadership of the parish has laid a foundation of organizational health that will help them go to the pews, not as a counter witness of "do as I say, not as I do" but with a unified approach to helping **Catholics in the pews** become disciples by encountering Jesus and those disciples being sent on mission to the **world**.

Cultures are not built through messages or slogans, alone. They are built by leaders extending "the way we do things around here" to the next circle of influence immediately connected to them.



Conclusion

Ours is not the first time in which the Church has found itself in need of renewal. The story of the people of Israel provides similar examples of times where a certain courageous urgency was required of God's people.

Two themes recur in every era:

1. **God chooses uniquely to work through leaders.**
2. **He doesn't need a lot of them.**

The work of Amazing Parish is driven by this conviction. We focus on walking deeply with a few leaders rather than mass-producing renewal. Our efforts are rooted in prayer, letting God lead.

This is because of the confidence we have in a God who asked Francis to “rebuild his church.” Who challenged Joan to refuse to be “ground down by mediocrity” and relent to the passive resignation common among her people at the time in the face of endless defeats by the British. Who raised up the Cure of Ars, unlearned, but told by the Devil, “If there were three men on earth like thyself, my kingdom would be destroyed.” Who sent Frances Cabrini to the ends of the Earth, driven by her love of Him, saying, “I will go anywhere and do anything in order to communicate the love of Jesus to those who do not know Him or have forgotten Him.”

In each, God works in calls within callings, pushing ordinary, normal Catholics to compelling forms of holiness, community, and mission, that shake the world and breathe life back into the Church. They do this through what they accomplish but, more importantly, they do this through who they are, or, rather, who they become.

The difference between them and us is not about level of gifting, but depth of surrender.



We believe that God is again calling ordinary leaders to *extraordinary surrender* — to rebuild His Church in our time. Amazing Parish exists to **walk beside them**, for the life of the world and the greater glory of God.

