

**The Purpose of a Parish**  
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Both the Parish Pastoral Council and Finance Council of the parishes I presently serve, [St. Mary's of the Lake in Watkins Glen, NY](#) and [St. Benedict's in Odessa, NY](#), have asked me what my vision for our parishes is. I do not have a *specific* vision at this time as I want to keep my mind open to ideas.

We are working towards initiating a three-step process of *informing* our parishioners of our present status, *listening* to their comments, *and then developing a plan* for the future. I hope the specific vision flows from this process.

This being said, from the councils asking what my vision for our parishes is, God has led me to first reflect on what the *purpose* of a parish is. This is not the first time I have thought about this sense of “church,” albeit before it was in a broader sense than any one parish. In 2017 I read Pope Francis’ then new Apostolic Exhortation, [Evangelii Gaudium](#). At that time, the parish I was serving, [St. Michael's in Newark](#), was just learning that it was about to begin a discussion towards clustering with neighboring parishes. These two items led me to reflect on the question, [“What Sort of Church Should We Be?”](#) and to write [a document](#) with this question as its name. Not long after, I offered a presentation, [What It Means to be a Church?](#). (This presentation discussed if by church do we mean the building, the parish, the diocese, the world-wide church, or is the church something that transcends these temporal items.)

A few years later, last spring (2023), I offered a series of presentations, [Being Church in Today's World](#). This series focused on how we can work together as a church in today's world. Then, I offered a series from the perspective of individual discipleship, [Made for Discipleship](#). Both of these presentations started with the above materials from 2017-2018 and expanded on them.

These documents and presentations involved reading and study on the topic. In this present work I would like to take a more reflective approach.

We read in the Code of Canon Law, [canon 515 §1](#), “A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church, whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (*pastor*) under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”

Here, “particular church” means the local diocese. A parish is a “certain community” within a diocese. Generally, parishes are outlined by geographic boundaries within the diocese but it is possible to have other criteria such as ethnicity ([see canon 518](#)).

While the diocese stands at the heart of what it means to be a Church, parishes become the face of the church. It is the parish where the people gather for Mass and seek spiritual support, growth, and guidance. The diocese is often seen as more distant, sometimes disconnected from the people. This is not necessarily because the diocese has done anything wrong. It is based on the simple reality that when we go to a specific church, we perceive our connection as being to the parish because it is close.

A parish is established to provide for the pastoral needs of the people within the parish. Standing at the center of the work of each parish and the whole church is the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source and summit of our Catholic faith (see [Lumen Gentium](#), 11).

As part of its purpose, building community is an important component of what it means to be a parish. Jesus tells us the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor. We need to be there for one another. We need to have good relationships with one another (see my series of articles [“Our Relationships with Others”](#)). It is in these relationships that we establish a “community.”

The *second* greatest commandment is to love our neighbor. Jesus teaches us *the greatest* commandment is to love God. Our greatest priority should be our relationship with God. Parishes (and dioceses) need to help the people encounter God. It is through the encounter that a person (or group of persons) can be transformed.

The story of Salvation History is the story of God’s relationship (encounter) with his people. The story of Salvation History is found largely in the Bible. The most solemn liturgy of the year is the Easter Vigil. A frequent topic of mine in my [Easter Vigil homilies](#) is the story of Salvation History that we celebrate that night. God created humans, male and female, in his image (see [Genesis 1:26-27](#)) and He saves us from our sins by sending his only begotten Son to die for us on the Cross (see [John 3:16-17](#)).

It is the mission of every parish to help share the story of Salvation History, the story of God’s love for his people with the people living in their parish. Where do we receive this mission? We receive from Jesus himself when He says, ***“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.”*** Jesus does not leave us alone in this mission for He continues, ***“And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age”*** ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)).

The diocese, not the parish, is the local church. The parish is the face of the church in its community. ***It is to deliver God’s Word to its people***. We deliver the Word on God’s behalf. God will see to its effect (see [Isaiah 55:10-11](#)). It is not for us to save everyone. That’s Jesus’ role. We are called to share what we have experienced of God, our own encounters with God, and what we have given in his Word, Truth.

The Church is the custodian of God’s Truth. ***“Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”*** ([John 8:31-32](#)). The world is desperately in need of God’s Truth. Each parish has a role in sharing it.

We do not get to determine the truth. God does. How could we possibly determine the meaning of our lives when we are just one person among billions of people? How are we to determine the meaning of the universe? We all live in the same universe. It is not for any one of us to set its meaning.

As we learn God's Truth, we are called to help others know the truth but it is not for us to force the truth on them. It is not for us to judge ([Matthew 7:1](#), [Luke 6:37](#)). It is only for us to point out the danger of sin to others as the Lord instructs in the Parable of the Sentinel ([Ezekiel 3:17-21](#)). **The Church needs to provide moral guidance** as well as spiritual guidance.

It is unfortunate that some people see the Sacrament of Confirmation as graduation because they think that means they have learned everything they need to know about their faith. They have not. Growing in our faith is a lifelong process. **Each parish needs to provide opportunities for this growth.**

Why has Confirmation been seen as graduation? St. Thomas Aquinas said that Confirmation was a Sacrament of *maturity*. However, maturity does not mean that we know all we need to. It merely means we have come to an awareness of faith for ourselves. (One way to examine our growth is Sherry Weddell's five thresholds of faith presented in her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus* (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, IN. 2012. These thresholds are discussed in [Part II of my series, Made for Discipleship.](#))

Each parish and each parishioner is called to perform Corporal *and* Spiritual Works of Mercy ([see my presentation, The Journey to Jesus: Acts of Mercy.](#)) Sometimes the Corporal Works of Mercy must come before the Spiritual Works of Mercy. For instance, if a person is starving, telling them of God's love and truth (Spiritual Work of Mercy #2, Instructing the Ignorant) must wait until we have performed the first Corporal Work of Mercy to feed the hungry. Each parish must ask itself what works of mercy are most needed in the local community. No one parish can do everything. We should not seek a great number of ministries. Rather, we should seek to do the ministries we are called to do well.

The world is a complex place. If we try to feed *everyone before* we begin to teach them about our faith, we may never finish feeding all the hungry to begin to teach them our faith. Nor can we ignore anyone who is hungry to teach the faith to those who have eaten physically. We need the Holy Spirit to help us find a balance in feeding the hungry *physically and spiritually*.

A different example of the need to find a balance in our efforts is seen in the parishes I presently serve. We currently face deficit budgets in both parishes. We are fortunate to have reserves so that we can manage the deficits for a period of time but not forever. To purely manage the deficits is to take a "maintenance" approach, i.e., how do we continue to survive. We do well to remember the saying "If we are not growing, we are dying." Just surviving (aka "maintenance") is not enough.

I would much rather focus on mission. In our mission, we are called to "**Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations**" ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)). However, if we focus only on mission, ignoring the deficit, we *could* run out of money before our new efforts at our mission bear fruit. I say *could* because I *firmly believe* that if we focus on mission, existing parishioners will become more invested in the parishes and give more, some giving their time and some giving of their finances. In focusing on mission, we strive to bring more people to the parish (and they will give). Mission can solve the deficit problem but only if we manage our finances well until then.

What should a parish not do? It should not make finance and administration its **highest** priority. Finance and administration are important because we need to use the resources of our parishes well. In [canon 1752](#) of the *Code of Canon Law*, we read the supreme law is the salvation of souls. We must take good care of the temporal goods of our parishes. ***However, we must not let the temporal goods control us.*** We hear this from Jesus himself when He says, “No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” ([Luke 16:13](#)). Which is more important to you, God or mammon (mammon meaning temporal goods)?

We must remember that while we indeed live in this world, we are not of this world. We come from something greater in God (see [Part I of my series, Being Church in Today's World](#)). Here are three passages from the Bible to consider:

- John 15:19 – “If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because ***you do not belong to the world***, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you.”
- John 17:14-16 – “I gave them your word, and the world hated them, ***because they do not belong to the world*** any more than I belong to the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.”
- Romans 12:2 – “***Do not conform yourselves to this age*** but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, ***that you may discern what is the will of God***, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”

Each parish, or group of parishes, needs to have a long-term mission based on discerning God’s Will for the parish(es). For me the mission is simple to determine, “Go and make disciples” (see [Matthew 28:19](#)). Each parish, or group of parishes, needs to have short-term goals that help it achieve God’s Will.

Here I turn to Curtis Markham and [FOCUS ministries](#) model of “Win, Build, Send” as one possibility (Curtis Martin, *Making Missionary Disciples: How to Live the Method Modeled by the Master*. Genesee, CO: FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. 2018). We must “Win” over people as disciples. Then we “Build” them to be better disciples. Then, we “Send” them out into the world.

What is the purpose of a parish? What is the purpose of the church? I have offered several possibilities including building community, spiritual teacher, moral guide, and performing works of mercy. These are all important and necessary in each parish. However, I think the best answer to the purpose of the parish is found in paragraph 14 of [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#), “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. ***She exists in order to evangelize***, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”