

Finding Jesus (in the parish?)

I was Catholic all my life. I left the church in my mid-teens – as did my 4 brothers and sister. I believed in Jesus. I just didn't see where he was in the parish. I started going back to church in my early 20's. However, it was in the context of a university chaplaincy where my faith in Jesus came alive. In my excitement, I told my brothers. They said, "Nah! Remember, we went to church too. We know what we're missing." I didn't know how to tell them that there is so much more to Jesus than what you see in a parish.

During my time in priestly formation, I reflected: "why did I have to go outside the parish to meet Jesus personally, and to learn how to follow him?" It got me thinking: "what might it look like if parishes could be places where people can explore Jesus, meet him, and learn how to follow him? And not just be a place where individuals ignore others and receive a sacrament."

Divine Renovation is a 2014 book by Fr James Mallon about the renewal of parishes in the Catholic church. When I read his book, I thought 'this priest is Catholic and gets it!' I actually went to Canada to stay with his parish for a month. It was amazing!

Divine Renovation argues that parishes have forgotten how to make spiritual babies (help people meet Jesus and follow him – ie, make disciples). Every pope has been encouraging parishes to "make disciples" for the last 60 years: John XXIII,¹ Paul VI,² John Paul II,³ Benedict XVI,⁴ and Pope Francis⁵.

¹ "the 2nd Vatican Council's principal task will be concerned with the modernization (aggiornamento) of the Church after 20 centuries of life."

² "She (the church) exists to evangelise." (Paul VI, EN 14)

³ "The moment has come to commit all of the church's energies to a new evangelisation" (JP II, RM 3) "new in its ardour, new in its methods, new in its expression." (JP II, Celam 1983)

⁴ "we are searching for... a new evangelisation..." (Cardinal Ratzinger address to catechists, 2000) "a personal encounter with Jesus Christ..." (B16, Lineamenta to Philippine Bishops, 11)

⁵ "I dream of a "missionary option" ... a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world (helping people meet, accept, and follow Jesus) rather than for her self-preservation." (EG 27)

The need is urgent. For the first time in 1700 years, Europe is no longer Christian. The previous census said that over 50 % of the UK population describes themselves as non-Christian (for the first time). Parishes haven't had to make disciples before. We used to be able to just have babies and build churches. Families would naturally 'be' Catholic. People would naturally come to church. No more! We need to relearn how to make babies, make disciples. Divine Renovation shows us how using 5 aspects to parish life:

Community - “[his parents] began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him.” Mary and Joseph trusted Jesus with their family and friends. Don't shy away from community. Embrace community. Christian community can be found in the hall having tea/coffee, it can be meeting up with a friend from church, it can be found in a team or service group, WhatsApp, playing sports, spending time with family, helping each other out. In all these fun things, the aim is to help people find Jesus.

Evangelisation - “After three days [searching for him] they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Jesus modelled how to **evangelise**. Alpha is a series where non-religious especially can sit, listen, and ask questions freely about Jesus. We have food and drink, and watch a short film. Our testimonies show that many people are meeting Jesus in an amazing way. We have just successfully finished our 4th season of alpha. We hope to do our next one after Easter (maybe a thurs eve?). Try alpha!

Worship – “The parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.” Temple worship was very important to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. This is why you and we should come to church every Sunday. Also develop a daily habit of prayer. “[Jesus'] mother treasured up all these things in her heart.”

Share your heart with God every day. As Jesus becomes more a part of our daily lives, worship at Mass becomes more meaningful.

Service - “he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them.” Jesus submitted to his parents. He served. In a similar way, ask not just what the church can do for you. Ask what you can do for the church. If you’re in a service team, invite people in. If you’re interested in serving, see our service sheet on the noticeboard and website.

Faith growth - “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.” Jesus always knew he was the unique Son of God. However, he grew in human wisdom. You may have gone through Catholic education, and may be ‘Catholic ‘til you die!’ However, we all need to grow! We need more faith and understanding as life becomes more complex. Join our **faith growth**. We next meet on Thurs 23rd Jan 7-9 pm.

Friends, the church is Jesus’ body on earth. People find Jesus, when we do church together as a community; as we commit to evangelise; as we pray daily and worship weekly; as we serve; and as a we grow in our faith.

I am passionate about renewing Catholic parishes. I want everyone to be able to find Jesus through us. Embrace this vision of Divine Renovation with me. Help revitalise Catholic parishes too. Invite others in to help others find Jesus!