

Towards a New Model of Pastoral Care of the Sacraments at Saint Benedict Parish

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Introduction

Over the last fifty years our society has witnessed what can arguably be called the most accelerated social change in human history. As we have moved through several paradigm shifts in the last generation the pastoral practice of the Catholic Church in Western Civilization remains, for the most part, unchanged from what existed prior to this state of flux. In the last decade, the result of this failure to adapt and recognize what the Second Vatican Council referred to as “the signs of the times” is finally becoming evident. As a result, Church leaders are openly calling for deep change in our pastoral methods and courage to implement new models of faith formation, discipleship and Christian living.

In 1979, Pope John Paul II used the term “the New Evangelization” for the first time, a term that became a hallmark of his papacy. In June of 2010, Pope Benedict spoke of the need for a re-evangelization of the West and appointed a Pontifical Commission to take on this task. Shortly thereafter he called for the 13th Synod of Bishops, to be held in 2013, to focus on this topic. Our own Archbishop, on the Feast of Pentecost 2011, issued his own call for a deep renewal of every aspect of our Christian lives based on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, nothing short of a new Pentecost. The Archbishop is calling for a complete refocusing of our efforts on the proclamation of the Gospel and the making of disciples. He courageously identifies the need to “reform the sacramental practice at the center of our Catholic spirituality” even if this means “going against the comfort of established customs and practices where sacraments have become singular, and primarily, social events in individual lives.”

At the heart of this call to a renewed approach to sacraments is the task of addressing the distance between what is professed and what is lived by many who seek the sacraments of the Church. For revitalization to take place, “the connection between the sacraments and the living community of faith” must be recognized as “essential,” as the pastoral letter says, “It is not enough to prepare individuals for the “celebration” of the sacraments. A real connection must also be made between those who seek the sacraments and the regular life of the Church.” This involves helping Catholics experience a life changing personal encounter with the Lord Jesus through which they seek to become His disciples.

At Saint Benedict parish we have just completed our first year in our new building. This beautiful new place where we gather each week for the celebration of the Eucharist has brought a heightened sense of newness to our parish as a culmination of a four-year process of forming one new parish out of three previously existing

parishes. As a result, there is an unprecedented openness to new methods and practices within our parish. No one approach to Church life dominates and no segment of this new parish can claim, "That's not how we do it here." The psychological impact of this new church has created a sense of expectation and openness to new pastoral methods. The sheer size of this parish also challenges us to form new models of Christian community in which people can be known and cared for. Clerically centered, top-down ministry, is simply impossible, and so our very structure demands change if we are to be a parish in which people grow spiritually and experience authentic Christian community. As a result, there is a window of opportunity to act to introduce bold changes in our pastoral practice around the sacraments and ecclesial life. The fact that this coincides with a call to a new evangelization by the Holy Father, and explicit permission from our Archbishop to take concrete steps in this matter, is, to say the least, providential. In taking these steps we can seek to be new wine for this beautiful new wineskin, to not simply come into this new place and continue doing everything the same.

Before proposing concrete models for the pastoral care of people seeking the sacraments, this paper will attempt to address several theological concerns before turning to look at some pastoral considerations.

Part I: Theological Considerations

A. The Centrality of Discipleship

The context for the sacramental aspect of the Christian Life is found at the heart of the mission that Christ gave to His nascent Church. In Matthew 28:19-20, we are given what has become known as the Great Commission. The wavering disciples are told to "Go, make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all I have commanded you." Of these four imperatives, we find in the original Greek that one of them is a finite verb and three are participles. The finite verb is the grammatical hinge of the sentence and thus, also, the theological centre. The finite verb is "make," or literally, "make disciples" (*matheteusate*). This task is the very heart of the Great Commission and it is around the making of disciples that all the other missionary aspects of the Church revolve: the going, the baptizing and the teaching. In recent centuries, the Catholic Church has had the distinction of being a great missionary Church. We went. We have a rich didactic tradition and are famed for our schools and universities. We know how to baptize and celebrate all the other sacraments. Our one pastoral weakness, however, is that which lies at the very heart of Christ's commission to the Church, to make disciples.

The root of the word disciple (*mathetes*) is the verb *manthanein*, to learn. To be a disciple is to be a learner, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is to be engaged in a life-

long process of learning from and being conformed to Jesus, the master, Jesus the teacher. The English term disciple comes from the Latin *discipulus*, and provides the connotation that this learning process is not haphazard but intentional and disciplined. To become a disciple is to commit to such a process. According to the Great Commission, it is those who have begun to walk the path of discipleship, in the midst of the community of believers, who are to celebrate the sacraments of faith.

As cited in the introduction of this paper, the basic cause of the lack of spiritual fruit, the frustration among ministers of the Church is the fact that in spite of our going and teaching and baptizing, confirming, absolving... we have failed to make disciples of the majority of those who seek sacraments, and, especially, sacraments of initiation. To focus on making disciples challenges us to respond to each individual who knocks on our doors as an individual with his or her own history. No one-size-fits-all process will be enough. Rather, we will have to move from programs with fixed starting and ending points, with their respective rewards, to a process more akin to mentoring, walking with those who knock so that they can celebrate sacraments when they are ready. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1072) tells us that liturgy and sacraments “must be preceded by evangelization, faith and conversion.” No five-month or two-week program can produce this. If we are to make disciples we must have models that will move away from sacraments as an age-based reward system to being moments of celebration of authentic faith in the heart of the Christian Community. This will take real courage to implement and will require us to overcome several theological biases that are deeply rooted in Catholic culture and consciousness.

B. Theological Biases

Traditional Catholic sacramental theology has been disproportionately influenced by Counter-Reformation theology and subsequent Tridentine definitions. The sacramental theology of the Reformers was developed in reaction to excesses, perceived and real, in late medieval theology and piety. Post-Tridentine sacramental theology is built upon a reaction to the theology of the Reformers. These perspectives continue to shape our perception and experience of the sacraments to this day, particularly the dogmatic definition that Sacraments work *ex opere operato*, and the consequent disproportionate stress on the concept of the *validity* of sacraments, as opposed to their *fruitfulness*. Another Tridentine focus on how the sacraments communicate sanctifying grace and bring about ontological change (with regard to Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders) has led to a de-emphasis on the existential dimension of the sacraments, especially with regard to the ecclesial, communal dimension. Lastly, the predominance of more than fifteen centuries of infant baptism has also had adverse effects on how the sacraments are experienced.

A) Ex Opere Operato

This Latin term, which literally means “from the work being worked” has to do with the objective validity of sacraments and is widely perceived to distinguish validity

from fruitfulness. Although this term originated in early Scholasticism and was clearly enunciated through the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, it originates to an earlier period in the history of the Church in the experience of the Donatist Controversy. The Donatists, a rigorist sect of Carthage in North Africa, grew out of the experience of persecution of Christians by the Emperor Diocletian in the year 303. Many in the Christian community failed. Many apostatized, and some even “handed over” the sacred scrolls of Scripture, the sacred vessels and even fellow Christians. The controversy began after clergy who were reputed to be guilty of such failures returned to pastoral ministry. The sect that would be eventually named Donatists contested the validity of Sacraments celebrated by these priests and bishops who had failed and sinned so grievously. This question caused great conflict in the fourth century Church of North Africa.

Through the intervention of the Emperor Constantine this question was referred to the Bishop of Rome and was eventually settled at the council of Arles in 314. The council decided against the assertions of the Donatists and declared that the sacraments of these clergy were valid sacraments because their efficacy is rooted, not in the personal holiness of the minister. Rather, it is found in the faithfulness of the Church as a whole, and, most of all, in the faithfulness of Christ who is *the* priest, as well as the promise of God who can act even through unworthy ministers. The Church found for the efficacy of the Sacraments *ex opere operato* and not *ex opere operantis*, meaning from the work itself rather than the work of the one working, that is, the minister of the sacrament. This position was eventually dogmatically defined by the Council of Trent in response to the Reformers. Since this time, Catholic sacramental theology has been disproportionately influenced by this question of validity, so much so that the question of fruitfulness has not received the attention it deserves.

It is also worth noting that the Church ascribed fruitfulness of the Sacraments to the realm of the *ex opere operantis*, which has come to include the disposition of the one receiving the Sacraments. However, this notion, juxtaposed to the concept of validity (*ex opere operato*), was in relation to what was lacking in the minister of the sacrament, not what was lacking in the one receiving it. Today, these concepts serve to underline the significance of a “valid sacrament” even when the ability of the person receiving it is in question. As a result, the issue of sacramental validity has become abstracted from actual human experience and the ontological dimension holds sway over the existential. Practically, in our contemporary experience, we see the fruits of these theological developments in the all-too familiar pastoral concern for whether or not the sacrament was actually valid, with little or no corresponding concern about fruitfulness.

B) The Concept of Sacramental Grace

By the time the Church clearly understood that there were seven sacraments, Scholastic theology had come to distinguish three ways in which the sacraments could be considered: 1) The *sacramentum tantum*: the outward sign, 2) the *res et sacramentum*: the invisible and immediate saving effect, and 3) the *res tantum*: the

ultimate saving effect, the life of grace. The second of these aspects, the *res et sacramentum*, had a Christological dimension and an ecclesial dimension: the configuring to Christ proper to each sacrament and the corresponding grace *vis a vis* the Church. So, in the Sacrament of Baptism, there was the forgiveness of sin (actual and the guilt of original sin), the infilling of the Spirit, the configuring to Christ, adoption by the Father and membership in the Church. As a result of the focus on ontological effects of the Sacraments and the debate with Luther on the theology of Grace, the ecclesial dimension of the *res et sacramentum* was short changed, even though baptism was, in the earliest biblical accounts, principally about reception into the community of believers.

Today, the results of this theology can be seen in the fact that so often we are contented with the liturgy of the sacraments, with the *sacramentum tantum*, and the concern for “validity” which concerns itself with the conferral of the invisible grace, even without any visible ecclesial dimension being lived out. As a result, sacraments become close to magical moments when spiritual vitamins are distributed, through ritual that, although it takes place in the church building, has little or no connection to the Church as the community of disciples.

C) Infant Baptism

The practice of infant baptism, although an ancient one, has accelerated the negative impact of Post-Tridentine Sacramental Theology. The pastoral normalization of what was originally theologically exceptional has impacted not only the theology of baptism, but the theology of all the sacraments. Here, the saying *lex orandi lex credendi* holds true.

The fact that infants were baptized in the early Church is a fact. Although the earliest explicit reference to this practice is not until the Apostolic Tradition, attributed to Hippolytus in 215 AD, and in the writings of Tertullian several years later, there are many references in the Scriptures to entire households being baptized. Nevertheless, both the Scripture references and the passage from the Apostolic Tradition alludes to or describes the baptism of children of adults who were themselves being baptized. Hippolytus tells us that the children who cannot speak for themselves are to be brought down into the water. The norm, theologically, was the baptism of adults. Children were baptized as an extension of the faith professed and lived by the parents who were presenting them. The Scriptures tell us that repentance, conversion and faith precede baptism. Infants who were baptized were done so in concert with the professed and lived baptismal faith of their parents, even if it was not synchronous.

For obvious reasons, what was pastorally and theological normative (the baptism of adults) eventually became rare and eventually practically non-existent until the 16th century when new mission grounds opened up for the Church. As a result, what was the exception became the norm, and practice shaped theology. Scripturally, baptism was a response to adult faith; in the life of the Church a theology of baptism emerged that had no connection to conversion or personal faith, but rested on the ontological

dimensions already discussed. As a result, baptism in particular, and indeed, all the sacraments, were disconnected from conversion, profession of faith, and from fruitfulness. The cultural changes of the last fifty years have simply revealed already existing fault lines. The culture no longer compels people towards a connection with the Church, and, as a result, this connection has rapidly faded. What we are left with is the experience of sacraments that have practically no relation to discipleship, at least for those who have not yet become disciples, when their original context was that they were rooted in discipleship.

Therefore, the challenge before us is not just pastoral, but also theological. Although absent in official Church teaching, these imbalances or biases of Catholic “popular theology” are deeply ingrained in the collective Catholic consciousness and need to be addressed and explained to our people before we can present new models to them. Responsible change management necessitates the communication of why something is being changed, and must take care that those receiving the explanation are capable of understanding it. St. Thomas Aquinas told us “Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver.” This does present a particular challenge, but one that we cannot fail to take up even if, as Archbishop Mancini said, it should “go against the comfort of established customs and practices.” Reeducation of our people will be vital so that changes in pastoral practice are not perceived as punishing children and families, as if some essential medicine was being withheld because people were not behaving as we thought they should.

Part II: Pastoral Considerations

A. Sacraments as Unique Opportunities to Evangelize

As Catholics our biggest pastoral struggle is also our greatest pastoral opportunity. Couples, parents or families who have little or no connection to the Church who come knocking must be welcomed with open arms and love, no matter how limited their faith or understanding of what they are seeking. Our starting point must be that we never say “no” to any request for a sacrament. However, this begs the question of what it means to say “yes.” Yes cannot simply mean the fixing of a date, some paperwork and a quick class. Our yes must be a wholehearted willingness to walk with them until they are ready to celebrate the sacraments and be accompanied with a clear definition of what readiness looks like. Our yes must be an invitation to a process, a journey, with a resistance to pressure to simply provide the date. The journey must be one of authentic conversion and not be simply a complicated obstacle course that must be successfully navigated in order to get the prize at the end.

B. The Dangers of the *Status Quo*

The consequences of failing to adapt to this new pastoral reality are not simply declining Church membership, the graying of our parishioners or the lack of ordained ministers. It is not just about the fact that in most parishes close to ninety percent of the baptized under the age of forty no longer live their faith at all or at least within the community of faith. The issue is deeper than our ongoing decline and the eventual and continuous restructuring of our parishes. The greatest consequence is the toll taken by continuing to settle for external appearances that have little or no connection to the internal reality. How long can a pastor and community joyfully and wholeheartedly celebrate confirmation as the completion of Christian Initiation knowing all too well that the vast majority of the freshly initiated have, in their minds, just obtained a ticket out of the Church. What makes it worse is that the young people know that you know, and they know that you know that they know that you know that all the externals, the *sacramentum tantum*, are simply that. At stake is our very integrity as Church.

What is the cost when a pastor, before the congregation, asks couples “Do you clearly understand what you undertaking” and they say “yes” and then the vast majority never return? How long can we keep this up when this witnessing of unfulfilled promises begins to make our own yes to the demands of Christ and the Gospel more difficult to fulfill. If we get so accustomed and practiced to settling for externals, how long before we settle for the externals in our own Christian lives without the corresponding internal reality? Was this not the central critique of Hebrew prophets of the religious system of their time? Was this not the heart of the conflict of Jesus with the religious establishment of His time who accused them of only being concerned with the outside but were full of corruption on the inside? To make peace with this reality is to allow a part of the heart of the Church to die. It also makes peace with compromise and sin. The recent sexual abuse scandals, although of an entirely different order, are extensions of this same malady: settling for the external appearance and the covering up of anything that may reveal an inner dysfunction, making peace with something with which we should wage war. We are one body. The success or failure, joy or sorrow of the other members of the Church truly affect every other believer. If the body is to be healthy we must demand authentic discipleship of ourselves and of those who seek sacraments of faith, for our own sake and theirs.

C. The Primacy of Belonging

What we desire in our Church is new outcomes. We desire authentic discipleship from our active parishioners and from those who seek sacraments, or at least an authentic move towards discipleship. We do not expect the process of making disciples to happen overnight. It is a process that takes no particular predetermined length of time. Therefore, it cannot take place through a simple terminal program. Rather it must be relationship based.

Traditionally in the pre-1960's culture, strong social mores meant that the majority of people were bound by strict moral and social strictures. Most people behaved in a manner that was deemed proper. The vast majority of people attended Church and behaved as good church-going people should. Their attendance in particular churches was rooted in clearly defined beliefs and demarcations between them and the others who believed differently. This belief led to and defined belonging. Today, social scientists tell us that this traditional pattern of behaving-believing-belonging has been turned upside down. People today will only behave in certain ways if they truly believe it. No appeal to authority, custom, community or even experience will allow them to be moved. They must first believe before they will behave in a particular fashion. Social scientists tell us that today peoples' beliefs are changed in and through a sense of belonging, through relationship building. This means that if the Church desires a change in the behaviour of those who seek sacraments and have little or no connection to the Church, then that change must begin with them experiencing a sense of belonging to the Church. This belonging, with time, will lead to a change in beliefs that will then produce a change in behaviour.

This new reality presents a challenge to our churches as most of our parishes are not equipped to welcome people who may not believe and behave as we think they should. The fact that most of our parishes only have the Eucharist as a gathering point means that, by definition, those who believe and behave in a heterodox manner are not able to fully participate. This can lead to a sense of rejection and isolation and produce the opposite effect. The question for our Church, then, is how do we provide experiences of community and belonging other than Sunday Eucharist? How can we overcome the prevailing sense that ones spiritual journey (including the celebration of Sacraments) are primarily private affairs? These questions call us to facilitate the building of relationships so that sacramental preparation can look more like a mentoring process than an endurance test that will soon be over?

D. Missional Dimension of the Christian Life

The making of disciples, teaching and baptizing are all part of the Church's missionary mandate. The Church exists for the sake of mission. In spite of this clear definition of our purpose, most parishes and most Catholics have very little awareness of their missionary calling. Jesus worked with His disciples in two key and related ways. He gathered them and then He sent them. Time and time again we see that He gathered to form them, teach them, minister to them, but this was always followed by sending. When we look at the life of a typical parish we see some degree of gathering, from the Eucharist and the celebration of sacraments, to children's catechetics and social gatherings and adult faith formation programs. We do a great deal of gathering but very little sending. The oft-repeated call to the "Lay Apostolate" in the documents of the Second Vatican Council has virtually disappeared in contemporary Church parlance. Instead of using the missional "apostolate" which is all about sending out, we exclusively speak of "lay ministry"

which, although necessary, is almost exclusively concerned with *ad intra* gathering activities. If we are to be revitalized as a Church, if the meaning of the sacraments is to be renewed, we must rediscover their missional meaning.

This is nowhere clearer than when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, which is known to most Catholics as the Mass. The term *missa*, of course, comes from *missio*, and it reminds us that the Eucharist is all about Mission. So, however, are all the Sacraments and, indeed, all expressions of gathering on our Church. They are all for the sake of going out. We have Sacraments so that we can receive God's grace and "complete His work on earth" as it says in the fourth Eucharistic prayer. Our mission is to make disciples of all people, to take the message of the good news of God's love beyond the four walls of our churches. It is to teach and baptize. It is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and prisoners. Our mission is to care for the stranger, the widow and orphan. To speak for the voiceless and work tirelessly for the building up of God's Kingdom, in our culture, in our city, in our communities and not just in our churches. What does it mean to become a member of the Church? It means that you become a member of the team and we have a lot of work to do. We are gathered in order to be sent.

E. Universal Expectations

This last point raises the issue of expectations. We must truly ask if those requesting sacraments understand what is expected of them. That so many boldly proclaim that they clearly understand what they are undertaking and then disappear from the life of the community and take no part in the mission, tells us that there is very little understanding of expectations. However, this lack of knowledge about what is expected of parish members is not limited to those who have little or no contact with the community. We have a need in the Church to clearly and openly communicate expectations to all members, active and inactive. The call to active discipleship, and a clear communication of what this entails, must be sounded to all members of our parishes.

The spirituality of Stewardship provides us a working model for how we can communicate expectations to parishioners. Expectations can be summarized as: worshiping, growing, serving, giving, and connecting. We should communicate with parishioners that they are expected to worship at Sunday Eucharist, not just "regularly" but weekly unless sick or out of town. We expect parishioners to be committed to spiritual and human growth, to learn, to be disciples. We expect parishioners to serve in some way for the sake of the mission of the Church. We expect all parishioners to give of their finances proportionally and sacrificially so that we can have the means to fulfill the mission Christ has given us. We need to ask our parishioners to commit to connecting with others and build up the community of the Church. We must overcome the perception of the Church that Archbishop Mancini has described as "a collection of individual believers, practicing their faith in private, satisfied with their self-sufficiency."

These expectations can be fulfilled through a commitment to the traditional stewardship concepts of time, talent and treasure. Time ought to be understood as commitment to spiritual growth and formation through Sunday worship, personal and familial prayer and adult faith formation. Talent is about serving others, taking our part in the mission of the Church in accordance with the unique gifts we have received from God. Fulfilling the requirements of these first two categories will also satisfy the expectation of connecting with others and building up the community. Lastly, an honest and clear teaching on the call of the disciple to give of his or her treasure for the sake of the mission of the Church must be something we do not shy away from.

Part III: Models of Pastoral Care

Before looking at models and processes for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, First Reconciliation and First Eucharist, I would like to propose a model of fostering expectations within the parish at large and a means to assist all parishioners on the path to discipleship, even if they are not seeking sacraments of initiation. Only if the entire parish is seeking discipleship can we ask this of those who are not yet full active members.

A. Stewardship of Time, Talent and Treasure

At Saint Benedict we plan to launch three distinct Stewardship “campaigns” in the coming year, using the parameters outlined above. The Stewardship of Time will be introduced in September and will focus on our call to spiritual growth. Parishioners will be called to make a plan and a commitment to personal prayer and to formation. Through a letter sent to each parishioner, Sunday homilies, lay witnesses and a Spirituality Fair, parishioners will be prepared to make such a commitment. The Spirituality Fair will take place in a festive atmosphere and will feature displays featuring all the ministries and opportunities within our parish for spiritual growth and faith formation for all members of our parish. We hope to offer close to forty distinct programs and opportunities of various styles, times, and levels. Parishioners will receive a booklet that will outline all of these opportunities to invest time in spiritual growth. The booklet will provide dates, times and contact information for the entire following year. On the first Sunday of October parishioners will be asked to make a commitment of time for the coming year. Every parishioner will be expected to commit to personal prayer and at least one program of spiritual growth or formation.

In early January of 2012 we plan to repeat this process, but with the focus on Talent. Talent is about our call to use our gifts at the service of others in the Church and in the community. We will follow the same process of preparation including a

Stewardship of Talent Fair, a booklet and a commitment Sunday when every parishioner is asked to commit to serving the mission of the Church in some way.

In the Spring we will then turn to focus on the Stewardship of Treasure. Although there will not be a fair as such, some concrete demonstration of how parishioners' financial gifts are used for the mission of the Church will take place. Preaching and lay witnesses will be essential. This campaign will be followed by a commitment Sunday when parishioners will be asked to commit to a certain percentage of their household income for the sake of the mission of Christ.

These Stewardship Campaigns will take place every year and will help call parishioners to a process of discipleship that is experienced through worshipping, growing, serving, giving and connecting. By repeating these campaigns, the awareness of what is expected of parishioners will be heightened.

B. The Alpha Course and Pastorates

A key part of our offerings for spiritual growth will be the Alpha Course and Pastorates. The Alpha Course will be one among many programs for spiritual growth offered through the parish. However, it will be presented as unique among the programs and will be recommended as the starting point for people beginning to invest in spiritual formation. Alpha is specifically geared towards welcoming and assisting those outside of the Church to receive the basic *kerygma* of the Gospel and is intentionally built on the belonging-believing-behaving model. Although it is a beginner's course, it is also perfectly suited to bring about spiritual renewal of longtime committed parishioners. In my experience of different programs, none produces the fruit of conversion to the extent that the Alpha Course does (if done properly) in proportion to the investment of time and resources.

The strength of the Alpha Course is not just in the rich offerings it presents as a course but is the wider picture. The goal of Alpha is to become a continuously running course at the heart of the local Church. Guests become team members on the next course. Some of them become small group facilitators on the next. Each step involves training and a process of discipleship. In addition, the experience of vibrant Christian community leads people to desire more. People who do Alpha are highly likely to continue onto other programs of spiritual formation and to seek experiences of Christian community outside of the Eucharist. Such experiences will be essential for drawing in the majority of people who come to the Church seeking sacraments. It will be in these communities that people will experience belonging, which will lead to believing and, eventually, behaving. This coming year we are planning on hosting five different Alpha groups in the Fall (Classic Alpha, Date Night Alpha for couples, Lunch Time Alpha for Seniors, Morning Alpha for Young Parents and Youth Alpha). In the New Year we will run one Alpha course.

Pastorates are groupings of twenty to thirty people who gather twice a month for fellowship, prayer and formation. By January of 2012 we hope to launch four pastorates primarily from the people who have gone through the Alpha Course. It is in the pastorates that parishioners will have their primary experience of pastoral care, of being disciplined, of being known and loved, affirmed, supported and challenged. Our present parish size cannot flourish through a top-down model of ministry and, so, pastorates will serve to broaden pastoral ministry and help parishioners become mature disciples. Pastorates are more open ended than traditional small groups, are less threatening to new-comers and more penetrable. It is within pastorates that parishioners' gifts will be recognized, called forth and exercised. Pastorates can all also become the community from which missional outreach of all forms takes place. Sunday Eucharist will be the occasion when these smaller communities gather together. In this way it can take it's place as the source and summit of the Christian life as there is a communal life outside the Eucharistic assembly.

Our vision is that these pastorate groups will grow and eventually split and multiply. Our hope is that every member of the parish will belong to a pastorate where meaningful Christian community will be experienced and people will be disciplined. This model will also serve to decentralize ministry, move parishioners into homes and free up an already over-congested parish building with limited space for gathering.

C. Welcoming Process for New Parishioners

As a majority of people who request baptism, marriage, First Reconciliation and First Eucharist are not active parishioners, we need to have a process that welcomes them into the life of the parish not based on their request for sacraments but based on the requirements of membership in the Church. This will help re-establish the communal and ecclesial dimension of the sacraments. It will also serve to communicate expectations of membership in the parish that apply to all parishioners and show that we are not isolating and "picking on" those who request sacraments, for to request sacraments is to request to be part of the Church, part of this Church.

This process will be focused around the following stages:

- A clear and visible welcome booth present at all Masses. Parishioners are invited to fill out a registration card and are told that this is the first stage in a process of welcoming them to the parish.
- A phone call goes out within a week and contact is made with the new parishioner.
- A welcome package is mailed or dropped off at the parishioners' homes. It will include a welcome letter from the pastor, a welcome DVD, information

about upcoming programs and an invitation to a welcome luncheon or evening meeting.

- At the luncheon or meeting the expectations of parish membership will be discussed and the Time, Talent and Treasure booklets and commitment cards will be distributed.
- New parishioners will be paired with parish mentors, who will be active members of the parish who share something in common with the new parishioner (for example, young couples with young couples).
- Within a month, a follow up meeting takes place with the parish ministry counselor to discuss the commitment cards and to help the new members take the steps they need to become active members of the parish.

This process will be in place by September 2011.

D. Baptismal Preparation

Before we can discuss details of a formation program, a fundamental distinction must be made between parishioners who are active members and those who are not members of the parish who request baptism. The majority of requests for baptism come from this latter group. For parishioners who are connected with the parish the preparation process could be quite minimal. If they attend Sunday Eucharist and have engaged in the Stewardship Campaigns, baptism of their children can be done immediately. Preparation will then be a simple meeting with a member of the baptismal team to prepare them for the celebration of the sacrament itself. If this is not their first child then this step may not even be necessary.

At Saint Benedict, unless there are serious pastoral reasons, all baptisms will take place at the celebration of Sunday Eucharist. This firmly takes the celebration of baptism out of the domain of a private familial rite of passage, to a celebration of the community of the faithful and being about membership in the Church. One Sunday a month will be designated as Baptismal Sunday and dates will be set one year in advance.

For families who request baptism, but have no connection with the Church the following process is suggested:

- 1) Initial contact will happen via telephone, email or at the welcome booth.
- 2) All inquiries should be treated with enthusiasm and joy. We must be overwhelmingly welcoming.
- 3) Parents who inquire should be asked if they are registered with the parish. If not they should be invited to enter into this process.
- 4) These requests should be passed on to the baptismal team who will then arrange an initial meeting. At this meeting we will gather basic information about the family and will seek to:
 - i. Be welcoming

- ii. Affirm their request
 - iii. Explain our process, especially that we work with families until they are ready, and so we do not discuss dates at this first meeting.
 - iv. Pass on an information package including a letter from the pastor and an information brochure about baptism.
 - v. The centrality of some connection to the community be stressed, especially Sunday Eucharist for those who are from a Catholic background.
 - vi. Inform the parents that a sponsor will be assigned to them by the parish should they choose to take part in this process. The sponsor will accompany them through the preparation period and give testimony to the pastor before and during the Rite of Baptism that they are ready to celebrate the Sacrament.
- 5) A follow up meeting will take place one week later. If the family wishes to proceed a sponsor will be assigned to the family who will personally mentor and help them prepare for the celebration of baptism. What preparation will look like will depend on who is requesting the sacrament and where they are in their faith (See below for this).
- 6) When the sponsor is able to testify to the readiness of the parents to bring the child to be baptized the couple will attend the next baptismal preparation evening hosted by the Baptismal team, a date will be set and the baptism celebrated at Sunday Eucharist.

Our pastoral reality is far more complex than it used to be. Recently at a Sunday Mass, I was approached by a family with three children. Neither parent was baptized, and only one of the children had been baptised (due to a previous marriage). The father was a nominal Muslim. Such a family do not fit into our typical categories. For cases such as these we must be ready to offer a process of preparation that is not just an invitation to come to Mass. For such a family, the Alpha Course, and or Pastorates could be the proper means to prepare them for baptism and eventually the Rites of Christian Initiation for Adults.

For the vast majority of unconnected Catholics who request baptism for their children it must be clearly explained that weekly Sunday Eucharist is part of what it means to become ready to celebrate baptism. It will be the responsibility of the sponsor to assist their family to make a habit of Sunday Eucharist. They will welcome them to Mass on Sundays, sit with them and introduce them to the pastor and other parishioners. Once this begins to take place and a suitable period of time has passed and the habit of weekly Eucharist is forming, we can proceed with looking at dates. Regarding a process of formation, young families are typically overwhelmed when new children arrive and, so, to ask them to commit to something like a ten week Alpha Course may seem like an insurmountable obstacle. While we wish to break old habits we do not want to “break the bruised reed.” Simply asking them to complete the requirements of new parishioners, the

meetings, the luncheon and committing to a plan of spiritual growth and service, with the expectation that there will be follow up, ought to be enough to establish the necessary relationships to foster the beginnings of discipleship. In this, we are not asking more of them than any other new parishioner. In fact, we will not be asking more of them than any parishioner, old or new.

This process will be in place by January 2012.

E. Marriage Preparation

The pastoral challenges of young couples seeking marriage, although similar, are rather different to the challenges of those seeking baptism. One of the main issues is the fact that the couple themselves are the ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage and, therefore, need to be properly prepared even to attain a valid marriage, never mind a fruitful marriage. 90% of the couples coming to us for marriage do not go to Sunday Eucharist, are unclear about their beliefs regarding the basic content of the Christian faith, have no concept of discipleship or experience of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. They also are living a common law relationship.

The principles outlined above also apply to these couples. We must:

- 1) Welcome them with open arms and rejoice with them that they are willing to take this step.
- 2) We must call them to begin a journey of faith that will include a faith formation course that will precede a program specific to marriage, and call them to begin to attend Sunday Eucharist.
- 3) We must assign a sponsoring couple to them who will mentor them and walk with them through this time of preparation.

The following process is suggested for couples who request marriage at Saint Benedict parish, and for couples who plan to get married outside of the parish:

- 1) Initial contact will happen via telephone, email or at the welcome booth. We will encourage that a one-year notice be given for marriage.
- 2) Couples will be presented with a brochure or via web with the basic outline of what is required to be married at Saint Benedict Parish.
- 3) All inquiries should be treated with enthusiasm and joy. We must be overwhelmingly welcoming.
- 4) Couples will be invited to make an appointment with the pastor. At this meeting an invitation to begin a spiritual journey that will include taking the Alpha Course and participation at Sunday Eucharist will be extended (in some cases, depending on where people are, the Alpha Course alone may be the best first step).

- 5) Couples will be invited to choose to take part in this process. Once they communicate their intention to do so, a date for the marriage will be discussed and booked.
- 6) A letter confirming these previous steps and what lies ahead will go out to the couples.
- 7) Couples will then take part in the registration process and become members of the parish.
- 8) The mentoring couple will assist them in their participation in Sunday Eucharist (if applicable) and in their preparation for marriage.
- 9) They will take the Alpha Course. If this is not possible because of scheduling, then they will be required to take another program of adult faith formation. However, Alpha will be considered the norm.
- 10) Couples will meet with a member of the pastoral staff to complete the required paperwork for marriage.
- 11) Couples will meet with our music director to plan the marriage liturgy.
- 12) Couples will meet with the parish ministry counselor. They will already know her from the follow up from the registration process. They will receive a Living Your Strengths book and be invited to identify their top five themes using the Clifton Strengths Finder.
- 13) Marriage couples will participate in an evening seminar around Strength Finder and work as couples.
- 14) Couples will participate in a Friday night/all day Saturday workshop specific to Marriage hosted and prepared by the parish. These sessions will be offered on two different dates in the Spring.
- 15) Couples will meet with the priest or deacon who will be witnessing their marriage in the week before the wedding.
- 16) Catholics will be expected to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the week prior to the marriage.
- 17) One month after the marriage a follow up call will be made to the couple.

This process will be implemented throughout the next year.

F. First Reconciliation/First Eucharist

Before we can discuss the specifics around preparation for these important moments in a child's spiritual life, we need to acknowledge the need for a new model of children's catechetics. Why do we need to consider a new model?

- 1) Child centered catechesis presumes Catholic culture and active participation in the Church. Catholic culture no longer exists in our society and most families requesting these sacraments are not active members of the parish.
- 2) At Saint Benedict, eighty percent of the families who register do not participate in Sunday Eucharist.
- 3) At Saint Benedict, sixty percent of those registered are not present at class on any given Sunday.

- 4) No matter how effective a program is, it will be of limited effect unless we work with the parents of the children.
- 5) By attempting to provide unique programs to every grade level our resources are spread too thin.
- 6) The communication of knowledge alone, no matter the quality of the content of a program, will not bring about the desired outcomes of discipleship.
- 7) Religious education should not be continuous and terminal, but occasional and permanent.

This new model would break the typical scope of religious Education into three parts: 1) A generic, open ended large group gathering, 2) A specialized, family-centered sacramental stream, and 3) Youth ministry programs for young people in grade six and beyond.

In this model the majority of time, resources and personnel would be invested in working with families seeking sacraments. We do not have the resources to do this properly and maintain distinct curricula for every grade level. A generic Sunday morning program will be established. Anyone is welcome into this "Sunday School program." Attendance will not be taken, there will be no expectations of parents of this program. It will be focused on games, songs, skits, and fun activities. Children from grades primary to grade five are welcome into this program.

The sacramental stream for First Reconciliation and First Eucharist will be entirely different.

- 1) This program will be family based and will also involve parents.
- 2) Sunday Eucharist will be a fundamental part of this process.
- 3) Any child can be presented to be a part of this process.
- 4) It will not be based on age or grade level.
- 5) Readiness to celebrate these sacraments will include
 - a. the completion of an eight week process that will take place four times a year,
 - b. weekly attendance at Sunday Eucharist throughout the eight weeks,
 - c. completion of the parish registration process if applicable.
- 6) First Reconciliation and First Communion will take place four times a year in the parish and will not be associated with any particular age or grade, but will be celebrated when a family is ready, as defined above.

The following process is suggested for families who request their children receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist for the First Time:

- 1) Initial contact will happen via telephone, email or at the welcome booth.
- 2) Families will be presented with a brochure or via web with the basic outline of what is required to celebrate these sacraments at Saint Benedict Parish.
- 3) All inquiries should be treated with enthusiasm and joy. We must be overwhelmingly welcoming.

- 4) Families will be invited to make an appointment with the Director of Children's Ministry. At this meeting families will apply for the eight-week program, and invitation to begin a spiritual journey and the process will be discussed.
- 5) Families who are not yet registered will go through the parish registration process.
- 6) Families will begin the process at the proper time and catechists will be assigned to each family to act in a mentoring role.
- 7) Families who are candidates for these sacraments will normally sit together at Sunday Eucharist during the eight week process.
- 8) Mentoring catechists will testify to the readiness of each family to come to the sacraments.
- 9) Preparation for First Reconciliation will take place before First Communion.
- 10) Parents who are Catholic will also be prepared to celebrate this Sacrament.
- 11) Families will be expected after they finish these family formation programs to make the same annual commitment to worshipping, growing, giving, serving and connecting as every other parishioner.

This process will be in place by September 2012. Before that, we must work out the specific structure and content of the eight-week programs and retrain the team to be able to serve in a mentoring role with families. From January 2012 we will begin to communicate the changes that will take place in our approach to these sacraments and the reasons for them.

Regarding Youth Ministry at Saint Benedict we will be breaking down into several categories:

- 1) Junior High ministry (grades 6-8): This program will be open-ended and will resemble the generic program for younger children. It will be run by a team of young people and will use the relational model rather than the classroom model. All will be welcome and the youth can invite their friends.
- 2) Grade 9 ministry. This year will utilize the Youth Alpha Course and other resources.
- 3) High School Youth Group. This program will be relationship based and will utilize a wide variety of programs and resources to help disciple the youth of the parish.

In October of this year a team of eight young adult youth missionaries from NET will be joining our parish until the end of May. They will build on the foundation of ministry carried out by our own parish youth team this past year. Their focus in the year they will be with us will be to build up a team of youth leaders who can lead youth ministry in the future under the supervision of one full-time youth minister. No one of these programs will be associated with sacramental preparation. This does not mean that those who participate in these programs may not be preparing to receive sacraments. Because this will be a relational ministry, team members will

respond to the particular needs of the young people and testify to the readiness of each youth to receive particular sacraments.

G. Confirmation

As with the preparation for First Eucharist and First Reconciliation, we need to move the focus of Confirmation from completing a set program at a particular grade level to a mentoring model in which we walk with people until they are ready to celebrate the sacrament in a meaningful way.

For this reason I propose the following:

- 1) That confirmation not be associated with any particular age.
- 2) That we proceed for preparation for confirmation on the request of parents who present their children as ready to receive the sacraments.
- 3) Readiness for the sacrament will be as has already been defined (active membership in the parish and weekly Sunday Eucharist).
- 4) Confirmation may be celebrated in the original order before First Eucharist.
- 5) Confirmation candidates for each year should be identified by early in January and be visible throughout the season of Lent alongside adult candidates who participate in the RCIA.
- 6) Confirmation, with the permission of the Archbishop, will be celebrated, either at the Easter Vigil with older candidates, or during the Season of Easter, and on the Feast of Pentecost.
- 7) Preparation will simply be the full and active participation in the life of the Church as already outlined: a commitment to Sunday Eucharist and to growing, serving, worshipping, giving and connecting.
- 8) If candidates want to memorize the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit they can do that too.

This process will begin in September 2012.

H. RCIA

It is no secret that the process of RCIA in most parishes is problematic:

- 1) 50% of candidates fall away from the Church with the first three years
- 2) Entire areas of Church teaching are often not covered in their preparation.
- 3) Candidates complete the process without being brought into a personal encounter with Christ through conversion and an experience of the Holy Spirit.
- 4) Problematic lifestyle issues such as cohabitation are rarely addressed.
- 5) Candidates are often formed in isolation from the broader parish community.
- 6) The lack of follow up after initiation is completed.

At Saint Benedict we plan to apply many of the same principles already outlined to the process of Adult Initiation. Most importantly we must be clear that this is an open-ended process that will only be completed when a candidate or catechumen is ready. Let us be mindful that in many places, including the African Continent (where the modern version of RCIA took shape), this process can sometimes last several years and is different for each candidate.

The following process is suggested for individuals who request the Sacraments of Initiation as adults:

- 1) Initial contact will happen via telephone, email or at the welcome booth.
- 2) Individuals will be presented with a brochure or via web with the basic outline of what is required to celebrate these sacraments at Saint Benedict Parish.
- 3) All inquiries should be treated with enthusiasm and joy. We must be overwhelmingly welcoming.
- 4) Possible candidates and catechumens will be invited to make an appointment with the director of the RCIA process. At this meeting they will be informed of what this process entails.
- 5) Individuals who are not yet registered will go through the parish registration process.
- 6) Candidates will be invited to start attending Sunday Eucharist.
- 7) The first stage of the RCIA process, the inquiry stage, will be the Alpha Course.
- 8) RCIA candidates and their sponsors will be placed in the same small groups.
- 9) For RCIA candidates the retreat weekend will be required and not just a strong suggestion.
- 10) After Christmas, if weekly Sunday Eucharist has not been a reality there must be a commitment made in this direction.
- 11) Candidates will take the second part of the catechetical process. This will be Catholicism 201.
- 12) Again, attendance at the retreat is not optional and RCIA participants will be placed in the same small groups.
- 13) Difficult pastoral issues should be addressed in some way before the Rite of Election for catechumens and the call to Lenten Renewal for candidates.
- 14) This catechetical process will be supplemented by additional meetings and by sessions to specifically prepare those who will be receiving the Easter sacraments.
- 15) Several follow-up sessions will be held and the newly initiated will make commitments to worshipping, growing, serving, giving and connecting as have their now-fellow parishioners.
- 16) Newly initiated will be strongly encouraged to join a Pastorate and continue the process of discipleship.

This process will begin in September 2011.

A Word About Engagement

Over the last year Saint Benedict Parish, and others in the Archdiocese, have been using the tools for assessing the health of Churches created by the Gallup Organization. The core philosophy of these tools is outlined in the book, Growing An Engaged Church, by Al Wiseman. Through research that began in the corporate world, Gallup sought to identify the factors that contributed to excellence in an organization. After great success using these tools in the corporate sphere they turned their attention to the life of the Church and sought to determine if the same factors were at work. They found that they were, and with some adjustments they were able to apply these tools to assist churches and church leaders in assessing the health of their churches by providing the means to measure and quantify this health, or lack thereof. Unless something can be measured it cannot be managed.

For Gallup, a healthy church is a community where people grow spiritually, where people serve each other, and share their financial resources sacrificially. These are the outcomes that define success, and they are the outcomes so often desired by pastors all over the world. So often we seek to bring about these outcomes by directly focusing on them. We call people to take programs for growth and get the same 20% of parishioners, we endlessly request volunteers to sign up for ministries, with the same rate of success. In terms of giving, in spite of appeals, Catholics still give the least out of all other Christian groups. In spite of our enthusiastic efforts the results have been very limited.

Gallup research indicates that we are looking and working in the wrong place. Rather than focusing on the branches and beseeching them to bear fruit, the research tells us that we ought to focus on the condition of the soil. If the soil is good, and we know the seed is good, then a harvest will be brought forth, thirty, sixty and a hundred fold. The single greatest indicator of good soil is what Gallup calls engagement. Engagement is not to be identified as busyness or even involvement. Engagement is a sense of belonging, a psychological connection to the local church, its mission and a sense of ownership over what is happening and where the Church is headed. Gallup's research concluded that the single greatest contributor to a healthy and successful Church was engagement. Engaged parishioners are far more likely to commit to spiritual growth, serve others and give sacrificially.

Gallup tools enable a church to survey its membership and discover the proportion of engaged members to non-engaged (happy but uninvolved) and the actively disengaged (the apathetic and those who are opposed to... everything). This survey is called the ME 25 and assesses twenty-five indicators of membership engagement. In January of 2011, over 1330 parishioners participated in the survey at Saint Benedict. The results of this survey showed that our parish was composed of 24% Engaged, 47% Unengaged, and 29% Actively Disengaged. Based on Gallup's data

from U.S. Catholic Churches, these results are slightly better than the average Catholic parish in the U.S. that uses these tools. Our main area of weakness seems to be related to our sheer size and our failure to be a parish in which meaningful relationships are built between the people and the leaders of the parish. This places a demand on us to reshape the perception of leadership within our parish as one priest cannot have a meaningful relationship with almost 5,000 people. The results of this survey would suggest that the strategies outlined in this document are where we need to go. They also warn us that such changes cannot come solely from the vision of a pastor or the work of a small leadership group, in spite of their mandate. The vision for change must be embraced by all parishioners if it is to produce fruit, if it is to contribute to engagement.

The Saint Benedict Pastoral Council has been discussing for several months a process to maximize ownership of this vision and involvement in the creation of a five-year pastoral plan. Since the release of Archbishop Mancini's pastoral letter parishes have been asked to work with this letter and use it as a basis for developing a pastoral plan. As we already had several steps in place, the pastoral council of Saint Benedict proposes the following process of refocusing:

- 1) On Saturday the 8th of October, Tom Quinlan, the Director of catechetics from the Diocese of Joliet and a well known speaker and writer on the topic of catechesis, sacraments and Parish renewal will present in the morning to parishioners of Saint Benedict and others from the Archdiocese on these subjects. In addition to his own expertise he will use the Archbishop's Pastoral letter as a basis for his presentations. In the afternoon we will have a session with the leadership of Saint Benedict Parish. This group will include Parish staff, Pastoral Council, the Stewardship Team and all ministry leaders in the parish.
- 2) In the three weeks following this presentation, a subcommittee of the ME25 impact planning team will conduct a series of surveys with ministry groups within the parish in order to reflect back and better understand the responses to the original survey. These questions will be based on two questions in the survey: 1) The spiritual leaders in my parish seem to care about me as a person, and 2) In my parish my spiritual needs are met. The team will seek to understand parishioners perceptions of what constitutes spiritual leadership, what it means to be cared for, what spiritual needs are and what it means to have these needs met.
- 3) On the weekend of October 29th we will have a morning large group session with parishioners to discuss and examine these same questions.
- 4) A brief survey will also be conducted at all the weekend Masses on that same weekend to examine these questions.
- 5) In the New Year, three all-day sessions will take place and will be facilitated by an ad hoc refocusing team. All parishioners will be invited and encouraged to attend. We would consider 2-300 people as a very successful

- attendance. Through a facilitated process each of these sessions will in turn look at the questions:
- 1) Where have we been?
 - 2) Where are we going?
 - 3) how will we get there.
- 6) Feedback from these sessions will then be handed over to the Pastoral Council who will use it to form our parish vision statement, mission statement and five year pastoral plan.
 - 7) We will repeat the ME25 survey in May of 2012.
 - 8) The final draft of this plan should be presented to the parishioners before Advent of 2012.
 - 9) The challenge with this process is twofold:
 - a. to maximize participation and to allow the contribution of parishioners to truly shape the results. Otherwise this process will not contribute towards engagement.
 - b. To continue to forge ahead with the initiatives outlined in this document due to the great sense of urgency before us.

In the end, we recognize that no pastoral plan or method is fool-proof or guaranteed to work. When we work with human beings we stand before mystery: the mystery of each person and the mystery of God's grace at work in their lives. These plans must be open to being evaluated and changed. How we are currently doing things is not working. It has not been working for almost two generations. We must have the courage to go forward and propose new methods. They may not be the best solution, they may be poor proposals, but they cannot be worse than what we currently have.

At Saint Benedict Parish, in the midst of so much newness, let us have the courage to allow the Lord to make us into new wine, made for this beautiful new wineskin in which we gather on the Lord's Day in order to be sent out for the sake of the Lord's Mission.