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## **Parish renewal in the image of Barnabas and Paul, sons of encouragement**

The current worldwide Synodal process has empowered parishes and dioceses to re-engage with the rich sources of their faith as a means of renewal and discernment. As Pope Francis reminds us in his vision for a missionary Church,

“Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world.” (EG 11).

In this spirit, parishes can return to the source by listening to the great missionary book of the early Church, the Acts of the Apostles, where they will discover - among the many outstanding witnesses - the figures of Paul and Barnabas who can inspire in them a powerful, practical and timeless vision of pastoral practice.

### **What’s in a name?**

Barnabas is introduced in the Acts of the Apostles 4: 36-37, as one whose name means ‘the son of encouragement’, a wonderful name which he lives up to by word and example. He is introduced as a man who sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money to the apostles, laying it at their feet. In doing so, Barnabas is throwing in his lot with the new Christian community and staking his very salvation on the name of Jesus. To possess terrain in the promised land was seen as a guarantee of salvation, since the owner would be buried there and therefore be among the first to rise at the judgement. Anyone visiting the Mount of Olives today will recognise this, since it is covered in the tombs of those who wish to rise first when the judgement begins in the Kidron Valley, at the foot of the hill. To sell his field means that he has come to believe that salvation comes only from Jesus Christ, and so he has ‘gone all in’ with the new movement.

Later, in Acts 14: 21-27, Luke reports that Barnabas and his companion Paul encourage the brethren in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. The passage lists the step-by-step ways in which they do so, providing a rich template for the parishes of today, while mirroring contemporary Catholic leadership theory.

### **“Paul and Barnabas went back though Lystra and Iconium to Antioch.” (Acts 14: 21)**

The two missionaries visit the churches which they have founded, giving encouragement by their presence, and “staying there a long time with the disciples.” (Acts 14: 28). A 2019 article on the crucial steps to develop leadership in Catholic schools by Australian researcher Christopher Branson and colleagues, considers presence and concern as the first step to being accepted as a leader: “Simply, to become the leader the person must be seen to be sincerely involved in the joys and celebrations, the hopes and dreams, the challenges and difficulties, and the doubts and uncertainties of the group.”<sup>1</sup> This is where Paul and Barnabas begin, and where Pope Francis is continually leading pastors and parish leaders, to be involved in people’s lives in order to shed the light and joy of the Gospel.

### **“They put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith” (Acts 14: 21)**

Living up to his name, Barnabas with Paul brings encouragement and new heart to the Christians of Antioch. The precise way in which they do so is laid out in the steps which follow, but at this stage we might pause once more in the company of Branson et al, who list championing, affirming, praising, celebrating and promoting the group and its individual members as the second stage of being accepted as a leader. This stage also includes protecting the group from excessive demands while giving group members a say in the formation of the group’s goals, thus building trust. In the contemporary parish, this will entail the creation and maintenance of parish structures which will allow genuine consultation leading to mission, as well as good communications strategy to celebrate the achievements of the parish and its members in internal communication such as the parish bulletin, in the local press, and social media.<sup>2</sup>

### **“We all have to endure many hardships...” (Acts 14: 22)**

Paul and Barnabas – counterintuitively – begin to encourage by spelling out the difficulties of discipleship. However, they lead by example: the immediate context of the passage is the stoning of Paul in Lycaonia, after

which he is dragged from the town (Acts 14: 19-20). With brevity and understatement, the passage reports that Paul then, “stood up and went back to the town.” He doesn’t lie down in the face of opposition. For parishes, this incident and the call to endure hardships might inspire us to understand and face squarely the problems and difficulties we face, with trust in the God who can raise us up. Key here will be discovering and maintaining a forum where signs of growth can be discerned, discouragement can be aired, problems can be identified, and solutions proposed.

The recent synodal process can be an extremely helpful pastoral tool in this regard. While the parish and diocesan reports are joined with others to form national and continental reports, the dialogue initiated and reports produced at local level can be a rich source of listening to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Rev. 2:29). Another way is to undertake a parish survey, both online and in written form, open to submissions from both practising members of the Sunday congregation and those who currently do not practise. It could be advertised in the local schools, parish social media/website, and even in the local press. It might take the form of a classic SWAT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), or be tailored to the parish context. Branson et al call this an appreciative enquiry process, as part of the third step to leadership which is shaping the group’s identity.

This process is above all profoundly encouraging. Parish clergy and pastoral workers often get almost no feedback on their work from the wider parish, and so the cycle of evaluation which, for example, teachers in schools and universities take for granted as a means of improving is absent.<sup>3</sup> Holding a survey establishes a feedback cycle which is encouraging since it lays out what parishioners like about their parish, and what is going well. It also flags up specific areas for improvement, many of which will come as a surprise: in a previous survey in my parish, parishioners pointed out that our bulletin, website and social media were strong, but our local press presence was weak. In consequence, the Parish Council set up a parish communications team who shared parish good news stories and photos with the local newspaper.

#### **...before we enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14: 22)**

Barnabas and Paul are able to lift the Christian community’s eyes beyond their hardships in the same sentence as they spell them out, by pointing towards the Kingdom of God, the goal to which Christians strive. As parishes we need a dream which will always ultimately be the Kingdom, but which can be expressed in provisional goals or mission statements which can animate and guide us, a kind of ‘north star’. For Branson et al, this is the final leadership step, which they call aligning the group’s identity to its wider reality. In *Evangilii Gaudium*, Pope Francis famously lays out his own vision for pastoral renewal:

“I dream of a “missionary option”, that is, 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 evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”<sup>4</sup>

Discernment leading to a reordering of customs and structures for mission must be incarnated and lead to local responses. Many parishes have found guidance in this process from Canadian parish priest Fr James Mallon’s *Divine Renovation* book and programme.<sup>5</sup> Mallon asks how we know whether our parish is a maintenance parish or a missionary parish, one whose structures are ‘suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation?’ He suggests parishes begin by auditing how the parish spends its *time* and its *money*. Is more money spent on buildings or outreach? Is anyone employed, even on a part-time or voluntary basis, on outreach? Mallon cautions that priests, deacons and parish workers tend to focus their energies on the 20% who attend Mass rather than the 80% of parishioners who don’t. These are not accusatory questions: we may be stewards of expensive and beautiful historic buildings, or be unable to even consider employing pastoral worker, or run off our feet in parish and chaplaincy work. In the quieter moments, though, Mallon’s questions could strike a chord.

The Pope’s dream of outward-looking and welcoming parishes requires that, “pastoral activity on every level [be] more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth.”<sup>6</sup> Another quick exercise might help test the parish’s response to the Pope’s call. How welcoming is the parish? A story might illustrate the point. I was once visiting my brother in Brooklyn, New York, and was walking along the

pavement one early evening. From a basement there was coming beautiful and powerful singing. There were broad steps going down, so I walked down them, and found myself at the back of a large underground evangelical church, during a service. There was someone at the door to say hello, and to direct me gently to a seat near the back. At the end of the service, the pastor asked anyone who was new to the church to come up for a chat with him, and that other parishioners would be on hand to welcome and pray for them. I didn't take up the offer, but I was amazed at how, in two steps, and in a few minutes, I could have moved from being a passer-by to a member of a worshipping community. It made me wonder: how welcoming is my church? If someone was looking for a spiritual home or to re-engage with their childhood Catholic faith, how many barriers, visible and invisible, would stand in their way of finding it in my church? It's a fascinating audit to make. Do people know where the church is? Does the parish website have simple information to direct newcomers? Is there a sign on my church so that people know they have come to the right place? Does the sign contain Mass times, the website address, a contact, does it say welcome? Are the doors always closed, outside of Mass times, before mass, during Mass (shops overcome the cold to have open doors by using an air curtain)? Is there anyone to welcome a newcomer? Is the priest, deacon or recognisable parish workers available for a chat before or after Mass? Is there a welcome desk? Would a new parishioner know how to register? Would a first-time visitor person know how the parish evangelises, catechises and baptises adults? Are there any groups dedicated to faith formation in the parish, "in which discipleship can be modelled"<sup>7</sup>, to which someone coming to faith might be directed?

Audits like these can allow parishes to reflect upon and implement tailored, often very simple, solutions to make the parish more like the outward-looking, welcoming and Kingdom-orientated places the Pope dreams of.

**"In each of these churches they appointed elders"** (Acts 14: 23)

One of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching is subsidiarity, meaning the exercise of authority at the correct level, which is to say the lowest level. A striking and original contribution to the political sphere, it states that,

"intermediate social entities can properly perform the functions that fall to them without being required to hand them over unjustly to other social entities of a higher level, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted, in the end seeing themselves denied their dignity and essential place."<sup>8</sup>

Paul and Barnabas seem to be applying the principle to the churches they visit, by appointing elders, delegating to them, and trusting the ability of the community for self-governance in communion with the wider church of God. The implications of such local governance is to allow a more diffuse group of people to be part of the pastoral planning process, working in a synodal fashion.

The advantages of a pastoral planning process involving lay people and clergy together are multiple. It creates room for new inspired ideas to emerge and taps into the *sensus fidelium* of which Vatican II spoke eloquently. It also ensures greater gender balance in planning and decision-making. In this regard, Fr Alec Reid, a Redemptorist priest who played such a crucial role in the breakthrough of peace talks in Northern Ireland which led to the Good Friday Agreement, said once that the negotiators discovered that if there was a gender imbalance around the negotiating table (whether more male or female), talks would make no progress, whereas when there was more or less a balance, progress seemed to follow.

Another advantage is that it balances the weakness and strengths of individuals. Anyone familiar with Myers-Briggs will know that we all are possessed of personality types which require to be balanced by others for fruitful working. It also makes clergy more aware of needs out in the parish and in family life, and makes discussion and planning less churchy. True needs can be matched to resources, e.g. the needs of the elderly and lonely, or the isolation of young adults with disabilities post-college, matched to opportunities for community and service. There is also greater room for prayer and discernment by a greater number of participants. The housebound could be invited to this kind of ministry. On diocesan level, the faithful could be asked to pray for discernment when the bishop is pondering clergy changes in the diocese.

**“With prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord” (Acts 14: 23)**

The foregoing reflections and strategies are designed to allow parishes to be open to the Spirit, and to hand over the workings of the parish to the power of Lord through an openness to prayerful shared discernment, after the example of Paul and Barnabas.

Barnabas, the son of encouragement, with his companion Paul, apostle to the gentiles, offer myriad examples of effective mission as they bring the good news to Christian communities throughout the near east. They continue to inspire and encourage the contemporary parish to locate and address their challenges without fear, to keep their fixed on the Kingdom in an outward-looking glance, and to trust the whole community to make decisions for the common good. Despite the hardships of discipleship, they give us new heart by their perseverance and joy, so that we may, “celebrate every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Branson, Maureen Marra & Michael Buchanan (2019) Re-constructing Catholic school leadership: integrating mission, identity and practice, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 11:2, 219-232, DOI: [10.1080/19422539.2019.1641053](https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2019.1641053)

<sup>2</sup> Congregation for the Clergy (2020). Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church." <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Spencer & Louise Hayward (2018) Assessment for Learning. In Mike Carroll & Margaret McCulloch (2018) *Understanding teaching and learning in primary education*, 2nd edn, London: SAGE Publications, 186-199.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. James Mallon (2014), *Divine Renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Sherry A. Weddell (2012). *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor,

<sup>8</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2006). *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, 186.

<sup>9</sup> EG, 24.