

THE
FOUR
WAYS
FORWARD

Becoming an
Apostolic Parish in a
Post-Christian World

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A blur of romance clings to our notions of “publicans,” “sinners,” “the poor,” “the people in the marketplace,” “our neighbors,” as though of course God should reveal himself, if at all, to these simple people, these Sunday school watercolor figures, who are so purely themselves in their tattered robes, who are single in themselves, while we now are various, complex, and full at heart. We are busy. So, I see now, were they. Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead — as if innocence had ever been — and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is none but us. There never has been.

— Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*

To those people who need a parish who will hope with them.

*To those parishes who need people who
will witness to Christ our Hope.*

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PREFACE

I sat on my metal folding chair in the church basement, munching on doughnuts and chatting with a group of married couples in their fifties and sixties, listening to them share about the life-shaping experiences they all enjoyed in leading a Catholic spiritual support apostolate for married couples. It was a good hour: These people were warm, happy, humble, and enthusiastic about expanding the gifts of this style of community to other married couples in the Church. After making some suggestions about outreach, I ended our meeting with a mild suggestion that perhaps some couples in their small groups would appreciate reading a book about how to draw your adult children back to church. The tenor of the group changed immediately, like flipping a switch from contentment to anguish. Everyone there — everyone — had multiple adult children who were not practicing the Faith. “What did we do?” they asked. “What do we do?” We never saw this coming. When we go to Mass, and look around, why is the church half-empty? It wasn’t like this even a decade ago. What is going on?

There is no need for your alarm clock when you wake up to the bucket of cold water called church affiliation statistics in the United States. According to Pew Research,¹ the number of people in America claiming Christianity has sharply declined: from 89 percent in the early 1970s to 71 percent in the late 2010s. That is sobering. The urgency in this story is that the decline is speeding up: There was a gradual loss of Christian affiliation by 10 percentage points from 1970 to 2000, a thirty-year period. There was another loss of 8 percentage points from 2000 to 2019, a twenty-year period. At the time of my writing this, the pandemic numbers have indicated no real improvement and possibly an acceleration of people exiting the Faith, but this is going to be hard to interpret given the different laws and practices regarding Church attendance and public practice across the various states.

What may be more disturbing are the numbers recently released by the Barna group. In the past twenty years, the number of practicing Christians (that is, those who attend religious services at least once a month) has dropped almost by half: from 45 percent in 2000 to 25 percent in 2020.²

Finally, a point that my friends, the older couples mentioned above, knew immediately: The bleed out has been most keenly felt in our populations of youth and young adults. The differences between affiliation in our oldest and youngest generations could not be more dramatic: In 2019, 84 percent of Americans aged seventy-four or older affiliated with Christianity. But among Americans aged twenty-three to thirty-eight? Only 49 percent affiliated with Christianity. (And keep in mind this is referring simply to *affiliation* — not exclusively to those who regularly practice their faith.) For the youngest generation — those in their teens through early twenties, otherwise known as Generation Z, or Gen Z — it looks the same, if not worse.

Where are they going? In general, the greener pasture is not another recognized religion or denomination, but a checkbox

called “no religious affiliation,” also known as the “nones.” Currently, almost one in four Americans identifies as a “none” — a far cry from the single digit “no affiliation” group in the 1970s.³

Because as the Church we exist to announce the good news of mercy and salvation and to make disciples of all nations, this is not merely a numerical crisis. It is a spiritual crisis when we find ourselves in a fall that only seems to be gaining speed. People are increasingly lost and in pain without the Lord and ignoring the message of salvation.

This crisis has been building to immense proportions, and apostolates, ministries, and publishers have taken note. As a director of a diocesan office of missionary discipleship, my inbox is completely overwhelmed by what some of us wryly call “the daily firehose”: all the new materials, resources, options, and initiatives that have come out in the past three to five years to help us all embrace the call to be and make disciples in a post-Christian culture. Some are excellent, others good, others simply neither. But there has not been a great deal of thoughtful consideration as to how these initiatives “fit” into either recent or ancient missiology. Yes, most of these initiatives spring from the Second Vatican Council and/or *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel, 2013 apostolic exhortation from Pope Francis), but those documents are so rich and sweeping in their treatments that inevitably the new materials tend to focus on one or two insights. And most new resources rarely state their method clearly. At worst, a few are repackaging what they have offered for years without new insight, while adopting *Evangelii Gaudium* language — apparently without recognizing that *Evangelii Gaudium* is a call to change.

If you are a pastor, or in lay leadership at a parish, doing nothing is not an option. But how do you choose what to do?

First, since this is a spiritual crisis, not a spreadsheet crisis, you pray. Hard.

Second, you need to tame the firehose. This book is meant

to help you do just that. My argument is that a local parish — in prayer to the Holy Spirit, and with awareness of its mission, community, and strengths and weaknesses — should make these decisions recognizing that there are four emerging models of parish-based evangelization in post-Christian America. All four parish-based models of evangelization reflect the insights of the Second Vatican Council and *Evangelii Gaudium* — but they also reflect the inspired activity of the budding Church of the Acts of the Apostles. Furthermore, any thriving parish community (and they do exist, even in our post-Christian era) will necessarily need to embrace three of the four models to evangelize the nones; and, in that process, evangelize one another.

THE FOUR EMERGING MODELS

The beauty of the work of the Holy Spirit in our current moment is that these emerging models are surfacing in response to the needs of those who need to hear the Word made flesh, and the needs of those who must share the Word. They each point to one or two essential elements of the human art of conversion. But in particular, they highlight the reality that, much like the original apostles in the Book of Acts, we too are reaching out to people formed by an increasingly secular and a-religious culture of power and comfort. That is, we should presume those to whom we reach out know little or nothing of the Christian God. But we should also presume their spirits are hungry for the Word.

These emerging models also mirror much of the teaching found in the *General Directory for Catechesis*,⁴ which has long said that catechesis and apostolate work only occur fruitfully *after* pre-evangelization and evangelization. In short, we've been investing in the wrong end of the process as parishes. The emerging models are, in general, a deep corrective.

The first chapters of this book explore in brief (1) how significantly our mission field in the West has changed; (2) the pri-

mary insights that animate the New Evangelization; and (3) the problem we have with program dependence. But the majority of the book treats the four emerging models themselves:

1. **The Radical Hospitality and First Proclamation model** focuses on the marriage of sharing the Gospel message with a “shallow entry” (or “begin with the basics”) environment offering warmth, food, and friendship, no strings attached. This model trains and facilitates people in listening and offering the *kerygma*, or the basic proclamation that Jesus Christ is truly human and truly God, and has a plan to meet you, love you, and change your life.
2. **The Spiritual Multiplication Small-Group model** focuses on the art of accompaniment and Christian friendship, but with an evangelization twist: We are by baptism called to evangelize, and that means not just engaging in a small group for our own sanctification, but going out and proposing the Gospel to others and accompanying them on the Christian road.
3. **The Organizational Mission (Re)focus model** challenges parishes to restructure to facilitate mission. Field hospitals look different from university medical centers. How would parishes look different if everything was measured by how they helped the greater community — not just the people attending on Sunday — to know Christ?
4. **The Signs and Wonders model** comes straight out of the Acts of the Apostles — the apostles shared the Gospel with signs and wonders that pointed to the power of God. The model in the twenty-first century can look very much the same in churches influ-

enced by the charismatic renewal, but the model is present in other ways as well: in churches that put a focus on sharing personal witness, and churches that focus on Eucharistic adoration.

Most emerging programs and processes fall into one of these models. Admittedly, a few programs fall into two or three models, but still have a tap root in a specific model. Once you finish reading this book, you will be able to look at a program and place it in a model. But you will also realize that building a thriving parish sensitive to the lost in their midst will take employing at least three of those models. You will have to read the rest of the book to understand why.

I pray that you find this construct helpful in reaching the lost who need to hear the Good News.