



## Dreams and Visions Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation

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### **Introduction to *Dreams and Visions***

Did you ever know someone with dreams and visions for the church? There are many people who have them, and I'll bet you're one! If so, you take your place alongside women and men of all kinds whose dreams and visions have been shaping the church for centuries.

Pope John XXIII had dreams and visions for the church. They were taken up and given lofty expression at the Second Vatican Council. His dreams led others to dream with him, and after him, both Popes Paul VI and John Paul II had visions as well. The popes, of course, are only servants of the church, the People of God. And the People of God have dreams and visions, too. You'll be reading about all of these dreamers in this book.

This book is a guide to help you move in the direction of the dreams and visions which you have for your parish, but the writer here doesn't ever promise that you will actually get there! As you will see in this book, the process of turning dreams and visions into specific programs and processes, a task known in the church as pastoral planning, never actually comes to an end.

#### **Good or Great?**

In the introduction to his powerful book, *Good to Great*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) Jim Collins wrote, "Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great."

He's so correct! And for Catholic parishes, this is a powerful wake up call. The church is filled with "good" parishes: The liturgies are planned. The education programs use a nice looking book. Some of the people take an active role in parish leadership and ministry. The collections pay the bills, for the most part. People can get their children baptized without too much hassle. The second grade students receive their first communions as they do every year. Couples getting married go through their routine of meetings. Lent comes and Easter follows, and sometime around Pentecost, things slow down for summer. It's a "good" parish.

But can we really afford to dwell forever in the doldrums of being only good? The world is bigger than that in every direction, more challenging and more dynamic! And it needs the message we have to bring! We have, after all, the secret of the Reign of God, and we need to be more than merely “good” to announce that. We need to move toward becoming *great!*

### **Setting the church on fire!**

In a great parish, the liturgy will not only be planned, but a team of leaders will also plan how to increase from mediocre to fantastic both (1) the level of participation and (2) the sense of welcome. In a great parish, the education process will not only use a good textbook, but over time, a team of leaders will plan ways to provide faith formation for *all* members, including adults, using the textbook as a springboard. In a great parish, not only will there be some people actively involved, but a team of leaders will plan ways to gradually engage more and more people in parish life, by lighting a fire in people’s hearts through encounters with Christ. In a great parish, not only will the collections pay the bills, but a team of leaders will gradually see collections rise to the point where the parish is able to afford more, not only for itself but also for the whole community. In a great parish, not only will children and young people celebrate the sacraments, or couples prepare to marry, but a team of leaders will plan how to place those preparing for sacraments in the context of the whole community, and the catechumenate will be the inspiration and empowerment behind it all! In a great parish, catechists and teachers will be in on-going formation, creating a spiritual community at the hearts of our schools and parishes.

And here’s the Core Work to be done: in a great parish, a team of leaders will gradually build up a process by which members have either (1) an initial encounter with Christ and his life-changing presence or (2) deeper communion with him, through retreats and encounters. In a great parish, people will have a way through which that conversion can be sustained for life, through Faith Gatherings and other means. Little by little in a great parish, a fire will be lit! Little by little, a team of leaders will help move the parish forward, not merely to repeat this year what we did last, but also to lead in a consistent direction over a long period of time, building momentum gradually until one day, a few years from now, everyone will stop and look back and say to themselves, “Gosh, we’re really a *great parish*, aren’t we?”

Great parishes aren’t built by lurching off after the latest pastoral trends! They aren’t built in one or two or three years. They aren’t built by entrepreneurial Pastors who fight the chancery and do their own thing. Even if that looks good for a while, in the end when that Pastor is gone, the parish will suffer implosion. It takes a lot of effort and a team of modest yet driven leaders to shift from being good to being on the road to greatness, as Jim Collins reminds us in his book. There is no one plan, or one action, or one program to adopt that can make a parish great. But there is a direction, and that direction is set by the church itself, as you will read in these pages.

So rather than suggest big new programs to implement, *Dreams and Visions* suggests moving in the constant direction of lifelong faith formation by establishing a pattern of

growth, step-by-step, little by little. *Dreams and Visions* suggests a strong plan of formation for the whole community, but it also cautions you not to run off into several directions at once. The Core Work (the Hedgehog Concept in Jim Collin's book) is quite simple and we keep returning to it in this book constantly. It's the concept which comes to us from the popes and bishops, but also directly from the Gospel, and from the spiritual insight of almost everyone! And that Core Work, of course, is the center point of *Dreams and Visions*. Every single dimension of pastoral planning suggested here leads always to and from this core: to help people experience an initial encounter with Christ, or to grow into deeper communion with God, or to turn one's heart toward Christ, or to go through a conversion, or to be part of the "new evangelization" described by John Paul II. However you name it, there is one central vision here: *Help people deepen their communion with Christ and you will light a fire in your parish!* That is the dream and vision of this book.

Through discipline and consistency, we will gradually build up our good parishes into great ones by growing the number of people who are on fire with this love of Christ and each other! Once the momentum begins, the movement will sustain itself. All the parish leaders have to do is stoke the fire and keep out of the way!

We sometimes settle for so little as parish workers and members! We're willing to accept the modest goal of balancing a budget or not making anyone angry in the parish! What is that about? It's about safety and security. But growing the parish requires risk, danger, and maybe even our very lives! It requires us to go out on a limb. It requires us to do what Pope John XXIII did when he was inspired to call Vatican II. The idea of a council, he later said, appeared to him "like a flash of heavenly light." He trusted that flash, and in his own modest yet determined way he changed the course of history and all our lives. (Clearly he was a Level 5 Leader as described by Collins in *Good to Great*.)

### **A Flash of Heavenly Light**

We as a church can do so much more to announce the Reign of God! We Catholics have a true heart for the poor; we love the liturgical flow of the year; we believe in defending the rejected and the forgotten (in fact, bills that come before the US Congress to do that are known as "Catholic bills!"); we're big enough to embrace everyone, and boy, do we know how to bury the dead! There's just nothing quite like a Catholic funeral!

And yet, so many pastoral staff people in these "good parishes" complain that attendance is dropping among the young, that collections are too low to meet the demands, that it's harder and harder to recruit volunteers, that we have lost our moral voice in the culture, that we're busy arguing over the language of our rituals while the world is marching to war! We're not working at our Core Work: helping folks meet Christ. We're distracted by politics, rubrics, or our own fears.

Now the task is upon us. Don't settle for being merely a good parish. Don't pass from one year to the next repeating the same pleas for engagement on the part of your members. Don't sit back and wait for the ones coming after you to do this. *Dreams and Visions* provides a road map toward a new horizon, one that is promised to us by Christ,

in the Spirit. Step forward now and move your parish from being good to being truly great!

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