

FR. MICHAEL WHITE

Priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore,
Pastor of the Timonium Bethlehem Church in Maryland,
Co-author of the Book *Rebuilt*

Rebuilt movement



Hello, and welcome. I'm Father Michael White, a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in Maryland in the United States of America, and pastor of a large parish here in North Baltimore, which is about an hour's car ride from Washington, D.C. Before serving as pastor here at Nativity, I studied in Rome at the Gregorian University and then served as secretary to Cardinal Keeler in Baltimore. So I've had the experience to see the church from Rome, the local church that is the diocesan church, and what I like to call the heart of the whole church, which is the parish church. Since publishing our book "*Rebuilt*" in 2013 and 2014 and pre-COVID, I've had the opportunity to travel across my own country and around the world to share our story and the key strategies that have allowed our parish to grow. I'd like to briefly share those with you and then acknowledge the current challenge when it comes to the COVID crisis. There are three key strategies that pre-COVID had tripled our attendance and volunteer ministry teams and more than tripled our offertory giving. They are strategies that have brought intentional growth. In 2017, we completed construction of a 1,500-seat sanctuary which, hopefully, one day soon, will be filling back up again. This growth has taken place in a community that is not growing in terms of population.

There are strategies that God has blessed to grow our church. They're entirely simple in our conception but quite challenging in their application and execution. These strategies are all about serving the mission that Jesus gave to the church to go and make disciples. We must constantly come back to that mission as we undertake the renewal and rebuilding of our parishes. The three strategies that have driven the trans-

formation of our parish are first focusing on unchurched people, thinking about church from the perspective of outsiders rather than insiders. Second, prioritizing the weekend experience. And by that we mean focusing our resources on the weekend masses and the programs that support and surround them. Third, challenging church people with a clear discipleship path and plan. Challenging the people in the pews to take ownership of their faith, meaning that they take personal responsibility for growing closer to Christ and for the mission of the church to go and make disciples. We call our discipleship path *STEPS*. It's an acronym, serve in a ministry or mission, tithe or give, engage in small faith-sharing groups, and participate in daily prayer and weekly sacraments, and finally, share your faith. *STEPS*.

I've been asked here to share with you what it means to prioritize the weekend experience. In our book, "Rebuilt", we call this chapter, "It's All About the Weekend, Stupid". And I was the stupid one because it took me so long to come to understand this concept. The weekend is the greatest opportunity even now during the pandemic to make an impact on people. I'm willing to bet that no matter what other programs or services you offer at your parish during the week you never have an opportunity to reach as many people as you do on the weekends. The weekend masses are our best opportunity to make the greatest impact. It's just wise. It just makes sense to invest our energy and resources and efforts on the weekend. But more than that, for most of the people in your church, their experience at mass on the weekend is their total church experience. For them, the weekend forms their whole impression of church, of the gospel, even of the Lord. We can't underestimate the importance of that. Based on that experience, they're determining whether they're going to give any more of their time, their effort, their energy, their money to the church. How we handle that hour will either build up trust with them or withdrawal from the trust account. If people have a bad experience or even just a mediocre experience on the weekend, then they'll assume the church has nothing to offer them. They'll assume the church is irrelevant. As church people, we have to stop saying to people, "You only get out of mass what you put into it." That's not fair and it's a cop-out. If we, the leaders of the church, are not investing time and energy into the responsibilities we have for the mass, how on earth can we expect the people in

the pews to invest their time? The weekend experience is the best opportunity we have for getting people on a discipleship path. It's also the best opportunity we have for connecting with outsiders, with disconnected or former Catholics.

I use the analogy of a restaurant. You go to a restaurant for good food, good service, a good atmosphere, a good time. If you go to a restaurant and the food is terrible, the wait staff is rude, the cutlery is dirty, you really don't care how well they do their accounting. You're not going back. The mass is the source and summit of our faith. We know that. So it deserves our very best efforts, but it is important to note that the unchurched don't see the inherent value of the Eucharist. They just don't. If simply having the Eucharist was enough to reach fallen-away Catholics and the unchurched in our community, then every church in your country and mine would be full. But sadly, they're not. In Colossians 1:24, Paul says that he's making up for what is lacking in the suffering of Christ. What does that mean? Does it mean that Jesus' passion on the cross wasn't enough? Of course not. Jesus invites us to use our efforts in a way that benefits others. In the same way, nothing is lacking in the Eucharist but maybe Jesus leaves space for us to use our efforts to express and reveal the value, the beauty, and the splendor of the Eucharist. We believe that our efforts rest on three pillars, music, message, and ministries. And I'm going to take a few minutes to explore each one with you.

First of all, music. Focusing on the weekend from the perspective of lost people means it's the music. The weekend experience should be a form of transportation, taking the participants on an emotional, intellectual, and ultimately spiritual journey to the higher things of God. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their document "*Sing to the Lord*" put it this way, "*God has bestowed upon His people the gift of song. It dwells within each person in that place where music takes its source. Indeed, God, the giver of song, is present whenever His people sing His praises. A deep cry within our being, music is a way for God to lead us to the realm of higher things. We like to say that music is the water on which the whole experience sails. Music does what words alone cannot do. It's capable of expressing a dimension of meaning and feeling that words alone cannot convey. More than any other element, more than*

any other element in the church's weekend experience, it is the music that can touch and change people's hearts for better or worse." Historically, at our parish, Nativity Church, music was a problem, a huge problem.

As it's typical in many churches in our country here in the United States, the program included some musical options. Three weekend masses were designated as organ and cantor. One was the choir mass, one was the so-called folk mass, and one blessedly was the quiet mass. The folk mass was far and away more popular than the other musical choices, perhaps because it was the easiest to listen to or perhaps because it was the easiest to tune out. The group tried their best but they struggled. Their presentation was flawed. The music they played, dated and uninteresting. At the other masses, the music was worse, far, far worse. Many of the choir members were more convinced of their skill than they had reason to be and their accumulated sound was harsh. Most of the cantors were prima donnas in clear performance mode. The organist was a wonderful person who struggled mightily with a poorly designed organ. Traditional hymns, as well as more recent additions to the compendium of sacred music were simply slaughtered mass after mass, week after week and no one sang. I mean, no one. If someone sang, you knew that they were a visitor and you stared at them until they shut up or went away. Not surprisingly on some weekends, the most popular weekend mass was the early one without any music at all.

Early on, we had a town hall meeting to listen to the range of concerns we'd inherited in coming to the parish. And while most people were generally apathetic toward the parish, that evening turned into a virtual riot of bitter complaint all about the music. And we had to agree with much of what was said. They were right. We had terrible music. We hated our music. We wouldn't have attended our church if we weren't paid to be there. We had terrible music and it made the weekend experience terrible too, and in turn, that made people angry. Think about that. People were coming to our church and we were making them angry. You want to know what we did about our problem? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings if you don't count the parishioners in the pew as anybody. So for years, we did nothing and that was a mistake. Music has the greatest potential to reach people, and because it has the greatest potential to reach people, it is often the most difficult

piece to get right in the life of the parish, finding good musicians, choosing the right music, integrating the music into the mass. It's hard work, especially at first. Moreover, music carries such importance that the evil one will fight us every step of the way. Often, it's so difficult that pastors and other parish leaders just give up altogether or manage it into a place where it won't create problems. It has little impact on the budget. And it's so vanilla that no one notices much less cares or complaints, and that is an opportunity lost, a huge opportunity lost.

Here's what we learned about investing in our music program. First of all, obviously enough, invest prayerfully. Our music changed when we began praying and fasting for our music. Music is a spiritual battle. This is because it has such incredible ability to move people's hearts and minds. If you don't acknowledge the spiritual battle that is music, you'll never make any progress. We prayed and fasted specifically for the right people, which is the second point, invest in the right people. When it comes to leading music in our parishes, we need the right people. There are two important qualifications for musicians in your parish. First, you've got to have the right skill. Music is incredibly difficult to play. It takes hours and hours of practice to develop the skill to play well. Skill must be required, not just desired to play in the parish. Sometimes parishes think that if someone's heart is good enough, well, that's a good enough reason for them to lead music at the parish, but it isn't. Instead, Psalms tells us, sing a new song to the Lord, play skillfully. Playing skillfully honors God and inspires people. Identify musicians who love their craft and want to continue to improve in their skill. Musicians need to have the right heart. You want people leading your music ministry who lead humbly and not out of ego. They recognize that their craft is to be God-honoring. If you're thinking, "Well, that's hard to find people like that" we know. We agree. That's why you need to fast and pray for the right people.

One time we were talking about music at a church conference and a priest came up to us afterwards and said, "You're killing me when it comes to the music. We have this woman who leads music at our church and she's terrible. She's just terrible." In fact, one of our major donors came up to me and asked, "How much are you paying her to sing?" And I said, "We don't pay her anything. She's a volunteer." And he said,

“Well, I’ll pay her not to sing.” We have to have the courage to move people out of music ministry who don’t belong there, who are lacking talent and ability. No one has a birthright to stand in front of your church and lead worship. The music ministry is supposed to be a ministry that leads people to God. One of the big issues in our churches is that they have developed this sense of entitlement, this entitlement mentality about music. Instead of a ministry serving others, it becomes about self-satisfaction and self-aggrandizement, and we can’t let that happen to a major ministry.

Next, invest financially. If you’re making the kind of investment you should be making, your music will have an outsized place in your parish budget. And that’s good. We hold an annual business meeting where we’re transparent about our finances for whoever is interested. Inevitably, year after year, someone will raise the concern over the disparity with the music budget compared to the other ministries. We understand their concern. We acknowledge the fact and we keep making the investment. It’s that important to us. If you can afford to do it, hire professional musicians, even if you have to cut other things out of your budget. If like us, not so long ago, you can’t do that, find the best talent you’ve already got in the pews and invest in them relationally. Give them help and support and encouragement to build your program, and then you’ll be surprised to see others stepping forward as well.

Next, invest thoughtfully. Careful thought needs to be given to how the music is heard by your target audience, especially the unchurched. Catholic churches tend to play music for church people. At least that’s the case here in our country. But what kind of music do the people in your community who aren’t going to church like? How does that translate into sacred music and worship in your setting? At Nativity, here in Timonium, we try to reach a fellow we call Timonium Tim. Who’s that? Well, he’s the quintessential guy in our community who hasn’t been to church in a very long time. We want Tim to feel comfortable with our music, and you know what? Tim isn’t listening to organ music in his car on the way to work. Oddly enough, that game is a huge revelation to me. It took me a long time to move beyond the music I like and I want in church to music that’s actually going to be attractive to the unchurched. We’re not suggesting any particular style of music. That can vary widely from

community to community and country to country, but we are strongly advising that you give a lot of thought to the kind of music that is going to connect with your community. Music and singing play a tremendously important role in the life of God's people over and over again. The songs exhort us to sing. And that is exactly what the faithful and the grateful have done from Israel's Exodus to Jesus' last supper, they sang.

Next, we talk about the message. Catholics call it the homily. Protestant Christians call it the sermon. We've come to refer to it as the message. For a few minutes each week, we get to share the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. It's an unparalleled opportunity to help church members go deeper. Next to the sacraments, preaching the Word of God is one of the most important things you can do to grow disciples. It's even more important, however, when it comes to reaching the lost. For lost people as well as those new to the discipleship path, the weekend message is the defining element of the weekend experience because they don't yet understand or appreciate the Eucharist. For insiders, it's the key way that they go deeper in their faith and so come to appreciate the Eucharist more deeply. When I first came to my parish, I didn't get that. Week after week, I just gave my pulpit away to whoever happened to be helping me out. Whatever the visiting priest wanted to say was up to him and fine with me as long as they said it in eight minutes or less. Typically, I didn't even know what they were saying, and sometimes there were even conflicting messages from mass to mass and weekend to weekend. Since then, I've come to see the value of the weekend message. Faithfully proclaiming God's word effectively unleashes God's power in your congregation. It's the power to change people's lives, healing what was broken, curing what was sick, raising up what was dead. God's Word brings about change when we take the time to introduce people to its relevance and meaning in their lives. When you're faithful to the Word of God, you get to see the power of God at work in your parish. Speaking God's Word in your church will change the people in your church and then it'll change your church. It will breathe new life into it. Maybe it'll resurrect it from the dead.

In our book, *"Rebuilt"* we list 10 best practices for preaching. And I don't have time here to go through all of them, but I'd like to share two of the most important ones, at least the two that I think are most

important. First, preach one message. Around our parish, it's axiomatic to say one church, one message. We work hard to try to offer the same message at every weekend mass. Accordingly, September to May, our peak season when pre-COVID, most of our parishioners would come to church. I usually preach all the weekend masses, regardless of who is the priest celebrant. That's uncommon, I know, but it ensures that the whole congregation is hearing the same message at each weekend mass. If that's not a direction you want to go in or you have associates and regular weekend assistants that need to preach, your homilies can be coordinated. You can work together to have a common or shared message. Having your whole community hear one message is well worth the effort. One message keeps the parish focused on one theme, facing the same challenges, moving in the same direction. Your parish is going to go much further, much faster with one message.

Second, preach in a series. A message series is about exploring a single theme over the course of multiple weekends. This is a common practice in many evangelical churches that we've studied. But if you think about it, the idea makes so much more sense in a liturgical church that has the liturgy seasons and the lectionary cycles of readings. It's interesting to explore the themes that are woven through the church's year in a series. Preaching in a series makes preaching prep easier because we're not starting with a blank slate every Monday morning. It also encourages people to keep coming back to hear the rest of the series. We find that our most effective series are closely associated with the lectionary and its cycles, which in turn is closely in sync with the seasons of the year and relevant to our people emotionally and experientially. In other words, a message in December is going to be different in style and substance from one in July. We found that four to six-week series are best. Any longer and it begins to feel too long. Any shorter and it just doesn't get enough traction. The message feeds the congregation. That's true. I know from speaking to former Catholics who currently attend evangelical churches, the number one reason they give me for walking away from the Catholic church, ironically enough, is that they don't feel like they're being fed. Of course, they're being fed on the Eucharist, but they fail to appreciate, given the fact that they're not being fed on God's Word in the message. Music, message, and then ministers. Ministers are

the volunteers in our parish who provide hospitality and do everything else the priest doesn't actually have to do himself.

We hold a new member class every month where people register for our parish, and I like to ask them how they came to our parish and why they chose to join us, and overwhelmingly, they tell me it's all about the welcoming environment that they experience here at Nativity. Our host ministries are the people that set the tone for this welcoming environment. Our host ministries include parking ministers, greeters, host ministers, cafe ministers, and our welcome desk ministers. When you come onto our campus, you're greeted by the parking team. We live in a suburban area here in North Baltimore, so people in our community tend to bring their cars with them when they come to church. Guests and new visitors' first connection with our parish is on the parking lot. So the ministers set the tone. Our parking ministers don't valet park. They're just there to smile, wave, and help guests find a parking spot more easily. Then there are greeters at the door who open the door, smile and express words of welcome. "We're glad you're here." And then once inside the door, we have a host team. The host ministers perform the traditional role of ushers but try to do it in an entirely friendly manner. In addition, we have cafe ministers who serve in our cafe after mass, as well as our welcome center ministers who assist with information in our lobby. The host ministries work together to create what we like to call an irresistible environment. That's what we're after, an irresistible environment here at our church. Working together, the ministries create something that is more than the sum of their parts. They work together to create layers of welcoming so that when new people come to our church, they can say, "Wow, wow, this is organized. They're ready for me. They're happy that I'm here. They want me here." It communicates that we aren't just going to church. We're entering into an experience with the living God. People care enough about this to give their time for it. It communicates as a church we're expecting guests to come and we're ready for them.

Hospitality is so important for the unchurched people in our community. Even though we know they're welcome, they don't know they're welcome, unless we communicate it to them through layers of hospitality. Our volunteer ministers lower their defenses so that the Word of God can pierce their hearts. The other ministry team that is vitally

important to our weekend experience is our children's ministry. We say the children's ministry is the low-hanging fruit when it comes to evangelization. It's low-hanging fruit because when you become a parent, you instantly recognize that it's much more difficult than you ever thought it was going to be. At least that's what I'm told. Since it's so difficult, you're looking for help and the church can provide it. As church, we can show young parents our support with good kids programs that kids want to be a part of. And when we do, we score a double win. We minister to the parents and we minister to the kids. As a former colleague of ours used to say, "Do something for my kid and you do something for me." So we minister to parents and we give a solid foundation of faith to young children so that they both want to be a part of the church. Children are also more evangelical than adults. If children are enjoying church, they'll have no qualms about inviting their friends, so invest in a great weekend experience to music, message, and ministers. Create an experience that's accessible to outsiders, inspiring to insiders, and your church will grow. It'll grow wider and deeper.

But, of course, all of these ideas and approaches must be interpreted or reinterpreted in the current context of COVID or what I've come to call the COVID ordeal. And this will mean different things to different people depending upon the restrictions and mandates that you are operating in wherever you are serving currently. But there's a larger question at hand too. That is the question of getting people back to church at all, not just the unchurched but getting church people back to church. In one recent poll that was taken here in my country, respondents were asked to identify their mindset towards next step when it comes to the COVID experience this fall. The poll found that people fall into one of four distinct categories. Forty-five percent of people polled are vaccinated and ready for a return to normal, 45%. Twenty-five percent are vaccinated but not ready for a return to normal. Twenty-five percent are unvaccinated and ready for a return to normal, and 5% are unvaccinated and not ready for a return to normal. While those numbers will doubtless vary in different regions and countries and change as circumstances continue to change, it's definitely a snapshot of our experience and what's going on here at our parish. Easily 30% of our congregation are simply not ready for a return to normal. They're not currently coming back, even with the

reimposition of the obligation to attend mass. It makes no difference. They're not paying any attention. They're not coming back. And it might be a very long time before we see this 30% again. But what about that other 70%? That 70% state a willingness to return seems positive but it might be a false positive. While both the vaccinated and unvaccinated of this group want to see a return to normal, there seems to be deep divide between them about what normal actually means. And if their experience of church doesn't meet their expectation, they could easily lapse into the nonattendance category. At Nativity, we're currently and consistently experiencing weekend attendance at about 35% of our pre-COVID attendance. And while we're grateful to those returning, we've frankly been hoping for more robust attendance. It's certainly nowhere near the percentage of people who supposedly are looking for a return to normal. Why not? What I believe is that for the vaccinated and unvaccinated alike, normal no longer includes weekly church attendance, at least in the short term, normal no longer includes weekly church attendance. Perhaps regulars will be twice a month or even once a quarter. That's an alarming possibility, I know, but one, we really must pause it and begin to equip ourselves to address.

Allow me to offer just three points in closing that might help us address that potential problem. First, promote the Eucharist. However exceptional our online experience is or ever becomes, it will never replace the in-person experience of attending the Eucharist and receiving Holy Communion. Everybody knows that, but a reintroduction might be called for given more than a year away from mass and the reception of communion. This wonderful conference that we're all attending will certainly have an impact internationally, at least I hope so. Here, in my own country, an upcoming pastoral letter on the Eucharist from the bishops' conference could be an important resource for pastors, but it will be up to the pastors themselves and their active parishioners to find effective ways to communicate with absent or non-church-going parishioners. We continue to think that the best strategy is invest and invite, encouraging and equipping parishioners to invest in their unchurched friends and then when they have an opportunity, inviting them back to church. Invest and invite. Two, continue to invest in your online presence. That might seem counterproductive to getting people back in

the building but it isn't. If your online presence remains difficult or uninteresting to watch, or as some pastors I've talked to have discussed, you suspend your online offering altogether, you could be cutting the lifeline you still have with many parishioners, as well as cutting off entirely your very best evangelical tool when it comes to potential guests and newcomers. If, on the other hand, you continue to invest in your online experience and engage your online congregation, you will remain relevant in their lives and increasingly attractive as an alternative on Sunday mornings.

Three, reopen kids and student programs. Another important feature of your parish life that cannot be replicated online is the friendship and fellowship. Kids and students enjoy in your programs of faith formation and youth ministry. Open those programs back up as soon as possible and keep them open and accessible. This will reengage your families and bring them back to church. I like to tell the story...actually, I love to tell the story of a dad and his young son that we spotted one Sunday. We have a long corridor that runs through our kids' wing and the dad was struggling to get the kid out the front door. The kid was resisting. The dad was insisting because the dad was bigger and stronger. He was prevailing. He managed eventually to get him all the way down the corridor through the lobby, out onto the front steps, down the steps, and into the parking. But somewhere out in that parking lot, the kid eluded his grasp and came racing back to the church. He runs up the front steps of the church, and at the top of the steps he swings around and fist-punches the air like Rocky in that movie and shouts out to his dad, "You don't get it. You just don't get it. I want to go back in the damn church." Well, we all want to go back in the damn church and get everybody else in there too. It just might take a little work. Thanks for joining us. Enjoy the conference.