

A Catholic parish in Halifax with a deeply ecumenical spirit

Father James Mallon has borrowed some ideas from Protestants. Many of these ideas were already pretty Catholic.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue



Father James Mallon (center) invites children to dance to the hymn at the end of mass at Saint Benedict Parish in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Photo by John Rae.

"Do you know what amazes me about Father Mallon's book?" I said to Pavel Reid, head of outreach for the Archdiocese of Vancouver. Reid had just told me that Catholic dioceses across Canada were using Mallon's book *Divine Renovation* as a guide to parish renewal.

“Let me guess,” said Reid. “That he stole it all from the Protestants?”

Precisely.

James Mallon, pastor of Saint Benedict Parish in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was recently named vicar for parish renewal and leadership support within his diocese. He has fielded more than 150 speaking requests since the 2014 publication of *Divine Renovation*, a book that has gone through multiple printings and been translated into French and Spanish. *Divine Renovation* and its sequel, *Divine Renovation Guidebook* (2016), are full of insights from people such as Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and Andy Stanley, and from the Alpha course, an Anglican evangelization video series. Mallon jokes that he subscribes to the CASE method—“copy and steal everything.” And it’s mostly Protestant practices that he’s been stealing.

Liberal Protestants will notice that his materials are mostly borrowed from evangelical Protestant sources—but then many mainline parishes use the resources of Gallup, Leadership Network, and Alpha as well. Mallon spends a surprising amount of ink defending his Catholic flank—citing this pope and that encyclical to say why something that he’s borrowed from Protestants isn’t actually *not* Catholic.

The Sunday I visited Saint Benedict Parish I noticed that the band uses standard numbers from the praise music repertoire, with lyrics projected on screens. (Mallon calls screens “Baroque Catholicism on steroids.”) Moms with babies in Björns swayed and sang; others raised their hands and closed their eyes (including the presider that day, associate pastor Simon Lobo). The homily was a good 20-minute exposition of scripture with four points (flashed on screen) and two items for homework.

An older parishioner commented, “Priests used to say ‘If it can’t be said in five minutes it shouldn’t be said at all.’ Now . . .” Her voice trailed off, acknowledging that things were different now.

The parish feels like another megachurch plopped down in Atlantic Canada (it’s the biggest Christian church east of Montreal). More than that, it feels Protestant.

I was told that Mallon would recoil at that observation. “He’ll say ‘Catholicism isn’t a feeling,’” Rob McDowell told me. McDowell is a Wesleyan pastor who is in charge of operations at Saint Benedict Parish. He’s not the only Protestant on staff. Laura O’Rourke, head of ministry to children, came out of Baptist churches.

Mallon's primary fight is against clericalism in Catholic culture. Laypeople, he finds, are all too happy to have priests be their "spiritual surrogates." Saint Benedict Parish is no Vatican II-rejecting neotraditionalist revanchist congregation. It follows Vatican II's call for ministry to begin with baptism, not ordination. It wants the whole people of God to be serious about discipleship.

In pursuing that end, it's found that the Alpha course, a discussion-based introduction to Christianity, is the best vehicle. Mallon runs a class called Catholicism 201, and when asked why he doesn't teach a class called Catholicism 101, he replies: "Because it already exists. It's called Alpha."

Mallon's intertwining of Catholic and Protestant church growth practices is rooted in his own story of faith. He was born in Scotland (and still has a slight brogue), where he had Protestant friends. For two years he dated a woman who was serious about her Reformed faith. Her parents had attended Calvin College and her family read scripture before meals. When members of her family asked Mallon why he believed in "nonbiblical" things like the mass, purgatory, and Mary as intercessor, he realized that he didn't know. So he started studying these topics and found that Catholic practices have their own biblical foundations. Regarding that Calvinist family, he says: "I was bowled over by their sense of faith and realized we had the same foundation. Though her parents didn't think so!"

Mallon had had an earlier conversion experience while on a Cursillo weekend retreat (United Methodists have something similar to Cursillo in their Walk to Emmaus discipleship program). After what he calls a "powerful encounter with Jesus" that weekend, he wondered why that kind of experience didn't happen in Catholic parishes.

Mallon said he often hears from cradle Catholics that they "never heard the gospel." His reply: "But you did!" The problem, he says, is that "they just aren't listening."

A campus minister once told McDowell that Catholics are the easiest converts: the wiring of faith is already present, but the electricity hasn't been turned on; all you need to do is flip the switch.

Mallon started dreaming about a parish where encountering the gospel would be unavoidable. He took this idea to his first parish—and quickly smashed into a brick wall. "My congregation was like a zombie convention," he said.

Mallon can sound more critical of the faith of ordinary Catholic laypeople than any evangelical Protestant polemicist would be. He says Catholic laity can be “unconnected sacramental consumers.” Their goal is convenience: if you switch the time of mass, he says, they “will hurt you.” For a long time, the Catholic Church has made parish ministry a place to “feed those who no longer hunger,” becoming in the process “dormant country clubs of consumer Christianity lite.” Catholic practices of confirmation and marriage cause people to lie to cover their “apostasy.” The church makes them say they’ll turn up when everyone knows they’re never coming back. Mallon draws an analogy between his fellow Catholic clergy and the religious leaders whom Jesus criticized. “We have become robbers of the people God has appointed us to reach.”

As resistant as laypeople can be to renewal, Mallon doesn’t think the state of Catholic parish life is truly indicative of Catholicism. He thinks it’s an aberration. Saint Benedict Parish is an attempt to prove that claim.

The congregation was born as an amalgamation of three parishes in 2010. Aging buildings were sold and an ambitious, towering new campus built on a hill in a growing suburb of Halifax. It could easily be taken for a megachurch in the Sun Belt. Mallon became pastor three months after the building opened, so he came in with a clean slate, without having to face the usual complaints of “We’ve never done it that way before.” The challenge, Mallon said, was that parishioners still assumed their job was to “pay, pray, and obey” and leave the serious discipleship to priests and vowed religious.

Early on, he announced that all the congregation had done by merging three parishes and erecting a new building was delay closing by a few decades. If they didn’t change their culture and mode of discipleship, the new parish would close too. Not everyone liked his approach. Some 800 people left the parish during the next three years.

Mallon sounds more critical of Catholics than any Protestant polemicist would be.

Mallon had seen the Alpha course be successful at other parishes in Atlantic Canada, so he set out to institute it at Saint Benedict Parish. When he started organizing, he found out that all the rooms in the new building had already been promised to various civic agencies, such as the Scouts or groups playing cards. *Divine Renovation* opens with a painfully funny story about a group of card players who had

rented the rooms indefinitely and who told Mallon they didn't need Jesus or any of that stuff—all they needed was cards.

Mallon persisted, however, and soon the Alpha program was flourishing. It still took years to get worship attendance back to where it was when Mallon started. He describes this point in the journey with a metaphor borrowed from Hybels: it's the middle of a voyage, when you can see neither shore.

Today the church draws 1,500 to 1,600 worshipers to its four Sunday masses. More impressively, Mallon said, 40 percent of those folks are involved in the church's discipleship process—Alpha, that is—and 60 percent in some form of ministry. The parish recently had its largest Alpha course yet, with 145 attenders, 43 percent of whom were unchurched. The church does fewer confirmations and weddings but sees more of the confirmands and couples sticking around. The energy is as palpable as the traffic jam in the parking lot: "I love bringing friends from out of town here," one woman told me. They can't believe a parish can be so lively.

Ron Huntley met Father Mallon on that same Cursillo conversion weekend, and he now directs Alpha in the parish. He describes Alpha as good at evangelism and even better at developing leaders. It creates its own discipleship pipeline: people go from unchurched to converted to leading Alpha to being a leader in the parish.

When I commented on the energy at one particular mass, Father Lobo told me it's the one most attended by Alpha graduates. Alpha is the parish's primary interface with non-Christians. The mass is for the converted. The leaders try to make Sunday morning warmly inviting, but the forum of invitation is Alpha.

Other Catholic parishes that seek renewal do this differently. The Church of the Nativity in Baltimore, for example, copies the Willow Creek "seeker sensitive" approach, aiming to make mass as accessible as possible to nonchurchgoers. But at Saint Benedict Parish, Mallon's traditionalism is evident. He peppers the mass with Latin at key points and prefers long readings to short ones. He uses Greek exegesis in his sermons. He will talk about Augustine's conflicts with the Donatists when he discusses new forms of ministry.

Mallon notes that Catholics have one advantage in evangelism: people still approach them asking for stuff, like the sacraments. The challenge is to turn consumer demand into spiritual desire.

So Saint Benedict Parish doesn't say no to requests for baptisms; it just ups the bar of commitment and uses the opportunity to teach the faith—Jesus crucified and calling people to himself. Church involvement without kerygma is dead, Mallon says—it makes people spiritual zombies.

What Mallon has learned from Protestants is often already deeply Catholic. He tells a story about attending a conference at which Rick Warren was speaking to Catholic leaders. Mallon noticed that Warren had next to him a copy of Pope Paul VI's 1975 encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi (On Evangelization in the Modern World)*, which was dog-eared and underlined. Warren was giving these Catholics Protestant insight already steeped in papal wisdom. Speaking of the current pope, Mallon says, "I don't know if he's reading Rick Warren, or if they're both just reading the Acts of the Apostles."

A crucial stop in Mallon's journey was the charismatic Catholic renewal in the 1980s, and a model parish for him is St. Mary's in Ottawa, which is a good deal more charismatic than Saint Benedict Parish. Simon Lobo's ministry and the young religious community to which he belongs, the Companions of the Cross, come from that parish. It seems odd to Mallon that so many millions of Catholics would leave the church for Pentecostalism when those gifts can be found in Catholicism itself. "What is so heartbreaking . . . is that there is nothing in our Catholic theology or tradition that need hinder any of these essential elements."

The Alpha course includes sessions on the Holy Spirit that present charismatic experience as an essential part of Christian faith. Many pastors I know either skip those sessions or heavily apologize for them in advance. Mallon does neither.

"I sweat out the Holy Spirit stuff every time we do it," he told me. He insists that if a church waters down the charismatic part of Alpha, they're doing it wrong. People actually long for an authentic, life-changing encounter with God—and it happens.

This emphasis triggered my anxieties: don't some charismatics imply, or even say, that without their form of experience of the Spirit you are not really a Christian? Yes, but Alpha does not say that, Mallon replied. And Alpha advises against having charismatics lead the sessions on the Spirit, since such leaders may come off as too intense or superior.

Another common response to Alpha among mainline Protestants is, Aren't the video talks sort of dull? Sure, Mallon said, which is why local people can give the talks

instead of showing Gumbel's videos. Getting strangers around a dinner table ten weeks in a row is 90 percent of the work. That doesn't happen in our culture, Mallon said.

Another worry is that the focus on individual faith comes at the expense of the social justice commitment for which many people admire the Catholic Church. Mallon insists that social justice and evangelism need one another like two foci of an ellipse, just as liberals and conservatives are two wings of the gospel.

Mallon dreamed of a parish where encountering the gospel would be unavoidable.

Far from being sectarian, Saint Benedict Parish is deeply ecumenical. It borrows from other Christian communions enough to make me, a member of one of those other communions, nervous—because I don't want the Catholic Church to become just another megachurch. In fact, however, Mary and the saints and the sacraments are still very much part of life at Mallon's parish. Lobo suggests that when Alpha's own history is written, it will be seen not so much as a tool of evangelism as a tool of ecumenism.

Lobo says there was a time when as a conservative Catholic he would have told Protestants that they were missing something of the fullness of faith found in Catholicism ("I wouldn't be celibate if I didn't think that!"). But he tells a story of evangelical leaders at an Alpha conference volunteering to pray for the Catholics present. They laid on hands. One of them asked forgiveness on behalf of Christians who act like the church began 500 years ago. "Hot tears poured down my cheeks," Lobo said. "I didn't know any evangelicals wanted to repent." He offered repentance too on behalf of Catholics.

The story calls to mind how Cardinal Walter Kasper compared ecumenical relations to two points on a circle: the closer they draw to the center, the closer they draw to one another. The closer relationship of different churches is a byproduct, not the goal.

Mallon says that in seminary he was trained "to be a philosopher-theologian, a personal chaplain, and a monk," but not a leader. Lobo says he can count on one hand the hours of practical theology he had. So Mallon has learned from Protestants how to lead a megachurch. He drops sound bites taken from Peter Drucker and other management gurus: "There can be no well-rounded leader, only well-rounded teams." "The bigger you get the smaller you have to become."

The deepest point of ecumenical contact in our time may be the effort to revive moribund parishes. Moribund parishes are not a Catholic problem or a Protestant problem. Friends in non-Christian religions tell me it's not only a Christian problem.

Lobo says when parishioners object to the emphasis on evangelism and discipleship at the parish, he asks them if their kids or grandkids still attend church. The point is that the practices of the past didn't work. Saint Benedict Parish is offering a model for a different future, one that Mallon will now try to extend nationally and internationally while Lobo tries to continue it as his successor in Halifax.

"There are 17,000 Catholics in our area," Lobo said. "We're not getting even 10 percent of them. And we're considered a beacon of hope for the whole country?!"

Yes. And maybe even the whole church.

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