
The

DIVINE
RENOVATION

group reading guide

BILL HUEBSCH

Twenty-Third
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Sample

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FOREWORD

“**W**hat was it like to write your first book?” I have been asked this question many times in the past six months, since the publication of *Divine Renovation*. My answer has been, “It was like giving birth to triplets!” Now, I should immediately qualify that it was what I would *imagine* it is like to give birth to triplets. The birthing process was one thing, but the content of *Divine Renovation* has been in gestation for many years. What helped me get through those many late nights of writing was my hope that the ideas, stories, and principles I was outlining would be of assistance to priests, bishops, pastors, and lay leaders within our church. I am very grateful to the Lord that this hope has been fulfilled, but with a surprising footnote: the reaction of ordinary, faithful Catholics to the content of this book. It has made me realize that *Divine Renovation* is not only for pastors and pastoral councils, but for anyone who cares about our church.

This realization is the reason for this short discussion guide. It really is for anyone who cares about our church, to help you unpack and absorb the contents of the book.

I am grateful to Bill Huebsch, who took the initiative in this process, to Sr. Nuala Kenny, SC, for her valuable contributions, to Therese Ratliff from Twenty-Third Publications and Joseph Sinasac from Novalis for their support. May this discussion guide help you form a vision for a renewed parish and inspire hope and action to make your vision possible.

Father James Mallon

How to use this reading guide

Six small group sessions

GATHER. Welcome everyone to your group. Ask participants to introduce themselves if needed. During the introductions, invite each group member to share one dream he or she has for this parish.

As each session gets underway, begin with the Sign of the Cross.

READ BEFOREHAND. Ask each participant to faithfully read beforehand all the passages so marked in the reading guide.

READ WITHIN THE GROUP. For all passages so marked, move around the circle in your group and read aloud the marked passage. Rotate readers with each paragraph. Group members should note items in the text that strike them as especially important.

DISCUSS. When you come to the group process notes, pause to continue around the circle, discussing as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans.

SIX SESSIONS:

SESSION 1: *The Introduction* and *Chapter 1: House of Prayer*

SESSION 2: *Chapter 2: Rebuild My House* and *Chapter 3: House of Pain*

SESSION 3: *Chapter 4: Clearing out the Junk*

SESSION 4: *Chapter 5: Laying the Foundation*

SESSION 5: *Chapter 6: The Front Door*

SESSION 6: *Chapter 7: Leader of the House* and the *Conclusion*

FINISH. As you come to the end of each session, invite participants to identify the one or two large ideas that they hear Fr. Mallon teaching in that segment of the book. Each participant may hear the text differently; there are no “correct” answers.

Conclude your session with a brief prayer and hospitality.

SESSION ONE

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 9–25 before the session.

Introduction—House of Cards *(page 9)*

FOR DISCUSSION » As you read this introduction, did any of it sound familiar to you? Does this sort of confusion over the purpose and use of the parish buildings happen in your parish?

When Fr. Mallon says that we are “an essentially missionary Church” (page 12), how would you describe this in your own words as it applies to your parish?

Chapter 1—House of Prayer: Remembering Our Identity and Purpose *(page 13)*

Regarding the segment on the Temple, on pages 13–17 (middle of the page).

FOR DISCUSSION » Jesus sought to restore the Temple as a place where all would be welcome and there would be no walls of separation. Fr. Mallon calls this a “mission of inclusion.” In your parish, who feels “outside the walls” or excluded from parish life? What groups or persons may feel that the church does not love and embrace them? Make a short list.

Regarding the segment “Déjà vu,” on pages 17–18.

FOR DISCUSSION » Fr. Mallon describes the church’s mission as one of seeking and saving those who might otherwise perish, as on the night of the Titanic. Using the list you just created above, discuss together how your parish fits the description in the final paragraph on page 18. Be brutally honest with each other about this because the work of the reign of God depends on it.

Do people who are currently involved sometimes unintentionally exclude newcomers? How might this happen?

Regarding pages 19 to the top of page 22.

FOR DISCUSSION » Fr. Mallon points out here that the key to understanding how Jesus sends us forth is in the verbs *go, make, baptize, and teach*. On your own, which of these verbs would you say best describes how you understand Jesus' command?

Talk about how you respond to the command to "make disciples." How does your parish do that? Respond in your conversation to the final paragraph on page 20: how can we bring the adults into the learning, growing, and disciple-making ministry of the church?

Regarding the segment on "Evangelization," on pages 22–25.

Fr. Mallon points out on the top of page 23 that "the difficult truth for us as pastors, leaders and people who care about our church is that so many of our people have never come to know [Christ] personally, and therefore have no hunger for him."

FOR DISCUSSION » Do you know Christ personally? Do you feel you have encountered him through your spouse, a close friend, or others; through the sacraments or ministry of the church; through personal prayer, on retreat, or in some other context? What was that encounter with Christ like? How do you walk with Christ now in your daily life?

If you feel you have not experienced a true encounter with Christ, share that as well.

Furthermore:

Fr. Mallon points out that in order for the church to announce the Good News to the world, each of us must first encounter Christ ourselves. Only then can we share Christ with others.

FOR DISCUSSION » What is your reaction to this? Does this help you see the first steps that must be taken in order for a parish to experience "divine renovation"?

SESSION TWO

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 27–58 before the session.

Chapter 2—Rebuild My House: From Vatican II to Pope Francis *(page 27)*

Regarding the segment on church renewal, on pages 27–34.

Fr. Mallon points out that, since the Second Vatican Council, the church has reawakened to the mandate of Christ that we go out to the world with the message of the gospel. All the popes since the Council have repeated this mandate.

FOR DISCUSSION » Does your parish “go out to the world,” or does it “take care of its own” in terms of the mandate of Christ?

Read aloud the final paragraph on page 41:

It is clear that in the 50 years since the Second Vatican Council, we have slowly unpacked and laid out the true innovation of the Council. It was not about liturgical language or postures. It was not about Church governance, the decentralization of authority or empowering the laity to exercise liturgical ministries. **It was about recalling the Church’s deepest identity.**.... In the days following the election of Pope Francis, I found an image on the Internet that showed Saint John Paul, Benedict and Francis, with a caption for each under the photograph. Under John Paul were the words “This is what we believe.” Under Benedict, the ever-ready German systematic theologian, were the words “This is why we believe it.” And under Francis, the one who calls us to rebuild, was the command “Now go do it.” *(emphasis added)*

FOR DISCUSSION » What is your response to Fr. Mallon’s key point here?

Chapter 3—House of Pain: The Experience of a Maintenance Church *(page 43)*

Regarding the abuse crisis, as described on pages 43–45.

FOR DISCUSSION » Speaking personally now, how has the sexual abuse crisis affected you in your commitment to the church, your devotion to the sacraments, and your overall experience of the living Christ in our midst?

What pain have you experienced as a Catholic during the past ten years? Who have you seen “walk away” from the regular practice of their faith? How has this affected you?

Regarding the results of the crisis, as described on pages 46–48.

FOR DISCUSSION » How have you seen people lose trust in the priesthood as an institution and in individual priests? How has this affected the priests? How can priests become good leaders in the face of such a loss of credibility?

Regarding the state of the priesthood, as described on pages 49–58.

FOR DISCUSSION » Fr. Mallon shares his own very personal and sometimes painful story here. As you read his words, what emotions rise up within you? What would you say to Fr. Mallon as a response?

If you were in a position to counsel Fr. Mallon on how to be a leader in the midst of the difficulty and pain he has described, how would you advise him? Would you tell him to throw in the towel and quit? To just keep trudging along without energy or enthusiasm, just “to get the job done”? Or to stay and fight (see the middle of page 56)?

Furthermore:

Fr. Mallon vividly describes a number of painful realities about our church and our experiences of faith today (e.g., family members leaving the church, and the decline of respect for the church). He states that “the first step in healing is acknowledging the pain.”

FOR DISCUSSION » What pain have you experienced in the church or because of the church?

How well do you think we deal with sharing our pain and disappointment in the church?

Furthermore:

Some of the pain results from a loss of fundamental identity as followers of Christ. Fr. Mallon quotes then Cardinal Bergoglio (now Pope Francis), who warned that self-referentiality is a grave evil wherein the church has been concerned with glorifying itself rather than Christ. This self-referentiality and internal focus is dramatically demonstrated in the response to the clergy sexual abuse issue.

The clergy sexual abuse scandals have brought a particular focus and intensity to the pain of Catholics:

- the public revelations of sexual abuse by clergy
- the failure of church leadership to acknowledge and respond to the harm to victims because of avoidance of scandal
- the loss of credibility of the church
- serious consequences to non-offending clergy
- the loss of resources to settlements (and anger at victims by many in the church because of these losses)

FOR DISCUSSION » How have you responded to clergy sexual abuse of children and youth? Have you had personal or parish experience of this abuse? Have you had involvement in policies and protocols promoting safe ministry environments? If so, what has been their effect? What does this crisis tell us of relationships in the church? What does the clergy abuse crisis say about the call to deep renewal?

Respond to the final paragraph on page 58. How does this give you hope? How is such hope different from optimism, avoidance, denial, or simple positive thinking?

SESSION THREE

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 59–86 before the session.

Chapter 4—Clearing out the Junk: What We Need to Jettison if We Are Going to Rebuild (page 59)

Regarding Pelagianism, as described on pages 59–67.

FOR DISCUSSION » In your own words, what is “Pelagianism”? (See the definition, starting on page 62.) How does Pelagianism differ from Catholic teaching?

Read this segment from page 64 aloud in your group:

There is nothing we can do by ourselves that will merit God’s grace, but with God’s grace at work in our lives, manifested by “faith that works in love” (Galatians 5:6), we receive the gift of being right with God, the gift of salvation, and it all flows from the cross of Jesus Christ.

FOR DISCUSSION » In your own words, how do Pelagianism and authentic Catholic teaching on grace differ?

Regarding Jansenism, as described on pages 66 to the top of page 70:

FOR DISCUSSION » In your own words, what is “Jansenism”? (See the definition starting on page 66.) How does Jansenism differ from Catholic teaching?

Read these two segments from pages 66–67 aloud in your group:

Whereas Pelagianism placed the emphasis on human free will – to the point that God’s grace was not necessary – Jansenists put such emphasis on God’s grace that they nullified the necessity of human free will ...

Having set out to emphasize the role of God's sovereign grace, Jansenism would, in time, become a movement proposing moral perfection and rigor. Its negative view of human nature would take its position so far out that it would find itself on the very same ground as the Pelagianism it originally sought to condemn.

FOR DISCUSSION » In your own words, how do Jansenism and authentic Catholic teaching on grace differ?

Regarding the "Good News" segment, starting on page 67.

FOR DISCUSSION » In your own words, what are the three pieces of good news that Fr. Mallon describes here? For each, share together how you understand this and see it at work in your faith experience.

Using Fr. Mallon's text, talk together about how we "take out the junk of Pelagianism." In your own words, what is the "first proclamation" that Pope Francis asks us to proclaim? To whom are we sent to proclaim this good news? Who is excluded from this good news?

How do Pelagianism and Jansenism undermine our proclamation of this good news?

Read this segment on clericalism aloud in your group (from pages 73–74):

Clericalism is nothing but the appropriation of what is proper to the baptized by the clerical caste. In this caste I include religious professionals, both clergy and religious. In the last decades, this professional clerical class has also come to include the professional class of lay people who minister within the Church in an official capacity.

Furthermore:

Pope Francis has identified clericalism as a grave evil in the church. It represents junk in relationships in the church. Clericalism refers to an inappropriate attention to position, power, and status in an organization, and inattention to its mission. It is a focus on *looking* good rather than *being*

good and a distortion of the priesthood of the baptized and the proper relationship between clergy and laity.

Pope Francis has said that “in the majority of cases, it has to do with a sinful complicity: the priest clericalizes the lay person and the lay person kindly asks to be clericalized.” Since clericalism brings a superficial deference for the ordained, it prevents real human relationships. It results in the isolation of clergy and inhuman expectations of them by laity.

FOR DISCUSSION » How have you seen lay people becoming more clerical as they assume professional roles within the church? How do you see clericalism as a force in your experience of the church? How do you see it in your own parish now?

What is your experience of relationships in the church? Do you think Pope Francis is correct in stating that clericalism requires both clergy and laity to participate? What do you think of Fr. Mallon’s call for a redefining of pastoral care (pages 80–81) for both clergy and laity?

Regarding the solutions described by Fr. Mallon at the end of this chapter.

FOR DISCUSSION » How is the work of an ordained priest different from that of any baptized Christian? What is your response to Fr. Mallon’s final points here?

How do complacency, passivity, and inactivity (pages 77–80) affect ministry in your parish?

What strikes you as most challenging for you and your parish in redefining how pastoral work is done?

SESSION FOUR

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 87–196 before the session.

Chapter 5—Laying the Foundation: How to Transform the Culture of the Parish Community (page 87)

FOR DISCUSSION » Describe the “culture” of your parish. Use the guidelines that Fr. Mallon provides (on the bottom half of page 89 and the top half of page 90) to help you.

Now begin with Fr. Mallon’s list of parish values starting on page 95. For each one, discuss together, based on the points provided below.

Giving priority to the weekend (page 95)

- What indicates that weekend liturgies are a priority in your parish?
- How do you celebrate liturgy in such a way that it touches and affects everything else in parish life?
- What stands in the way of you making more out of the weekend liturgies?

Hospitality (page 101)

- Who welcomes whom at the weekend liturgies?
- How are new people identified and welcomed personally? Who follows up with new people to make sure they are finding their way into parish life?
- Whom do you not welcome and why?

Uplifting music (page 110)

- Does your parish sing with full participation?
- How do you evaluate your present music ministry?
- How are hymns of praise made central in your musical choices?
- How do you assure that your music is diverse (see page 112)?

Homilies (page 123)

- Are the ones who homilize open to feedback and suggestions?
- How do the homilies address parish life as a whole?
- Do the homilists follow the suggestions of Pope Francis?

Meaningful community (page 136)

- Why do people join your community? What does it offer them?
- How does the community provide a sense of security to people?

Clear expectations (page 153)

- Do your people know what is expected of them when they come forth for the sacraments or other activities?
- How do you communicate parish expectations?

Strength-based ministry (page 164)

- Are people offered ministry work either in the parish, at home, or in the community that fits their strengths?
- How do you organize for this?

Formation of small communities (page 168)

- How are small communities received in your parish?
- Does everyone who seeks a small community have access to one?
- What prevents you from having more small communities?

Experience of the Holy Spirit (page 176)

- What process do you have in place to help folks meet and encounter the Holy Spirit?
- How do people in your parish learn to trust the Spirit?
- Do people have enough opportunities to share their faith?

Become an inviting church (page 190)

- How can we create opportunities to which we can invite the unchurched in our parish? Is inviting the unchurched, fallen away, or nonbelievers to Sunday Mass the best place to begin at your parish?
- How do you invite those who have been absent from the parish to return?
- How do you prepare your active members to become “Spirit-filled evangelizers”?

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SESSION FIVE

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 197–232 before the session.

Chapter 6—The Front Door: The Sacraments as Our Greatest Pastoral Opportunity *(page 197)*

Read these paragraphs aloud in your group:

I strongly believe that our starting point must be that we never say “no” to any request for a sacrament. To do so is to cut off at the heels even the possibility of conversion and transformation. However, this begs the question of what it means to say “yes.” “Yes” cannot simply mean the fixing of a date, some paperwork and a quick marriage preparation class.

Our “yes” must be a wholehearted willingness to walk with couples until they are ready to celebrate the sacraments and be accompanied with a clear definition of what readiness looks like. Our “yes” must be an invitation to a process, a journey, as we resist the pressure to provide the church on a certain date. Our “yes,” therefore, may also involve a “not yet.” The journey must be one of authentic conversion, and not be just a complicated obstacle course that must be successfully navigated in order to get the prize at the end. *(page 198)*

FOR DISCUSSION » How does your parish use the sacramental life of the church as an opportunity to respond to Jesus’ command that we “make disciples”? (See especially the section starting on the bottom of page 198.) Specifically, how does participating in the sacraments do that work in your parish? If it does not, where does that mission break down?

Fr. Mallon gives a list of “junk” that must be removed from the church (pages 200–204) in order to renovate it. What strikes you as most powerful in this presentation? How does your parish reflect these needed reforms?

Regarding the segment on “The Cost of Inaction,” starting on page 206.

FOR DISCUSSION » What is your response to the idea that we use the sacraments as “an occasion for people to stand up publicly and tell lies before God and the Church”? (page 207).

Read this segment aloud in your group:

Do we have a desire for every person to truly encounter Jesus in a life-changing way? Are we driven by a conviction that the encounter with Jesus makes a difference? What, then, are we willing to do? What are we willing to change? What obstacles are we willing to climb and even tear through to make it happen? The mission of our Church is to make disciples, not to celebrate good liturgy or keep people happy. Sacraments are given to us to initiate and sustain believers into discipleship. Are we willing to do whatever it takes to make this a reality? (page 208)

FOR DISCUSSION » Taking into consideration whatever “role” you may have in your parish, respond to the questions Fr. Mallon poses above. Are you ready to do whatever it takes to make disciples? Be brutally honest with each other here. What fears does this raise in you? Who will lead? What first steps will you take? Have you yourself had that personal encounter with Christ that is at the heart of this?

Regarding “Working with Children,” which begins on page 210.

FOR DISCUSSION » How would you as a parish implement this vision? What points here struck you as vitally true? What points caused you to feel stress? What first steps would you take as a parish to implement this vision? Since this is such a large parish ministry, how do you think parents, catechists, and children would respond to being offered a deeper encounter with Jesus?

Read aloud each of Fr. Mallon's principles for a renewed program for children:

PRINCIPLE 1. Our primary investment of time and resources would be in sacramental preparation. (page 213ff)

PRINCIPLE 2. All catechesis and sacramental preparation would be family based. (page 214ff)

PRINCIPLE 3. Reception of sacraments would no longer be based on age or grade. (page 215ff)

PRINCIPLE 4. Sunday Eucharist would be restored to the centre of our programs. (page 216ff)

FOR DISCUSSION » For each of these principles, talk together about how your parish embraces or does not embrace it in your programs and plans.

Regarding the segment on baptismal preparation, beginning on page 221.

FOR DISCUSSION » How would you as a parish implement this vision of baptism prep? What points here struck you as vitally true? What points caused you to feel stress? What first steps would you take as a parish to implement this vision? How would your baptism prep team or volunteers respond to changes in your program that would allow you to raise the stakes on baptism?

Read this segment aloud in your group:

For unconnected families who contact us to get their babies “done,” we have a remote process that seeks to help them understand what they are truly asking for and we assist them in taking the steps they need to take to be ready. A couple who has no connection with the parish or the Church needs to be reinitiated into the life of the Church either before or as part of the initiation of their child. They need to be welcomed and gradually invited into a process whereby they are reacquainted with Sunday Eucharist and even invited to “second baptism,” the sacrament of reconciliation, before they bring their children to the font. (page 224)

FOR DISCUSSION » Do you think young couples bringing babies for baptism would respond positively to being asked to take an active part in parish life and grow in their faith?

Regarding the segment on marriage preparation, beginning on page 226.

FOR DISCUSSION » What points here struck you as vitally true? What points caused you to feel stress? What first steps would you take as a parish to help couples make marriage a more true sacramental experience? How would the couples preparing for marriage respond to higher demands on them?

Read this paragraph aloud in your group:

Applying these pastoral principles to marriage preparation has an added twist. Since the couple ministers the sacrament to one another through their vows, proper pastoral preparation is not only a question of a fruitful sacrament but also of a valid one. That's why so much ink has been spilled on the canonical issues around marriage and the need for proper knowledge and understanding. In the end, however, the same question applies: How do we help bring couples to the feet of Jesus, and what are we willing to do to support them? (*page 226*)

FOR DISCUSSION » How do you want to see young couples prepared for marriage in such a way that they enter into a lifetime of shared faith?

What does it mean to be "at the feet of Jesus"? How does dying to oneself fit into a daily practice of marriage?

Read this paragraph aloud in your group:

As mentioned earlier, the fact that couples still come to us, unsolicited, to celebrate marriage is an incredible opportunity. There is no doubt that as our society becomes more and more secularized, not only is marriage within the Church diminishing, but so is marriage as an institution. For now, we still have the phenomenon of unchurched, un-

evangelized, non-attending couples contacting parishes and asking to be married. The first step in responding to these requests is to welcome them with open arms. Over the years, I have heard dreadful stories of priests and parish secretaries interrogating couples over the telephone about Mass attendance and parish boundaries. I believe every parish should welcome these couples in to sit down and discuss their request to be married in the parish church. (page 226)

FOR DISCUSSION » How can we help couples become part of parish life without badgering and judging them?

Regarding the segment on RCIA, beginning on page 229.

FOR DISCUSSION » How would you as a parish implement this vision? What points here struck you as vitally true? What points caused you to feel stress? What first steps would you take as a parish to implement this vision? How do you think your RCIA leaders would respond to this? In what ways can parishioners better engage in welcoming new members to the community?

SESSION SIX

In preparation for this session, all participants are asked to read pages 233 through to the end of the book.

Chapter 7—Leader of the House: The Essential Role of Leadership (page 233)

FOR DISCUSSION » When you are finished and before you go on to the conclusions, pause and summarize together what you have read. Share what felt most important to you personally in this chapter.

If you are a pastor, what feelings did this chapter cause you to have? If you are a pastoral leader, how can you influence your parish in order to nudge it toward renovation? If you are a parishioner, what is your dream for your parish in ten years? Describe what it would look like if “the sky was the limit” and everything you dream was possible!

Conclusion (page 283)

In the remaining time, talk together about your overall reaction to this book as it applies to your parish. List your key insights using this method:

1. Go around the group and list on a flip chart every insight anyone wishes to name. It will help you if you review the book and your notes in this reading guide to glean these insights. Every idea is welcome. You cannot have too many ideas in this part of the process.
2. Go through this list together now and connect the related ideas to each other, sorting and sifting them until you get your key set of ideas down to about five or six (more or less).
3. Now allow each group member to rank these ideas, with the most im-

portant ones first and the least important ones last. Compare your notes with each other and try to develop a sense of priorities for your parish.

4. Now discuss what steps you can take as a parish community to begin to allow each idea to grow into a plan and process for the parish. What changes will be needed? What further help do you need from outside advisors? What first steps will you take? When? Who will take them?

5. Plan a way to share these outcomes with the wider parish.

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