

# Best Practices of Faith Formation



**A scalable project to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote resources  
for the spiritual revival and renewal of Catholicism in America**

*The Church and country will not be saved through  
economic or political processes,  
but only by the conversion of hearts  
to Jesus Christ and the pursuit of holiness.*

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v. 1.5

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# Best Practices of Faith Formation

## MISSION

The mission of this project is to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote the best practices of faith formation to facilitate a spiritual revival and renewal of the Catholic Church in America so that the Church overflows with vitality and is the salt and light in society that Christ intended.

## PROBLEM

Today, in the shadow of the 2008 Presidential campaign, the moral prognosis of the United States is bleak as it tips on the precipice of hell. In every discipline, from economics to human rights, Christianity has been the moral ballast that has anchored, and the fuel that has propelled the United States to world leadership. But Christians in America have been lured away from the safety of Christian truth by the country's declaration and the culture's incessant promotion of personal independence.

Rather than forming their consciences around the infallible teachings of Catholicism in order to be salt and light to the culture, too many Christians in general and Catholics in particular have wallowed in the spice and shadows of self-indulgence that has led society in general into the shallows of immorality, greed, and pride. Without spiritual revival, conversion of hearts, and an incessant renewal, the destruction of life will continue and the destruction of America is inevitable.

The problem and the solution has been well documented by Catholic Bishops:

For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all the fervor that they should, so that the radiance of the Church's image is less clear in the eyes of our separated brethren and of the world at large, and the growth of God's kingdom is delayed. All Catholics must therefore aim at Christian perfection and, each according to his station, play his part that the Church may daily be more purified and renewed. (Vatican 2's 1964, *Decree on Ecumenism*, 4.6)

Many Catholics seem "lukewarm" in faith (cf. Rev 3:14ff.) or have a limited understanding of what the church believes, teaches, and lives. Others may know about the gospel message but have not personally experienced the risen Christ. Still others are indifferent to the church's guidance or see the Church's teaching in a negative light. (USCCB 1999, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 35)

For example, Catholics have been taught to keep their faith private and not bring offense to others. But this advice can easily be interpreted as hiding one's Christian witness under a basket, and being so tolerant of others that even evil is tolerated—a sin in and of itself. Instead of being salt and light to culture, Catholics have been taught to blow out the candle and take the salt off the table.

Many Evangelical Protestants, on the other hand, are taught to be open witnesses to the truth. Recently during a Catholic conference luncheon at which I arrived late with my plate, I sat down, bowed by head, crossed myself, prayed a blessing, and crossed myself again. As I began to eat a woman at the table asked, “Do you do that in public restaurants?” “That” referring to the crossing-myself-and-prayer demonstration. She continued, “I’ve never seen anyone do that before in public.” Now, this was at a conference of “orthodox” Catholic individuals. I replied that I was trained as an Evangelical Christian to publicly profess Christ, and that if I didn’t I could be assured of going to hell when I died. Her eyes got big. I thought, too many Catholics and other Christians have abdicated society to the pagans. It’s no wonder that our nearly pagan society is the result.

To change this mundane, pandering to paganism mindset, Church and family leaders (especially parents) need to adopt those practices that will imbue into those under their influence an enthusiasm for the things of God, which will spread the Gospel of Christ to our culture.

## **SOLUTION**

The Church documents cited earlier articulate inspired strategies that resonate with the author’s own research and experience. For example, *Our Hearts...* recommends that parish-centered faith formation:

1. Focus on adults
2. Invite conversion
3. Enable holiness
4. Promote personal relationships, and
5. Prepare adults for evangelism.

These points along with the document’s fully articulated vision for small groups and families, coincide with those Protestant techniques that the author believes have been largely responsible for the enthusiastic spread of Evangelical fellowships in America, to say nothing of the reported spread of Protestant Pentecostalism in Latin America.

But the documents fall short by not suggesting practical techniques or best practices that can instill that vitality and renewal, leaving the specifics up to parish committees. This *Best Practices of Faith Formation* project, however, is designed to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote specific, practical faith formation *techniques* that have found success in both Protestant and Catholic communities.<sup>1</sup>

Looking outside the Catholic culture to our separated brethren for best practices has precedence.

A 1990 study of Protestant congregations identified two factors as having the strongest positive influence on the faith maturity and loyalty of adults: (1) *lifelong involvement in Christian education* (during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) and (2) *lifelong involvement in the life of the Church*. (USCCB 1999, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 123)

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the term “success,” as used in this project, is not measured in numbers or dollars, but in terms of producing authentic Catholics who demonstrate a vitality and passion for the things of God, are faithful to the Church’s magisterial teachings, and naturally attract and evangelize others through their enthusiasm and authenticity -- on loan from G-O-D.

Catholics must gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brethren....Nor should we forget that anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can be a help to our own edification. (Vatican 2's 1964, *Decree on Ecumenism* 4.8,9)

These statements reflect the author's experience in Evangelical-Protestant communities from his early childhood to his conversion to Catholicism at age 50. They produced in him, his family, and many friends a deep vitality, passion and knowledge of the faith that has carried over into his Catholic life, a vitality and passion that is generally missing in American Catholicism.

From his decades of professional experience in the development and implementation of best practice interventions for Fortune 100 companies, he recognizes the correlation between the lack of vitality in American Catholicism and the lack of similar training and motivational interventions in faith formation. That, then, is the motivation for this scaleable project.

## **PARTNERS**

While best practices are generally specific programs and processes that occur within the local parish and family, many best practices become the seminal concept around which an apostolate or ministry is formed. This phenomenon creates a tapestry of mature techniques that these ministries have tried, tested and perfected over time.

There are many examples; here are two category examples.

- Best practices that involve the reading and digesting of good books create the need at the organizational level, for authors, publishers and distributors -- at the parish level for lending libraries, bulletin review columns, and book clubs -- and in homes for reading tables, personal libraries, and book discussions around the dinner table.
- Best practices that involve personal renewal and holiness create the need at the organizational level for evangelism and discipleship ministries, media development, conferences, and retreats -- at the parish level for Bible studies, prayer groups, support groups, spiritual direction, and workshops -- and in homes for devotion times, journaling, contemplation, and spiritual study.

Organizations that are involved in development, promotion, and implementation of particular faith formation best practices offer broad support and cross marketing opportunities for the project at every stage of the implementation plan outlined below.

## **PLAN**

There are four actionable steps to fulfill this project's mission:

### 1. Discovery – A Criteria Based, Categorized, Prioritized List

The project will identify an advisor board of Catholic leaders in faith formation and conduct a Delphi poll between them to determine a prioritized list of practical, actionable, behaviorally measurable Best Practices of Faith Formation.

- This will require a short list of measurable criteria to determine what can be considered either a genetic best practice *process* and what can be considered as “certified” *support material*. The criteria MAY include: (a) vetting of all material that includes doctrinal teachings as being faithful to the Magisterium; (b) identifiable as being in specific accord with the Church’s strategic vision articulated in one or more of select Church documents such as *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* or *National Directory for Catechesis*); (c) having spiritually appropriate and behaviorally observable outcomes;<sup>2</sup> (d) being capable of administrating by a reasonably trained and number of staff or individuals; and probably others.
- The list of advisory leaders (some of whom the author has already spoken with) may include: Ralph Martin, Sister Ann Shields, and Peter Herbeck (Renewal Ministries), Deacon Alex Jones, Marcus Grodi, Diane Eriksen, Diane Hansen, Francis Beckwith, Martha Fernández-Sardina, Dr. Ray Guarendi, Bill Wegner (Goodnews International), Fr. John Riccardo, Fr. Larry Richards, Curtis Martin, Steve Ray, Jim Cloud and others this group may suggest.
- The project must also be under the oversight of one or more bishops.
- The best practices that emanate from Protestant sources should be scrutinized to ensure they do not subtly undermine any true aspect of Catholic doctrine, while being unafraid to challenge traditions that hinder spiritual growth and maturity.

## 2. Development – Multimedia Resource Modules

For each best practice identified in the Discovery stage and funded for development, a BEST PRACTICE MODULE will be created. As appropriate each module will include:

- A white paper that describes the practice in terms of history, theology, Church document references, features, advantages, expected outcomes, implementation guidance, experience resource contacts, evaluation instruments, and testimonials of leaders who have used the practice successfully. These white papers can be released in a quarterly or semi-annual journal, or published in book form. Paid subscriptions will be sought for the journals.
- List of media resources (print, audio, video, other) for sale that were developed for the best practice.
- A video documentary. (See DEMONSTRATION description below.)
- Internet resource page on a Best Practices in Faith Formation website with posting of the white paper briefs, and images from the video. Full text available for subscription.
- Links to applicable Internet sites by others.
- Applicable book list with brief summaries of how each applies.
- Consultancy contacts where available.
- Speaker Bureau contacts for the practice.
- A website forum.

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<sup>2</sup> We will develop an appropriate paradigm not unlike used in criterion referenced instructional design where learning objectives must meet the rules of RUMBAS — the criterion reference learning objectives must be: Reasonable, Understandable, Measurable, Behaviorally oriented, Acceptable to the trainer and trainee, and acceptable to Supervision.

Although a prioritized, and perhaps categorized, list of best practices does not yet exist, the author suspects that the first best practice module should be a national call to prayer and fasting for revival and renewal. (See more on this in stage 4, Promotion.)

### 3. Demonstration – Video Documentaries on Television, DVDs, Internet

The author believes that a significant reason many successful Evangelical-Protestant best practice techniques are rejected by Catholic leaders is because the implementation of the practice of its success cannot be visualized. Leaders naturally have a fear of the untried or unknown, relying, to a fault, on the excuse: “we’ve never done it that way before.”

The best practice for promoting and gaining adoption of any activity is to participate in the practice in-person—experience is the best teacher. In the corporate world, best practice investigation teams visit the sites of other non-competitive organizations and see the operation or practice first hand, and are able to talk with the managers. That is not practical, however, for many parish and family-situated best practices of faith formation.

The next best way to learn about something is to simulate or demonstrate the activity through a film or video documentary. Such a video involves the viewer in an on-site visit that shows descriptive and motivational footage of the practice in operation, complete with up-close interviews of the leaders and participants. This can be particularly effective when the video captures events and locations that are typically hard to schedule for personal visits or when access is limited. A well produced video suddenly makes the practice compact, understandable, transparent, visible, and accessible. But most importantly, such videos instantly visualize and make palatable the pragmatic and psychological impact of the practice.

There are many very good faith formation resources, such as books, study guides, audio and other video materials that are already available, but for the lack of visualizing their use and success, are not used at all. Television, DVDs, and Internet documentaries (of various lengths) will quickly and entertainingly demonstrate their features, advances, benefits, and show the practices in a successful environment. Think of these video features as program and product infomercials that promote and facilitate the Church’s revival and renewal.

This component is also of critical importance because of the video literacy and bias of the current culture toward video. The on-line, viral, YouTube phenomenon cannot be ignored. Recently the author has been keeping tabs on the number of visitors to his many blog posts on Catholic and political issues. ([CrossingNineveh.blogspot.com](http://CrossingNineveh.blogspot.com)). Those posts that include links to videos, as opposed to those that are strictly text, attract 3 to 4 times more visitors. That statistic indicates the broad acceptance of video as a preferred medium for the upcoming generation. The benefit (and danger) of that, is the greater impact video can have when properly produced.

#### 4. Promotion – Marketing the Church’s Revival and Renewal Through Best Practices

Public promotion of the project cannot begin until there are several modules and promotional campaigns produced and reading for distribution, while others are being developed and readied for roll-out.

First, the author suspects that the most important Best Practice Module that will result from the Discovery stage, and thus the project’s first promotional effort will involve the launch of a national prayer campaign for the revival and renewal of the Catholic Church in America. As the project rolls out this prayer campaign will remain ever in the forefront of all materials. Such a campaign can unite Church leaders, parishes, sponsors, partners, and individuals. Certainly, prayer is a best practice, and it can be the cornerstone of the project as well as a promotional powerhouse. The “promotion” here is our appeal to God for mercy, forgiveness, and strength to obey him in holiness; it is not to sell product.

*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)*

Second, marketing through traditional advertising, merchandising, and word of mouth promotion of the project as a whole and of its various elements, will occur on several levels: by (a) the project directly, (b) supporting sponsors, (c) ministry partners, (d) diocese and parishes who use or subscribe to project materials, and (e) families and individuals who do the same.

Third, a compressive project and program identity tagging system will be available for every certified practice, certified support material, and every stakeholder type, e.g. sponsor, partner, parish, and family.



It must be clear that a best practice partner is not necessarily a sponsor of the project (see below), although it is probably that many accepted sponsors are involved significantly in a best practice. For the project’s integrity, however, care must be given to ensure that the best practice modules produced are based on the discovery stage and not simply marketing promotions for sponsor’s products.

Otherwise marketing and promotion occur through regular channels including press releases, bishop statements, endorsements of leaders, DVDs, articles in news outlets, on-air interviews of partners, sponsors, and most importantly users who have experienced success.

#### **ORGANIZATION**

The project can be operated under an existing non-profit organization that includes the ideas described under its existing charter. Or, it can be organized under a new name such as CATHOLIC FAITH FORMATION FOUNDATION (CF<sup>3</sup>).

## **FUNDING**

Funding for the project may come from:

- Grants from dioceses, perhaps earmarked for particular programs
- Grants from private foundations and individuals
- Product sales and licenses
- Sponsorships from various profit and non-profit organizations.

Sponsors of the project can be involved in the following ways:

1. Foundation Sponsor: supports research, overhead, general communication, and planning budget and receives corporate recognition in all print, Internet, and video resources produced.
2. Resource Sponsor: supports the production of generic print, Internet, or video resource elements regardless of the organization's affiliation with the best practice.
3. Best Practice Module sponsorship: supports the production of a complete best practice module that includes the organization's products or services.
4. Advertising placement in print, Internet, and video as available.

## **NEXT STEPS**

My production company (SWC Films) and distribution entity (Nineveh's Crossing) have begun to identify and produce some materials that help to fulfill the mission of this project. But we need both active advisors, financial backers, and workers to give it a full life.

Please join us with your enthusiasm and service to the Church. If you currently are part of a NPO that would like to embrace this vision, please contact me. We have a number of projects in development and production that cannot be completed without funding, and others that need guidance and promotion. But significantly there are many projects that other organizations have fully developed that simply need to be modeled and promoted in a way that will attract parish and diocesan leaders.

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