

## IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY STAY?

Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2013.

Realizing the need to bring back the lost sheep, Fr. Michael White and his pastoral associate Tom Corcoran sought to transform a parish in the suburbs of Baltimore. *Rebuilt* depicts this journey and proposes a model to be adapted by other parishes to address their own particular needs. While it seems that their efforts at Nativity Catholic Church in Timonium have been extremely successful, they very honestly acknowledge their mistakes and seek to present their failings as opportunities from which other pastors can learn and then improve.

A review of this book is quite challenging. Truly, they have made a noble effort with much good as a result, and there is much to learn from their advice about hiring and firing, conducting group meetings, using a cooperative approach in ministry, and creating a welcoming atmosphere. In fact, almost all of their practical HR advice is quite useful and transferable to other parishes. At the same time, it is very hard to gauge the long term success of their model. Will Nativity turn into a Catholic version of the Protestant mega-churches that simply fizzle out a few years after they open their doors? Hopefully not. To proceed, it seems that the most helpful way to review their model will be to look at two of their principles and evaluate the presentation on a more fundamental level.

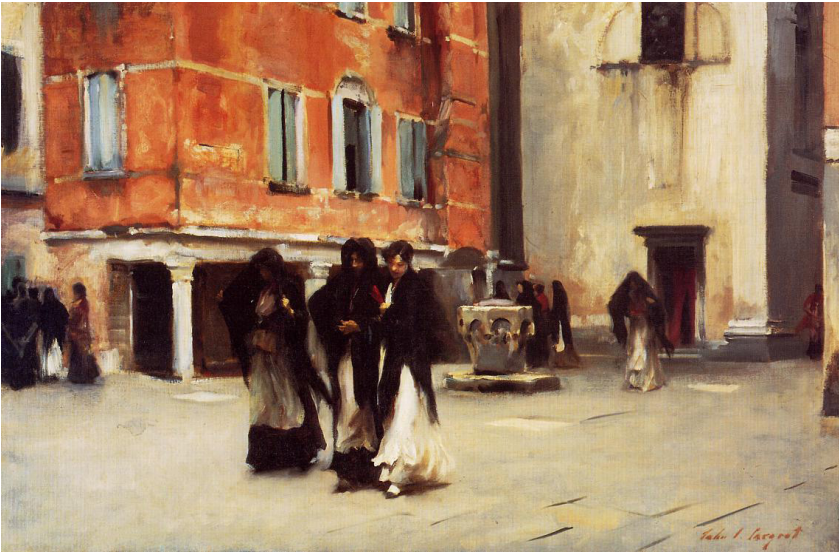
## A PRINCIPLE FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

There is a classical Thomistic principle which relates to evangelization—whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver (cf. *ST* Ia, q. 84, a. 1). In other words, it is important to meet persons where they are because their “mode” or current place in life is going to be the lens through which they see everything. And thus, the message needs to be tailored to meet the needs of the audience.

White and Corcoran hit this nail right on the head. They recognize that they need to seek those who have fallen away and meet them where they are (93). They seem to pinpoint this locus of encounter as the marketplace. These people are lost in a world of consumerism where they expect to have their needs catered to (2). They expect to get the product they pay for. But like any wise consumer, they are only going to buy in after they have cross-referenced the *Consumer Reports* of “Churchworld” (37). On so many occasions, they gave church a bad review in the past, and yet, this church seems to present itself as something new. They then ask themselves, “So what is the new product that *this* church is offering?”

Having seen that this was the perspective of so many people, White and Corcoran began there. They met the consumer, whom they dub “Timonium Tim,” and tried to sell the product of “church” to him (72). They created an “irresistible environment” where they could market themselves to Tim and try to draw him in through things like adequate parking, a welcoming environment, and liturgical music with which he and his family could connect (113). Overall, this approach to meeting the lost where they are and trying to assist the transformation of their lives seems to be good guidance for many pastors.

Yet, as White and Corcoran admit, they ended up losing another type of consumer—Nativity Nancy, the churchlady who had been going to Nativity for ages and expected things to go the way they



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had always gone (62). When Nativity changed modes and began catering to the lost, the churchpeople, who were already there, left. Granted, White and Corcoran admit that they are still trying to find the balance between “meeting the legitimate needs of our congregation and pandering to consumers,” yet they unfortunately seem to downplay the great importance of this (274). What about meeting Nativity Nancy where she is and trying to draw her along too? After all, they describe the reason for the book as being a strategy to help both Timonium Tim and Nativity Nancy: “By looking beyond the people in the pews to the people who are not there, creating a path to help them get there, and leading both parishioners and newcomers to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, you can rebuild the culture of your parish and make church matter” (xviii). While White and Corcoran cover the first two parts of that thesis very well, they almost entirely skip over discussing how to lead current parishioners to grow as disciples.

## THE DEPICTION OF DISCIPLESHIP

This leads to the second principle worth drawing out—discipleship. White and Corcoran present the disciple in two lights, namely as a student and as a leader. They present a number of ways that the disciple can become a good leader (243–252). Most of these ways are good for those who have already come on board and have begun to operate as the manufacturer’s coworkers. Yet, even for the person who has bought the product and fallen in love with it, simple experience is not enough to keep up sales in the long run. He needs to know the product’s specs and to have a sense of what is happening in the company on a larger scale. This necessitates training. The same is true with regard to any sort of work or ministry. Training is required, and this is where White and Corcoran skimp on details. In other words, their training manual to help the parishioners is fairly empty.

This becomes clear when it is put into the context of one of the other principles of evangelization—the evangelist needs to meet the Lord before he can share Him with others. Before he becomes a leader, he should become a student. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it, the evangelist needs to contemplate before he can share the fruits of that contemplation (see *ST* IIa-IIae, q. 188, art. 7). In modern lingo, this translates as “you can’t give what you don’t have.” If the employee has to train himself, he is probably going to make a ton of mistakes and possibly break some of the machinery in the process. Likewise, the disciple who does not sit at the feet of the Lord likely will end up preaching himself and his own experience rather than Jesus Christ and His grace. Thus, if there is no training manual and no clear explanation of what it means to be a student, the explanations of the leader will be hazy, like trying to see through a thick fog. While this hopefully will not lead to problems down the road at Nativity, it does seem to be a major oversight on the part of White and Corcoran, especially if it

is their intention to present *Rebuilt* as a guide for helping pastors minister to both Timonium Tim and Nativity Nancy.

#### CONCLUSION

**R**ebuilt has much to offer. White and Corcoran give fantastic advice on how to bring back Timonium Tim. Moreover, their practical principles for running a parish can be used with little adaptation. Yet, they lack an explanation of how to help Nativity Nancy. As they admit, they have yet to figure out how to balance seeking the lost and serving the faithful. Unfortunately, this likewise leads to the lack of an explanation of how to help Timonium Tim once he has come back to the faith. Nevertheless, rebuilding means starting somewhere, and in the interests of the New Evangelization this book offers such a start, even if it is in need of some principled re-tooling along the way.

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