

You Can Bring Someone Back to the Faith–But First...

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Q: I’ve been trying to help a family member come back to the church. They seemed so “on fire” when they were younger, but have since lost their faith.

A: Thank you for bringing this up. You are not alone; it has been said that Catholics make up the largest Christian body in America, while fallen-away Catholics would constitute the second-largest group, if they were a denomination. This means quite a few of the people surrounding you at Mass are in the same boat. In addition, when you really love someone, you are never content to “live and let live” when it comes to issues of, oh, I don’t know, where they might spend their eternity.

There have been a number of surveys regarding why Catholics leave. Some of the usual suspects are listed: disagreement with the content of the church’s teachings, being in irregular marriages, a lack of being engaged by the way the gospel is presented and being treated poorly by the church’s representatives (which could range from the terrible abuse by a limited number of priests all the way to feeling slighted by the parish staff).

Interestingly, some people say that they stay away from the church simply because no one has asked them to come back.

Not the Time to Judge

There are many reasons why someone might have left the church. Therefore, practically speaking, I think that it is important to begin the discussion by not talking. Listen.

Why has this person left the church? Have they simply “drifted” away due to a lack of motivation or engagement? Or do they have serious questions that deserve a mature and thoughtful response? It is almost always better to seek to understand before we even make an attempt to be understood.

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It is important for them to know that they can speak freely and honestly without fear of you losing your temper. (This is something I need to remember; this priest can have a tendency to get a bit prickly in a dispute.)

In addition, there is an ever-growing fear of “being judged.” Because of this, any language or attitude that indicates you have made a judgment about the choices of your family member can have a disastrous effect. We take our cue from Jesus, who clearly knew the right and wrong way to live, and yet knew when to be gentle with that truth and when to be hard with it.

If your family member is able to point to a reason, I have found that trying to understand the reason from their perspective is the kindest and most helpful way to proceed.

Sure, these reasons might be erroneous, but there is almost always at least a hint of truth to an objection. If you can demonstrate that you acknowledge and agree with every part of their objection that is true, then the person you love will know that you are not there to beat them up.

Remember, this isn’t about being right or winning, it is about sharing the love of Jesus with someone for whom Jesus died.

If they aren’t able to point to a reason (maybe they just don’t really see any need for Jesus or the church), this is a good chance to exercise your evangelization muscles.

Invite, but Prepare First

Have you ever shared the gospel with someone? I mean, have you ever told someone about the difference Jesus has made in this world and in your life?

Remember, one of the reasons people leave the church is because the gospel hasn't been presented to them in a way that was compelling and reached them where they were living. Maybe you are the person who is in a position to invite them into a friendship with Jesus. If you have never presented the Gospel of Jesus to anyone before, then you have some homework to do.

Here is my invitation: Take some time in the next couple of days and really pray for the person you love who has left the Church.

How would you tell them about Jesus and God's love for them?

How would you invite them into a personal relationship with Jesus?

What are the areas of their life where the Gospel could find a foothold?

| God's grace is what changes hearts.

Don't worry about knowing it all or having a super academic presentation of the Good News. I recently spoke with some Catholic missionaries at Harvard. They said that everyone assumes that those students will only respond to the most sophisticated arguments for Christianity. They indicated that this wasn't true; the students responded most quickly and fully to a clear presentation of the relationship to which God was calling them through his Son, Jesus.

After this, pray for an opportunity. God's grace is what changes hearts. Prepare how you would share the Good News of Jesus in the context of the Catholic Church, and ask God to prepare their hearts and provide an opening.