

“When A Loved One Leaves the Church”

So many of us can relate, but not much is ever said about this topic. There are an estimated 16 to 20 million inactive Catholics in the United States. Often family and friends carry their pain silently, may be too ashamed to admit that a family member has fallen away, have questions and concerns but don't have the courage to ask. Some questions may never be answered satisfactorily.



When a person leaves the church, whether quietly or dramatically, it can set off fireworks displays between spouses, family members, and even generations and family gatherings wear the shadow of this division. In Catholic life, there are moments when the church is expected to be engaged: marriages, births, rites of passage, serious illness, death, funerals, sacramental celebrations...but when a loved one leaves the church these occasions often give rise to embarrassment, tension, and even dissension.

The decision to leave active membership in the church is often a tough one – on the individual who makes it, the family who is pained or challenged by it, and less obviously on the church itself. The church loses their vitality, gifts and purpose. A lot gets broken when a person makes that choice and often it lingers without any reconciling or healing. Each person's story of leaving the church or becoming inactive is different, but there are some common questions and concerns from those who care about them and love them, such as...

- Why do they leave?
- Whose fault is it?
- Why am I so upset?
- How can I keep the lines of communication open? What should or could I do?
- What if this person is dying?

Why DO people leave the church or become inactive?

- Interfaith marriages
- Divorce and annulment issues (receiving communion questionable)
- Theological differences and issues
- Problems with the Church: One lady stated, it's a religion of don'ts—Catholic teachings on sexuality and abortion keep them away.
- Some simply drift away because of competing priorities: sports, shopping, travel, it's boring, couple who drop children off for Sunday Mass and PSR and drive off because it's the only time they have to spend with each other – go to breakfast.
- Family tensions
- Spiritual needs not being met by Catholic Church and are attracted to other denominations for worship, Bible study, prayer, belonging – greater sense of community
- Objection to changes in the church

- Have been hurt by either the Church as institution or by particular church representatives.
- Lack direct personal familiarity with Jesus Christ (faith not internalized)
- Did not experience warm, personal, caring relationships in their encounters with Catholics – How welcoming is our parish?
- Don't find a welcoming, vital and serving faith community
- Often our liturgy is lifeless, music non-existent, homilies poorly prepared and unchallenging; not connected to a direct experience of God or to the joys and problems people face in their lives
- Feel they have committed sins that put them outside the Christian family
- Priests and parish staff who don't seem to have the time for people who come to them or who don't exercise patience and sensitivity
- Lack of information or bad information given out
- Anxiety producing events
- Issues of gender and sexuality
- Issues with the institutional church – authority, women's roles, hierarchy, etc,
- Bothered by the attitude of “pay, pray and obey.”

There are no easy answers, no simple steps; can't give you a manual of procedures on how to get them back to the church, but we can certainly consider some guidelines that should be helpful. I have seven of them to offer you.

The decision to return is part of a conversion process and no one – not even God—can force someone to come back.

The first thing to remember is: Don't go on guilt trips:

Guilt is anger and disappointment that we direct toward ourselves when we do something we think is wrong. When we face major losses and disappointments we look for someone or something to blame. We start to wonder...maybe if I had done this, if he or she would have said that...This is usually not based on solid evidence. Often parents consider it a great failure when a child leaves the church and tend to blame themselves. Sometimes we are at fault because of negligence or life circumstances, but not guilty. (Couldn't afford Catholic education; going through self-searching and neglecting spiritual life, etc.)

“If only...” Don't blame yourself.

Was it Jesus' fault that the rich young man walked away from him? Jesus didn't run after him and say, “Wait. Maybe you don't have to give up everything. We can compromise.” Was it Jesus' fault that Peter denied him? That Judas betrayed Him? Jesus didn't ask, “Where did I go wrong?” He was sad, but he always respected the other person's free will. Adults are accountable for their own decisions.

Only God can answer the question, Who is to blame? Only God can look into people's hearts and know what is the truth. Usually a person's decision to disconnect from the church is a combination of influences and circumstances. If you think you are at fault,

you may want to apologize and or/ go to confession. Whether you are guilty or not is another thing.

Alex and Sandy were lax in practicing their faith in the early years of marriage. They make a retreat in the parish or retreat center and like the prodigal son, come to their senses. They return to being active members of the parish. Their children are in their late teens and early 20's but still live in their household. How easy do you think it will be to bring them back? If they didn't take them to the dentist annually for all these years, how formed will they be to go on their own?

Remember that while parents are the major influence in their children's lives, they are not the only influence.

Secondly, Get in touch with your emotional reactions:

“How could my daughter reject something so important in our family life? (feels like betrayal). My son is getting married by a justice of the peace and my wife said she'll refuse to go to the wedding if it's not in the Catholic Church. What should I do? Feelings of anger for disrupting family unity; tendency to blame.

Identify your feelings and talk about them with someone you can confide in and dialogue with. Feelings are neither good nor bad. There is no morality to feelings. It depends what you do with your feelings. Repressed feelings don't go away, so don't stuff them inside. They will rear their heads at unexpected times if not dealt with – similar to the grief process. Healing can happen in the telling.

Range of emotions: sad, upset, confused, disappointed, angry, frustrated, fear: “I'm concerned and angry that my sister doesn't accept what our parents taught us.” Or “how could my son and his wife reject something so important?” (feeling betrayed) Anger triggers resentment, and tension grows.

As emotions escalate they can generate fear. How will this impact family relationships: holiday celebrations, family gatherings, will it cause divisions? Will family members begin to distance themselves?

Another emotion is fear about death: Some wonder what will happen to them when they die? How will God judge them? Us?

Fear of failure: How could he or she do this to us? How could this happen? What went wrong? What will people say? How do we deserve this?

Know that you are not alone. It helps us understand that this is a bigger and more complex problem than most people imagine.

Learn to let go...even if you don't like what's happening, you have no power to change the situation.

Third, Love them in spite of the separation.

People might say things like, if you do this, you will no longer be a part of this family and will not be welcome in this house. Let the person know you don't agree or approve of the act or behavior, but you can keep on loving them. God certainly does.

Story of Prodigal Son: father could have refused the son, but he gave him his share of the estate and let him go. How easy do you think that was? The father let him go in freedom, even though he knew it would cause pain for both his son and himself – a sign of God's unconditional love.

Sometime we use psychological ammunition against the person without even using words. (Silence, ignoring, snubbing, building camps against the person with others.)

We can take comfort in people like:

- St. Monica who prayed for 17 years for her son, St. Augustine.
- St. Louise de Marillac, co-founder of the Daughters of Charity in France, who grieved over her son who fell away from the practice of the faith, lived with a string of different women, and fathered a child out of wedlock.
- St. Catherine of Genoa, who suffered great anguish over the unfaithfulness and immoral behavior of her husband during their first 10 years of marriage. Her own faithfulness eventually led to his conversion and his membership in the Third Order Franciscans.

Don't cut off relationships. You need to acquire a certain detachment only in your realization that you will not change this person. "I don't know how this is going to be resolved, but I have faith that God will take care of it." And allow the one you love to find God in her or his own way. And try to keep an open mind, a broad sense of understanding, knowing that the reason that contributes to alienation in one person might be an attractive feature to another.

A sympathetic and loving response will leave the door open for reconsideration in the future. An angry and accusing reaction will make reconciliation at a later time less likely.

Fourth, Respect the person's free will; don't take their problems on yourself. Have conversations with the person; not confrontations. Try to come to a deeper understanding. It is not helpful to try to convince the person he or she is doing wrong. Be open to what the other person is saying, listen with a compassionate heart. Look for openings to talk about it without putting guilt on the person. Honor their story; it is THEIR story, even if you think or know they have embellished it. Refrain from JUDGEMENT! Judgment is God's province. No human being can see deeply enough into another's heart to judge wisely. Trust that the Holy Spirit will guide you with wisdom to know when to speak, how to speak, what to say. Approaching someone like a bull in a china shop is not the best way.

Fifth, Pray, pray, pray... Pray to the Holy Spirit for inspiration and guidance... We can never say enough about the efficacy and power of prayer. Bring the person you love into God's presence with you. No instrument has yet to be discovered that can measure the power of persistent prayer.

Teach by example, by your witness and your faithfulness.

Sixth, Trust God who acts in and through life's events. Give the person you love time to wonder over love, birth, sickness and loss.

Seventh, Speak your own beliefs by talking about what Mass means for you, about belonging to the Church. And look for ways to be an agent of reconciliation. Share reasons why you STAY in the church, the life you experience, the value of the Christian Community.

What if the person is dying?

A person should always be offered the opportunity to reconcile with God. Call for a priest to administer the sacrament of anointing of the Sick. If it's too hard for you to raise the subject, ask a nurse or another family member if they could pose the question. There is no clear-cut procedure if the person says they don't want to see a priest. Sacraments cannot be administered against a person's will. But remember that people who are dying may not have full use of reason. They may be afraid the priest will reject them or afraid that God could never forgive them. You can always discuss the situation with a priest.

Hospice workers and others who work with the dying say it is quite common for people in the last stages of life to have visions of Jesus, saints or loved ones. There is always a chance that a person could reconcile with God in the final moments of life, even in cases of sudden death or suicide. Only God knows what is in the heart of the dying person.

Who can be buried from the church?

Canon law: any baptized person is entitled to Christian burial, even baptized who commit suicide. (And those who were cremated). When a person dies without some outward sign of repentance, the Church usually gives the person the benefit of the doubt. If a priest refuses Christian burial, you have the right to consult with the local bishop. Always check with another priest if the situation doesn't seem right to you.

The ways you evangelize can influence someone to return to the Church.

The most important and effective means of helping the alienated or inactive catholic is to create an environment in which they can tell their story of alienation and departure in an atmosphere of reverence. We need to honor and reverence their story even if we think it's embellished, even if we know it's embellished ... Listen without judgment!

We are planting seeds!

In Summary:

1. Don't go on guilt Trips.
2. Get in touch with your emotional reactions – identify feelings, talk about it with a trusted person.
3. Don't cut off relationships. Let the person know you disagree but love them in spite of the separation.
4. Respect the person's free will and refrain from judgment.
5. Pray. Bring the person into God's loving presence.
6. Trust God who acts in and through life's events.
7. Speak your own beliefs. Be an agent of reconciliation when possible.

Resources Used:

A Faith Interrupted: An Honest Conversation With Alienated Catholics
by Alice L. Camille and Joel Schorn

When A Loved One Leaves the Church
by Lorene Hanley Duquin