

INTRODUCTION

[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “Feed my sheep.” JOHN 21:17

A program for returning Catholics may be the most profound, rewarding ministry your parish has undertaken.

As a pastor, parish staffer, or lay leader, you doubtless have found comfort in your faith and community during some of life’s biggest challenges. You know the strength the Eucharist and the Great Amen provide, the peace of reconciliation, and the joy that comes with witnessing or experiencing the rites of baptism, confirmation, and matrimony.

Now, imagine someone who is Catholic by virtue of baptism and confirmation, but away from those gifts God gives us, sometimes for decades. The reason for his or her departure may have seemed important at the time—wanting to sleep in on Sundays, not “getting anything” out of Mass, not feeling welcome at the parish, not wanting to go to Mass alone, or not understanding some of our faith’s doctrines and dogma.

There are forty million “away” Catholics in the United States. It’s certain that something—marriage, birth, death, divorce—will bring some of them to your parish door, tentative and hungry.

How will you feed them?

This book's goal is to give you the tools you need to set up a short course for these sheep who have already begun the re-conversion process at some level.

Chapter 1, "The Missing Sheep," provides a snapshot of these "away" Catholics and the reasons (some of which will surprise you) that they are inactive. We also explain why at this juncture of the Church's life in the United States it is especially important that we reach out to inactives.

In Chapter 2, "Preparing the Pasture," we offer tips for preparing your parish, including staff, to welcome returnees, whether they make their entrance in a program or as "new-comers" seeking the sacraments.

Chapter 3, "How to Help Them Find You," provides strategies for letting returnees know they are welcome in your parish. This chapter has a strong emphasis on Internet strategies, but also offers templates for bulletin and pulpit announcements.

Once returnees have found you, it's important to see whether your program is right for them—and vice versa. Chapter 4, "The Meeting," shares likely questions and suggests structure for the meeting.

Chapter 5, "Building Your Program and Team," outlines the formal and informal approaches to programs. You'll find a basic topic schedule as well as thoughts on selecting your lay leader and team members.

For a session-by-session discussion guide, including questions you're likely to hear, check out Chapter 6, "Feeding the Flock."

In Chapter 7, "Feeding Their Fire," we share some suggestions for helping the returnees channel their rekindled passion into ministries at your parish and beyond.

An appendix provides information about existing programs and services parishes can use as well as Web links of interest to the lay leaders and returnees.

Along the way, we share the snapshots of the journeys of real-life returnees—including the two of us—as well as tips for success developed during nearly a decade of ministry to returnees.

No matter which strategy your parish chooses—home-grown or adoption of an existing program such as Catholics Coming Home, Catholics Returning Home, or Landings—your program doesn't have to cost much: some photocopying of handouts, a room once a week for twelve or so weeks per year; a few hours of volunteers' time. God will take care of the rest.

Open your heart. Open your arms. Open your soul. Feed his sheep.