

CHAPTER 1

The Missing Sheep

“I was baptized Catholic, but my parents did it for my grandparents and we never went to Mass or CCD...”

“I was raised in a strong Catholic home, Mass every Sunday, but when I got to college, I just stopped going. It just didn’t mean anything to me.”

“I used to be Catholic, but I married a non-Catholic...”

It’s the “but” that tears at the heart. Those of us who love Our Catholic faith have heard these words too many times. These inactive Catholics are all around us: the woman at the playground who looks wistful when you talk about the local parish school; the coworker who jokes when he observes you not eating meat on a lenten Friday; the next-door neighbor who waves and watches you drive away to Mass on Sunday mornings while he mows the grass.

But these statements and interactions offer hope for a re-kindled relationship with Christ and our Church. People like

those in the examples still identify with some part of their lost Catholicism; many consider themselves “still Catholic,” and that is something.

As a parish staff member, you may see the “but” almost every day. They are the young couple who come to find out about a church wedding, mainly to please their parents, and are surprised to learn that they must attend marriage preparation. They are the couples who call about scheduling a baptism and don’t understand why at least one godparent has to be a practicing Catholic. They are the grieving middle-aged daughters and sons who quit coming to Mass a long time ago, but know their parents would want a proper Catholic burial.

You do your best to help them, of course, but it’s hard. Their knowledge of the faith and their relationship with Christ and the Church appears to be limited at best, and your parish’s needs are many. Why should your parish expend resources on people who aren’t regularly in the pews?

The answer is simple.

Because this is the essence of being Christian. The Good Shepherd loves all his own, and we, as his followers, are called to extend his mercy and love to those who have drifted away. The shepherd who went after that one missing sheep...the father of the prodigal son...the vineyard owner who paid the men he hired late in the day the same wage he paid the early workers. Those are the people he calls us to emulate.

Catholicism is a communal faith, lived out through the local parish. We are incomplete without these Catholics. The body of Christ needs to have them back with us, contributing their talents and treasures to building the kingdom. We yearn to see this group of people back in the fold and living an active Catholic life. It is a blessing to be a guide and witness in warmly welcoming inactives who come to the parish office because of life events such as baptism, marriage, or

the death of a loved one. The Holy Spirit may be using this opportunity to change a life or two, and you can be part of that miracle.

Wherever your parish is located, it's a sure bet there are a whole lot of people missing from your pews. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, there are close to sixty-five million Catholics in the United States. Of those, only thirty-six percent attend Mass on a weekly basis (CARA's measure of an active Catholic). That means nearly two-thirds are inactive—over forty million people—but still call themselves “Catholic.” (This group, inactive Catholics, is the second largest “Church” in the country.)

Why You Need Them

Twenty years ago, studies confirmed something the Church has always found consoling: even though forty-two percent of all Catholics traditionally were inactive for at least two years in their teens and twenties, an estimated fifty percent came back as they married and had children.

But as our society changes, so does the Church. According to the 2008 CARA report, the median age for having left the Catholic faith is increasing. From 1953 to 1962, the median age was seventeen; from 1993 to 2002, it was twenty-six. This change is significant because the later people leave the Church, the less likely they are to come back.

Further, as ethnic Catholics have assimilated into the American society, their demographics now mirror that of the general population. The increase in Catholics marrying non-Catholics, people marrying much later in life, and the breakdown of Catholicism rooted in ethnicity have all lessened the likelihood of a natural return to the Church.

About the “But”

There are many reasons why people stop practicing Catholicism—boredom, family tensions or rebellion, divorce, a bad experience with a priest or nun, a disagreement on moral teachings. But very few leave over true theological issues with doctrine or Christianity, and contemporary research has not linked the pedophile scandals or “rejection by the Church” to a significant movement away from Catholicism.

Research on “Catholic dropouts” showed that most inactives leave during their teens and early twenties, the “find yourself” years. When they left the confines of their parents’ home, many rejected their inherited Catholicism as boring and irrelevant. When asked, they may say they have disagreements with the Church on issues such as sexual morality or the ordination of women. But most don’t leave angry with the Church; they’re just ambivalent. Many say they still pray and believe in God, but a majority (sixty-eight percent of all Catholics) don’t think they need to attend Mass to be a “good Catholic.”

Who Are They?

Beyond the numbers, here are snapshots of people you’re likely to attract to a program that explores the possibility of returning to the Church. The names and details have been changed, but the stories are real and are used with the individuals’ permission. The first two stories, however, belong to us, the authors of this book.

ANNA was raised in a Catholic home where Sunday Mass attendance was never optional. The Catholic faith was an obligation to be met religiously every Sunday and holy day. (Of course, the main attraction for her was the juice and doughnuts served in the parish hall after Mass.)

When she went to college, she met friends who were evangelical Christians, who seemed very serious about Jesus. They committed their lives to serving him and said they had a “personal relationship with him.” They studied the Bible and knew a lot about Christianity. Anna had never met Catholics who lived their faith in such a holistic way. It made a deep impression on her. She became “born again” and started attending the local Presbyterian church and a Bible study.

Faced with graduation and not knowing what she wanted to do, Anna became clinically depressed. She found comfort in her new Christian community, but also started wandering back to the Catholic Mass. She began reading about Catholicism, and found that Catholics believe in most of what the other church was teaching about Jesus Christ, but also believed that Christ was really present in the Eucharist. She started listening carefully to the liturgical prayers, and the Mass began to come alive to her in a new way. Most of all, she felt like she was home.

MELANIE was pretty sure she wanted to be Catholic again. She just didn’t know how. She was forty-nine years old, and hadn’t belonged to a parish for thirty-four years, having left almost as soon as she’d been confirmed. In the past year, Melanie had left her husband and moved five hundred miles away to take a new job. She had filed for bankruptcy to deal with nearly \$200,000 in marital debt.

A disagreement with the man she was dating sent Melanie to a therapist. When Melanie told the therapist she’d been raised Catholic and was looking for a spiritual home, the therapist suggested her parish just seven

blocks from Melanie's apartment. The parish's bulletin advertised a returning Catholics program, a "place to update your faith as an adult," facilitated by a woman named Anna. It seemed like the best way to explore her concerns and situation.

PAULINE, in her mid-twenties, had been baptized and confirmed. During her high school years, her family moved several hundred miles away from her hometown, and she had drifted away from attending Mass. Now, armed with an advanced degree and on the fast track to her dream job with the federal government, everything should have been perfect. Except it wasn't.

"Something was missing, but I didn't know what," Pauline said. "I had been toying with the idea of going back to church but did not quite know how. I searched for a Catholic church in my neighborhood and found a Landings program. It sounded like exactly what I needed, so I made the call."

JULIA, a Latina in her early thirties, had earned a law degree in her homeland. An attractive opportunity arose for a position with an international aid association thousands of miles away in the United States. It was perfect for her background, and no one was surprised when she was hired. But then her contract ended.

"I was feeling lonelier than ever without my family, in a foreign country, and without a job for the first time in my life," Julia said. "I was dating a divorced man and that made me doubt whether I was still a good person and a good Catholic. Also, I had always had that thirst for something more, and going to church on Sundays

wasn't doing the trick. It just wasn't enough for me to get it, to really believe, to understand, and to have a relationship with God." That was when she saw the notice about the parish's program for inactive Catholics.

What They Need


Dean Hoge, sociologist at Catholic University of America, was among the authors of *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*. Twenty-five years ago, he conducted research that found demographic and motivational commonalities between returnees and converts.

"We have noted that, sociologically, returnees are a lot like converts," Hoge wrote. "This is especially true of those in their twenties and thirties who are concerned about their marriages or their children....We should not be surprised if the two groups are similar, and evangelistic efforts directed at them would be similar."

In a broader context, many of your parish's inactive Catholics received a typical Catholic education, then stopped coming to Mass in their teens and twenties. Many are children of parents who did not model an active Catholic life. They have little knowledge of their faith and need to re-examine what they know. The Barna Group, a Protestant research group, labels these inactive Catholics as "unchurched" and ripe for evangelization.

The new generation of potential returnees may identify themselves as Catholic, but they have a weak sense of how being Catholic impacts their life. Their sense of Catholicism does not come from their participation in the community or the sacraments, though they know those elements are important. Still, they believe they are still "Catholic," and they can't imagine being anything else, especially when it comes to marriage or baptizing their children.

These adults will be among the first to acknowledge that they need to re-examine their faith. Their eighth-grade confirmation class, long forgotten, didn't give them the resources to know how to live out the challenges of their adult life as active Catholics. As they seek to fill that spiritual void, your parish's outreach to them will help determine if they remain Catholic in name only, or if they renew their relationship with God in a vibrant way and become an active part of your community.

“Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep,” Jesus told Peter. “Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”  JOHN 21:15-18

Those exploring a return to the Church are stretching out their hands to you, even if that gesture seems ever so slight. When they timidly come to the office to register or inquire about a sacramental occasion, this could begin a process of conversion for them. They have taken the first step. It's not so much that those who have been away don't want to be active again as it is that there's an unspoken fear that they don't know enough, that they're not good enough to be accepted. The smallest effort—a smile or handshake or welcoming word—can make all the difference to these inactive Catholics. Can your parish then offer them a simple way to update their faith as adults and invite them to a more vibrant understanding of what it means to be Catholic? Be a shepherd. Gather up and feed his sheep. They'll be richer for rekindling a relationship with Christ—and you'll be richer for sharing their journey. Let's get started!