



Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2015 C

15 reasons why Catholics disconnect from church. Did I miss any?

I am in the process of preparing a 'special bulletin' to hand out for my Door-to-Door ministry. Currently, it's the previous week's bulletin that I share with the people I visit.

The cover of the 'special bulletin' will have a picture of Jesus knocking at the door, along with our Mass schedule.

On the following page, I will list 15 reasons why Catholics disconnect from church. I believe naming the reasons will achieve two things:

1. Show those we visit that I *do* have a good sense of why Catholics disconnect from church.
2. Help those who are not always sure why they disconnected, to name the reason(s) why they did.

Most of you reading this bulletin may have for a period of time either disconnected from church or have a family member or friend in the same situation. In that case, you may be able to help me to see if I have missed other reasons. Here are 15 reasons, some of which are connected to church and some not directly related to church.

1. *Bad or painful experiences with a priest or with some members of the church family.* Because our church (and every church) is a church of sinners, its members could sometimes hurt or fail us. Perhaps a priest was absent or was a poor presence in one's time of loss or family crisis. Perhaps regular members or even some of the so-called 'pillars of the church' were poor examples of Christian behavior.

2. *Clergy sex scandals and cover-up by their own superiors.* This crisis was one of the worst, if not the worst event in the church's history. It caused thousands of Catholics to be disillusioned with the church. Thankfully, very strict, protective measures are now in place in every parish and diocese to prevent this from happening again.

3. *Spiritually weak parishes.* Parishes are as good as the leaders and members who make them up. Sadly, all too many parishes are spiritually weak and offer very little to spiritually hungry people. This can cause people to stop going to church or to look elsewhere.

4. *Divorced and remarried outside the church.* Until fairly recently, many Catholics who were divorced and have remarried outside the church believed that they were excommunicated. While some of them believed that they could come to church, they felt very left out because they were not able to receive Holy Communion. Thankfully, Pope Francis is seeking to change that punishing church dictum. If you are in this situation, please contact me and I will be happy to share with you the church's new pastoral response to this widespread situation that will allow you to return to the sacraments.

5. *Busy lifestyle.* A hectic lifestyle including a weekend work schedule and children's sports events are often the reason people gradually pull away from church.

6. *Relocation.* It is a well-known fact that when some people relocate, they fail to connect with a Catholic church in their new place.

7. *Personal suffering and family crisis that lead to a faith dilemma.* So many people live a hard life. When bad things happen to good people, they pray for help but when God *seems* absent, they often pull away from God and church.

8. *Spiritual laziness.* Some people readily admit that plain spiritual laziness is the reason they do not come to church.

9. *Church politics and some church teachings.* Some people on different sides of the political divide become disenchanted with the church because of her stance on issues that they have strong opinions about, whether it be abortion, the environment, marriage, ordination of women, capital punishment, immigration, etc. Some see their diocese or their parish as being too political, and they get turned off and withdraw from church.

10. *Study of science and world religions* may lead one to become skeptical of religion and even to disbelieve in the existence of God.

11. *Lack of personal relationship with Jesus and the Bible.* Many Catholics who grew up in the church and attended Catholic school say that neither helped them to have a personal relationship with Christ or come to love the Bible. Pope Francis reminds us that a personal relationship with Christ is at the heart of the Christian faith. Sadly, all too many Catholics did not grow up reading the Bible, so when friends from other Christian churches invite them to their church where Jesus and the Bible are front and center, they are drawn in. Interestingly enough, many Catholics who found Jesus and the Bible in a non-Catholic church are now being drawn to come home to the Catholic Church. (Visit CatholicsComeHome.org. or read the book *Surprised by the Truth* in which 11 converts give biblical and historical reasons for becoming Catholic. Most of the converts were previously Protestant ministers.)

12. *An authoritarian style of church* that stressed rules and was often cruel in its exercise of ministry. As we know, Pope Francis is doing everything he can to replace this model of church with one that stresses, foremost, the mercy of God. He is calling all church leaders to replace legalism with mercy.

13. *Non-Catholic spouse* strong in his/her faith could pull away a Catholic spouse who is weak or somewhat weak in his/her practice of the faith.

14. *Growing secularism* that falsely communicates to young people that belonging to a church is outdated and unimportant.

15. *Unforgivable sins.* Having done pretty bad things, some people conclude that they have committed unforgivable sins and pull away from God and church.

Did I miss other reasons? I'm sure I did. If you can think of any more, let me know by email as soon as possible.

A church of sinners and saints

Ever since Jesus founded the church, she has been a 'mixed bag' of saints and sinners. Peter, the man chosen by Jesus to be the first Pope, cursed and denied Jesus during his passion. Judas sold him for 30 pieces of silver. The rest of the Apostles left Jesus in his hour of greatest need. Every area of church history has its own stories of the failures of the clergy and lay faithful.

Many people wonder how the Catholic Church could survive the corruption of the Medieval Popes and the recent clergy sex scandals. They wonder how in recent years large numbers of people, including a sizable number of Protestant ministers, continue to join the Catholic Church. The simple answer: when Jesus founded the church, he promised to be with her until the

end of time and vowed that the 'gates of hell' (sin and darkness) would not prevail against it (Matt 16).

Despite the many imperfections of the Catholic Church, she has, over the centuries, produced thousands of saints, opened and operated thousands of great institutions of learning, hospitals and orphanages. Today, the Catholic Church in America is the largest supplier of assistance to the poor and needy, second only to the Federal Government.

The next pages of the 'special bulletin' will contain a list of ministry opportunities at Ascension that bring a sense of meaning, belonging and spiritual growth to the lives of hundreds of parishioners.

Returnees to the church

In the 'special bulletin, I will also give a brief account of how some non-church-going Catholics were led to come back to the church. The following are three examples. I would love to have several stories from people of various ages and backgrounds, male and female. Perhaps, in time, we can put together a small book of 'returnee' stories. Who knows, God may even use your return-to-church story, to bring someone else back to the church.

Meet Martha



I tell Martha that she is our poster child for our Door-to-Door Ministry because I met her on my very *first* day of my neighborhood visits. She came back to Mass the following Sunday and is now one of my regular companions in this ministry. (In the interest of space, I have abbreviated Martha's and Paul's story.)

Martha was born and raised Catholic in a devoted Catholic home. She attended a Catholic grade school and was married in the Catholic Church at the age of 20. The marriage turned out to be very abusive and Martha was divorced at 25 years of age. She felt thrown out of the church and so stopped going to Mass. 13 years after Martha remarried, she reconciled with the church and received an annulment of her first marriage and started to go to Mass again. A few years later, Martha and her husband relocated and as sometimes happens, never connected with a Catholic church in her new place. The fact that the clergy sex scandals were occurring at that time did not help.

Two years ago, Martha and her husband retired to Melbourne. They live at Sweetwood Estates, two minutes from the church. She registered in the parish but never came to Mass.

In early October, on my first day out on the Door-to-Door Ministry, Mary Birmingham and I knocked at Martha's door and we had a great conversation. Martha writes:

"This unexpected visit left me with the feeling that God was sending me a message: 'It's time to come back, Martha.' Both Father and Mary were so kind and understanding as they set the seeds for my return. In the sales profession, one of the cardinal rules is to ask for the order. If you don't, you most likely won't get the business. As he left my house, Father asked me to join him at Mass the following Sunday, and Mary Birmingham asked me to sit near the choir and introduce myself before Mass."

Martha did just that. At the end of Mass, Mary told me Martha was present. I introduced Martha to the congregation who in turn welcomed her with a standing ovation. For Martha, the experience was 'quite overwhelming' but also a 'beautiful moment.'

Now Martha looks forward to attending Mass and she feels "closer to God than ever before in her life." Recently, Martha joined our Door-to-Door Ministry and, needless to say, it is a HUGE blessing having her with me to witness to people who were just like her until two months ago.

Meet Paul R, OD



Paul grew up Catholic and attended Catholic grade school and high school. He became an atheist in his senior year in high school. After living for 20 years as an atheist, Paul began questioning the emptiness of an atheistic life after achieving several major life goals, including becoming an optometrist, opening his own practice, and becoming engaged, yet finding himself all the more frustrated and discontented.

At the recommendation of a friend, Paul started to read the Bible and attended Calvary Chapel in Melbourne, where he 'found Jesus,' grew spiritually, and came to love the scriptures.

Paul's journey back to the church started after attending Mass at his parents' request. He experienced the Mass "as an act of worship" for the first time in his life. At this time Paul had become friends with a young Catholic man who was able to share with him "the biblical" basis for most of his objections to the teachings of the Catholic church which he had grown suspicious of during his time in a local evangelical church. Paul was led back to both the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation. He closes his sharing by saying: "I now

experience Christ in richer and fuller ways than were possible as an evangelical Christian. I look forward to continuing to spend my lifetime growing further in my understanding and experiences of my Catholic faith. I am so excited to be growing daily in my love for Jesus

Meet Kate

I quit going to church in my teens because I thought I'd committed sins that God wouldn't forgive.

I came back to church in my mid-50's as a gift to my father, whose health was failing and who had been praying for years for me to return.

Coming back to church four years ago rocked my secular life, and amazingly to me, I'm having more fun! With the weight of my past sins lifted, I found an indescribable joy that continues to increase as I practice my faith. Attending Mass, receiving the Eucharist, Reconciliation, adoration, CRHP, and the amazing supportive faith family I have found at Ascension, bring a serenity to my life that I could never have imagined.

Prayer for the Door-to-Door Ministry

*Christ Jesus, Head of the Body, the Church,
You so loved the world You gave your life
to redeem us and restore us to Your friendship.*

*Give us, we pray, the grace we need
to speak lovingly and confidently
a word of invitation to inactive Catholics
to return to the practice of their faith.*

*Make us instruments of Your welcome and peace.
Bring back to the fold all who have been hardened
by the world or wounded by the Church.*

*May they know the joy of reconciliation with You
and join us once more at the Table of the Eucharist.*

*Use us as messengers of your love
to reach out to inactive Catholics,
to marginalized Catholics, and to anyone searching
for a faith community they can call "Home."*

*Grace Your Church with new members
strong in the practice of their faith
and in their devotion to the Eucharist.*

*Help us grow in love for one another
and for the Most Holy Name of Jesus
in whose Name we offer this prayer. Amen.*

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah