



Fourth Sunday of Advent December 22, 2013 A

CHRISTMAS
EDITION

Reaching out to Catholics who do not attend church on a regular basis and people seeking a church home

Christmas greetings! I'm glad that you are able to join us for Mass on this most holy day, when Christians all around the world gather together to celebrate that awe-filled moment in time when God joined the human family.

Pope Francis. Last March, our Church was given an unexpected huge gift in the election of Cardinal Bergoglio as our new Universal Shepherd. And what a wonderful Shepherd he is showing himself to be. *All* people of good will are loving this man. They love his humility, his non-judgmental disposition, his inclusiveness, and his love for the poor. One could go on and on. Ideally, every bishop and priest should have the spirit of Pope Francis.

While I am *most grateful* for the roughly 3,000 people who attend Ascension Church every weekend, I cannot ignore the thousands who do not attend, the thousands who have, for a variety of reasons, have stopped attending on a regular basis. I know that this is a burden shared by many parents whose adult children no longer go to church and whose grandchildren are not baptized or are being raised with little or no religious formation.

Twelve reasons why former churchgoing Catholics no longer attend church on a regular basis

Why don't Catholics attend church on a regular basis? These are twelve reasons. Perhaps you can help me to name some others.

- 1. Weekend schedule.** Some parents work on weekends. Other parents with young children may be busy with sports activities on Sunday morning.
- 2. Family situation.** One spouse may want to go to church, but the other does not. Kids don't want to go and the parents don't want to force them to go. Kids are with a divorced parent and stepparent. It's a hassle to get young children ready for church. A single mom or single person may not want to sit alone in church. After kids have received their sacraments, some parents feel that they have done their job and quit going.

3. Hectic lifestyle. People who work 60, 70 or 80 hours a week often see Sunday as their day to rest and a time to catch up with stuff at home.

4. Mass is not a spiritually fulfilling experience. As we all know, church experiences can and do differ from place to place. Some parishes may have good music, great homilies, and the congregation is hospitable to adults and kids. People feel a sense of belonging. Other parishes may do a poor job in some or all of these areas. But we need to keep in mind that people's liturgical tastes vary. What some people regard as good music or great homilies may not appeal the same way to others.

5. Doctrinal issues. People raised as Catholics may now disagree with the Church's teaching on certain moral or doctrinal issues and feel that they are no longer welcome, or they simply do not want to go to a church whose teachings they disagree with.

6. Faith issues. Some people feel God has let them down because he did not answer their prayer in a time of great need. God seems distant. Perhaps some people never *experienced* God's unconditional love and mercy. Others just lose faith by neglecting to do the things that keep faith alive.

7. Negative church experiences and perceptions. Some people may have been turned off by recent sex abuse scandals, and feel let down and rejected by the church, especially by priests. Some may perceive that the church is wealthy, self-serving and does not care much about ordinary people.

8. Personal failures. The commission of certain sins, like abortion, may cause one to feel that he/she cannot be forgiven and, hence, does not belong in church.

9. Lifestyle. People who live a certain way of life do not want to be in a place where their lifestyle is challenged because it is contrary to the gospel.

10. Secularist mentality. There are those who do not see any need for church or even God. They feel they can and perhaps do live a good life without being part of institutional religion—or even without God.

11. Transportation. Some people do not have transportation to get them to church. (If we have a vehicle and can drive, we tend to forget about them.)

12. Illness or down on one's luck. Physical or mental illness could be the reason, or life is just not going well for some people.

Did I miss any other reasons? If I did, please share.

I am, of course, well aware that millions of Catholics experience many of the above challenges—e.g., hectic lifestyle, difficult family situations, struggle with some Church teachings—and yet make it to church regularly.

Words to non-churchgoing Catholics

I know that many non-churchgoing Catholics are go people. They may be closer to Jesus and his ways than many churchgoers. I will let Jesus be the judge.

So why do I have a passion to fish non-churchgoers back into the net of God's church family? Because I believe they *belong* there. More importantly, I believe that *Jesus* wants them at his table.

If our church failed you or hurt you in some way, I am very sorry and would be happy to apologize to you in person.

If you feel little or no desire to reconnect with your Catholic roots, there is not much I can do for you at this time, other than place you in the care of our Blessed Mother who loves all of us like the most perfect mother in the world.

On the other hand, if you have *some desire* to reconnect with your Catholic roots, I would hope and pray that you know that that desire is a *tangible sign* of the Holy Spirit at work in your soul. Our Church is indeed a church of sinners—always was and always will be. But amazingly, she has, despite her imperfections, produced thousands of saints. Such is the power of God at work in and through the weakness of the Church.

If you think that I can in any way help you to reconnect with your Catholic roots, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Words to a non-Catholic seeker

If you are not Catholic but have a strong or some desire to find a church home, that is surely good news. Your desire to find a church home is indeed a *tangible sign* of God's spirit working in your heart.

Reasons to include the Catholic Church in your search

The Catholic Church is big, has a lot of rules, and excludes women from ordination. Her imperfections are known to all or nearly all. So why should anyone explore the Catholic Church in his/her search for a church home? Here are some reasons:

- Because the Catholic Church is the church founded by Jesus. We can trace our origins all the way back to Jesus who said to Peter: "*You are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my church*" (Matt 16). Perhaps the strongest argument for the *divine* origin of the Church is the fact that for 2,000 years, she has not only survived but grown amidst attacks from without and corruption from within. After a very dark night focusing on the priest sex abuse scandals, God has raised up a universal shepherd who is restoring the image of the Church all across the world. Anyone searching for a church home should explore the beliefs and practices of the Church founded by Jesus.

- While many people either left the church or stopped going to church during the recent sex abuse scandals, many others continue to join the church. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this phenomenon is the fact that some of the converts were Protestant ministers with strong anti-Catholic sentiments. Why would such men be drawn to join the Catholic Church during such a dark period in her history? Surely, these are stories worth exploring. If interested, read the book *Surprised by the Truth—11 Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic*. If you want to listen to one such story on CD, check out Scott Hahn's story. The book *Surprised by the Truth* is available at the parish office or you can order it through Amazon.com.

TWO REQUESTS

1. If you are a regular churchgoer and have a family member, neighbor, friend, or co-worker who no longer goes to church on a regular basis, consider sharing this column with them. If you have a good relationship with them, you may be able to engage them in a conversation. You might ask why they no longer go to church or go on a regular basis. You might ask if they have any desires to reconnect with church.

2. If you currently do not attend on a regular basis, I would love it if you would tell me why and if there is anything we can do at Ascension to reconnect you with church.

A little bit about Ascension Church family

Our parish, which was founded in 1959, has a current attendance of close to 3,000 individuals at its five weekend Masses. The Sunday 9:30am Mass is enriched with our wonderful choir while the Sunday 5:30 pm Mass is alive with contemporary Christian music.

Our parish school, which is very highly regarded in Brevard County, has an enrolment of about 460 children (from Pre-K-3 to 8th grade). We have a very active Junior High and High School Ministry. Faith formation

classes are available to public school children on Tuesdays (4:00 - 5:15pm) and Wednesdays (6:30 - 7:45pm).

Hundreds of adult parishioners are engaged in one or more of our adult faith programs and outreach ministries. More details on these activities in a moment.

Following the example of Jesus, Ascension seeks to welcome all truth-seekers, irrespective of their background —Catholic, non-Catholic, non-Christian, married, single, divorced, straight and gay, poor and rich, sinners and saints. To be less than welcoming to ALL would be unfaithful to Jesus who welcomed everyone during his public ministry. We also seek to faithfully proclaim the full Gospel that Jesus taught, realizing that none of us fully embrace *all* of his teachings.

Over 100 years ago, Irish writer George B. Shaw said:

“My life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatsoever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die.... Life is no ‘brief candle.’ To me it is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

Life is a gift. What we do with our lives is *our* gift to God and the world we live in.

Suggested reading

1. Facing Adversity with Grace—Lessons from the Saints is a wonderful book by Woodene Koenig-Bricker which deals with 14 types of suffering, such as physical pain, mental and spiritual struggle, addiction, temptation, divorce, marital discord, financial stress, grief, old age. It has a final chapter on life lessons on suffering.

The book is an in-depth, realistic and wise observation on the great mystery of human suffering from a woman who has experienced divorce and lives with a serious physical disability. Concerning the book, James Martin, S.J., author of *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Anything*, says: *“In this beautiful new book, readers will learn lessons about almost every type of human difficulty.”*

2. The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything—A Spirituality for Real Life by James Martin, S.J. Concerning this book, John Allen says: *“James Martin is arguably the best writer today on Catholic spirituality. Reading Martin on his own storied order [Ignatian] is therefore my five-star, slam-dunk, can’t-miss tip of the year. This book is a winner!”*

Morning Prayer

*Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
I come into your loving presence
with gratitude for another day.
I thank you for the blessings in life
that I tend to take for granted:
food, shelter, health, family,
work and faith in you.*

*May I live this day in a manner
that pleases you,
and helps me to become the person
you created me to be.
Help me to recognize and respond generously
to the promptings of the Holy Spirit
in the events and encounters of this day.
May I live this day with the dispositions
of heart that reflect the values of Jesus:
love, truth, compassion, mercy,
justice and kindness.
When decisions need to be made,
help me to choose well.
When asked to walk the extra mile,
grant me generosity of heart.
Protect me from the false ways of the Evil One
and help me to live in your truth.
Expand my capacity for love and joy.
In all things, may I give you honor and glory.
Amen.*

Fr. Eamon Tobin

A blessed Christmas to all of you,

In Christ,

