



The Nativity of the Lord December 25, 2016 A

Reaching out to Catholics who have become disconnected from our church family and to people seeking a church family

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.

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, 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 or whose grandchildren are not baptized or are being raised with little or no religious formation.

Fourteen reasons why Catholics disconnect from church

Why don't some Catholics attend church on a regular basis? These are fifteen reasons. Perhaps you can help me 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. But millions of parents who live very busy lives are in church every Sunday or most Sundays.

2. Family situation. One spouse may want to go to church, but the other does not. Kids do not want to go and the parents don't force them to go. Kids live with a divorced parent and stepparent. It may be a hassle to get young children ready for church. After the kids have received the sacraments, the parents may feel that they have done their job and quit going. A single mom or single person may not want to sit alone in church.

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 and great homilies. The congregation may be hospitable to adults and kids which gives people 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 in the same way to others.

5. Doctrinal issues. People raised as Catholics may later 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. Nonetheless, there are lots of people in church every Sunday who do not embrace every teaching of the Church.

(If you wish to do a self-study of Catholic beliefs, see my writings on our website. On the homepage, click on *Catechism Topics* [endorsed by Cardinal Wuerl of Washington, DC]. The website also has commentaries on the books of the Old Testament.)

6. Faith issues. Some people may feel God has let them down because he did not answer their prayer in a time of great need. God may seem distant to them. Perhaps some people may have never *experienced* God's unconditional love and mercy. Others just lose faith by neglecting to do the things that keep faith alive. The retreat weekends (CRHP) that we host each year have helped a lot of people rediscover their faith.

Contact Teresa at 254-1595 x3050 or tromano@ascensioncatholicsch.org for the dates of the next CRHP women's and men's retreat weekends.

7. Negative church experiences and perceptions. Some people may have been turned off by the sex abuse controversy, which is probably the worst scandal in the church's history—certainly in American church history. But when Jesus founded the church, he knew it would be made up of and led by imperfect people, starting with Peter who denied he knew Jesus, and Judas who sold him for 30 pieces of silver. Others may have felt let down and rejected by the church, especially by priests.

They may perceive the church as 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. In his letter *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis said: “*The church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.*”

9. Lifestyle. People who live a certain way of life may 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 may not see any need for church—or even God. They may feel they can and perhaps do live a good life without being part of institutional religion—or even without God.

11. Transportation. Some people may not have transportation to get them to church.

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

13. Laziness. Some non-churchgoing Catholics have told me that laziness is the reason they no longer attend church.

14. Relocation. Often people quit going to church after they relocate. They may or may not take the time to seek out the closest church in their new town. But when they go, their first experience may not be positive. I am happy to say that lots of newcomers have told me that they loved Ascension from day one.

After being away from church for years, it usually takes a major effort for some people to begin again—to dress up on a Sunday morning and go to a place where they may know no one and where the music and songs are unfamiliar to them.

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, but yet make it to Church regularly.

Words to non-churchgoing Catholics

All the non-churchgoing Catholics that I know are very good people. They may be closer to Jesus and his ways than many churchgoers, including myself. 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 you *belong* at our table. More importantly, I believe that *Jesus* wants you at his eucharistic 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 have little or no interest in connecting with church at this time, I do hope that you do what you can to remain connected to God and Jesus.

On the other hand, if you have *some desire* to reconnect with your Catholic roots, I would hope and pray that you know that your 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.

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 very irregular basis. You might ask if they have any desire 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 480 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.

Jesus comes especially to express solidarity with the forsaken and poor of the world.

When God decided to join our human race, he chose a people, very small (i.e., as a nation) and preoccupied. He joined a lower income family who could only afford the offering of the poor when they went to the Temple (Luke 2:24). He chose to be born not in a nice hospital or home, but in an abandoned cow barn. Just imagine the Creator of the world choosing to be born in a cow barn! His first visitors were not the important people in town but lowly shepherds from nearby hills. Shepherds were considered outcasts. His parents had to flee and whisk him away to a foreign country—not in fancy transportation but on a donkey. Talk about God’s ways not being our ways. For the first few years of his life, he, Mary and Joseph were immigrants who spoke with a “funny accent.” Our God, who could literally have enjoyed the lifestyle of the rich and the famous, chose instead to live as an outcast.

How could we ever even think our God doesn’t care and love us madly? The late spiritual writer and monk, Thomas Merton, writes:

Into this world, this demented Inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, who are tortured, bombed and exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.

I wrote the following Morning Prayer some years ago. Several people have told me how much they like it. As you will see, there is a lot of connect in the prayer. If we prayed no prayer but the following one a few days a week and tried to live its message, we would be in good shape spiritually. If you like the prayer, share it with your friends.

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,



