

**Easter Sunday of the Resurrection
of the Lord
March 27, 2016 C**

- ◆ **Why Jesus' Resurrection matters**
- ◆ **12 reasons Catholics become disconnected from church**
- ◆ **Reasons to consider returning**
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Why Easter matters

In one of his letters, Paul tells us why Easter matters when he says:

*If Christ is not risen
Our faith is in vain
And we are still in our sins.*

Paul is saying that the whole Christian message hinges on the Resurrection of Jesus. Without Easter morning, the Good Friday forces of darkness would have been victorious.

For Jesus, his Resurrection was God's resounding 'Yes!' to all that he was about in his three years of public ministry—all his teachings, miracles, exorcisms, suffering and death.

The Resurrection of Jesus gives us the hope of life eternal when our lives on earth are completed. Imagine approaching death with no hope in an afterlife.

Reasons Catholics become disconnected from their spiritual roots

Since last October, I have spent many hours visiting neighborhoods in search of Catholics who have become disconnected from their spiritual roots. I have talked with about 180 non-churchgoing Catholics, all of whom have become disconnected from the church for one reason or another. Sometimes people are not even aware why they stopped going to church. About two weeks ago, my Door-to-Door Ministry companion sat down with a couple who had not gone to church for a long time. They were a very nice couple. In the middle of their conversation, the nice lady said: *"I really don't know why we stopped going to church."*

But I do know that once people quit going to church, it will not be easy for them to start up again. There is an amazingly strong inner resistance to breaking the habit of

not going. So what are some of the reasons why people stop going to church?

1. *People allow life to push church to the margins of their lives.* This is especially true of parents with young children.
 - ◆ Going to church with young children demands a lot of effort: getting them ready for church, watching them in church, and perhaps sometimes getting inhospitable glances from those around them.
 - ◆ Sports on Sunday all too often takes priority over church.
 - ◆ After a busy week, Sunday is the only day to relax and get some stuff done that had been neglected during the week.

Having said that, thousands of *very busy* families with young children *do* make it to church on Sunday, *simply* because it is a priority for them. We always *make time* for what is important.

2. *Many Catholics, unhappy with their local parish, allow themselves to be drawn into another church.* If the music, the homilies, or the hospitality is weak at one's home church, that makes it easy to look elsewhere. This is especially true of millennials who have little or no sense of the church's rich spiritual tradition.

While Ascension is far from being a perfect church, we do try hard to extend hospitality to newcomers and visitors. We have a variety of music at Mass with choirs at the 9:30am and 5:30pm Mass (Contemporary Christian music). We have a host of small groups (male, female and mixed) and many opportunities to participate in outreach to the needy in our midst.

3. *Relocation.* It is a well-known fact that many people disconnect from church when they relocate to a new place. Some never make an effort to find a new local church, while others may go once or twice and not like what they see. Getting connected to a new parish takes time and effort. It is not unusual for new Catholics in the area to shop around for a church family. While it is common for people to judge a church solely on the Sunday experience, I wish that newcomers and seekers

would look a little bit further to see what ministries a parish offers. If you, the reader, would like to inquire more about Ascension ministries, come by the office and get a copy of our Ministry Booklet, or visit our website www.ascensioncatholic.net.

4. *Loss of faith in the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ.* It is my experience that most non-churchgoing Catholics, or Catholics who have left the church to join other churches, *find it hard* to admit their loss of faith in the Eucharist. One Baptist believer said: “*If I believed what you Catholics believed about the Eucharist, I would come crawling on my knees to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.*” It takes a lot of humility to admit a loss of faith in the Eucharist.

5. *Divorce and remarriage outside the church.* This phenomenon has been a huge turn-off for thousands if not millions of Catholics. Marriages fail—yes, in America half of the marriages fail. Good Catholics have had the painful experience of divorce. They may or may not have tried to get an annulment. They end up remarrying outside the church and may be told that they cannot receive Communion. That is currently still the law of the church. Many pastors, like myself, have a hard time with such a law. I think Pope Francis also does, even if he does not change the present law. It is hard to see why the church can forgive someone guilty of murder but not forgive someone guilty of a failed marriage—especially if the person worked to keep his/her first marriage together, and is currently involved in a good marriage. If you find yourself in this situation, please come see me.

6. *Personal crisis of faith and/or suffering.* Many wonderful people, including clergy and religious, may, at one time in their faith journey, have had a crisis of faith. If they fail to discuss the problem with a spiritual guide, it may cause them to *remain* in a state of doubt and/or pull away from God and church.

Also, unanswered prayers in times of suffering may cause one to conclude that God is not a caring God.

7. *Negative experiences with the church.* We all know that the sex scandals in the church have been devastating for many Catholics. For others, the failure of the church to be a caring presence in a time of need may be a reason to pull away from the church.

The stark and sometimes painful truth is that the church, being made up of imperfect, sinful people, will at times hurt us or fail us. This has been the reality ever since Peter denied Christ. A part of faith—for some a *big* part of faith—is staying with an institution that can fail us and hurt us in many ways. What should help us to do that is looking at the wonderful things God has done through this

imperfect institution: raised millions of saintly men and women; established wonderful institutions of learning, hospitals and places of outreach to the poor. Our church (and really *every* church) will always be a ‘mixed bag’ of saints and sinners.

8. *The study of science and religion may lead one to a path of unbelief.* If you or someone you know has been led down that path, you may want to check out a book by Trent Horn entitled *Answering Atheism—How to Make the Case for God with Logic and Charity*.

9. *A growing secularism* on college campuses—and in society in general—suggests that people, especially educated ones, do not need God.

10. *A non-Catholic spouse* strong in his/her faith may pull away a Catholic spouse who is not well-grounded in his/her faith.

11. *Spiritual laziness.* Many non-churchgoing Catholics have told me that they do not go to church because of laziness. Being part of a church family demands a good bit of effort, time and treasure. Many prefer not to make this effort.

12. *Conflict with church teaching on some issues* like marriage, abortion, the environment.

Reasons to consider returning to the church

I strongly believe that a decision to return to the church is a big blessing for the returnee *and* for the parish. Sometimes we do not realize *what* we are missing until we make that decision to reconnect *and* to become actively engaged.

This is what Martha, a recent returnee, has to say.

Mine is not an unusual story. I was born and raised in a devoted Catholic home, went to Catholic grammar school and was married at the age of 20 in a lovely Catholic ceremony. The marriage was anything other than “made in Heaven,” and at the age of 25 I was divorced. Since I felt the church had thrown me out, I no longer went to Mass. A short time later I remarried and moved to another state, still not attending Mass, though I always considered myself Catholic.

After being married for 13 years, I reconciled with the church and began the annulment process. Two years later, I was remarried in the church and began attending Mass once again. A few years later, we moved again and I lost touch with the church again. About this time, the sex scandals hit the news and I found it a convenient excuse to continue my lax attitude toward practicing my faith.

Two years ago, we moved to Melbourne to retire and enjoy the company of family. Although I live just across

the railroad tracks from Ascension and I did sign up in the parish office, I never attended Mass.

Recently, I returned to church after a visit by Fr. Tobin and Mary Birmingham on the first day of their Door-to-Door Ministry. 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. As he left my house, Father asked me to join him at Mass the following Sunday.

Lots of thoughts ran through my head the following days and I finally realized that I was the only thing standing in the way of my demonstrating my faith. I had gotten lazy and used to sleeping in on Sundays. So, on my first Sunday back, I was mulling over my feelings and enjoying the comforts of being in a church after so many years.

I am now a regular attendee at the 9:30 Mass. I look forward to Sunday mornings now and love having put aside time to praise and love God in an intimate setting. I feel closer to God than I ever have in my long life and always come home happy and joyous. In order to pay it forward, I have joined the Door-to-Door Ministry. I feel called to go out and invite people like me to return to church. I feel very confident that if you took this step, you will feel the joy I feel in every aspect of my life.

You see, if Martha had not accepted our invitation to return, she would have gone on with her life *not* missing the church. But once she made that decision to return and became active, she was so happy she did!

While just returning to Mass may be spiritually fulfilling for some people, I believe our church experience will be *much more fulfilling* when we become actively engaged in the communal and ministerial life of the parish. When we are actively engaged, we meet other people and feel we are giving back. We all know that “*in giving, we receive.*”

So often, it’s all about taking that *first step*, followed ideally by a decision to become involved in one or more of the parish ministries. Remember: your parish needs you and the gifts God has given you to bless others with.

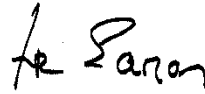
If you are not convinced of that, just think what Ascension parish family would be like if *all* of the hundreds of volunteers that we currently have quit because they felt that they had nothing to offer the parish.

- ◆ We would have no outreach programs.
- ◆ We would have no spiritual growth programs.
- ◆ We would have no faith formation programs.

- ◆ We would have no Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, no Knights of Columbus, and no Council of Catholic Women doing great things.

Beware the devil does not want you to reconnect with church. The devil is our spiritual arch enemy who will do everything he can to stop us from making any forward steps when it comes to our relationship with God.

Have a blessed Easter,



AN EASTER HOUSE BLESSING

Say the following prayer with all present before sharing your Easter dinner, or pray it at any other suitable time.

Lord,

We rejoice in the victory of your Son over death:

by rising from the tomb to new life

he gives us new hope and promise.

Bless all the members of this household

and surround us with your protection,

that we may find comfort and peace

in Jesus Christ, the Paschal Lamb,

who lives and reigns with you

and the Holy Spirit,

one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Afterwards, sprinkle the rooms of the house with holy water while invoking the following prayer: “***Let this water call to mind our baptism in Christ, who by his Death and Resurrection has redeemed us.***”