

Reading the Signs: Someone is Thinking about Returning to the Church

Some say that evangelization “is the fine art of paying attention to others.” As we befriend them, they give us all kinds of cues about themselves—how they feel about their lives, what they are thinking about, and where they are going. Lorene Hanley Duquin, author, speaker and Catholic evangelizer notes that inactive Catholics who are considering returning to the Church often give us some concrete signs or cues. Below are six of them:

1. Questions:

The most common sign is when someone begins to ask questions about God, good and evil, or the meaning of life. A lot of people in our society have lost that sense of meaning. They begin to ask, “What is my life about? Why do I do what I do? Is there any purpose in all of this?” As a parent, spouse, sibling or friend, your role is not to restore that meaning, but to help the person find meaning for him or herself. You can do that by active listening. Non-threatening comments such as, “It sounds like you’re really searching...” will encourage the person to talk in a more open manner. You don’t have to offer solutions or answers. Offer your opinion only when asked.

2. Memories:

Reminiscing about Catholic school, nuns, priests, or parish activities is another sign someone may be thinking about returning to the faith. Sometimes people will recall childhood devotions to Our Lady or the saints. Memories of music, incense, or some special liturgy will surface. Don’t be afraid to share your own memories. You might want to suggest revisiting a childhood parish together or seek out a priest or religious who had a profound impact on the person. If remembering takes a negative turn, you don’t have to be defensive. The person may be justified in his or her anger. Sometimes, talking about a bad experience can help put it in perspective. If possible encourage the person to separate anger toward a person from anger at the Church and the Sacraments. It wasn’t the Church that caused the pain. It was a person connected to the Church. If a person is open to praying with you, ask the Holy Spirit for healing of memories.

3. Reading:

Many inactive Catholics read or watch their way back to the Church. It’s a good idea to keep Catholic books, magazines, newspapers, CDs, DVDs, website or blog addresses available and even have your parish bulletin in places where family members and friends can pick them up. If there’s something particular that you think might be of interest, recommend it to family members and friends. One woman sent books on Dorothy Day and Edith Stein to her sister who was struggling with how she perceived that the Church treats women.

4. Current Events:

Catholic news events can trigger interest in some people. Make sure you’re up to date on Papal visits, Marian apparitions, Vatican announcements and local news about Catholic people and events. Even the recent scandal was a great opportunity to explain to people why you are still a Catholic! When discussing any aspect of Catholic news it’s a good idea to emphasize the universality of the Church. Unlike other Christian denominations that tend to attract people with similar interests and backgrounds, the Catholic Church numbers one billion people with different cultural, intellectual, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As James Joyce said, the Catholic Church means, “Here comes everybody!”

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5. Major Life Events:

Illness, death, divorce, the birth of a baby, a job loss or transfer, kids growing into their teenage years, moving to a new home are all life events that can trigger a desire to return to the Church. Sometimes people are afraid the Church will reject them if they have been gone for a long time. Some think they are excommunicated. You might find yourself in a position of helping someone get accurate information about where they stand with God and the Church.

6. God's Presence:

The real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is often a factor in bringing people back. Invite people to come with you for family funerals, weddings, baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, Ash Wednesday, May crowning, and Mass on Christmas and Easter. It's hard for people to go to church by themselves. Be an inviter. If they don't want to go to Mass, invite them to parish social, cultural or educational events. Keep the lines of communication open. Radiate God's love to everyone you meet. Let the Holy Spirit work through you. Before long, you'll begin to see that people will be attracted to the Church because they want the faith, the love and the peace you possess.

Individual Activity (10 mins.)

Reflection Exercise:

1. Jot down the first names of six (6) or more inactive or unchurched Catholics that you know from your everyday life.
2. What do you know about each of their reasons for being inactive or unchurched?
3. Have you noticed any of the six signs (above) that one of them may be considering returning to the Church?
4. What do you imagine Jesus is inviting you to do to reach out to that person? Or to inactive and unchurched Catholics in general?

Sharing in small groups (3 or 4 people—20-25 mins.)

- Share your answers to questions #1-4 above.
- After that, spend some time discussing what your group and your parish might do to learn how to "pay attention" to the needs, needs, stresses and transitions that inactive and unchurched Catholics are going through in their everyday lives.
- What are we already doing to reach out to them?
- What more might we plan to do to reach out to them?
- Conclude your time together by praying for those on your lists out loud or in silence.

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