

Catholic

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The Joy of the Sacraments

REAWAKENING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE FAITH

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THE EXODUS FROM MASS NEEDS THE ATTENTION OF THE FAITHFUL—NOW!



TUOMAS LEHTINEN/SHUTTERSTOCK

The bad news about church attendance is probably worse than you think. Attending Mass is a thing of the past for six of every ten Catholics, according to a 2018 Gallup Poll. In any given week, only four in ten Catholics follow the bells hailing them to church. The poll also shows church attendance sank six percentage points in the last decade. For the faithful, the poll means the tolling from their parish home should set off alarms in their hearts.

Common explanations for the downhill slide? Some leave because their cultures aren't reflected in the worship. Some turn their backs because they disagree with certain Church teachings. Some feel alienated or excluded because of gender, gender identity, or the Church's position on gender matters. Others have trouble seeing a connection between faith and the world. Still others feel their parish liturgies lack luster and the church community is unwelcoming. And finally, there are those who simply choose to make other things a priority.

Although there are nearly as many opinions on where to place the blame as there are active members in the Church, two things are clear: Many are leaving the Catholic Church, and while this issue may be considered "old news," it still needs attention. What we've done so far to address the dilemma has not worked.

The sacramental preparation process offers a real opportunity to reach out to people who have drifted away. It's a time when lukewarm Catholics are focused on the faith. And it's a time when fallen-away Catholics often visit in support of loved ones receiving the sacraments.

Enter Pope Francis. In a January 2017 speech on marriage and annulment, he acknowledged that many people seeking the sacrament of marriage lack adequate formation in the faith and in their understanding of marriage and family life. If the Church focuses on that, as well as on continuing support after the wedding, he said, sacramental preparation can become an opportunity to draw people back to the Church.

The pope's comments resonate across the full spectrum of the sacraments, but marriage provides a good jumping-off point. Preparation can't start with a diamond ring, and the celebration can't stop at the conclusion of the wedding recessional. The pope's vision presupposes that young people are

formed in a vibrant faith throughout childhood and that, after the wedding, couples have ongoing opportunities for fellowship and formation.

Preparation, celebration, and ongoing formation. Does that structure sound familiar? It should. It's the basis for the crown jewel of Catholic faith formation: the RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. New Catholics tend to be on fire for their faith, and not just for a few weeks or months after joining.

Preparation

What would marriage preparation modeled after the RCIA look like? It would begin with an invitation to couples to discern why they want to be married in the Church. If they're lukewarm about the practice of the faith, why come to the Church? Suzanne Lewis, adult education and marriage ministry coordinator for the Church of the Epiphany in Coon Rapids, MN, notes that priests and parishes often bend over backward to accommodate couples out of a fear of alienating them. Lewis instead asks couples to consider what hosting their wedding in the Church asks of them. Not all couples are willing to dig deeper into their faith, but when they do, inevitably it changes their lives and strengthens their relationship with Christ and his Church.

Diana Macalintal, cofounder of TeamRCIA.org, points to one key tenet of the faith as particularly relevant to marriage preparation: forgiveness. "An engaged couple preparing to be married lives out their faith by forgiving one another," she said. "They practice forgiveness with their family, their coworkers, and especially if there's someone in their family they have a grievance with. They learn how to forgive that person so this sacramental marriage can be a true merging of families."

Marriage preparation must focus both on the development of the couple's faith and the nitty-gritty reality of what it means to merge two lives into one. Facilitating these types of discussions, perhaps even in community with other engaged couples, will help draw them closer to their faith, even if they aren't aware of it at the time. It proffers an important time of transition for their future together as a couple. Following the wedding, the Church will either become central to their family identity or it will fade into the background.

What do our parishes offer newly married couples? Do we have a healthy system of small faith-sharing groups? Do we offer opportunities for fellowship with other couples in a similar stage of life? Do we encourage open discussions and presentations on issues relating to marriage and family life? Ultimately, parishes need to examine if they have a stable community in place that can enfold newly married couples and draw them deeper into the mystery of the sacrament they have just celebrated. If not, the danger is that they will fall away from the flock and disappear until they want to baptize their first child.

Although such efforts must begin small, consistent messaging from the clergy, support at the parish staff level, and witness from participants will ensure growth and enrichment.



DAN MELOY/CNS

Formation for Families

This support network for married couples is vital to the Church's future. Again and again, studies have shown that the best predictor of kids staying Catholic is parents who are committed to their own faith. Just going to Mass isn't enough. When parents can talk about their faith and articulate how it directs their everyday decisions, kids are far more likely to internalize that faith and claim it as their own.

This means parents need faith formation just as much as their children do. In the RCIA, new Catholics continue to meet after Easter, unpacking the experiences and deepening their faith. Ideally, this faith sharing and formation should transition seamlessly into larger groups that are already active in the parish.

Likewise, ongoing formation, through parish programs or small groups, can help parents network, draw on the wisdom of others, and put words to their faith. That in turn equips them to be their children's primary teachers of the faith—to fulfill the promise they made at their child's baptism and to guide their children through sacramental preparation.

Ideally, says Macalintal, such formation will take place primarily within the community, not in a classroom—"going out to where Christians are praying, serving, and debating issues." Such formation offers lessons in reconciliation and self-sacrifice. It demonstrates that while Christianity begins with worship, it expresses itself through discipleship, which is carried out in the work done in the world.

This brings faith out of the realm of the theoretical and illuminates its power to help family members cope with their everyday struggles and dilemmas. No matter where people are in their spiritual journey, ongoing formation offers an invitation to go deeper. And while not all will respond, many will.

Faith Formation for Parents: A Case Study With Positive Results

The Church of the Epiphany, in Coon Rapids, MN, near Minneapolis, serves more than 3,000 families. A parish that size is worth looking at to see what it's doing right.

Jill Fink is the parish's director of faith formation. Her assistant, Suzanne Lewis, works with parents through the family faith program. Both have positive things to say about their work with parishioners.

For the past five years, Epiphany has operated its religious ed program on the understanding that parents stay on campus once or twice a month for their own faith formation while their children are in class. This allows for general adult catechesis or a speaker to tackle tough topics like pornography or internet safety. Occasionally parents and children come together for a retreat activity or family liturgy. Afterward, parents pick up a packet of lessons to complete with their children at home.

Offering a meal and free child care eases the burden on families and facilitates community building. Lewis calls those who don't attend to touch base and underscore the importance of their participation in their child's faith formation. "The danger of parents not witnessing to their faith is that children can actually become inoculated against the faith," she said. "They think they're Catholic, but if they don't see how this affects their life, what good does all this knowledge do them?"

Recently, Epiphany has begun transitioning to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. In this model, young children begin in a group setting, known as the "atrium," where the foundations of the faith are laid out. As the program expands to include older grades, children will be required to spend one or two years in the atrium before entering first Communion preparation. And the program will retain the expectation that parents will attend monthly adult formation evenings.



J.D. LONG-GARCIA/CNS

"We don't want to make (sacramental preparation) cumbersome, but if you're asking the Church for something, it's natural the Church is going to ask something from you," said Fink. "Preparation has to be meaningful. Otherwise we've done them a huge disservice."

This parish's efforts have borne fruit. "It used to be that you'd expect school families to be at Mass, and those from faith formation were less likely to be there," said Lewis. "Now we're seeing those devoted families at church. We've had friendships blossom among the families."

The best fruits, though, are seen when fathers begin to participate. "That's when you transform families," said Fink.

Liturgy

Of course, formation is only part of the equation. We should also explore the role sacramental liturgies play. Weddings, baptisms, and first Communions often bring in family members who rarely interact with the Church. This should prompt us to explore the role of sacramental liturgies: Are our liturgies engaging and inviting or insipid?

It's not enough to have fabulous liturgies on special occasions, says Alan Hommerding, a hymnist, editor, and liturgical presenter. If they have a good experience and come back on a regular weekend to find it just as lackluster as they remember, they'll simply leave again. "It's really a two-step process," he said. "Make your Sunday celebrations inviting, then reflect that in the occasional sacramental celebrations."



The Makings of a Fabulous Liturgy

The music can be traditional, contemporary, or a mixture, but it must always be well-executed by people whose focus is facilitating community worship rather than showcasing their own skills. It should reflect the diversity of the community gathered.

Great liturgy means homilies grounded in the concrete reality of daily life—homilies that help parishioners wrestle with the difficult questions they face every day. On the other hand, if a homilist gets too specific—for instance, digging into politics—he risks creating the perception that God endorses one secular vision over another. Both vague, general homilies and overly specific ones tend to cause people to disengage. This is true even for faithful churchgoers, but it's especially true for the fallen-away Catholic who—in response to a special occasion—is dipping a proverbial toe back into the Church water.

Great liturgies exude hospitality. The faithful in the pews recognize their own role in welcoming both strangers and fellow parishioners. Why would a visitor want to return if they're made to feel unwelcome?

Great liturgies allow communities to share in each other's faith journeys. Baptism and first Communion frequently get pulled out of the weekend liturgy, either because of expedience (people will complain if Mass gets any longer!) or because the group photo is given too much importance. Weaving the milestones of faith into the fabric of ordinary weekend Masses, with the entire community present, is a powerful witness. Regardless, to take

advantage of the opportunities that sacramental preparation provides to bring fallen-away Catholics back to the fold, parishes must have a strong foundation for adult formation already in place. And active members must be formed in hospitality and the love of Christ, which in turn we must welcome and extend to the people sharing our pews. And we must strive to maintain vibrant liturgies that speak to ordinary life.

Making this shift is a major undertaking, but the investment is worth making. After all, evangelization is the *raison d'être* of the Church.

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How to Do Your Part: Be Hospitable, Talk to Newcomers, and Volunteer

The average parishioner has little influence over parish programming, so how can you make sacramental preparation an occasion of evangelization for your parish? Simple: hospitality and volunteering.

Hospitality is everyone's responsibility. Your parish may have greeters at the door, and priests can recognize and welcome visitors. But that's superficial hospitality. If visitors who have been away for weeks, months, or years come into your parish and no one in the pews makes eye contact, smiles, or makes them feel they belong, they likely won't return.

The best Christian hospitality comes when the regulars engage with those sharing the pews with them. Before or during Mass, a simple smile will suffice, but afterward, converse with them.

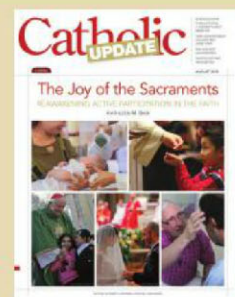
Volunteering. No one needs more to do. Still, formation programs can't run without volunteers, and most volunteers agree that they receive at least as much as they give. Those who facilitate learning for others find their own understanding deepened. Those who help others grow closer to God find their own faith strengthened. The giver of gifts is prospered, too.

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