



How Do I Help My Adult Child Return to the Church?

1. Pray, fast and sacrifice

If you aren't doing these three things, the other steps won't matter. Commit right now to praying 5-10 minutes each day for your child's return. Jesus' parable of the persistent widow (Lk 18:1-8) confirms that God loves tireless prayer — even if you pray for the same need every day. Don't give up, and don't think your prayer is unheeded or pointless. Look at what St. Monica's prayers did for St. Augustine.

Also, fast and sacrifice for your child. Skip a meal, give up Facebook or Netflix for a week or willingly bear a small pain. Then offer your sufferings to God on behalf of your child. Unite them to the cross and ask that he send new grace into your child's life.

2. Equip yourself

You can't give what you don't have. You may be excited about sharing the Faith, but enthusiasm and goodwill won't get you far. You need to know your faith. The two go-to sources are the Bible and the catechism. Become familiar with them and read them each day, in small doses. Then find good Catholic books that will help you explain and defend the Faith so you're ready when your child reveals his main hang-ups with the Church.

3. Plant the seeds

You should also begin planting "seed gifts" in his life. These are DVDs, books or CDs that can lead him to reconsider the Church. Many people who come back to the Church point to a resource like this that sparked their return. Leave a booklet on his desk, mail him a DVD or drop a CD in his car. Even before you start discussing God or the Church with your child, you need to plant small seeds of faith and trust in his life. One seed is unconditional love. Your child needs to know that you'll love him no matter what — no matter his moral choices or whether he stays away from the Church. He must know that you totally will his good. Only then will he listen to you.

4. Start the conversation

At some point, you need to open a dialogue about God and the Church. You might say, "Can I ask you something? I wonder if you'd be up for talking about spiritual things some time. I know you have a mixed relationship with the Church, but would you be open to chatting about it with me? I just want to listen." Then do just that: listen. Your goal is to detect why your child has drifted from the Church.

5. Move the dialogue forward

You've now identified why your child left the Church. Speaking with joy and positivity, clear up any misconceptions he has. For example, if he says, "I was never spiritually fed as a Catholic," it's likely he never fully understood the Eucharist or was exposed to the great spiritual masters of our tradition. Gently propose those to him and encourage him to reconsider.

6. Invite and connect

Once your child expresses curiosity and openness to returning, invite him to a parish event. This might be a weekend retreat, such as Christ Renews His Parish or Cursillo, or perhaps a parish small-group study or community event. Your goal is to usher him into the life of the parish, which will re-establish the communal bonds of faith.

If your child is in college, connect him with the local Catholic campus ministry, such as FOCUS or the Newman Center. Leaders there will be thrilled to talk with him and help him on his journey. Don't move too fast, though. Only extend these invitations after he's expressed openness to returning, otherwise you may push him away.

7. Close the loop

Finally, you need to help your child formally reconcile with the Church. Lots of people get stuck here. A priest once told me about a lady who left the Church as a teenager and stayed away for over 30 years. Her reason? She simply didn't know how to come back.

The key is to never give up hope. Hopelessness is not a word in God's vocabulary. As long as your child still has breath, there is always hope. God loves your child even more than you do. As much as you yearn for your child to come home, God desires his return infinitely more and is continually working to make that happen, even when things appear dire. So trust God, beg him to keep moving in your child's life, and be confident that he will bring your child home.

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