

# RETURN

HOW TO DRAW YOUR CHILD BACK TO THE CHURCH

BRANDON VOGT

SECOND EDITION

WORD  
*on* FIRE<sup>®</sup>

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While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information  
have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.  
Also, while all stories are based on real experiences, some have been  
merged or generalized to represent common themes.

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## ENDORSEMENTS

“Every Catholic parent needs this book. It demolishes the myths about why young people leave the Church and lays out a wonderful (and very practical) step-by-step plan for helping them come back to the faith.”

— **Trent Horn**, staff apologist for Catholic Answers

“*Return* is the resource that parents of fallen-away children have been waiting for: it combines powerful spiritual insights with practical tips that you can begin applying right now. It’s like a bootcamp for spiritual warriors who are about to go out on a great search-and-rescue mission.”

— **Jennifer Fulwiler**, blogger and author of *Something Other Than God*

“Brandon Vogt’s *Return* offers practical and realistic ways to bring lost souls home. And I should know: I was one of those kids who left the Church for over ten years. *Return* hits home for me. It reveals not just why people are drifting from the Church but how to get them back into the fold of Christ. It’s a true treasure for our times.”

— **Leah Darrow**, Catholic speaker, author, and founder of Lux University

“Everywhere I go I meet parents who are troubled because their children no longer practice the faith. Finally, here is a practical guide to doing something about that. It’s time we took this problem seriously, and *Return* can help with that.”

— **Matthew Kelly**, founder of Dynamic Catholic

“*Return* is a resource that is desperately needed by today’s Catholic families. This terrific new resource is full of practical, supportive, and affirming answers. A ‘must have’ for every Catholic home, parish, and library!”

— **Lisa M. Hendey**, author of *The Grace of Yes*

“The number one question I am asked frequently is, ‘How can we get our son or daughter back to the Catholic Church?’ This grieves the hearts of millions of parents. Finally, someone has given us sound tools, prayers, and wisdom on this vital issue. Brandon has once again created an inspirational book to help us bring loved ones home to Jesus and His holy Church!”

— **Tom Peterson**, founder of Catholics Come Home

“What greater gift could any parent want for their fallen-away Catholic child than to help them get back in touch with God’s grace? Brandon Vogt’s new book, *Return*, offers more than just practical wisdom and timeless advice, it is a roadmap of evangelization for Catholic parents of fallen-away Catholics. Buy this book. Read this book. Do what this book says. Then see what great gift God has for your family!”

— **Marcel LeJeune**, author and founder of Catholic Missionary Disciples

“Well-researched and realistic, Brandon Vogt’s *Return* is not just hope-filled, but superbly hope-filling. A resounding answer to many Catholic parents’ most ardent prayers.”

— **Dr. Stephen Bullivant**, Director of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society at St. Mary’s University

“One of the most common questions I get as the director of St. Paul Street Evangelization is, ‘How can I bring my son or daughter back to the Church?’ I hear it all the time. Every Catholic I know has at least one close family member who has drifted away from the Church. Brandon Vogt’s *Return* is an excellent answer to that question. He does a great job laying the foundation and sharing the best tips and practical strategies. Buy this book if you want to help your child come back.”

— **Steve Dawson**, founder of St. Paul Street Evangelization

“The LORD says . . .

Stop your crying and wipe away your tears.

All that you have done for your children will not  
go unrewarded. . . .

There is hope for your future;  
your children will come back home.

I, the LORD, have spoken.”

—JEREMIAH 31:16–17 (GNT)

For all those who have drifted away  
and those preparing to draw them back

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## FOREWORD

by Bishop Robert Barron

The Church faces many challenges today, but I am convinced that the most pressing concern, at least in America, is the attrition of our own people. Thirteen percent of Americans identify as former Catholics, and for every one convert to the Catholic faith, more than six people leave. One-third of people raised Catholic no longer identify as Catholic today, and attendance at the Mass, identified by the Second Vatican Council as “the source and summit of the Christian life,” continues to fall, with only a paltry 24% in the pews on any given Sunday. The statistics get worse among younger generations. One-third of the Millennial generation now claims no religious affiliation, and only 16% identify as Catholic.

It’s easy to gloss over these numbers and justify a false sense of security. Admittedly, the overall Catholic population has remained relatively stable, but this is mostly a result of immigration, of faithful new immigrants replacing the Catholics who leave. But obviously this is not a sustainable or desirable trend. Even among immigrants, as cultural assimilation takes hold of second and third generations, they leave the Church at rates similar to the general Catholic population. As many evangelists have observed, “God has no grandchildren.” Each generation must meet Christ and the Church for the first time, not relying on mere cultural ambience or ethnic identification.

But while God may not have grandchildren, people do. If you’re reading this excellent book by Brandon Vogt, chances are high that you’re a parent or grandparent, worrying that your child has drifted away from the faith. In the face of apparent failure and heartbreak, you’re asking yourself, What went wrong? Did I do enough? What more could I have done? Is there anything I can do now? How does one repair a broken relationship with Christ and the Church?

To these many questions, Brandon Vogt’s *Return* offers tremendous and desperately needed help. Every parent or grandparent with a fallen-away child needs to read this book. You’ll find concrete advice and

practical strategies. Rather than opting for despair, Brandon calls for creativity and courage, new approaches imbued with the liveliness of the New Evangelization. *Return* includes one of the best summations of Catholic attrition, coupled with keen insights as to why people dismiss the Church's faith. He doesn't cast aspersions or blame, and he avoids the scapegoating that marks some approaches to this problem. Instead he focuses on the solution, using a positive emphasis on what parents can say and do to respond to their child's objections, rebuild relationships, and ultimately draw them back to the Church.

*Return* offers no magic-bullet guarantee that your child will come back. But you will find a complete game plan to create the best possible environment to reintroduce your child to Christ and his Church.

I have worked alongside Brandon Vogt for some time now in the fields of the Lord's work. His dedication to the cause of evangelization is exemplary. He is a pioneering missionary disciple, whose sense of joy for the Gospel is contagious and reassuring. Therefore, if your son or daughter has left the faith, I encourage you not to give up hope and to learn from his advice in this book. *Return* will serve as an essential resource for the Church's evangelization efforts and a true game-changer for desperate parents everywhere.

— **Bishop Robert Barron**

*Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles and Founder of Word on Fire*

## INTRODUCTION

John's family was enjoying a nice, quiet dinner together, sitting around the table discussing his first semester at college. The conversation was great until his mother, Dianne, casually wondered which parish he was attending at school.

John hesitated, then said, "Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't really been to church in a while. It's hard in college—I have class, and sports, and activities, and I'm so busy. I went to Mass a few times when I first got there but then I skipped one or two Sundays. Over time, I guess I just stopped going. I actually haven't been in a while . . ."

"Oh," his mother replied, gulping nervously. "Hmm. I'm a little surprised. You went to church every Sunday growing up; we raised you Catholic. It's really important that you . . ."

"Mom, it's okay," John interrupted. "To be honest, I'm not sure I really see the point anymore. I mean, I appreciated church growing up. I'm really glad we all went. It shaped me and helped me to become a good person. But after meeting new people at college, and really thinking about God and faith for the first time, I realized that I'm not sure if I really believe it myself. I just kind of accepted it because that's what you guys believed. I went to church because that's what we did as a family, and that's what everyone believed growing up. But I'm not sure I believe it all anymore, and I feel that if I go to church now, I'd just be a hypocrite."

Dianne's heart sank. Her throat tightened. She looked at her husband for support, but neither knew what to say. A few moments passed before she murmured out a reply:

"Wow, I'm . . . not even sure how to respond. I just thought by sending you to Catholic schools . . ."

"Really, it's okay, Mom," John interrupted. "It's not a big deal. None of my college friends go to church and they're all really good people—nice, generous, open-minded, tolerant. Like I said, I think it was good that I went to church growing up and Catholic school, and I'm happy that you and Dad get

a lot out of it, but I just don't see the need anymore. Maybe one day when I have kids, I'll come back so they can be raised with good morals, but I'm fine without it for now."

If you're a Catholic parent in the United States, and if the statistics hold true, this isn't a far-fetched scenario for you. It's real and familiar. Chances are at least one of your children has drifted away from the Church and, at least right now, shows no signs of coming back.

And it's not just your family. The Catholic Church is hemorrhaging young people.

Half of young Americans who were raised Catholic no longer identify as Catholic today. Roughly eight in ten (79%) who shed their faith leave before age twenty-three.

Some drift away as teenagers while searching for their own identity. Some have been hurt by people in the Church. Others slide into lifestyles that conflict with Church teaching. Many go off to college, connect with non-Christians or skeptical professors, and slowly lose their faith. Some move into the world, start a family, and get swept up in work, hobbies, and family life, losing their faith in the shuffle. There are lots of stories, but most of them share the same outcome: young people fleeing the Church.

The parable of the prodigal son is being reenacted every day in homes across the country as millions of mothers and fathers wait for their children to come home to the Church. It is being relived in the eye-rolls and shrugs of children who don't care about God, and in the tears, pain, and frustration of the broken dreams and cries of "Where did we go wrong?"

Few experiences cause more despair than having a child leave the Church. Parents become deeply concerned about what will happen to their child after death if he continues to reject the faith. How will God judge him? How will God judge us? Will we all be together for eternity?

Others worry about how the situation will impact family relationships. Will it change how the family celebrates holidays and special occasions? Will it cause divisions in the family? Will the child begin to distance himself? One mother laments, "My son and his wife will not attend family First Communions or confirmations because they don't want their child exposed

to Catholic rituals. It has driven a wedge through the core of our family.”

If the grief wasn’t enough, many parents also experience guilt and shame, thinking they are to blame for their children drifting away. “All of this is so humiliating,” one mother admitted. “We were always known as the perfect Catholic family. I can just hear people saying, ‘Well, I guess they weren’t as good as we thought they were.’”

Most parents feel helpless. They’re desperate to draw their child back to the Church, but they don’t know what to do.

Over the last several years, I’ve encountered this situation many, many times. I’ve spoken with thousands of Catholics around the country at large conferences, small parish groups, and everything in between. After each talk I give, there’s usually a question-and-answer session. Inevitably, no matter the topic of my talk, the most common question I hear is some version of this: “My child has left the faith and I’m devastated. What should I do?”

For a long time, many Church leaders suggested we just play the waiting game. “Oh, take heart, your child will come back,” they encouraged. “Just wait until they get married or have children.” But as we’ll see later in this book, that’s just no longer the case. Today, very few young adults who drift away end up coming back solely because of marriage or children.

The passive wait-and-see game is no longer an option. We need a different strategy, something more attuned to reality. We need to understand the landscape and the real reasons why our young people drift away. Then, once we understand the problem, we need a game plan to bring them home.

That’s precisely what this book will give you. I spent over a year planning and researching this book, talking with experts and chatting with hundreds of parents and young people who have left and returned to the Church. I wanted to figure out exactly what works, and then share it with the millions of parents who are desperate for help. In this book, you’ll discover the best practical strategies for drawing your child back—no fluff, no spiritual platitudes, just real, proven strategies that work.

Imagine the joy of seeing your child next to you at Mass again, not just sitting there disinterestedly but excitedly praying and worshipping the

Lord. Picture the bliss of having deep conversations about God and the faith. Imagine the satisfaction of knowing your child is in a thriving, personal relationship with Jesus in his Church, and is a committed disciple who will spend all eternity with you and the heavenly Father, and all his saints and angels.

Those are not just fantasies. They are real possibilities, and this book will put you on the path toward fulfilling them.

A few quick notes before we dive in. First, the language. You'll notice throughout the book that I frequently refer to "your child." This isn't because your son or daughter is an adolescent or teenager (though perhaps that's true)—they might be college-aged, or even a young adult. But I use the word *child* because that's the place they still hold in your heart. We're talking about your *child*, your own flesh and blood, a person you would do anything for and sacrifice whatever was necessary to bring back to the Church. In this book, I also use the masculine pronoun *he* because I wanted to avoid the confusing shifts between *he* and *she* and the burdensome *them* to describe individuals. But the advice in this book applies equally well to sons or daughters. Lastly, I use the term *former Catholic*, which is how many people think of themselves after drifting from the Church, even though such people are not—and can never become—former Catholics as far as Christ and the Church are concerned. The Church never regards her children as having left the family, no matter what they do or how distant they drift, even if they themselves no longer regard themselves as belonging. But with that in mind, for the sake of clarity, we'll use the term *former Catholic* to describe those who no longer actively practice their Catholic faith.

Another thing worth noting is that this isn't a guide to *keeping* your kids Catholic. Lots of other resources help instill a deep and lasting faith in your children while they're young. These are desperately needed. But the question we're focusing on here, and likely the question you're asking is What do I do *after* my child has already left? You may wish you had responded differently while he was young, but that ship has sailed. You don't need to keep it docked; you need to steer it home. Thankfully, that's what you'll learn in this book.



Third, this book doesn't propose a magic formula. I wish there was a simple, plug-and-play formula that was guaranteed to lead your child back to the Church, no matter his situation. You just plug in the child, follow the steps, and *voilà!* He's back. But alas, we're dealing with real people and many variables—you, your child, personal beliefs, free will. I can't guarantee that the steps in this book will *definitely* lead your child back to the Church. But I can promise these strategies will create the *best possible environment* to facilitate his return. They will increase the odds dramatically.

Fourth, this isn't a quick fix. You probably won't finish this book and see your child heading for the confessional the next day (though anything is possible with God!). As you'll discover later, this journey could take months or even years to reach its goal. Conversion is a slow process. In most cases, a child drifts from the Church over a long period of time, and what took months to occur usually takes months to reverse. So commit right now to being in this for the long run. If you're looking for a convert-your-child-quick scheme, this isn't it. But if you want solid tools that work, even if they take time, you're holding the right book.

I should say one final thing. You might be tempted to skip ahead in the book. In fact, you may have already skimmed the Table of Contents and jumped to an intriguing chapter. But it's really important that you read the sections in order since they build on one another. So, for example, if you skip Part I and move straight to the "Game Plan," you'll learn how to draw your child back before really understanding *why* he left in the first place. That's like a doctor diving into surgery before he diagnoses what's wrong with the patient—it's bad and potentially harmful. So be sure to read the chapters slowly, in order. Trust me, it's worth it.

So now you have a choice to make: Are you ready? Do you want to finally make progress with your child? Do you want to help him reverse course and find his way back to the Church?

If so, then now is the time. Now is the time for him to encounter Jesus anew. Now is the time for him to rediscover his faith. Now is the time for him to receive all the gifts God has for him in his Church.

Now is the time for him to return.



# PART I

## Understanding the Problem

“The most significant challenge facing the  
Catholic Church today is the attrition of  
our own people.”

— BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

## CHAPTER 1

### *Why Are They Leaving?*

If there's one thing about which any parent of wayward children should take solace, it's that you're not alone. The statistics surrounding those who leave are not just dire. They signal a religious epidemic.

Reliable data shows that half (50% exactly) of young Americans who were raised Catholic no longer call themselves Catholic today. Think about what that means. Over the last twenty to thirty years, half of the babies you've seen baptized, half of the children you've seen confirmed, and half of the kids in your parish youth group have left the Church. If you're a parent with multiple children, it's a fairly sure bet that at least one has drifted away.

But that 50% statistic only concerns religious *identification*, not practice. Although just 50% of young people raised in the Church still identify as Catholic, that doesn't mean they all attend Mass or have a personal and dynamic faith. Researchers at Notre Dame found that when we gauge young people by that more stringent criteria, the number sinks to shocking lows: just 7% of young people raised in the Church still actively practice their faith today, meaning they still attend Mass weekly, pray a few times a week, and say their faith is "extremely" or "very" important to them. So only half of our young people are still "Catholic" but among those, a huge majority aren't seriously living out their faith.

So when does the breakdown occur? A recent Pew Research Center study showed that eight in ten (79%) who drift away from faith leave before age twenty-three. These aren't middle-aged Americans, fed up with the Church or disgruntled because of changes at Vatican II. They're disenchanting teenagers and young adults. They attend high schools and colleges, they're on social media every day, but there's one place they're not: in church.

This problem extends across many ethnicities and regions. For instance, although 55% of Hispanic adults are Catholic, a stunning one in four Hispanics in America are now *former* Catholics. Soon, the majority of US

Catholics will be Hispanic but the majority of Hispanics will no longer be Catholic.

When we parents and leaders hear these statistics, our first reaction is likely shock and despair. And because we're natural problem solvers, our next inclination is probably to ask, Why? Why are children leaving? What's pulling or pushing them away?

The hard reality is that there's no one answer. Pope Benedict XVI was once asked, "How many ways are there to God?" and he said, "As many as there are people." Similarly, G.K. Chesterton, a famous convert to Catholicism, said, "The Church is a house with a hundred gates; and no two men enter at exactly the same angle."

If people *enter* the Church through different routes, they certainly leave through just as many—if not more. The most recent Pew religious landscape survey found that for every person who becomes Catholic, roughly 6.5 leave the Church. That ratio of loss-to-gain was the worst of any religious or nonreligious group. It means that for each person coming in the front door of the Church, six or seven leave through the back. We might paraphrase Chesterton to say, "The Church is a house with a hundred gates and people are rushing out of each one!"

But again, what's causing people to exit? Some leave for personal reasons. They had a bad experience with a priest or fellow Catholic, they became too busy for Mass, or they just find church boring. Others leave for moral reasons. They disagree with the Church's sexual teachings or they think Catholics are too judgmental. Still more leave for theological reasons. They think Catholics don't place enough emphasis on Jesus or the Bible, or they weren't being spiritually fed, or maybe they just stopped believing in God altogether.

We must be careful not to assume everyone leaves for the same reasons. Having spoken with hundreds of former Catholics, many of whom have returned to the Church, I can say from personal experience that assuming their reasons for leaving can have harmful consequences. For example, a friend of mine was beginning to doubt that the Eucharist really was the Body and Blood of Christ, and so he stopped going to Mass. But when his

mother found out he was no longer attending, she dismissively suggested he was actually just lazy and wanted to sleep in on Sunday mornings. The sting of that barb took many months to heal.

Of course, as a parent, you're not worried as much about national statistics as you are about your own child. You want to know why *your* child left. Later in the book, you'll learn how to set up conversations to pull this information into the light. You'll discover how to dig past the surface-level reasons your child might give, which often mask deeper issues and concerns.

But before we get there, let's first take a 30,000-foot view of the situation to see the most common reasons why people leave in general. We'll look at data from large surveys of thousands of former Catholics, and we'll also discover common misunderstandings about God and the Church. Later, you'll discover exactly how to answer these objections. But for now, we just want to learn *what* the objections are and why they cause people to leave.

As you continue reading, focus on detecting *your* child in one or more of the descriptions. Understanding the "big picture" of why people leave the Church can equip you to handle your child's particular reasons.

## The Most Common Reasons Why People Leave the Church

The Diocese of Springfield, Illinois, knew they had a problem. Catholics were leaving the Church in droves and they weren't sure why. So, in 2014, the diocese partnered with researchers at Benedictine University to commission a large survey of lapsed and former Catholics to ask them a simple question: Why did you leave?

Many businesses use this "exit survey" technique to poll former customers or employees. But few church groups have considered the approach. Instead of assuming or imagining why they left, why not just ask them?

The survey was admittedly not perfect. It didn't use random sampling, and the respondents skewed older. It was not completely representative since, as we learned, most people who leave the Church do so while they're young. But the results still paint a helpful picture of why many Catholics abandon the Church today.

Here were the most common reasons people gave (the percentage indicates the number of respondents who said the factor played a role in their departure):

- Spiritual needs not met (68%)
- Lost interest (67%)
- Too many money requests (56%)
- No longer believe (48%)
- Dissatisfaction with atmosphere (47%)
- Too ritualistic (38%)
- Too formal (36%)
- Music not enjoyable (36%)

How many of those reasons do you think rubbed *your* child the wrong way? Maybe your child doesn't personally feel put off by donation requests, but did he lose interest or fail to have his spiritual needs met?

A few years before the Diocese of Springfield conducted its exit surveys, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a much larger study. Instead of a few hundred people, it involved tens of thousands of respondents, and was both scientific and representative. Titled "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.," it revealed many of the same insights as the Springfield survey.

Here were the most common reasons people gave for leaving the Catholic Church:

- Just gradually drifted away from the religion (71%)
- Stopped believing in the religion's teachings (65%)
- Spiritual needs not being met (43%)
- Unhappy with teachings about the Bible (29%)
- Dissatisfaction with atmosphere at worship services (26%)
- Dissatisfied with clergy at congregation (18%)
- Found a religion they liked more (10%)

Between the Springfield and Pew surveys, we learn that there are two main groupings: people leave the Catholic Church because they drift away slowly and unintentionally, or they leave for specific, spiritual/theological reasons.



The Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey, found similar conclusions in a survey they commissioned in 2012. Like the Diocese of Springfield, they wanted to know why Catholics were leaving their parishes, so they interviewed nearly three hundred non-churchgoing Catholics to find out. Interestingly, about a quarter said they had separated themselves from the parish but still considered themselves to be Catholic. One respondent wrote, "I separated my family from the Catholic Church and turned to an alternate religion for a while and then returned knowing I had the right religion but the wrong people running it." Several chose to specify that they separated themselves from "the hierarchy." Many sociologists have noted that the millennial generation (those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s) are especially skeptical about institutions and authorities, and so they naturally grate against the hierarchical Catholic Church. In many cases, young people have no problem with Jesus but many problems with the Church.

A common theme in the Trenton survey was how the lack of community pushed people away. "As much as I wanted to get involved and expand my faith," said one respondent, "there were no clear avenues to do that. So, it was just a place to attend Mass. And because attending Mass was a guilt-ridden obligation, I was always alone in a crowd where I knew no one and no one knew me." Another said, "I did not experience community in the sense that I knew people just from going to church. The ones I knew, I knew them outside of church. No one misses the fact that we stopped going. No one has called from the parish, even though we were regular attendees and envelope users!"

### The Church's Sexual Teachings

While lots of young people drift away unintentionally, or for spiritual reasons, many rebel against the Church's sexual teachings, primarily those on homosexuality, abortion, contraception, divorce, and cohabitation. Recently, a teacher at a Catholic university handed out note cards on the first day of class. She asked her students to write down their answers to this question: "What do Christians believe?" A few of the answers, though not many, predictably centered around Jesus, Baptism, and salvation. But she was shocked

that almost every single card referenced homosexuality or abortion (and many listed both). Most references were negative. One student responded, “I know Christians don’t like gay people or women, but that’s all I ever learned in Christian school. I don’t know what else to list.”

Those students aren’t alone. Another recent Pew study found that among former Catholics who are now unaffiliated with any religion, 56% said they were unhappy with teachings on abortion and homosexuality; 48% were unhappy with teachings on birth control; 39% were unhappy with how the Church treated women; and 33% were unhappy with teachings on divorce and remarriage. A group of University of Notre Dame researchers found that despite distinctive and strong Catholic Church teachings against abortion, birth control, capital punishment, suicide, and divorce, the views of Catholic young adults on these issues “are nearly indistinguishable” from their non-Catholic counterparts.

What does this mean? It means the Church’s sexual teachings are leading many young people to leave and stay away from the Church. To give just one common example, for many young people Catholicism is no longer a serious option simply because they assume the Catholic Church condemns same-sex-attracted people. Since most of them have friends who identify as gay or lesbian, they feel they have to make a choice between the Catholic Church and those friends. And the friends almost always win.

Later in this book, we’ll see how this is a false choice. The Catholic Church doesn’t condemn same-sex-attracted people but instead lifts up their dignity, even while recognizing the disorder of sexual acts outside of marriage. You’ll learn how to delicately discuss this and the other sexual issues later.

But the point to realize now is that these obstacles may have played a large role in your child leaving the Church *and* may be great barriers to him returning.

## A Warped View of God

Most of the issues we’ve discussed so far are spiritual and moral. We’ve seen how people drift away because they aren’t spiritually fed or because they

disagree with the Church's sexual teachings. But a different problem, one that accentuates the others, is the way many young people misunderstand God.

Several studies over the last two decades have confirmed that most young people in America, churched and unchurched, believe in what sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have called "moralistic therapeutic deism." It's so critical to understand this misguided view about God, because it's likely this is a main reason your child resists the Catholic Church.

The authors sum up this "moralistic therapeutic deism" view in five statements:

**1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.** This is where we get the "deism" part. Catholicism is a form of *theism*, meaning it holds a personal God who continually interacts with his creation. Followers of *deism*, however, believe that God set the world in motion but rarely involves himself in daily affairs. He's like a watchmaker who places all the gears and springs and starts the watch, but then sits back as it runs on its own. Your child probably sees God this way—distant, uninvolved, and pleased to let the world just tick along. More than half (54%) of nominally Catholic young adults believe in God but think he is not personal, which is essentially deism. And if your child believes in deism more than theism, it's no surprise he has no personal connection to God or the Church. Thus, one of your first tasks is to make faith personal for him.

**2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.** This is the "moralistic" part. It assumes the goal of religion is simply to be nice to others. If you ask your fallen-away child, "What's the point of religion?" he'll likely offer some form of that answer: religion is about becoming a good person. This, of course, is a far cry from the core of Christianity, which is centered on knowing, loving, and imitating Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. True Christianity is about Christ's death and Resurrection, his forgiveness of our sins, and his reconciling all creation into a new and glorious kingdom, which begins

through his Church. Reducing that breathtaking vision to “just being nice” is like suggesting the Sistine Chapel is about “just some colors.”

It’s important to recognize this misperception because chances are, when you try to help your child “return to church” or “get right with God,” they’ll see those pursuits through a moralistic lens. They’ll assume you’re mainly interested in changing their *behavior* rather than drawing them into a dynamic relationship with God. This is why leading with moral commands can often harm your child’s chances of returning. But we’ll get to that later. For now, the key insight is that becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ *leads* to becoming a good person, but that’s not all it involves. True religion can’t be reduced to morals.

**3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about one-self.** This is the “therapeutic” part. It holds that the most important thing in life is to be happy and emotionally stable. C.S. Lewis gives voice to this view when he says, “What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, ‘What does it matter so long as they are contented?’ We want, in fact, not so much a Father in heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see the young people enjoying themselves’ and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day ‘a good time was had by all.’” On this view, God becomes a sort of cosmic therapist whose main goal is not to upset our feelings or bring us discomfort. Yet as Pope Benedict XVI affirmed, “We were not created for an easy life, but for great things, for goodness.” True Christianity leads to more than happy feelings, although they may come. Instead, it offers everlasting joy. As we all know, that sort of deep joy sometimes involves difficulty, pain, and discomfort along the way—you know this especially as a parent. Thus, the goal of life is not to feel good about ourselves; it’s to find joy in knowing and loving God.

**4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.** This is where each of the above three parts fit together. If we combine the deistic view of God with

his therapeutic role, we assume God exists to solve our problems. Need help studying for test? Ask for God's assistance. Receive a bad diagnosis? Time to turn to "the big guy." Strapped for money? Ask God to send some funds your way. To be clear, these requests are not bad in themselves. In fact, we're encouraged to bring our greatest needs to God. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The problem arises when the *only* times we turn to God are when we need help, when "asking" becomes our only form of prayer.

Imagine if you had a friend and the only time you ever talked to him was when you needed a favor—and only huge favors. That's not real friendship. Any relationship predicated *only* on begging is not a mutual relationship.

**5. Good people go to heaven when they die.** Finally, this part assumes that we earn our way to heaven simply by being good people. It's the effect of reducing religion down to morality. Decent people are automatically saved because of their decency and since every person is essentially decent, pretty much everyone will be saved (except maybe Hitler and Judas). You can only lose salvation by doing something really, really bad like mass murder, and then not saying you're sorry. On this view, we earn our own salvation by doing nice things and avoiding really, really bad things.

So, look back over these five characteristics. Do you think they describe the way your child sees God? Do they describe the way *you* see God? In either case, you'll learn in the coming chapters how to reorient this perspective. But the point is clear: if someone has a dramatically warped view about God, that's the first thing we need to address before helping him to return to God out of love.

### The Ultimate Reason Why Anyone Leaves the Church

We've now covered several common reasons why young people leave the Church, and chances are at least one will strongly resonate with your child's situation. However, consider a boat untethered from the dock, drifting out to sea. We can observe factors that *pull* the boat out (e.g., the wind and waves)

but also factors that allowed the boat to leave in the first place—namely, that it was not properly tethered to the dock, or anchored. Most young people who leave the Church are easily pulled away because they have nothing anchoring them to stay.

To put it simply, the ultimate reason people leave the faith is because they're not rooted in a living encounter with Jesus in the Church. If they consistently encounter the Lord in the Church, then despite all the problems, frustrations, scandals, and pain they may suffer and observe, they would nevertheless echo St. Peter's reply to Jesus when he asked whether the disciples would leave him: "Master, to whom shall we go?" (John 6:68).

Catholics have a specific term for the act of helping people encounter Jesus: *evangelization*. To *evangelize* means to announce the Good News of Jesus raised from the dead and help others to personally encounter him.

But over the last several decades, we've done a poor job at that. As many Church leaders have pointed out, most people raised in the Church are baptized. Many are catechized. But few are evangelized. Most have moved through institutional and sacramental funnels, but they have not truly encountered the Lord Jesus in a personal, profound way.

If we want to prevent our children from leaving the Church, and if we want to win them back after they've drifted, we need to create what Pope Francis calls a "culture of encounter," which unites young people to Jesus *through* his Church, not in spite of it.

The whole second part of this book will show you how to do that. But before we get there, let's focus on another important question. We now have a good sense of why young people leave the Church. But when they leave, where are they going?

## CHAPTER 2

### *Where Are They Going?*

It's the major religious story of the past twenty-five years: the meteoric rise of the "nones." These are people who check the "none" box on religious surveys, signaling they don't associate themselves with any religious tradition. Sociologists often group the "nones" alongside smaller nonbelieving groups such as atheists (who don't believe in God) and agnostics (who are not sure whether God exists) to create the broad category of the "religiously unaffiliated."

From 2007 to 2014, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated Americans soared from 16% to 23%. That 7% gain, which represents around 19 million people, was more than five times higher than the gain of any other group. What does that mean? It means the "nones" are taking over—and fast.

This is bad news for all religious groups, but especially Catholics, since we're suffering the greatest losses to the "nones." Among the nonreligious, 21% were raised in an unaffiliated home, while 28% were raised Catholic—more than any other tradition. That means if you bump into the average unaffiliated adult, he's more likely to have been raised Catholic than anything else.

The percentage of those who identify as "nones" is even higher among young people. In 2014, the median age of the entire US population was forty-six. The median age of Catholics was forty-nine. The median age of the unaffiliated? Just thirty-six.

When we focus only on millennials, those born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s, roughly 35% identify as religiously unaffiliated compared to just 16% who identify as Catholic. In other words, young people are now *twice* as likely to say they have no religion than to identify as Catholic.

Now, I don't want to overwhelm you with statistics. So let's pause, step back, and focus on the big picture that all these statistics point toward. Here it is:

*If you raised your child Catholic, there's a roughly 50% chance he left the Church before turning thirty. And if he did so, he likely became unaffiliated, no longer identifying with any religion.*

However, it's important to note that unaffiliated isn't the only label former Catholics settle on. According to the Pew Research Center, here's a breakdown of where they end up.

## Where Do Former Catholics End Up?

### **Unaffiliated (49%)**

We discussed the unaffiliated above, so we don't need to spend much more time on them. This is a broad group that includes about half the Catholics who leave the Church. It's also diverse, encompassing many categories of unbelief or quasi-belief: active seekers, the "spiritual but not religious" crowd, agnostics, and hardcore atheists. Some of their traits may surprise you:

- 68% say that they "believe in God or a universal spirit" (30% say that they are "absolutely certain" of this)
- 37% say that they are "spiritual but not religious"
- 21% report that they pray daily
- 18% consider themselves "a religious person"
- 14% say that "religion is very important in their life," despite not committing to a particular tradition
- 12% identify as "atheists"

Many parents worry that "unaffiliated" means "atheist." They think that if their child leaves his religion behind, he also turns his back on God. But that's not often the case. In fact, nearly seven-in-ten unaffiliateds still believe in God. Many of them also pray daily and consider religion important in their lives.

So even if your child no longer identifies as Catholic and would answer "none" if you asked which religion he identifies with, there's a decent chance he still has some traces of faith. This is important and will be helpful later on as you learn to tap into those religious vestiges in order to draw him back.



### **Evangelical (25%)**

In his book *Search and Rescue*, Catholic apologist Patrick Madrid shares the story of a young man named Rick. Rick was raised in a good Catholic home, and his parents took him to Mass every Sunday. They taught him his prayers, drove him to altar-boy practice, and made sure he attended CCD classes. His parents scrimped and budgeted so he could attend a Catholic high school, where they assumed he would remain Catholic. But after he went off to college, they discovered he had become friendly with a large, dynamic group of Evangelical Protestant students who met every week for Bible study.

Madrid asks you to imagine yourself as Rick's parents: "At first, you were happy to see him remaining interested in religious issues, so you didn't give it much thought when he began quoting Bible verses when he came home on weekends. . . . [But] eventually, you noticed his vocabulary changing. He started saying things like 'The Lord spoke to my heart about this' and 'Praise God about that.' . . . Before long, he broke the news to you that he's no longer a Catholic. He left, he explained, because his Evangelical friends convinced him that the Catholic Church is unbiblical and that her traditions are man-made and her doctrines are false."

If your son is like Rick, Madrid counsels, you shouldn't despair. "Even though Rick may think he has already discovered the answers in his new church, he still wants, deep down, to grapple with what the Catholic Church claims to be true. Believe it or not, that makes it easier to bring him back to the Church."

Typically, people who leave the Church to join an Evangelical or non-denominational community display a deep spiritual hunger, a strong appreciation for the Bible, a dynamic prayer life, and are heavily involved in activities, ministries, and small groups. These are all good things that can translate easily back to the Catholic Church.

### **Mainline Protestant (13%)**

The mainline Protestant communities, which include Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians, draw a significant number of Catholics away from the Church, often through a mixed marriage. Catholics marrying a

mainline Protestant will frequently change religions shortly before or after the wedding to satisfy their spouse and achieve religious harmony in the home.

However, as the general size of mainline Protestant communities continues to plummet, this group is shrinking as well. The share of mainline Protestant Americans dropped from 18% in 2007 to 14% in 2014.

For former Catholics, mainline communities often serve as stepping-stones down the path toward becoming unaffiliated. Many people who leave the Catholic Church for a mainline Protestant denomination find that after a few years they've stopped attending church altogether.

### **Other (13%)**

This last destination includes a broad and eclectic range of religious groups. Some who end up here become Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. Both groups are known for their masterful evangelism, going door-to-door and park-to-park to find new converts. They offer warm, tight-knit communities that make it easy to stay once you've been drawn in. It's not uncommon for Catholics to be sucked into one of these groups, especially if they don't know their faith too well or if they marry someone who is part of the community.

## **Six Main Types of Fallen-Away Catholics**

Most of the data above, while helpful, concerns religious identification. In other words, it deals with the answers people give to the question, "What religion do you hold?" But that data doesn't tell the whole story, since it doesn't look behind the label to the real thoughts and personalities of the drifters.

So let's turn now to some of the most common profiles of former Catholics. These profiles don't perfectly align with the labels in the last section. For example, you can find "shruggers" (which I'll explain in a moment) who still identify as Catholic, and others who become Evangelical. While the labels above draw outlines of those who have drifted, the descriptions below color those outlines in.

See if you recognize your child in one or more of these descriptions.

## Cultural Catholics

I focus on this one first because people in this group straddle the line between being in the Church and having drifted away. Though it contains a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices, it usually includes those for whom “Catholic” is more of a cultural, ethnic, or familial label than a personally meaningful identity that shapes their lives. They still might come to Mass because of family, but they aren’t personally connected to God or the sacraments. (People in this group are sometimes negatively referred to as “C&E Christians” since they rarely show up outside of Christmas and Easter.)

Cultural Catholics often still identify as “Catholic.” Thus, they don’t technically count as “unaffiliateds” or “nones.” But for all intents and purposes, they’ve drifted from the Church. Their bodies sometimes show up in Mass, but their minds and hearts are far away. They float on the margins, often with much disinterest, confusion, and not a little dissent.

Almost every survey confirms that *most* self-identifying Catholics in America fit this description, meaning most US Catholics are “cultural Catholics.”

A perfect example is Rob, who was interviewed during a large study on young adults and religion. When the interviewer asked about his religion, he said “Catholic,” but when the interviewer asked what he meant by that, he said, “I believe in God and basically I celebrate Christmas.”

Rachel offers a similar view. Although she drifted away from church in college and hasn’t been to Mass in eight years, she says, “I don’t necessarily feel like I’ve ‘left’ the church so much as taking a decent sized hiatus. I still identify as Catholic. I simply don’t practice anymore.”

So what’s the problem with “cultural Catholicism”? The problem is that it masks a lifeless and decaying faith life. Few “cultural Catholics” have a living, personal relationship with Jesus in his Church, but worse, they don’t *realize* they’re missing out because they think the label and occasional church attendance is enough.

With an atheist, you at least have someone who *knows* they aren’t Catholic. Therefore, becoming a fully active Catholic requires a significant, intentional shift in their life. But “cultural Catholics” already think of

themselves as Catholic. It's much harder to convince them that by attending Mass sporadically or living against the Church's teaching, they're in fact missing out on the fullness of Catholic life.

On the other hand, as sociologist Christian Smith notes, "cultural Catholics" sometimes stand a better chance of actually returning to the Church than estranged Catholics, because, "while they disagree with the Church on some points, they are not generally hostile toward the faith, but rather see it as a positive source of family identity and togetherness."

"Cultural Catholicism" isn't an insurmountable problem, and we'll see later how to help this type return to a full and thriving life of discipleship.

### **The Shruggers**

One mother wrote to me saying, "My oldest son left the Church because of complacency. I asked if he was mad about anything the Church teaches and he said, 'No.' I think it is just general laziness. He works in a restaurant/bar and getting up early on Sunday is difficult."

Bishop Robert Barron describes this young man's attitude as indicative of the "meh" culture, an allusion to the ambivalent response many young people give toward faith—"meh" or "whatever," usually alongside a shrug of their shoulders (thus the other label sociologists apply to this group: the "shruggers").

Molly Oshatz, a Catholic who once identified as a "meh" young adult herself, writes about this growing trend. "Forty-four percent of the respondents to a 2011 Baylor University study reported spending no time whatsoever seeking 'eternal wisdom,' and 19 percent replied that 'it's useless to search for purpose.' In the same year, Lifeway, an evangelical research agency, found that 46 percent of those it surveyed never wondered whether or not they will go to heaven, and 28 percent reported that finding a deeper purpose in life wasn't a priority for them." In other words, when it comes to God and the Big Questions of life, many young people today aren't just confused—they don't even care.

This religious indifference inevitably leads to the belief that *no* religion matters at all, or that religion is akin to a sort of recreational

hobby—something like quilting or coin-collecting. A “shrugger” may say, “If you’re into religion, that’s great for you, but I prefer sports or reading (or sleeping) instead.”

How do they develop this “meh” attitude? Sometimes it’s rooted in the desire to appear open-minded, a valued trait among young people today. But as G.K. Chesterton observed, open-mindedness is not a virtue in itself—it’s a pit stop on the way to finding truth. “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth,” he wrote, “is to shut it again on something solid.” To shrug off religion in the name of “open-mindedness” is a sign of stagnancy, not progress.

Others develop their “meh” attitude through lethargy. The lazy seeker wanders around aimlessly, neither committing to a particular religion nor even believing such a commitment is worth making. Meaning of life? Eternal joy? The value of faith? Meh. This indecision, of course, eventually becomes a decision to oppose *all* religions—an “I don’t care” now becomes an “I reject all” at death. Frank Sheed and Maisie Ward, two prominent evangelists in twentieth-century England, agreed that such a position is, literally, insane: “A man may investigate the claims of religion and accept them; he may investigate those claims and reject them; and in both cases he is acting like a sane man. But a man who simply ignores the whole thing is acting like a fool.”

If your child is a “shrugger,” your main task will be to convince him that the Big Questions of life matter, that it’s worth seeking answers about God, morals, and meaning. He needs to see what the convert C.S. Lewis came to realize, that “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.” Similarly, when it comes to the person at the center of Christianity, Lewis notes that “Jesus produced mainly three effects: hatred, terror, adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.”

In the second part of this book, you’ll learn how to transform your child’s indifferent shrugs into genuine interest, but for now just know that the key involves presenting the stark truth of Jesus and Christianity in a way that demands he make a choice. The Big Questions of life, including those of Christianity, must be answered; they can’t be ignored forever.

### **The “Spiritual But Not Religious”**

This group still falls under the “unaffiliated” label, but they are quite different from other subsets of the unaffiliated. Typically, they reject religion, liturgy, doctrines, and dogmas, but they still believe in God or a higher power, still pray, and still seek experiences of God.

Many of the “spiritual but not religious” claim they don’t need to go to church because they can find God anywhere—in a beautiful sunset, through movies and music, during yoga, or while gazing on mountains or the ocean waves. Stephen, who grew up Catholic but no longer attends Mass, explains, “I can go on a 40-mile bike ride and get as much from it as I can from going to church. Nature to me is what God is all about. It’s a renewal.”

These people naturally see the Mass through the frame of feelings and experience. They think the Mass is fundamentally designed to evoke feelings of wonder and awe, and to generate religious sensations. While those are some of the effects of Mass, and a reverently celebrated liturgy can and should do all those things, the Mass is about something much more, as we’ll come to see. It’s about a real encounter with the living God through Word and sacrament, an encounter that simply can’t be matched by a bike trip or mountain vista.

### **Moral Movers**

Jason was a typical Catholic growing up. His family regularly attended Mass, and he went through Catholic schools, but nothing really stuck. When he got to college, he stopped attending church. There he met Jessica, a beautiful young woman, and they quickly fell in love. After graduating, Jason and Jessica decided to move in together. As marriage came on the horizon, Jason thought about possibly returning to the Church to celebrate their wedding in his local parish. But when he inquired about that possibility, his living situation became a problem. The priest suggested that before they get married, Jason and Jessica live apart or at least cease their sexual relations. Jason balked at the idea and decided if that was really the Catholic Church’s position, then returning to the Church was no longer an option.

Like Jason, many people leave the Church (and stay away) because of her moral teachings on topics such as contraception, abortion, homosexuality, or

divorce and remarriage. These people aren't necessarily evil or egotistical. They typically pursue what they think are truly good things—love, sexual intimacy, personal freedom. They just think the Church is misguided in her teachings. However, in my experience, most of these people have very distorted ideas about what the Church teaches and why.

Drawing a “moral mover” back to the Church can be tricky. If your child's moral hang-up involved a one-time decision, such as an abortion, perhaps one that occurred many years ago, that rift can be healed rather easily through the sacrament of Confession. But if your “moral mover” is involved in a more continuous practice, such as a homosexual or cohabiting relationship, the journey back to the Church may be more challenging (though not impossible). We'll handle these particular cases later in the book, providing a roadmap for each of them.

### **Religious Switchers**

A large percentage of former Catholics end up switching to another faith, usually to an Evangelical or nondenominational Protestant tradition. They often do so for spiritual reasons. One of the biggest complaints made by former Catholics is that they “weren't being spiritually fed” in their Catholic parish. Others switch because their spouse has a different faith and they want to preserve religious harmony.

“Switchers take a wide range of personal journeys to end up in a different religious group from the one in which they began,” explains researcher Christian Smith. “However, it does seem that personal connections to others outside of the Catholic faith and a dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church in general or a home parish in particular are factors that contribute to a lot of switching.”

Bringing “switchers” back can be both easier and harder than helping other types of former Catholics. On the positive side, “switchers” generally have a real passion for faith, as well as specific reasons why they left. Unlike the “cultural Catholics” or “shruggers,” they actually know why they're not fully Catholic. That makes it easier for you to home in on their primary hang ups.

But on the other hand, the reason why “switchers” leave can often be strong and deeply felt, which can be challenging. For example, if your child became Mormon to satisfy a Mormon spouse, convincing him to return to the Catholic Church isn’t just an intellectual appeal—you’re asking him to potentially upset the harmony of his marriage. Later we’ll learn how to deal with these prickly sorts of issues and help religious “switchers” revert back to the Church.

### **Skeptics**

Although atheists (3%) and agnostics (4%) make up a relatively small part of the population, I’m constantly surprised by the many stories I hear of young people leaving Catholicism for one or the other. The number of atheists and agnostics, often grouped together as “skeptics,” continues to expand rapidly. Their numbers have doubled over the last decade, in no small part due to Catholics: 12% of former Catholics identify as atheist and 16% as agnostic.

Why the sudden surge of skepticism? It was fueled, in part, by polemical books written by the so-called “New Atheists” during the early 2000s. This group included writers such as Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*), and Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*), each of whom wrote bestselling books denouncing God. Their books were characteristically harsh and full of mockery and insults toward religious people and were meant to dissuade Christians by depicting their faith as violent, irrational, and even dangerous. Although the New Atheist rhetoric has been exposed as more heat than substance, young people across the world have gravitated to it, especially on college campuses. Chances are high that if your child has come out as an atheist, he has read one of these books.

Many parents despair when learning their child no longer believes in God. It might seem the child is as far away from faith as possible, and that it’s impossible for him to return to the Church. Yet in my experience working with thousands of atheists through my Catholic-atheist dialogue website [StrangeNotions.com](http://StrangeNotions.com), I’ve discovered that many atheists are closer to the Church than we might assume.



Why? Two reasons. First, they're generally open-minded and are willing to investigate the God question through reading and dialogue. This is great for Catholics hoping to win them back to the truth. Second, atheists are typically passionate about the question of God, even if they answer it negatively. Sometimes it's easier to win an atheist back to faith than someone who just doesn't care (like the "cultural Catholics" or "shruggers"). Atheists, even if they don't believe in God, at least acknowledge that the question is worth considering and discussing.

\* \* \*

As we saw in the last chapter, there isn't just one type of "fallen-away Catholic." Every person, and every journey away from the Church, is unique. Hopefully among these different destinations and types, you've been able to develop a clearer picture of where your child may be, religiously and mentally. If not, don't worry. Later in the book, you'll learn how to elicit these exact answers, directly from your child.

Now, though, after wrapping our heads around the general problem, we'll turn to five big myths about fallen-away Catholics that prevent many parents from helping their children return.