

How to bring our family back to the Church

Step 1: Grow in holiness



SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

If we are to bring our family and friends back to the Church, it must be attractive to them. The most powerful thing we can do to make the Church attractive is to live a life of holiness. The joy that comes from true communion with God is very enticing and compelling. We will bring far more souls to Christ by demonstrating this Christian joy than through any other method. Said another way, we evangelize with our actions and our lives far more than we do with our words. As Saint Francis is famously paraphrased as saying “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.” (Actual quote: “Yes, the true servant unceasingly rebukes the wicked, but he does it most of all by his conduct, but the truth that shines in his words, by the light of his example, by all the radiance of his life.”)

Step 2: Rid your soul of all ego

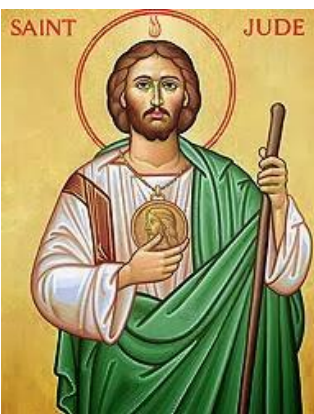
We must ***REALLY*** ask ourselves the question: “Why do I want to help my family members come back to the Church?” Don’t answer that question too quickly... let the question sink in for a while. We must dig deeply into the recesses of our minds and our motivations. Too often the answer is somehow connected to our pride. We’re embarrassed to admit to our friends that “we failed” as parents. We feel like we’ve been disrespected by our children. There’s a whole host of reasons we might want them back that are too self-centered. Until the answer is 100% fully and truly “because I want what is best for them”, we’re not ready to reach out to them. If we don’t have humility, we are almost guaranteed to fail.

Step 3: Pray for them

It is said that Saint Monica went to her bishop to complain about her lack of progress in helping her son (the eventual Saint) Augustine come to the Catholic Faith. “Augustine won’t listen to me,” she bemoaned. The Bishop wisely counseled her, “Speak less to Augustine about God and more to God about Augustine.” We must never forget the power of prayer. We would do better to spend 90% of our time praying for their coming home and 10% talking to them about it, than the other way around. By the way, prayer time is a great way to validate our true motives from Step 2 and to grow in holiness.



Step 4: Apologize for your failures

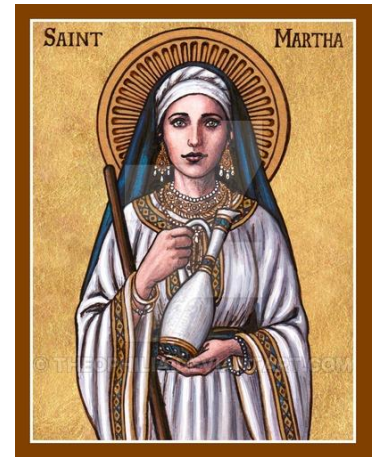


Once we’ve grown in holiness, rid ourselves of ego and prayed unceasingly, then and only then, are we finally ready to talk to them. For most of us, this will not be the first time we’ve brought up the subject. It’s also likely the case that many of our past attempts have not gone particularly well and we share a fair amount of the blame for that. (If you don’t feel that way, make sure you’ve really gone through Step 2... there may be some digging you need to do.)

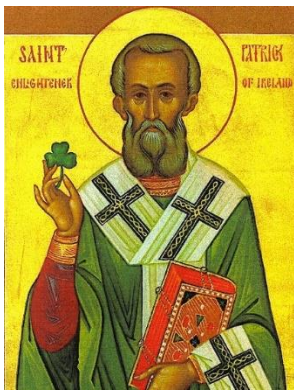
The good news is that we’ve likely already got them curious what’s going on because we just spent the last 6 months ***not*** incessantly badgering them like we usually do, because we spent that time on steps 1, 2 and 3. Chances are they’re already wanting to talk with us to understand the changes that have been occurring. This gives us a wonderful opportunity to unleash on them the most powerful practical tool we have as Christians: Repenting and asking for forgiveness. This is not some one sentence, fleeting apology. We must find a time to sit down with them privately and uninterrupted for a half hour or more. It must be full of tear-filled sincerity. It must not have any caveats or conditions (never use the word “but” (I’m sorry but...)). We should probably write down all the things we want to apologize for, just like we often do before we go into the confessional. We don’t want to forget anything.

Step 5: Listen to them

Once we've apologized, our family members may have something they want to tell us. It may be anger. It may be frustration. They may even surprise us with an apology of their own. Whatever they have to say, there is one important key: Listening. This must be the one and only goal we have when they decide to open up to us and speak. We will undermine everything we've just done if we respond. It will make our apology seem insincere, as if it was only motivated by the desire to have a new strategy for badgering them. There will be plenty of opportunities later for us to respond. Instead, we must prove how sincere our apology was and how much we've transformed our approach by listening with an open heart and working hard to internalize what they are saying. In fact, we must go beyond their actual words, to see through to what they might be unwilling or unable to say. One final thought: We must not fall for the temptation of letting listening be a one-time event. It must be an on-going point of emphasis every time they talk to us.



Step 6: Enlist the help of others



If we've done step 5 well, we've given ourselves a secret weapon that can be used for the glory of Christ: We ***actually*** know how to help them. If we're still feeling unclear about how to help them, perhaps we need to spend more time listening. That means finding more opportunities to listen. But even once we know what they need to grow closer to Christ, we must tread carefully. Sometimes we are exactly the wrong person to help them. (Again, listening will help us discern how much this is the case.) Ireland was not converted by the Pope or by some European evangelist. Instead, it was St. Patrick, someone who had been enslaved in Ireland as a youth, someone who understood the heart of the Irish Druid culture, who was able to convert their hearts. We must honestly ask the question of who is best positioned to help them. (Remember step 2... we must keep our ego out of this.) It may be an author of a book, or someone who publishes videos. It may be a friend of theirs, or a local clergyman. It may be a group that meets regularly they could join. But whoever it is, it must be someone who will resonate with ***them***, not with us. Finally, once we've found that person, we must not be afraid to ask for their help. As an added bonus, that outside perspective might help us see some things that we are blind to because we are too close to the situation.

Step 7: Be both patient and unrelenting

If we've made it this far, there are only a few things that can stand in the way of accomplishing our goal of bringing our family members back to Christ's Church:

- **Becoming impatient or desperate:** One of the worst things we can do to undermine the progress we've made is to get frustrated and let our frustrations get the best of us. It can undo all the progress we've made. When this happens, we must recognize this as a sign of impatience and desperation. We must remember that conversion happens on God's time, not ours. We must remember that we are only vessels of God's grace, and that it is never our doing when people come back to the faith... it's God's doing. If we can accept that, hopefully we can see that the timeline is not important. Our job is to be constant in our love for them and never give in to desperation or impatience.
- **Giving up hope:** The inverse of becoming impatient is despair. We must remember that hope is never lost. Even if it has been years; Even if every passing year seems they grow farther from the Church; even if you've made countless mistakes in trying to help them... miracles happen every day. God's grace abounds everywhere. This is why we must be unceasing in our prayer for their conversion of heart and never give up hope. We must never be unwilling to repeat the above steps over and over and over and over again.
- **Becoming predictable or stale:** We must be unrelenting in our willingness to do whatever it takes. We must never be afraid to try something new or to ask for yet another person's help. Don't let yourself get stuck in a rut of having the same discussion over and over again with your family members. If it didn't work before, it probably won't work the 2nd or 3rd time either. Listen to their feedback honestly and try something new.

Do's and Don'ts for bringing our family back to the Church

This is a companion to the 'How to bring our family back to the Church' handout (called the 'How To' going forward). That handout is the far more important than this handout. If you don't take the right conceptual approach, observing the following tactical guidance will be of little help. If our souls are not properly prepared, even the right approach can quickly go wrong. However, once we've committed to taking the right approach, there are some more practically oriented things we can do to that will aid in the cause.

Do's: (things that will help reach our family)

- Do give them books, videos and audio (particularly for those who have long commutes and like to listen to things like books on tape in the car). One of the reasons people don't like to ask questions is that they dislike getting into arguments. Books, videos and audio are much less threatening in this regard than a person because your family members can "walk away" whenever they need a break or decide they don't like it anymore.
- If they are someone who has moved in a secular direction, make sure to emphasize that we are not fundamentalists Christians. Too often the further people get from the Church, the more all Christians look the same to them. When that happens, they can think that us Catholics share some of the unfortunate beliefs other Christians groups hold, particularly those that get a lot of press (being anti-science, being tied to one political party, being hateful to various groups (homosexuals, immigrants, other faith groups, etc.)). Remind them that these Christian groups are wrong about these things and the Catholic Church stands firmly against them.
- If they are someone who has moved the direction of other Christian churches, make sure to frequently reference the bible's support for Catholic positions. Most other Christian churches are very suspicious of any teachings they can't directly support with the bible. Supporting Catholic beliefs with the Bible will be much more convincing to them than other approaches
- Do emphasize that the Church makes mistakes. Particularly in the current era, where there are numerous high profile and very unfortunate human failings of the Church, it is foolish to pretend our Church is a perfect Church. Let them know that it has always been the teaching of the Church that we fail and make mistakes and that this happens at every level of the hierarchy. Point them to examples of the Pope and the Bishops apologizing for their mistakes. Remind them that we preach about and strive for perfection, but know we are constantly coming up short.
- Do your research. Make sure you really understand what the Church teaches before you try to teach your family. Make sure you reference and read official Church documents like the Catechism or council documents.

Don'ts: (things that will drive our family away)

- Don't give them a book or a movie/video that you haven't fully reviewed yourself. As mentioned in Step 6 of the 'How To', we need to introduce them to people who will resonate with ***them***, not us. How will you know that if you don't look at it first? Sadly, far too many books theoretically aimed at potential converts only "preach to the choir" and non-Catholics find them very unconvincing. Additionally, it's disrespectful to give someone "homework" if you're not willing to do the same work you ask of them.
- Once you've given them something to read, watch or listen to, let them decide if they later want to talk about it. The best way to get them ***not*** to look at it, is to constantly badger them about whether they have looked at it. If you don't hear anything back, you'll know the answer of whether it helped.
- Don't resort to scare tactics like admonishing them that they could be going to hell. Perhaps in a different era that strategy may have had more success, but in the post-modern era, it isn't very compelling to most people. Furthermore, we want our family to desire to be close to God and His Church, not end up there merely because they fear the alternative. That doesn't make good disciples.
- Don't ever get in a heated argument. Whenever things are headed that direction, it is best to apologize and suggest that it is time to take a break from the conversation. But at the same time, don't leave! Leaving gives the appearance of being angry or disappointed. Instead, change the focus of the gathering to something that will bring you closer together, whether it be pictures of the grandkids, a card game, a movie or a nice meal.