

radio and television programming are becoming more available. These resources will answer many of his questions and reveal to him — often, for the first time — the "splendor of truth." Finally, introduce him to your devout Catholic friends. There's nothing quite like being surrounded by good role models. With God's grace, at some point, your friend may begin to come around. At that time, you'll want to bring him to a good priest. Try to find one who's eager to hear confessions, give spiritual direction and embrace this prodigal son. You may want to fill the priest in on the particulars of how your friend got to this point. After that, let him apply God's saving grace in confession and any other sacramental ministrations that are necessary to bring him home.

But what if your efforts do not bear visible fruit? What if your friend continues on his runaway from God and towards perdition? Just remember, "It ain't over till its over." Continue to pray, sacrifice and let your friend know you love him unconditionally in the Lord. God tells us that He gives us whatever we ask for in prayer, so we must raise this person up to God in our intercessions. God will answer us in His own way and in His own time.

While we are overjoyed with the repentance of one lost sheep, we know there are millions more to round up. In the meantime, we have the consolation of James 5:1-20: "My brethren, if anyone among you wanders

from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

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Pamphlet 563

Recovering Stray Catholics

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Bringing 'em on home, one lost sheep at a time.

One of the monumental missions of the Catholic Church in the next millennium will be to recover our lost sheep. There are many millions of these fallen-away Catholics. We have to be like the merciful father who rushes out to meet them half way and then escorts them back home. Fortunately, our lapsed Catholic relatives, friends and colleagues are normally only one good confession away from reconciliation with Christ, one step away from entrance into the Father's loving embrace. We have to stay with them till the end with our prayer, sacrifice and friendship. The Lord tells us that "the Son of Man came to save what was lost. What do you think? If a man have a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it. . . he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:11-14).

Let's look at the present situation. Out of approximately 60 million nominal Catholics, only 25% or so actually practice their faith (even minimally) by attending Sunday Mass regularly and confession yearly. The other

45 million Catholics are lukewarm (we know what Our Lord said about that!). They are simply "sacramental" Catholics, taking part in the Faith at a few key moments: baptism, marriage, wake and funeral (hatched, matched and dispatched). Of course, there are probably millions of former Catholics who aren't even on the books. These are individuals who have openly and definitively left the Church. They don't profess or live a prayerful, sacramental life. They don't behave according to the teachings of the Church or see these teachings as authoritative or Divine. Some merely drift off into a comfortable American bourgeois existence of work and play.

Others pay lip-service to the Christian creed by worshipping in mainstream liberal Protestant churches (talk about jumping into a sinking ship). Many others have joined Evangelical and Fundamentalist denominations, or strange sects and cults. This movement is all in the great American subjective spirit of the individual as the sole arbiter of Sacred Scripture and his own conscience. "To worship the God of your choice," as one former president put it, "is the American way of life." "They sing of and worship themselves," as poet Walt Whitman might have written. Not one of the readers of this article is without a friend, relative, colleague or acquaintance who does not fit into one of these categories.

How many tears have been shed over the defection of literally millions of Catholics the last thirty years? Why have these people left the Church? It is, first of all, a mystery.

We cannot peer into their heads or their hearts. Ultimately, they're responsible before God for their decisions. The Catechism, however, gives us some clues: "Ignorance of Christ and his Gospel, bad example given by others, enslavement to one's passions, assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience, rejection of the Church's authority and her teaching, lack of conversion and of charity: these can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct" (CCC 1792). The great majority of people who leave the Church do so because of moral faults. They're not ready to submit their sins to God and to the Church's judgment and mercy through the sacrament of penance. This unwillingness to ask God's forgiveness for having offended Him leads to rationalization and self-justification. Over time, this leads to a loss of the virtues of faith, hope and charity, which are necessary for eternal life.

So, how do we bring back stray Catholics? First, we should be praying for conversion of their hearts. If their hearts come back, their minds will follow. We also need to have a relationship of friendship with the potential revert. True friendship means sharing ourselves without reserve. For a Catholic, this includes sharing Christ and His Church. We have no axes to grind, ulterior motives or hidden agendas. We don't come to judge, condemn, analyze or disdain. Rather, our goal is to help our friend find eternal life. Perhaps the first approach to bring the fallen away Catholic back is to ask, in a friendly manner, why he left the Church in the first place. We know, of

course, there's no such thing as a "good reason" to leave the Church. There are plenty of bad ones, however, and your friend will provide a few.

You must be sympathetic and understanding while at the same time, uncompromising in your defense of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. Once you've heard him out, you can begin to address his problems or objections. Rely on the Holy Spirit here. You want to be able to convincingly "account for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15). This may well involve your own study of the particular teachings of the Church to which your friend objects.

However, the ability to answer your friend's doctrinal questions will probably not be sufficient to bring him back. There is something else, just as important. He needs to see that you're a happy, well-adjusted Catholic. By observing your prayer, frequent confession and Mass, and Scripture reading, he'll notice the connection between the interior and exterior life of a Catholic — and how the sacraments work in both. You may have to gradually reintroduce him to Catholic sacramental and liturgical practice. Bring him to Mass, make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, explain the meaning of Catholic customs and sacramentals to him. He probably never understood these Catholic practices in the first place.

You'll also want to see he has good Catholic books and pamphlets. Expose him to Web sites like www.catholicity.com, ewtn.com and www.envoymagazine.com. Catholic