

I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU TOOK ME IN

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I WAS A STRANGER
and YOU TOOK ME IN

A Guide for Ministering to
Returning Catholics

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DEDICATION

*I dedicate this book
to the memory of
Sr. Anita Sherwood, OSB,
who mentored me
and taught me so much
about how to share
the love of God.*

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INTRODUCTION

I have ministered in the Catholic Church for forty years—as a volunteer, as a professional, and again as a volunteer. One of the many ministries I worked in was service to inactive Catholics who were thinking about returning to an active practice of their faith. In this ministry, especially, I came to see that one needs to tread gently because we are working with people who have broken hearts and wounds. I would venture to say that this is more a ministry of healing than of catechesis. Although catechesis is certainly part of it, we must first invite God to mend and heal.

I have seen this ministry done very well, and I have seen it done poorly. I write this book as an invitation to you who are in parish ministry to do it well. I certainly do not have all the answers, but over the years I have seen and been a part of what works for folks. God bless you as you welcome home the stranger.



WHY PEOPLE LEAVE

“**M**y mother lay dying in the hospital,” the woman told me. “She was a devout Catholic all her life, and I know it was important to her to have a priest anoint her and give her viaticum in her final hours. It was the middle of the night, and I called our local Catholic parish and asked them to send a priest as soon as possible. A priest never came! My mother died without the benefit of the sacraments. I was very upset and angry! I haven’t been inside a Catholic church since my mom’s funeral.”

I have heard stories like this many times. There are many possible reasons why a priest didn’t come: he didn’t receive the message; he fell back to sleep; his car wouldn’t start; he got stuck in traffic...who knows? But the perception of this daugh-

ter is that the church (generalized from a single member of the clergy) was not there for her when she needed it. Some would say that maybe she was ready to leave the church anyway. Maybe so, but even if that's true, the reasons for that are equally worthy of exploration. We needed to hear and respond to her where she was, and that didn't happen.

Once, when I was a patient in a hospital, a Catholic priest came into my room. He did not introduce himself, nor did he ask me my name. He anointed me (sacrament of the sick) and gave me Eucharist and left without much to say! The whole encounter lasted less than five minutes.

The sacraments are wonderful opportunities for extending the love and warmth of Christ and his church. In the opening example I shared, the dying mother and her daughter may very well have been open to healing and compassion.

In my case, sickness exposed my vulnerability. Ministers have to respect the sick person's dignity and the freedom to say yes or no to what the church offers.

People Whose Parents Drifted

Sometimes people have been born into the faith and received one or more of the sacraments, but are pulled out of active practice by disillusioned or disengaged parents.

Just a few months ago, a woman in our parish RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) process, whom I will call Ann, was confirmed and received first Eucharist. She was born in Vietnam to American parents at the end of the war when all the refugees were leaving. Her father did not want to start the perilous evacuation journey home with his family until she was baptized, so he found a Catholic priest to baptize her when she

was six days old. By the time the baptism occurred, they were the second-to-last American family to leave for the States.

Not too long after their arrival, the father, never happy about the changes from the Second Vatican Council, became increasingly angry about them. He left the church and took his family with him. Ann's older brother and sister had received their sacraments of initiation, but Ann had only been baptized. When their mother died, Ann and her sister decided to return to the church. Ann came to our RCIA process and completed her sacramental initiation. Her sister was her sponsor. Her brother, although he had not returned to an active practice of the faith, attended his sister's initiation and celebrated with them. I see the women regularly at Mass, and perhaps the brother will someday return. Their father's anger at the church forced them to leave the church, but the death of their mother showed them that they needed faith in their lives.

In the first parish where I worked, I started an RCIA process—a somewhat daring step, since only the 1979 provisional rite had been promulgated. A man came to my office and said he wanted to have his eight-year-old son baptized. The little boy had spent time with Catholic friends, and he wanted what they had. The father had left the Catholic Church many years before. No particular reason was offered; he had just drifted away.

He shared with me that when he was in the army and stationed in Korea, he met and married his wife who was a non-practicing Buddhist. I told him that in order for us to baptize his son he himself would have to return to an active practice of his faith. I didn't know if he was ready to do that. He said he thought he might be. I referred him to the pastor for counseling and spiritual direction and enrolled his son in the RCIA process for

children. (This event occurred early in my career and the parish did not have in place a process for returning Catholics, other than to meet with a priest.) His son was fully initiated into the church the following spring, and Dad returned to the church as well. The following year, Mom started the RCIA process, and a year later she was fully initiated into the church. The following year, Dad, only in his early fifties, dropped dead of a heart attack. As sad as the loss of their father and husband was, the little boy and his mom were now part of a faith community that would continue to pray for them and love and support them. And, of course, Dad was now with Jesus! This dad, spurred by his son's search for God and church in his life, had decided he needed to reflect on his own faith journey and return.

People Who Felt Unimportant and Neglected

It is important to make time to help people even when it is inconvenient for us. Sometimes the most significant ministry happens at inconvenient times—they may be invitations from Christ to be present to his people.

I once heard a priest tell this story: "It was late Friday afternoon and I was ready to leave my office and relax a bit before the hectic schedule of the weekend. I was headed to the door when my phone rang. I debated whether or not to answer it. I decided, reluctantly, to answer. There was a young man on the phone, and he said, urgently, 'Father I need to talk to you right away!' I replied, 'What is this about?' The young man answered, curtly, 'Does it matter?' Shamed, I answered, 'No, of course not! Come over right away.'" The priest ended his story by saying, "I never asked that question again."

Sometimes the biggest issues for pastoral ministers are time

and energy. I once heard a priest say that our real ministry exists in the interruptions. But if it is Friday or the end of a stressful day, it's often difficult to respond as Christ would. Sadly, sometimes, we do this at the expense of alienating people in need.

People Who Have Felt Condemned or Excluded

The needs and issues of everyone are important, not just those of the people with whom we feel comfortable. Again, at issue is the dignity of the human person.

I was at a workshop for pastoral ministers working in the RCIA process. During one afternoon session, we discussed how to minister effectively to folks with serious issues, such as addictions, divorce and remarriage, or gender identity. At one point in the discussion, one of the attendees spoke up and said, "Let's not just discuss the issues of inquirers, catechumens, and candidates. What about us? Let's be honest—don't we have some of the same issues?" The speaker was a priest who was a recovering alcoholic. Several people began to share their stories and spiritual struggles. Then a young man spoke up and said he was gay. He left the seminary because he did not want to use the priesthood as a "cover" for his sexual orientation. But he asked the poignant question, "Is there room for me in this church?" I wonder how many LGBTQI Catholics feel "at home" in the church.

Human sexuality is a "loaded" emotional, moral, spiritual issue as well as a physical one. Shame and guilt are two feelings the pastoral minister does not want to elicit. Rather, we should welcome people with warmth and hospitality. We need to listen to their stories and experiences; then, in time, we can gently and clearly explain the teachings of the church on human sexuality, not forgetting their nuances.

While it is not possible for us to change the teachings of the church, it is possible for us to invite people to join us in worship at Mass, devotions, and prayer services. If they are in a situation that prevents their reception of the sacraments, they are still welcome to be a part of our community. Invite them to parish activities. If one does not already exist, start a support/prayer group. The goal is for them to experience healing and the love of Jesus Christ from us and the faith community.

Those Who Reject Key Teaching

Sometimes we encounter people who disagree with important teachings of the church, find them irrelevant, or are not willing to make the changes in their lives as a response to these teachings.

In addition to the issue of gender orientation and practice, there is the whole area of the church's teachings on human sexuality. I have taught adolescents and young adults who were amazed and shocked that the church teaches that they could not be sexually active and intimate until they were married. "You've got to be kidding! That's so unrealistic! That's just plain medieval!" were some of the responses I received. They (and some adults) see the church as rigid and out of touch with today's culture.

Some people have left because of the pedophilia scandal and/or have been victims of sexual abuse. It is difficult for some to believe there is sin in the church. Sin has existed in the church since its beginnings because there are flawed human beings in the church. Thank God (literally) that the Holy Spirit has ensured the church's survival.

I have worked in the RCIA process for four decades. I have

met and ministered to numerous individuals and couples who were divorced and remarried and struggled with the annulment process. Some went through the process of waiting and received their annulments. They entered the church even though their conversion and readiness to become Catholic happened long before the annulment was final. Some folks became discouraged and left the RCIA process. Some Catholics I know left an active practice of the faith because they felt the church's teaching on divorce and remarriage was punitive and the annulment process was too painful, unwieldy, and complicated.

Once again, we cannot change the teachings of the church on marriage, but we can welcome and love. In my experience, many Catholics do not know the teachings, or if they do, they do not understand them or are misinformed about them. For example, it is important to clarify the status of the marriage.

I met with a mother who wanted her daughter, age ten, to receive the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist for the first time. When I inquired about her own faith life, she burst into tears and sobbed. She said she hadn't received Communion in several years. When I gently asked her why, she responded, "Because I am divorced!" I asked her if she had remarried, and she said she had not. I had the delightful task of telling her that she was welcome to receive reconciliation and Eucharist herself because she had not remarried. Divorce is not a mortal sin. She replied that she had been taught that divorce excommunicated her from the church. "No," I said. "You were misinformed. Welcome back!"

In some cases, such as a lack of form, a simple paperwork process and a validation ceremony is all that may be needed.

If in fact the couple does need an annulment, then inform

them about the process. Put them in the care of someone who will guide them—someone such as an advocate priest or deacon, or a lay person who has been trained in canon law. Invite them to participate in parish activities—especially a support group for the divorced. Give them pamphlets to read.

Invite someone trained in the process and canon law to come to the parish to give a talk, followed by a question and answer period and perhaps some faith sharing. These couples may have children who have not, or not often, participated in a faith community. Help them to enroll their children in faith formation or an RCIA process adapted for children. Invite the children to participate in children's liturgy of the word (if they are not in RCIA). There should be no guilt or censure imposed on these parents—just help, support, and education. I have been privileged to be a part of and witnessed so much healing and joy. Often miracles happen in the lives of these couples and families.

The Frustrated Faithful Dissenters

I once interviewed for a diocesan job in religious education. The cardinal who was interviewing me said that if Catholics knew the beliefs and teachings of the church, they would not leave. I am convinced this statement is not entirely true. I know some well-informed Catholics who have left.

Those Who Have Wandered Off

Some folks just drift away from an active practice of the faith. Often people do not see the teachings and practices of the church as relevant to their lives, to the issues with which they struggle. Some say they don't have time. Many have not expe-

rienced a close intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and the faith community.

One friend said to me, "I was happy being 'bad'; I didn't need the church." Many years later she started attending Mass. She would not talk to anyone, because she felt guilty and felt like she really didn't belong. Then one day she decided she would volunteer to clean the church. She figured she was at least worthy enough to do menial tasks. Eventually she worked up the courage to attend some of the social events of the 50+ Club (a social club for seniors). She made some friends and realized that no one was judging her, and she began to feel like she belonged to the community. She felt herself growing closer to God, and she returned to the sacraments. The pastor, with whom she had a few conversations, invited her to sit on the pastoral council. She was overwhelmed but accepted.

Eventually, the coordinator of the RCIA process invited her to be a sponsor. After a lot of encouragement from members of the team, she agreed. Being a sponsor was, in her words, a life-changing experience. She learned and grew in her faith. She then had a severe emotional crisis that involved her having flashbacks of physical and emotional abuse in her childhood. These were memories she had repressed for many years. She went to see the pastor. He met with her frequently and strongly suggested she see a therapist. He recommended one from the parish. She began therapy and shared her situation with a couple of us on the RCIA team. We were very supportive and prayed with her and for her.

She is a wonderful sponsor and now attends daily Mass and continues with parish ministry. She is still in therapy but is gradually healing and has found much peace and joy in her

life. Her goal now is to raise the awareness of church leadership about the frequency and severity of abuse of children. When she was a child being abused, she attended Catholic school and now realizes that the faculty (professed religious) was aware that something was wrong in her life but did nothing about it. Of course, many years ago, church educators were not educated themselves on how to handle and report abuse. My friend is a “walking miracle” now. I went to Central Europe with our parish choir and invited her to come and to be my roommate on the trip. She had a wonderful time and made many new friends. It has been such a blessing to see this woman blossom in her relationship with Jesus Christ and the church. She is now a member of the RCIA team and a Sunday dismissal catechist.

Those Restrained by Fear or Shame

Recently, I was serving on a retreat team, and one woman, raised Catholic and a junior in college, said to me, “I didn’t feel good enough and worthy to go to church!” This young woman had a difficult family life, a tremendous amount of responsibility, and was trying to live up to her family’s cultural expectations of “what a good daughter should be.” She also suffered from serious, chronic depression. Many of us on the retreat team spent a lot of time talking to her and praying with her. At the end of the retreat (four days) she felt much better about herself and agreed to see a therapist and her campus minister.

Another woman, now in her early thirties, had an out-of-wedlock child at the age of seventeen. Her parents, whom I know, were very active in the church. She said, “I felt such shame and guilt that I couldn’t go to church. I felt I was an embarrass-

ment to myself and my parents.” Her parents, extended family, and friends supported her and encouraged her to return to the church and the sacraments. After several months, she started to attend Mass and eventually returned to reception of the sacraments. She said the most healing experience she had was that nobody, especially the parish priests and parishioners, judged her. They all simply loved her and supported her in her new role as a single mother. She eventually married the father of her child, had another child, and she and her family are active in the church. She wants to help other young adults return to the church.

In one parish where I worked, I started an RCIA process for children of catechetical age. Some of these children had parents entering the church, but most had parents who had left the church. These parents delayed presenting their children for the sacraments because the parents felt shame and guilt and were afraid of being judged and rejected. And, in some parishes, they were. The pastor of this parish gave me permission to start the RCIA process for children but said to me, “I don’t want to deal with those parents who are angry at the church.” I replied, “But they come to us because the word on the street is that here they will be welcomed and treated with respect, dignity, and mercy.” Later, this dear man would brag about all the families returning to the church.

Those Made to Feel Different

A basic belief of our faith is respect and care for the dignity of every human person. This belief obviously includes those who have a physical and/or an intellectual disability. Many parents of children with disabilities stay away from the church because

they think the church has nothing to offer them. Education, marketing, and publicity are very much needed in this area of ministry. Many (most) parishes have now made their physical buildings accessible, but we need to make our worship, sacraments, and catechesis accessible as well. An intellectual disability should never be an obstacle to receiving the sacraments. God can and does reveal himself to children and adults with disabilities. We sometimes have a tendency “to limit God.”

Because some of these children are nonverbal and/or do not have a fully developed sense of right and wrong, their parents assume their children cannot receive penance, Eucharist, and confirmation. Many years ago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, wrote a pastoral letter encouraging access to the sacraments for all persons with intellectual disabilities. I remember the day I told a mother that her nonverbal, twelve-year-old daughter was welcome to receive the Eucharist. Once again, I was embracing a weeping mother. There is no disability that God cannot break through.

Again, there is a need to educate our people and, in some cases, change our own attitudes about inclusivity in our church for people with disabilities. Early in my ministry, a woman whose son had a severe learning disability came into my office. She was very angry and lambasted me for not providing a good supportive learning environment for her son. She had been given the “run around” by the public school system, and she expected the same treatment from me. She had left the church, but she wanted her son to have a learning experience that respected him and would help him with his disability.

I gave her time to calm down, and then we discussed options for her son. The intermediate step was to place her son

in the RCIA for children. Her son was already baptized, so this placement was a stopgap measure, not an appropriate permanent solution. We discussed the need for a religious education program for children like her son. There was a diocesan program but no program for children with special learning needs in our region, so I started one in our parish. The diocese supported us and provided the training for me and the catechists. Her son was enrolled in SPRED (Special Religious Education Development), and she became the volunteer director. She also returned to the church. To this day, that program is still running and, almost thirty years later, she and I are the best of friends. Patient listening and a warm welcome helped to create the environment for a solution.

There are catechetical and liturgical programs written specifically for people with disabilities. Rose Kennedy, who had a child with an intellectual disability, wrote a catechetical program. Jean Vanier, who is well-known for his L'Arche communities, brought the catechetical process SPRED, mentioned earlier, to the United States and originally based it in the Archdiocese of Chicago. It is now available to any diocese—the program and the appropriate training. I started this program in two parishes. Some dioceses have offices or departments for special religious education and offices for persons with disabilities. Their trained staff can be very helpful to local parishes. The gospels have numerous stories in which Jesus reaches out and heals persons with disabilities. As in all situations, he sets a model for us to follow.

As you read these stories, a few of your own may come to mind. It is rare that people leave for no reason. As I have mentioned earlier, people leave because they do not feel they have

been treated with respect, or they sense a lack of compassion on our part. Parents drift away and do not raise their children in the faith. As ministers, we are not always willing to share our time or our own vulnerability. We sometimes show lack of sensitivity when dealing with issues of sexuality, marriage and divorce, and abuse of all kinds. And sometimes we are restrained by our own fear and shame. As ministers, we are not perfect but we do need to do some reflection, even perhaps with a spiritual director, about what we can do to open our minds and hearts and minister more effectively.

In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the reasons why people who have left an active practice of their faith now long to return.



WHY PEOPLE LONG TO RETURN

There is, as Fr. Ronald Rolheiser wrote in his book *The Holy Longing*, a longing that exists within each of us. St. Augustine in his *Confessions* wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we spend our entire lives trying to fill that longing—that empty space within us. Some people unsuccessfully try to fill that empty space with drugs, alcohol, food, sex, money, possessions, and power—often ending up addicted. Even in healthy relationships there can still be within us the feeling that something is missing. No one human person can totally fulfill that longing. St. Francis de Sales said that we do not experience true peace, joy, and fulfillment until our hearts are one with the heart of Christ.