

# Activity Handout:

## Assessing Our Attitudes Toward Inactive Catholics

Marge and Ralph, a Catholic married couple, called my office late one Friday afternoon. “There is going to be a crucial meeting tonight of leaders in our parish to discuss **‘the inactive Catholic problem’!**” Ralph exclaimed. Marge continued, “Numbers at Sunday Mass and parish activities are steadily declining. Financial support is in a downward spiral. We want to do a survey of missing Catholics. What are the best questions to ask **back-sliding, lapsed, fallen-away, and apathetic** Catholics so that we can get them back?” (emphasis mine) My first response was to congratulate them for their willingness to reach out to our inactive brothers and sisters. Yet, their words and tone in describing inactive Catholics made me pause. My next suggestion shook them up a bit, “Maybe the first questions to consider are not ones you would ask inactive Catholics. Perhaps you might start by asking yourselves, ‘How do we feel about inactive Catholics? What are our assumptions about them?’”

We all would like to have an “EASY” button we can push to bring back everyone who has left or drifted away from our parishes over the past 20-35 years. However, if we see inactive Catholics as **“THE PROBLEM”**—the reason why many of our parish communities are stagnant, dwindling or no longer viable—the welcome light we put out will be pretty dim.

Nick Wagner, editor of *Today’s Parish Magazine*, writes, “I think we all agree that we should be welcoming toward inactive Catholics and be reaching out to them. Sometimes, however, we have a giant ‘IF’ behind our welcome. We will welcome them *if* they meet certain criteria.” Melanie Rigney and Anna M. Lanave have written a questionnaire that can help us unearth some of our attitudes and assumptions. It and many helpful insights are in their book, *When They Come Home: Ways to welcome returning Catholics* (Twenty-Third Publications, 2009).

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### Individual Activity (5 minutes):

What are my attitudes toward inactive Catholics? Please fill out the following questionnaire. Circle “True” or “False” after each of the ten statements below.

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**1. People who don't go to Mass are jeopardizing their salvation.**

- True
- False

**2. Most inactive Catholics are angry with the church.**

- True
- False

**3. If you disagree with the church, you shouldn't call yourself a Catholic.**

- True

(Some material reprinted with permission from *When They Come Home: Ways to Welcome Returning Catholics* and <http://blog.todaysparish.com/2009/12/poll-inactive-catholics/>, published by Twenty-Third Publications. For more information call 800-321-0411 or visit [www.23rdpublications.com](http://www.23rdpublications.com).)

- False
4. **You can be a good Catholic and not go to Mass.**
    - True
    - False
  5. **If you are divorced, you shouldn't go to Communion.**
    - True
    - False
  6. **We should invite all Catholics to come back to Mass, but only if they go to confession first.**
    - True
    - False
  7. **There are liberal Catholics and conservative Catholics. All should be welcome.**
    - True
    - False
  8. **If a Catholic feels more comfortable in a Protestant church, he or she should go there.**
    - True
    - False
  9. **We should not baptize a child of parents who don't intend to practice the faith.**
    - True
    - False
  10. **Once a Catholic, always a Catholic.**
    - True
    - False

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### **Instructions for Small Group Sharing— 4 or 5 people (45-60 mins.)**

- A. Divide into small groups of four or five people and answer the questions below for 15-20 minutes.
- B. Invite your pastor or another member of the parish staff (as well as one or two inactive Catholics who returned to the Church) to join you about 20 minutes into the meeting.
- C. (Optional) For 3-5 minutes each, have the returning Catholic(s) tell the story of how he or she returned and their initial impressions of the parish.
- D. Continue by having a 10-15 minute question and answer period with the pastor or staff member about inactive and returning Catholics.

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## Small group reflection questions:

- Without commenting or judging others' answers, go around the small group and see how many of you circled true or false for each statement.
- What one or two of the statements above stir up the strongest feelings in you? Why?
- What two statements do you have the most questions about?

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## Instructions for closing in the same small groups (5-10 mins.)

After the question and answer period, return to your small groups. Reflect in silence for a minute about how you would complete the sentence below. Then go around the group, each person briefly speaking one last time.

- “By doing this exercise I have realized that my own attitudes and assumptions about inactive Catholics are...”

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## Take an Evangelization Challenge:

- ✦ Learn more about how to effectively reach inactive Catholics. Explore six keys for developing a new model of everyday missionary outreach that goes beyond programs and relies on God's presence in each person's journey of faith. Sign up as an individual or group for the next offering of “**Keys to Reaching Inactive Catholics**” online training from the Paulist Evangelization Training Institute. Go to: <https://www.pncea.org/events/keystoreachinginactivecatholics.aspx>.
- ✦ Deepen your capacity for meaningful encounters with inactive Catholics. Get your own copy of the new PNCEA e-workbook, ***Evangelization Workout Series: Engage Inactive Catholics (Item 0510)***. It is a pastoral tool suitable for individuals, ministries, and/or faith-sharing groups. With your purchase, you will immediately be able to download and print this workbook. Go to: <http://www.pncea.org/boucher-faith-exercises-book1/>.

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