

RETURN

HOW TO DRAW YOUR CHILD BACK TO THE CHURCH

Book Discussion Guide

BRANDON VOGT & PEGGY PANDALEON

RETURN: HOW TO DRAW YOUR CHILD BACK TO THE CHURCH

SESSION 1: *Understanding Why They Leave* (Chapters 1–3; Pages 1–32)

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’”

– Luke 15:11–24

Study Questions

1. Where does your teenager or young adult child(ren) stand on the issue of identifying as Catholic and/or practicing the faith? As best as you can ascertain, what is your child’s reason for their lack of connection with the Church? (You can refer to the most common reasons listed on page 6.)
2. If your child does not identify as “Catholic,” how does he identify in terms of religious affiliation? (see pgs. 14–16)
3. What type of fallen-away Catholic is your child? (see pgs. 16–23)
4. How would your child define God? How personal is your child’s relationship with God and how/when has he encountered him? (If you can’t answer this about your child, you can revisit the question during the dialogue part of the book.)
5. How would you define God? How personal is your relationship with God and how/when have you encountered him?
6. Which of the five myths of why your child won’t return to the Church are you most prone to believe? What do you need to help you stop believing in that myth?
7. Who is ultimately responsible for your child’s faith? What is your role and what is God’s role?
8. How, specifically, would you define success with respect to the return of your loved one?

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SESSION 2: *Equip Yourself* (Chapters 4–6; Pages 33–78)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”

– Luke 18:1–8

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

– Matthew 7:7

Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.

– 1 Peter 3:15

Study Questions

1. What has been your “policy” for Mass attendance as your children were growing up? What about older teens and young adults who are visiting or living with you? Do you think your older children ever feel forced or nagged about attending Mass or receiving the sacraments? If so, how can you change to avoid nagging or forcing them?
2. Do you disagree with some of your child’s major moral decisions? Have you discussed these decisions with them? How have these discussions affected your relationship with your child?
3. What do you do when your child raises objections about the Church, Catholic beliefs, morality, going to Mass, or receiving the sacraments? What do you think is the right way to handle these objections?
4. What do you do if you cannot answer a question from your child about the faith? How will you take steps to prevent falling into the category of “you can’t give what you don’t know”?
5. How have you prayed for your child’s return to the faith? What is your prayer plan going forward?
6. How will fasting and sacrifice play a part in your game plan for your child?
7. What is your testimony or story that answers the question “Why are you Catholic and what are the benefits?” Write down an outline of your testimony and pray over it, asking the Lord how to share it with your child at the appropriate time. (see pgs. 74–77)
8. Have you given up control of your children to God? If yes, how and when did you do this?

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SESSION 3: *Plant the Seeds and Start Conversation*

(Chapters 7–8; Pages 79–103)

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

– Matthew 13:31–32

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

– 1 Corinthians 13:1–2

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.”

– Luke 4:24

Study Questions

1. “The great danger for any parent,” says Rob Parsons in *Bringing Home the Prodigals*, “is that the desire to let a child know how strongly we disapprove will be greater than the impulse that lets him know, no matter what he has done, he is still loved.” Why is unconditional love so crucial in a relationship? What can you do this week to express your unconditional love to your child?
2. What things have you done or said to your child regarding his attitudes or behavior that have upset him? Do you need to ask your child’s forgiveness for any of these things?
3. How can you get closer to your child by sharing something he loves, so you will be fortifying a foundation of trust and building your relationship with him?
4. Have you ever planted “seed gifts” in your child’s life? If so, how did they work? If not, what are some possible gifts that would especially help your child?
5. What has happened when you’ve started conversations with your child about faith or religion? What have you learned from those experiences?
6. What are your biggest worries or fears about having a spiritual dialogue with your child? Describe the worst-case scenario. Is there some way to avoid or recover from that scenario?
7. If you could ask your child any three questions about God or faith, and be guaranteed thoughtful answers, what would you ask?
8. How will you respond if your child’s answers to your questions contain criticisms of God or the Church and its beliefs?

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SESSION 4: *Move Forward and Close the Loop*

(Chapters 9–11; Pages 104–140)

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”

– Acts 17:22–23

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

– Matthew 16:24

Study Questions

1. What are some important things to remember about your own behavior when you are discussing faith and religion with your child?
2. Do you express joy in your faith? Or is there another adjective that better describes how you live your faith?
3. How should you handle what you think might be a misconception about the Church or something that you cannot answer yourself?
4. After you have started a dialogue, what did you learn are your child’s objections to the faith or to the Church?
5. How can you improve your dialogue with your child by looking for the “positive intention” in his objections?
6. What “shoe pebble” questions can you ask your child?
7. Who or what activities can you suggest to help your child explore a Catholic community? Think of at least three (as some may be rejected).
8. What are some possible “close the loop” questions that would be authentic for you to ask and for your child to consider and take seriously?

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SESSION 5: *Personal and Moral Objections*

(Chapters 12–13; Pages 141–176)

When many of his disciples heard it [see John 6:25–59], they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

– John 6:60, 66–69

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

– Romans 3:23

Personal Objections

1. Why doesn't your child value attending Mass? What is your own reason for attending Mass regularly? How can you help your child understand what the Mass truly is?
2. Are there certain rules in the Church to which your child objects? How would you explain the reason for these rules?
3. Many Catholics have had bad experiences with a priest or a fellow parishioner. Catholics around the country have been shocked by and abhor the sexual abuse scandal that surfaced in the late 1990s. What are some of the differences between those who remain Catholic in the face of these bad experiences and those who leave the Church?

Moral Objections

4. What are the two meanings of “judging”? Which type of judgment should be avoided and which is permissible?
5. What is the Church's teaching on homosexuality (CCC 2357–2359)? What is the Church's teaching about heterosexual promiscuity or fornication (CCC 1852, 2353)? How do both of these teachings flow from the Catholic belief that sexual relations should occur only within marriage (CCC 2361)?
6. How would you respond to the objection that the Catholic Church oppresses women?
7. Are you familiar with the Church's position on cohabitation, contraception, abortion, and divorce and remarriage? How would you explain the teaching on each one of these moral issues? What resources could you use to help you in your explanation?

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SESSION 6: *Theological Objections and Conclusion*

(Chapter 14 & Conclusion; Pages 177–196)

Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good,
in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.

– Genesis 50:20

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you.

– Psalms 5:4

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose.

– Romans 8:28

For nothing will be impossible with God.

– Luke 1:37

Theological Objections

1. What is the difference between subjective and objective reasons for believing in God? Which should you emphasize with someone who is an atheist? What evidence for God's existence can you share with an atheist?
2. Is science the only key to unlocking the answers to all of our questions and problems? What does science study?
3. Can religion be explained or refuted by science? What are the tools or ways that we explore and understand religion?
4. How can you or your child have a personal encounter with God through the Catholic faith?
5. How biblical is the Catholic Church? Where do you see the connection between the Bible and the Church?
6. How can you shed light on the mystery that evil and suffering exist even though God is all-loving and all-good?
7. What will you do differently in your faith life and family relationships after going through this book? What is your first step this week?
8. How will you manage the ups and downs of drawing your child into a deeper connection with Jesus in the Church?

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Individual Reflection

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Profile of Your Child

Chapters 1-3

Complete these questions BEFORE you read chapters 1-3.

Child's name and age: _____

Child identifies religious affiliation as _____

Why is your child not a practicing Catholic?

(Check as many as apply. Then circle your child's key objection.)

- _____ Gradually drifted away
- _____ Spiritual needs not met
- _____ Stopped believing in some or all of the Church's teaching
- _____ Unhappy with teachings about the Bible
- _____ Unhappy about moral teachings
- _____ Dissatisfied with atmosphere at Mass/liturgies
- _____ Music at liturgies not enjoyable
- _____ Dissatisfied with clergy
- _____ Found another religion
- _____ Lack of community
- _____ Too many money requests
- _____ Too ritualistic
- _____ Too formal
- _____ Other: _____

Agree or disagree with each statement ("Child" refers to what you think your child believes, or what he has revealed to you):

	Child	You	Other Parent
God created and ordered the world and watches over it from a distance.	_____	_____	_____
I have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.	_____	_____	_____
Religion is primarily about becoming a good person.	_____	_____	_____

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	Child	You	Other Parent
The central goal in life is to feel happy and to feel good about oneself.	_____	_____	_____
God does not need to be particularly involved in my life except when I need him to solve a problem.	_____	_____	_____
Good people go to heaven when they die because they earned their salvation with good moral behavior.	_____	_____	_____
I believe in God.	_____	_____	_____
I pray daily.	_____	_____	_____
Religion is very important in my life.	_____	_____	_____
I have encountered Jesus through the Catholic Church.	_____	_____	_____

How would you best identify your child?

- _____ Cultural Catholic (refer to page 17)
- _____ Shrugger (page 18)
- _____ Spiritual but not religious (page 20)
- _____ Moral mover (page 20)
- _____ Religious switcher (page 21)
- _____ Skeptic: atheist or agnostic (page 22)

Please write “agree” or “disagree” for each statement about *your own* beliefs:

- He'll come back eventually once he marries or has kids. _____
- I took him to Mass and sent him to Catholic schools—that should have been enough. _____
- He left because of me. It's all my fault! _____
- He won't listen to me; it's just impossible to have a discussion about faith. _____

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It's hopeless. No matter what happens, my child is never coming back to the Church. _____

How, specifically, would you define success with respect to the return of your child?

Equip Yourself Chapters 4–6

What is your “house rule” about Mass attendance for your older teen or young adult children who live with you or visit?

Do you have to force or nag your child to comply with this house rule?

What specific conflicts have you had with your child over religion or morals?

Which threshold best describes where you are and where your child is on the “thresholds of conversion”? (see pgs. 43–45)

	Me	My child
1) Initial trust	_____	_____
2) Spiritual curiosity	_____	_____
3) Spiritual openness	_____	_____
4) Spiritual seeking	_____	_____
5) Intentional disciple	_____	_____

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What is your prayer commitment regarding your child's return?

Which fruits of the Holy Spirit do you need most on this journey: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

When will you ask for them?

What is your fasting and/or sacrificial commitment regarding your child's return?

How well do you know your faith? Are you able to explain it?

What can you do to enhance your knowledge of the Catholic Faith?

- _____ Read the Bible or join a Bible study. When? _____
- _____ Read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially about teachings that you are unsure of or that your child questions. When? _____
- _____ Other spiritual reading. Name it _____
- _____ Catholic videos or podcasts. From whom? _____
- _____ Other ideas: _____

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Why are you Catholic?

**Outline your story of conversion and/or why the Catholic faith is important to you?
(see pgs. 75–77)**

Plant the Seeds and Start Conversation Chapters 7–8

Is your child absolutely sure of your unconditional love for him? _____

What will you say or do to make sure he knows the nature of your love or to reinforce your unconditional love? How and when will you do this?

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What in your attitudes or behavior regarding being Catholic upsets your child?

Which of your child's interests or hobbies can you participate in? How will you do it?

"Seed gift" ideas: _____

If you could ask your child three questions about the faith and be sure he would answer them honestly, what would you ask?

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Move Forward and Close the Loop
Chapters 9–11

As you dialogue with your child, what does he say are his objections to being a practicing Catholic?

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What “positive intentions” can you find in these objections?

What are some “shoe pebble” questions you can ask your child when the time is right?

What Catholic community opportunities can you recommend to your child in the area where he lives?

Who can you recommend to talk with your child about the faith (e.g., priest, deacon, teacher, spiritual director)?

What are “close the loop” questions that would be authentic for you to ask and that your child would take seriously? (These should tie back to your definition of success in the first section.)

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Personal and Moral Objections

Chapters 12–13

What are your child's objections to attending Mass? Does he understand and believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist? If not, how can you share that truth with him?

Are there particular Church practices or "rules" to which your child objects? If so, how will you explain the reasons for these practices or "rules"?

Does your child believe God will forgive him for *any* sin he has committed? What resources about reconciliation and forgiveness can you provide for him?

Does your child have any special circumstances to consider in his return to the Church, such as cohabitation, contraception, past abortion, same-sex attraction or homosexual activity, divorce, or divorce/remarriage? Where will you go to research the Church's position on these special circumstances? How will you communicate with him about his behavior or beliefs in these areas?

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Theological Objections and Conclusion

Chapter 14

Are you struggling to refute any of these beliefs expressed by your child:

1. "I'm an atheist or agnostic."

Where can you find resources to help you argue that God exists?

2. "Faith is not compatible with science."

What is your child's evidence that this belief is true?

If evolution is one of his arguments, what is your response?

If how the Church treated Galileo is one of his arguments, what is your response?

If there is another scientific objection, how will you explore this argument so that you can have an educated discussion with your child?

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3. *"I can't have a personal relationship with Jesus in the Catholic Church."*

How can one encounter Jesus in the Catholic Church?

What examples of encounter from your own life can you share with your child?

4. *"Catholics don't value the Bible."*

What is your response and what evidence will you use to form your response?

5. *"I don't get anything out of Mass."*

Does he understand and believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist?

If not, how can you help him accept this belief?

6. *"Since evil and suffering exist, there can't be a good and loving God."*

How can you shed light on the mystery that evil and suffering exist even though God is all-loving and all-good?

What will you do differently in your faith life and family relationships now that you have gone through this book?

What is your first step *this week*?
