

When You Notice the Empty Pews: What Can You Do?

Maybe you've noticed empty pews where a bustling Sunday crowd used to gather in your church. Maybe members of your own family have abandoned regular practice of the Catholic Faith. Maybe you have wondered how this happened and what can be done about it, short of closing and merging more and more churches.

Good News! These pews have a story to tell and are meant to be more than a source of discouragement. Let's delve into their story and see where it leads us. Let's search out their message. Perhaps these pews are meant to be like the empty manger during Advent. They look dark and deserted, but the Christmas star burns brightly just over the horizon and Jesus has not abandoned us.

Individual Activity (3-5 mins.)

Below are some sobering observations, related to decreased attendance. Check off the ones that strike you or that have happened to you.

- There are a lot less people at Sunday liturgies than there were 10 years ago.
- Most parents who bring children for Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation don't bring their children on Sundays.
- Several of my neighbors drive by our parish to go to church elsewhere.
- We have a lot of non-English speaking people in our area, but provide no Masses in their languages.
- My own grown children, nieces and nephews don't go to church any more.
- Even on Easter or Christmas, we still have quite a few empty pews at Masses.
- Eighty to ninety percent of the people at Mass are over sixty.
- I have spoken to someone in leadership about the declining numbers on Sunday.
- I wonder what I have done wrong in trying to share our Catholic faith with my family and friends.
- Less people give less money to support our parish. Collections are down.
- At work and in my social circles, I have met many people who say they used to be Catholic.

Small Group Sharing (25-30 mins.):

1. How have you experienced "empty pews" in your life? How have you tried to do something about this?
2. Give yourself two points for each item in the list above that you checked.
What was your score in the exercise above? What does this mean for you?
 - If you scored 6 to 8 points, you are awake to the greatest needs of today's Church.
 - If you scored 10 to 12 points, God has been nudging you in the direction of evangelization for a while.
 - If you scored 14 to 22 points, Thanks be to God! Jesus has been calling you to share your faith and to evangelize. We can use your help!

Share your desires, dreams and strategies for addressing this situation with the rest of the group.

Complete the statements, "I believe that we can..." and "I believe God is..."

3. How can you prepare yourself and others in your parish to reach out to inactive Catholics?
4. Use a computer to view and discuss one of the following free presentations together:
 - Outreach to Inactive Catholics*** by Fr. Frank DeSiano, CSP
http://www.pncea.org/store/item.asp?ITEM_ID=157&DEPARTMENT_ID=72
 - Fishing Nets and Fishing Poles: Reaching Inactive and Alienated Catholics*** by Lorene Hanley Duquin
http://www.pncea.org/store/item.asp?ITEM_ID=184&DEPARTMENT_ID=72
5. Sign up for a training course on how to reach out to inactive Catholics at
Online Courses with the Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association
http://www.pncea.org/store/index.asp?DEPARTMENT_ID=68

Material excerpted from *When You Notice the Empty Pews: Simple Ways to Share Our Faith* by John and Therese Boucher. Princeton, NJ: www.catholicangelizer.com, 2008.