
We are looking to meet—or to make up with—God. We are seeking a spiritual home, a community of faith. Whether we are cradle Christians who “fell away” from the faith or unchurched folks who never (until now) found a need to believe, we are on a pilgrimage. The good news is that there are road maps.

For those who have wandered (or run) away from religion, or who never had it in the first place, finding a path to God may seem impossibly difficult. But it happens.
Give It Time

“If someone were to ask, sincerely, about coming back to the faith, I think I’d say: Spend some time, go a bit deeper…sit for a minute in silence. Then sit for two minutes. Then five.” —Margery Eagan

Why do people come home to faith? Each convert or “revert” will have his or her own answers. For some, it’s a reasoned choice, prompted perhaps by a need to offer one’s children a church community and a prayer life. Catholic parishes swell with inquirers and returnees around the family rites of passage: marriages, baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations, funerals. Others talk of experiencing a tug of the heart, that “still, small voice” in the silence of life, a sense of something missing.

Though some accounts of conversion and reversion make it sound like an instantaneous process, most of us don’t follow the path of St. Paul. We aren’t knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt on the road to Damascus, only to jump up convinced. Coming home can—and usually must—take time. Those who never had faith in the first place have a lifetime of unbelief to let go of. And most who “fell away” from faith didn’t do so after one quick quarrel with God. Leaving is a process, and so is returning.

To counter her drift from the Church during college, Nicole Calaro returned to her childhood parish and committed to “really go to Mass and pay attention...[I] opened myself to whatever God needed me to do.” Ronald Earley, one of the parish deacons, noticed her steadfast presence and convinced. Calaro made the outreach work. “She was very persistent.” And in the process, she found a spiritual home herself.

Leah Libresco Sargeant, a popular atheist blogger, caused a commotion by announcing that she was converting not just to belief in God but to Roman Catholicism. It wasn’t a sudden decision and, as she shared in an interview with Sean Sawyer, SJ, at America magazine, it would involve a lot of learning. Through her love of dancing, Sargeant found a unique path to prayer and faith:

“When I started learning to waltz, I spent a lot of time just practicing the basic waltz step—the same kind of endless repetition as the Hail Marys of the Rosary. The reason I was supposed to keep practicing was so that my feet could keep the rhythm, no matter what…I wound up thinking of the Rosary as my chance to follow a ‘basic step’ for prayer. My goal wasn’t to produce epiphanies about the lives of Christ and Mary, but to fall into God’s rhythm and to be ready to move if he led me.”

Blessed John Henry Newman, another famous convert, spent many years on the path to Catholicism. He even resisted the journey actively at times, but came to understand that as powerful an intellect as he possessed, he could not think himself into belief. In his poem (later a hymn) “Lead, Kindly Light,” Newman prayed to be led where God willed: “Meantime, along the narrow rugged path / Thyself hast trod / Lead, Savior, lead me home in childlike faith / Home to my God.”

Listen to Your Heart…and Your Head

“Whenever you seek truth, you seek God, whether or not you know it.” —Edith Stein (Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross)

Leila Marie Lawlor grew up without any knowledge of God, as she told host Marcus Grodi on an episode of The Coming Home Network. With a fallen-away Methodist mother and a fallen-away Muslim father, Lawlor spent her childhood among secular humanists. Something inside her, she says, drew her to the beauty of fairy tales, which seemed to hint at a larger truth.

When she read C.S. Lewis’s Narnia stories, Lawlor was baffled. Never having heard the story of Jesus, she did not recognize the lion character, Aslan, as a Christ-figure. Only later did her quest for truth, awakened by her childhood reading, lead her to the Scriptures. There, Lawlor encountered Jesus—and the world began to make sense. Her heart and her reading called her to faith.

Lawlor listened to her heart to find her path home. Others, like journalist Lee Strobel, listen to their heads. “The only way to truth,” insists Strobel, a journalist who was once an avowed atheist, “is through facts.” And it was facts—hard evidence, pursued with an investigative reporter’s thoroughness—that led to his conversion.

After a health crisis with their daughter, Lee’s wife Leslie turned to God. Her growing involvement with Christianity, which Lee dismissed as a super-
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