

Seven tips for new Catholics, from one convert to another

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I came to the Easter vigil this year just as the bonfire outside the church was starting. The pews inside were all taken by then, but I found a wide enough windowsill near the front with a wall between me and most of the action. What I could see, closer up than most, was the joy, beautiful joy, and maybe some well-contained terror of the nearly two dozen catechumens entering our communion that night. I attend a university parish, and so most were college-aged; with them I remembered when I came into the church that way, too, 16 years earlier.

I remembered the years that followed. Everyone's sojourn is different, but for me, the Easter vigil was more a beginning than an end. Finding a place in this vast and ancient church was not easy, but it has been a trial of grace, one in which the parts that were once the hardest became easier, even light and liberating.

On Easter morning, I woke up with a handful of aphorisms in mind that might be of use to someone new to this church, from one who has been there, too—not always easily but gratefully.

Pray constantly

You may be more primed for prayer right now than most of us, but the eagerness can wear off. Even then, St. Paul does not let us off the hook from praying without ceasing. Prayer is the start of an honest Christian life.

Memorize prayers. People don't memorize much anymore—can you even remember a phone number?—but the effort here is worth it. Aim for 10. Some of those can be the same in multiple languages, even ones you cannot speak. Some obvious ones, some

not; some short, some long; some joyful, some penitential. Add some hymns to that as well. Then recite them to God and yourself whenever you can, when you are walking or waiting or sitting on the toilet, with the kind of foolish devotion that is sanity in God's eyes.

Also, pray your own words. Catholics can be bad at this. We rely so much on official liturgies that we do not practice speaking with God ourselves. Do it alone, with friends and in public. Make sure that if someone needs you to pray with them for what they need in that moment, you know how.

I start with prayer because, trust me, you are going to need it.

The church is a creature of the Fall

I became a Catholic while the Boston Globe sex abuse revelations were coming out. If you are coming in now, you know what I'm talking about. You could only become a Catholic in this period of scandal if you understand the Fall already (or have your rosary over your eyes). You have probably seen painful disappointment among those who were raised to think the church is perfect. Many of them have left upon discovering, so viscerally, that it is not.

The church, as Pope Francis put it, is a "hospital for sinners." Being a Catholic, including a Catholic priest, does not make anyone good. You will see lots and lots of evidence of this. Christianity is a way of declaring we want to be more worthy of what we know we will never deserve in this life. It is a commitment to strive after holiness and to help others do the same. Have no illusions. Hospitals are full of sick people.

Still, there are living saints among us in this church. They are not perfect either, but they can be really good. Find them, accept their peccadilloes, learn from them, and walk away if you need to. You will probably find them in places you least expect.

There are many churches in one

What makes the Catholic Church catholic—that is, universal—is its ability to hold together diverse cultures and diverse ways of being Christian. This is a feature, not a bug. It is a beautiful variety: Explore it, across time and geography. Among them all, find the communities and charisms that call you, that suit your talents and challenge your shortcomings. You might find your calling in the church, for instance, through a particular religious order or through a lay movement or through a way of praying or a

way of serving. Make sure it is a path that is in full communion with the Catholic whole, of course, but do not be scared away by simpletons who think there is only one kind of true Catholic.

When you find your place and your people, do not forget about the rest. If you feel at home in a certain small group, go to Mass with people of many groups. If one church seems to speak your language, go from time to time to one where a different language is spoken.

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Honor different paths, in the church and in yourself

As you find your place in the church, also be prepared to honor the ways of others. If you feel tempted to denounce some order or path within the church, consider what purposes it serves. Consider how it travels to people and places where your path does not go. Recognize that we are interdependent. Jesuits need Franciscans! Readers of the National Catholic Reporter could learn a thing or two from First Things.

One reason for this kind of forbearance is that you never know how your life will redirect your calling. During my early years as a Catholic, my place was among renouncers—Cistercians, first, and then radical war resisters. Those callings, however, have not fit well with the way I feel called to be a parent of small children more recently. I have had to find other saints, other ways of being. In years past, I might have looked at myself today and scoffed at my tepid moderation-in-most-things.

Get ready for that. Have mercy on yourself, and let yourself evolve among the many ways of being a Christian. This church holds them together as one.

Argue in charity

When some Christian communities encounter disagreement, they schism on a dime. Catholics don't do that. This means we have to create spaces where debate and argument can persist without tearing us apart. That is why, for instance, Catholics invented universities, at least in Europe. Perhaps it is also why the church did not

invent the internet.

We are a family, and families need to argue so the truth can come through. Some of the greatest saints—people now portrayed as benign servants of Rome, were courageous reformers in their time, challenging received beliefs and entrenched power. But a family argument only turns out well when we remember we are a family. Remember, Catholics believe that we are going to be stuck together for eternity.

This is not a private faith

It is fashionable nowadays for people to think and talk about faith as a private matter, as something solely between themselves and the divine, as a quiet way to begin the day or a personal journey that is nobody else's business.

This is foreign to the Catholic outlook. If Jesus had kept to himself, there would have been no cross. He promised to be among us when we gather. He knew that we need each other. You will see. Your prayer life will deepen when your Christian community life is honest and vibrant. Sometimes our interior faith carries us more, and sometimes the community carries us more, but one cannot stand on one foot for too long without losing balance.

Be Catholic in public. Not *just* Catholic—God made you to be more than your piety. Present yourself, to yourself and the world, as a human being made more human by your faith.

I spent years embarrassed by my Catholic identity—as the dodgy disciples in the Gospel narratives foreshadow. My ambition was to sort this irregularity out through Herculean introspection and rationalization. It didn't work. I did not really integrate my faith into my sense of self—long after entering the church officially, mind you—until being forced to present as Catholic quite vocally and uncomfortably in the world.

Know the poor

At least since Constantine's conquest of Rome in the year 312, Catholicism has had a respectability problem. Religion needs to have a relationship with power to inhabit this fallen world, but that means people can use religion as a means to power as well. Doing so can even be for the good. Catholicism in the United States, for example, has been an important vehicle for helping immigrant communities into the middle class. A downside of that legacy, however, is how it can lead people to conflate Catholicism and

classism.

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Christ and the prophets speak with one voice: God dwells among the poor. We must know the poor because we are the poor. Even the most privileged among us have poverty in our souls, and we forget this when we blind ourselves to the crucifixions happening all around us. Some people hide from these in mansions and private jets. Some hide in addictions and endless therapies.

Some hide in social-justice proclamations, which can be as effective as riches in masking the lived reality of poverty.

I should get off my own soapbox at this point. I do not have a litmus test to offer or even a definition, but you should know it when you see it: Even while enjoying the splendors and wonders of this church, know the poor.

Finally, welcome! Christ is risen.

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