

**In the Heartland
With Bishop Pates**

Catholics Come Home

Shortly after the presidential seeking politicians leave Iowa and the beginning of Lent on February 10th, the Diocese of Des Moines will launch a program entitled **Catholics Come Home**.

Catholics Come Home is an outreach to Catholics who for whatever reason have wandered from the faith are welcomed back to its practice. It is conducted principally on television and has been undertaken by some 38 dioceses in the United States.

Coming during the celebration of the Jubilee of Mercy **Catholics Come Home** attempts to reach out with wholehearted understanding to those who have disaffiliated from the Catholic community. What has been key to the program's effectiveness in other dioceses is the preparation within the parishes and diocese to extend a heartfelt welcome to those motivated to approach the Church once again.

This welcome should be responsive to the different reasons individuals have left the community of believers. Those testing the waters of return have different issues. Awareness of these situations and adequate responses on our part will help solidify a successful return to Church involvement for those influenced by the media campaign. Among the factors which are cited for discontinuing being active in the Church are:

1. Drifting, discontinuing the routine of regular Church attendance and a daily prayer life. These individuals cannot identify any particular reason for their lack of participation. So often, an effective response is to facilitate opportunity for engagement and a bonding with members of the parish community. This then leads

- to a deeper experience of the personal relationship with Jesus and the sacramental life.
2. Often in the development of faith life, young people were introduced into the ongoing external practice of the faith but never entered into a fundamental relationship with the Lord Jesus. Thus, opportunity for internalization of the faith or formation development need to be available for those seeking authentic experience of faith.
 3. A significant number of Catholics have undergone divorce. Living in this state without remarriage does not disqualify an individual from practicing the faith. They are welcome to continue to be active in the Church. Those who are remarried are invited to pursue the annulment process which simply determines whether the former marriage(s) was valid in the eyes of the Church. Pope Francis has established new guidelines which streamline this process. The Diocese of Des Moines is prepared to follow the Pope's lead in seeking to make this undertaking less burdensome.
 4. There are some who hold considerable anger/hostility toward the Church in large measure because of unfortunate experiences with priests, deacons, church secretaries, etc., maybe even a bishop or two and oftentimes families or friends. What is needed are responsive ears, open hearts and a willingness to be accepting and kind in the face of a Church which, on occasion, can be all too human.
 5. To be encountered are those who object to some facet of Church teaching. They can be scandalized by polarization and factions in the Church. Many also are influenced by a secular world that attributes no usefulness or meaning to religion. This can evolve into a hostility in which strong opposition is forged against the expression and practice of the faith with repercussions in the public realm. Pope Francis calls us to encounter such people with kindness and to enter into dialogue with them after first making a human connection. Our parishes would do well also to set up opportunities for "fireside" chats and other non-threatening settings for beneficial conversation.

6. A welcome posture should be developed in parishes in which newcomers are clearly invited to share their gifts, providing opportunities for engagement. From time to time, those arriving find a “closed shop” where participation is discouraged.

7. In the Diocese of Des Moines we are blessed with the arrival of immigrants and refugees who are seeking to better their families’ lives as was the case with our forebears who came searching for identical opportunity. We are taught that in welcoming the stranger we welcome Jesus Himself. May we go out of our way to recognize these newcomers, no matter their language or culture, and to assure them that with Jesus we speak the universal language of love.

A key component to this entire effort is that it be encased in individual and communal prayer, beseeching God to rivet our attention to those returning and make us open and generous in response to their needs.

Hopefully, a goodly number will be touched by the media portion of the upcoming **Catholics Come Home** Campaign. But this will only be the beginning. Over each of our Church doors will be symbolically emblazoned “**WELCOME**”, “**BIENVENIDOS.**” Once our returning friends have entered the Church space, may we readily slide over in our pews and greet them with a broad smile and a warm handshake revealing the sentiments of our hearts. These gestures, ever so essential, will be but the gateways to a journey of faith holding much consolation and deep peace for those returning home and heartfelt joy for those of us called to be good shepherds.