

Six Rules for Dealing with Non-Catholic Family and Friends

By Steve Ray

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“I can’t believe you are thinking about being Catholic. Have you lost your mind? Why in the world would you leave biblical Christianity to follow a religion based on men’s tradition? How in the world did you fall for a religion like that?”

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“Listen, Mom and Dad, I appreciate the education you gave me at Catholic school, but I just don’t believe it anymore. I have found Jesus now, and I don’t need your religion anymore. I’ve learned so much since joining the Bible church, and they are much friendlier than the Catholics at Mass.”

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Then the arguments begin, the hostilities and the senses of betrayal and loss arise. One grabs a Bible and begins quoting newly discovered verses out of context while the other tries to recall why he believes Catholic teaching but, alas, discovers he believes but doesn't know why. It goes from bad to worse, and the lines of communication and trust collapse.

With multiple variations, this scenario plays itself out in families across America. Sometimes it is an Evangelical Protestant wife who finds out her husband has been studying in secret and is now deciding to join the dreaded Catholic Church. In another home it is heartbroken parents who've spent tens of thousands of dollars on their children's Catholic education only to have tears well up in their eyes when they watch their children leave the faith for secularism, a Baptist church, or another religion.

Not peace but a sword

There is no question that many families are split over religion. My wife and I know this from own experience. We were ostracized by our families and friends when we converted to the Catholic Church. Family refused to talk to us or visit our home for almost a year, and we lost all of our Evangelical friends—which were the only kind we had at the time—in less than a month.

Religious arguments and split families are as old as time. The [New Testament](#) is full of conflict as Jews discovered

the Messiah and were “divorced” by their Jewish families and communities.

Jesus knew the gospel would bring strife and division in families and warned of these ruptures: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household” (Matt. 10:34–36).

Of course, for those who heard him, the immediate conflict was between Jews—those who rejected Jesus as Messiah and those who followed him. But similar conflicts continue to rip through families even to this day. It is especially common among Christians of different denominations, but most pronounced with conversions to the Catholic Church and those who fall away or choose another religion.

The religious division and pain within families is especially highlighted for me as I travel across the country and around the world speaking at conferences and parishes and leading pilgrimages. Of all the questions I am asked, there is no question more frequent than: “What should I do about my son or daughter who has left the Catholic Faith? It is tearing us apart. What can I do to get them back? What is the No. 1 argument to get them to listen and return?”

At this point, whether family members have left, or a coworker is relentless in his attacks on the Faith, or a wife is unable to get her husband to understand her newfound love for Catholicism, people look for a silver bullet. Unhappily, there is no silver bullet or special Bible verse that will turn back the clock, convert the heart, change the mind, convince the opponent, or drag back the child. What is done is done; we have to accept the situation as it is and take a long-term approach.

Anger and pain

Our first inclination when confronted by an anti-Catholic or a fallen-away Catholic is to argue or withdraw, often displaying our anger and pain. If it is a family member or friend at work, we are inclined to think it is our job to quickly retrieve them from their error. With good intentions, we press the issue by confronting them and using emotionally charged comments such as “I can’t believe this!” or “You’d do this even though you know how much it hurts us?”

The result is often the opposite of the intention. The loved one is usually pushed further away and more deeply entrenched in his resolve to resist. Bridges are burned, and discussion shuts down. After a few heated confrontations or silent treatments, the doors to conversation close shut. It is usually too late when we realize we’ve only made matters worse.

It is a rare and a blessed family that does not experience the personal grief of these problems and trials. Learned through the fires of my own experience and with a desire to help so many hurting brothers and sisters in Christ, I came up with my Six Rules for Dealing with Non-Catholics. Watching people practice them over the years has proved to me that these rules work.

They do not always bring the wanderer back into the fold or convert the entrenched Protestant. But they help repair damaged relations and set the stage for future reconciliation and peace—even a full acceptance of the Catholic Faith.

The rules are not in any necessary order, although I do think the last one is revolutionary.

Rule No 1: Don't argue.

When someone approaches me at a conference and asks this ubiquitous question, I usually surprise them by reaching out and pushing them. With surprise they say, “Why did you do that?” I smile and say, “What is the normal reaction when someone pushes you?” They respond, “To push back.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And that is what we don't want when dealing with your loved ones.” Arguing is like pushing and can quickly escalate. Voices get louder and anger reddens the face. Emotion can take over, and unfortunate things are said that cannot be taken back.

This is not to say that we should not discuss in a measured and charitable manner, but we should avoid the emotional, arm-twisting argument that generates more heat than light, more bad will than desired results.

Of course, for many of us this takes tremendous self-control. We have to remember that we can win an argument but lose a soul; win the battle but lose the war. We have to bite our lip and grimace inside.

I say this from experience. I've done the exact wrong thing more than once and paid the price. I've been on both sides of the confrontation. I've pushed, and I've pushed back. I've alienated family members and friends. I still regret my quick words and unmeasured responses.

But regret and remorse don't fix anything unless we act on them. Love for souls—and relationships—often requires us to confess our faults and to humbly ask for forgiveness for things said hastily in the heat of the moment. Good intentions, yes, but not always good results!

At Thanksgiving dinner, when the snide comment is made, or the challenge is thrown out at the dinner table, we quickly breathe a prayer that the Holy Spirit give us the grace to be graceful. We take the high road. Bridges are not burned, relationships are retained. We save the discussion for a more appropriate time.

Rule No. 2: Love them more than ever.

Our love for them is the cause of our hurt and the desire to win them over, but we need our love directed carefully with the big picture in mind. At the point when the antagonist expects us to react negatively, we need to respond with love. Love is the one argument no one can resist.

I remember the time a woman came up to me with a red face and angry words rushing from her mouth when she was still five feet away. She railed against the Catholic Church and my teaching. After a few moments, I stepped forward and gave her a big hug and whispered in her ear, "I love you too, and thanks for caring about my soul."

She was shocked into a dumb silence. She walked away. I didn't take the bait; rather, I expressed my love and thanks to her.

Loving the other is especially important between spouses separated by religion. The Catholic spouse, whether she is dealing with a loved one leaving the Faith, or whether he himself is just discovering it, must go out of the way to love and accept the other.

It is difficult to love the person and disagree with his ideas, especially if he is forceful about it. But we have to take the lead and demonstrate the love of God. Love, love, love, and make it daily and demonstrable.

When a husband or wife, or any family member for that matter, is discovering the truth of the Catholic Faith, he or she should include his or her loved ones in the discovery.

Don't study in private and then surprise everyone with the announcement of your conversion. This is viewed as a betrayal. "Why didn't you love and respect me enough to share your inner thoughts with me? Why do you now announce something without first sharing and discussing it with me respectfully?"

Include your loved one in the journey. Respect her by asking what she thinks; honor him by asking his opinion. Ask her to pray with you about these important matters, and discuss Scripture with him openly. Share a book together.

Attentive love and quality time spent together is important to avoid alienating the other person. Sometimes a new convert is so excited he just can't help himself. He is rightfully gushing with a new-found love. He goes to daily Mass, spend hours reading and praying and going to meetings with new friends.

The spouse feels left behind, abandoned. The spouse feels jealous like a "new lover" has entered the scene and swept her spouse away.

The inflamed emotion can only drive the "abandoned" spouse further away. Spouses need to love each other more, not less. They need to be more intimate now than ever before. Family members and close friends need to open their lives and hearts to each other. This is love, and love is the best argument.

Rule No. 3: Pray and make sacrifices.

This seems like common sense, but we often spend our time fuming and creating imaginary arguments in our heads when we should direct our energy and time to serious prayer. Make a prayer list and be persistent in prayer.

Jesus told the parable of the woman who came to the unjust judge requesting justice. He gave it to her not because he was a good judge or because he liked her, but “because this widow bothers me, I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming” (Luke 18:2 ff.). She got what she asked for because of her persistence, and Jesus said, how much more will our heavenly Father give us what we ask if we persist in prayer and make sacrifices?

An acquaintance of mine had left the Church. A relative decided to pray daily and make a weekly sacrifice for this person’s return. After a year the apostate returned to the Church, and with a knowing smile said to the prayer warrior, “I know what you did! You prayed and made sacrifices for me. God would not leave me alone.”

Rule No. 4: Study the Catholic Faith.

We are not Catholic Christians because it makes us feel good or because it was the way we were raised. Ultimately we are Catholics because the Faith is true. And if it is true, we should know why it is true and be able to explain it to ourselves and to others (especially our children).

Since we are praying and making sacrifices for our loved ones, we are expecting them to come around sooner or later—correct? And what if they come to us (because we've loved them and kept the doors of communication open) with good and honest questions and we cannot answer their questions?

St. Peter understood this. That is why he told us, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). If we learn the Faith, we are prepared to answer questions when the blessed time finally arrives. The worst thing that can happen is for the person to come back and honestly ask why we Catholics believe and do thus or so—and we have no answer!

When I travel to Europe it does no good to pull out a \$20 bill to pay for lunch. The waiter shakes his head in disgust. The dollar is not the common currency there; they use euros. What is the common currency of the one we pray for? Has he become an Evangelical Protestant? The common currency for them is the Bible. In this case it is wise to study the Bible so we can relate to the loved one.

The Bible is a Catholic book, and we of all people should love and understand it. It is necessary for us to put ourselves in her shoes, understand her new religion or lack thereof. We need to learn the Bible and the reasons

for our Catholic Faith so we can share it confidently with others.

Rule No. 5: Show the Lord's joy in your life.

Joy, happiness, and love attract people. Anger, frustration, and discontent alienate them. Our joy and gladness in the Lord should be contagious; they should draw people to Jesus and his Church. We should make our acquaintances inquire, "Why is he so joyful? What does he have that I don't have?" If we grumble and gossip, it will convince the lost one that they have indeed received the better part.

If we are always criticizing the priests, the Mass, and the homily, then others will never take us seriously. If we complain about Church teaching, dissent from Catholic morals, and make it clear we'd rather watch football than go to Mass, we've pushed our family or friend further away.

The joy of the Lord should radiate from us even during difficult times. Moths are attracted to the light.

Rule No. 6: Ask God to bring someone else to influence him for the Faith, since he won't listen to you.

Rule No. 6 may be the most important of all. This is a no-brainer but rarely practiced. People say, "I never thought of that!" With family or friends we think it is our job to win back the lost, to convert the non-Catholic. But ultimately it is *not* our job; it is the job of the Holy Spirit, and he may

likely choose to use someone else rather than us. He will use your prayers and maybe someone else's immediate influence. So pray that way! I've seen this work over and over again.

We prayed for family members who had completely shunned us because of our conversion. I decided to pray every day, like the woman and the unjust judge. A year later a person unknown to me said to my relative, "I just read the best book I've ever read. You must read it." My relative said, "Tell me the title and I'll order a copy." The friend said, "It's *Crossing the Tiber* by Steve Ray."

My relative almost fell on the floor. "What? He's my relative! You liked his book?" From that point on all animosity was gone. No more arguments, silent treatments, or shunning. My relative did not convert, but relations were restored, and we consider that a huge step forward.

Rule No. 6 means we must be willing to step back and take a hands-off approach. Pray for God to move the pieces around on his cosmic chess board until he can bring the right pieces together—to bring the right person to influence your loved one.

Put these Six Rules into practice, and watch the Lord do wonders. Don't expect immediate results, but pray for the Lord's timing. You will find that not only is this good for the restoration of the loved one, it will do wonders in your own life as well.

