

Dear friends,

I feel really privileged to be introducing a beautiful Christmas message from a parishioner who has recently returned to practicing their faith. They write powerfully and movingly of their faith journey.

I'm writing to invite you to be part of our "Come Home for Christmas" welcome for non-Churchgoing Catholics. As we celebrate this wonderful feast of Jesus' birth, of God making Himself vulnerable so that we might come into relationship with Him, we are called to share God's joy and welcome for those wanting to come back to being a full part of our parish community.

Over the last year, a number of people have come back to regularly practicing their faith in our parishes. I hugely admire the courage of those who have made this journey. As I pray with the beautiful passages from Scripture about God's welcome and joy in those who return, one of my big questions is how we can make it easier for others to come back, those who perhaps are hesitating about doing this themselves.

I'm writing to ask for you to consider being part of this invitation from our parish. There are many ways in which you can be part of this. Perhaps you have yourself been away from practicing your faith and are thinking about returning to regularly coming to Mass? If so, do get in touch (my contact details are below) and we would love to help support you in your journey. This support can be in whatever form you'd like. I'd be delighted to meet up with you to discuss anything you wanted. We are also launching a new Landings group for returning Catholics, which will be starting shortly. This is an opportunity to meet up with others who are on a similar journey back and support each other.

For those who are already regularly practicing their faith, perhaps you know someone who would like a copy of the letter and could give it to them or drop it through their letterbox? Alternatively, maybe you would be willing to accompany someone to Mass to give them some support as they come back?

The most precious support that you can give is through prayer for those who are on this journey, for those accompanying them and for our parish community, that we may radiate ever more fully the love of Jesus and His joy in welcoming us.

May the Lord bless you and your family and friends with His joy and peace this Christmas.

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A message from someone who has recently returned to practicing their faith.

So, how have I come to be writing this letter to accompany Father Tom's Christmas letter? I was born in Bristol into a Catholic Family in the early 1950's. My mother was a convert and my Father, though not a Catholic, was a good Christian man. Upon marriage to my mother, he agreed that any children they had would be baptised and raised as Catholic, and he was faithful to his word.

My brother, sister and I were very fortunate as we were brought up by loving supportive parents. We observed all the usual practises, mass every Sunday, all the holy days of obligation, which was especially great for us as children as it also meant a day off school! We said our prayers at bedtime and never ate meat on Fridays and the parish priest was a regular and welcome visitor to our home. So, in many ways, according to my interpretation, a traditional Catholic family. Although I was not consciously aware of it, I spent very little time in the company of people who were not Catholic. All the schools I attended were Catholic schools, all my activities like Brownies, Guides, youth clubs etc. were all church sponsored. It was only when I went to college, in my home city, that I started meeting people from other faiths. I still attended Mass but I found I was becoming more detached from the Catholic faith.

Following the completion of my college course I took a job with London University and sadly, unless I was at home with my parents, my links with the Catholic church all but disappeared. I married and had two children and they were not brought up in any sort of Christian faith environment. However, at quite a young age my daughter announced she would like to go to church. She chose to go to the local Methodist church where she knew some of her friends attended and I accompanied her. I began to realise then that something had been missing in my life. When I was invited to attend a Billy Graham rally that was screened through to our local cinema I found myself compelled to go forward. After this, for several years, I was quite happy with not really committing myself to God but just being on the fringe of the Methodist church.

After an extremely difficult episode in my life, I found myself once again drawn by a need for God. I was invited by friends to a Charismatic Christian Church. I did not want to go but once again I felt a compulsion. I found myself nervously entering a large hall where I did not know anyone as the friends who invited me were late! However, I remained. I received genuine warmth and a real welcome from the members of this community and I became an active member. During this time God spoke to me and I learnt about forgiveness. After all, how could I expect forgiveness from Jesus if I could not forgive others?

I enjoyed my time there but even so there was still something missing. I felt I wanted to return to my Catholic roots but that I had strayed too far and had no idea how to find my way back. Then, about a year ago, my sister showed me a write up in The Sunday Messenger about a new course the Church was running. The Landings Course is for people such as myself, a Catholic who had drifted from the faith, who was contemplating a return but did not quite know how to go about it. I did not need a second invitation. I did not know what to expect but neither did the other participants and the course worked well. We were able to discuss a wide variety of topics on Catholicism in a safe and confidential environment, supporting each other. Learning about the Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching challenged some long held views and prejudices that I had held for many years. It was a turning point for me and here I am, home.

It was a long and winding road back but I now know that through the years Jesus was always by my side, he knew he was there, I just needed to realise it. I would urge anyone thinking about a return to the Catholic Church to step out and do it. You have nothing to lose and much to gain. "Take courage, get up, he is calling you"