

*“Every Catholic parent needs this book.”*

- Trent Horn, apologist at Catholic Answers

# RETURN

HOW TO DRAW YOUR CHILD  
**BACK TO THE CHURCH**



BRANDON VOGT

*Foreword by Bishop Robert Barron*

## ENDORSEMENTS

“Everywhere I go I meet parents who are troubled because their children no longer practice the faith. Finally, here is a practical guide to doing something about that. It’s time we took this problem seriously and *RETURN* can help with that.”

—Matthew Kelly, founder of DynamicCatholic.com  
and author of *Rediscover Jesus*

“Brandon gives wise, sound counsel on ways that parents can serve Christ as evangelists and help their children journey to heaven. This book is for every father of prodigal children or Monica shedding tears for wayward children.”

—Fr. Mitch Pacwa, S.J., EWTN television and radio host

“Brandon Vogt has produced an amazingly comprehensive resource that responds to one of the greatest felt needs among Catholic parents today. If you’re in anguish about a child who has drifted away from the faith—as so many have today—the *RETURN* project is for you.”

—Dr. Ralph Martin, president of Renewal Ministries  
and host of “The Choices We Face”

“Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* is wise, accessible and thoughtful, and it helps to answer one of the most painful problems for Catholic parents: how can I bring my child back to the Church?”

—Fr. James Martin, S.J., Jesuit priest, editor at large  
at America, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

“*RETURN* is the resource that parents of fallen-away children have been waiting for: it combines powerful spiritual insights with practical tips that you can begin applying right now. It’s like a bootcamp for spiritual warriors who are about to go out on a great search-and-rescue mission.”

—Jennifer Fulwiler, radio host, blogger and  
author of *Something Other Than God*

“Brandon Vogt is one of the brightest points of light in the American Church and *RETURN* is a huge gift given to us by the Holy Spirit. Here is a wise book, brimming with practical things anybody can do to help the ones they love so much find their way back the Church. Read this book and know hope.”

—Mark P. Shea, author of *By What Authority:  
An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition*

“*RETURN* is a resource that is desperately needed by today’s Catholic families. This terrific new resource is full of practical, supportive, and affirming answers. A ‘must have’ for every Catholic home, parish, and library!”

—Lisa M. Hendey, founder of CatholicMom.com  
and author of *The Grace of Yes*

“Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* offers practical and realistic ways to bring lost souls home. And I should know: I was one of those kids who left the Church for over ten years. *RETURN* hits home for me. It reveals not just why people are drifting from the Church but how to get them back into the fold of Christ. It’s a true treasure for our times.”

—Leah Darrow, Catholic speaker and author

“The number one question I am asked frequently is, ‘How can we get our son or daughter back to the Catholic Church?’ This grieves the hearts of millions of parents. Finally, someone has given us sound tools, prayers, and wisdom on this vital issue. Brandon has once again created an inspirational book to help us bring loved ones home to Jesus and His holy Church!”

—Tom Peterson, author, TV host, founder  
of “Catholics Come Home”

“With an engineer’s mind and a convert’s heart, Brandon Vogt proves a sage guide through what can be overwhelming, dark, and scary waters for the parents of wandering souls. *RETURN* is a roadmap back into the loving arms of our Heavenly Father.”

—Mark Hart, author, speaker, and  
Vice President of Life Teen

“Every Catholic parent needs this book. It demolishes the myths about why young people leave the Church and lays out a wonderful (and very practical) step-by-step plan for helping them come back to the faith.”

—Trent Horn, staff apologist at Catholic Answers

“I wish every Catholic parent would read this. Brandon Vogt knows what he’s talking about. *RETURN* is a marvelous, practical, and well-researched book. Regardless of why your child drifted from the Church, this will help you bring them home.”

—Matt Fradd, speaker and author  
of *Delivered and Restored*

“Few things are more painful for parents than seeing their children leave the Catholic faith. Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* is changing that. It’s an indispensable guide for anyone whose children have left the faith.”

—Devin Rose, blogger and author of  
*The Protestant’s Dilemma*

“Practical, prayerful, and prudent, if you long for someone to return to Christ, this is one of the most important books you’ll ever read.”

—Greg Willits, co-host of “Adventures in Imperfect Living Podcast”  
and author of *The New Evangelization and You: Be Not Afraid*

“Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* is a road map for Catholic parents of fallen-away Catholics. Buy it. Read it. Do what it says. Then see what a great gift God has for your family!”

—Marcel LeJeune, Assistant Director of Catholic Campus Ministry at Texas A&M University

“So many heartbroken and discouraged parents today lament that their children have left the practice of the faith! If you are one of them, here’s what you have been waiting for. And if you are a priest or Catholic leader who searches for practical advice to give such parents, here it is.”

—Msgr. Charles Pope, priest of the Archdiocese of Washington

“*RETURN* is a must-read for any Catholic serious about evangelization. Brandon Vogt covers the entire process of helping a loved one discover the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith, from the first panicked prayer to the sometimes-messy logistics of settling into parish life. Anyone who cares about the future of the Catholic Church should check out *RETURN*.”

—Jennifer Fitz, author and blogger at Patheos.com

“Well-researched and realistic, Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* is not just hope-filled, but superbly hope-filling. A resounding answer to many Catholic parents’ most ardent prayers.”

—Dr. Stephen Bullivant, author of *Faith and Unbelief* and co-editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*

“Every Catholic I know has at least one close family member who has drifted away from the Church. Brandon Vogt’s *RETURN* is an excellent answer to that question. He does a great job of laying the foundation and sharing the best tips and practical strategies. Buy *RETURN* if you want to help your child come back.”

—Steve Dawson, founder of St. Paul Street Evangelization

“*RETURN* is the most up-to-date, practical book I’ve read on how to train for and do the New Evangelization. It will be my foremost recommendation for today’s pew-sitting Catholic who wants to evangelize lost sheep but isn’t sure where to start. Outstanding!”

—Matt Nelson, blogger at ReasonableCatholic.com

“As a Catholic revert myself, I can attest that this book is spot on with its recommendations! *RETURN* is a must-read for anyone looking to draw a loved one back to the Church.”

—Josh Simmons, founder of eCatholic



# RETURN

**HOW TO DRAW YOUR CHILD  
BACK TO THE CHURCH**

**BRANDON VOGT**



NUMINOUS  
BOOKS

“The Lord says...

Stop your crying and wipe away your tears.

All that you have done for your children  
will not go unrewarded...

There is hope for your future;  
your children will come back home.

I, the Lord, have spoken.”

—Jeremiah 31:16-17 (NIV)

For all those

who have drifted away

and those preparing

to draw them back

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# START THE CONVERSATION

A recent survey of young Catholics found that the large majority of their parents rarely or never speak to them about religion. Only 8% of the young people said their parents talked about religion daily and 20% said they did it once a week.

It's hard to open up conversations about religion, and you're probably thinking, "Yeah, and it's *especially* hard if you're their parents!" Patrick Madrid, one of the most effective Catholic apologists in the world, agrees. "Although I can draw to Christ the souls of strangers," he writes, "I sometimes find myself unable even to get a hearing from some of those I love the most. I'm not alone." Indeed, Christ himself observed, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place" (Lk 4:24). Even God himself found it difficult to get through to those nearest to him.

Many parents believe that it's impossible to talk with their children about God or religion or faith. But while it's true that some children are more closed off than others, it's always possible to start a good conversation, no matter the child, *if* you know what you're doing.

What you need are simple, practical strategies to initiate the conversation and then stay in control—in a good way—even if your knowledge is limited. That's what you'll learn over the next two chapters.

The approach we'll use is grounded not on confrontation but on what Christian author Gregory Koukl calls "friendly curiosity," which is a kind of relaxed diplomacy. These tactics are not manipulative tricks or sly ruses. They are not designed to embarrass your child

or coerce him into your point of view. Instead, they will help you gracefully discover his main objections, complaints, and accusations against Catholicism, and then effectively work through them.

You might be nervous moving into such conversations with your child. That's normal—most parents are, at least at first. But once you learn the tips below, you'll feel extremely confident and prepared.

I want to caution again that you should only begin these sorts of conversations *after* you've spent considerable time fasting and praying for your child and equipping yourself, and *after* your child has expressed some openness or curiosity toward returning to the Church. It often takes several months or years for a young person to reach that stage. So don't rush into these conversations. But when you sense your child is ready, the tips below will help tremendously.

So let's dive in by starting with a question you're probably asking yourself: "How do I even open up a conversation about God or the Church?"

## Create Opportunities to Chat

The first key to generating good conversations about faith is this: don't start with faith. Once your child has moved past the "initial trust" threshold, and has become spiritually curious and open, you may discern it's time to start discussing these things with him.

But don't immediately begin with religious topics. This is a common mistake. Start by asking normal questions about his daily life. Show that you care about him—all of him—and not just his religious or moral dimensions. Sometimes this is where a conversation ends—you may not have time to get to any religious questions, or the atmosphere just isn't right. That's totally fine. Your purpose in this beginning stage is just to generate dialogue about *anything*.

Some former Catholics need lots of lead time before discussing heavy issues. They might be somewhat open to faith conversations, but they won't handle it well if you just switch from light chatting about

the weather to serious issues about God and eternity. You might need to test the waters before diving in.

Abraham Piper recommends another, slightly bolder way to open a meaningful conversation: “Just ask about his soul. You don’t know how he’ll respond. Will he roll his eyes like you’re a moron? Will he get mad and leave? Or has God been working in him since you talked last? You don’t know until you risk asking. God will give you the gumption.”

So at some point in the conversation, when it feels opportune, take a risk and ask a straight question: “Can I ask you something? I wonder if you’d be up for talking about spiritual things some time. I know you have a mixed relationship with the Church, but would you be open to talking about it with me? I just want to listen.”

In addition to showing your child that you’re not just trying to force your agenda on him, it shows you respect him and his sensitivities. Phrased like that, the question also gives room for your child to say, “I’m interested, but not right now.” Chances are, that’s an answer you’d gladly take, for it’s still one step closer to a later, more meaningful discussion.

I know, I know—you’re probably not comfortable with questions like that right now. I know they’re difficult and forward, and I know you’re probably skeptical about how your child will respond. That’s all fine.

But if you’ve spent enough time doing everything else so far—you’ve prayed, fasted, made small sacrifices, and planted the seeds—your child is likely ready. Before the conversation begins, steel your resolve to fight through the awkwardness. That resistance you feel is not coming from God; it’s coming from other powers bent on *preventing* you from talking with your child about religious matters. Those powers want nothing more than your silence. So take

**The first key to generating good conversations about faith is this: don’t start with faith.**

heart and push through. If it makes things easier, you might start these conversations via e-mail rather than on the phone or face to face. You'll eventually want to move into real-time, person-to-person conversations, but if e-mail seems more doable, then start there.

Also, if you're still a bit nervous, consider this question: what's the worst that could happen? Maybe your child will brush you off. Perhaps he might sigh or express frustration for a couple moments, or he might respond negatively to your question. But even if all of that happens, let it roll off you. Don't give up. Remember, you're in it for the long run—this isn't a convert-your-child-quick scheme. If you can handle the worst-case scenario, which basically involves a few uncomfortable moments, then these questions are more than worth the effort.

When you do feel it's time to ask the questions, and get the conversation going, stand confidently behind them. Don't worry about whether there will be an awkward pause after your query—there will be; expect it. Don't interrupt any silence that follows. Give your child time to think and respond.

And then what happens when he responds? That's when you begin to listen.

## Listen First, Then Listen Some More

Theologian Francis Schaeffer was once asked what he would do if he had an hour with a non-Christian. He replied by saying he would listen for fifty-five minutes. Then, in those last five minutes, he would have something to say.

That's a great strategy for discussions with your child. Listening should be your first, second, and third aim. Make it clear from the beginning of each conversation that your primary mission is to understand your child, that you're simply *interested in him*. At least initially, you shouldn't set out to get your point across or try to change his view on things. You just need to listen.

Listening to your child has at least three advantages. First, you immediately come across as agreeable. This can disarm your child and make it easier for you to persuade him later on.

Second, you get to hear your child's genuine feelings and doubts, which may be far different than what you imagined.

Third, you give your child a chance to vocalize and clarify the reasons why he has

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drifted away from the Church. It may be the first time he's given serious thought to this, and he might surprise himself by what he says.

Marcel LeJeune, campus minister at Texas A&M University, which boasts the largest Catholic student group of any college in the country, offers a list of helpful questions to ask during this listening phase. Review them carefully and choose a few that you can ask your child. They are perfect questions to draw out your child's thoughts, and will make listening much easier.

- Tell me about what kind of role faith played while growing up, if any?
- How would you describe your idea of Catholicism (or Christianity)?
- Who do you look up to? What personality traits are most attractive?
- How do you handle the rough parts of life?
- What are you passionate about?
- What brings meaning to your life?
- What makes you happy?
- Would you like to continue our conversation?
- Would you be interested in learning more about God, Jesus, the Bible, the Catholic Church, etc.?
- Do you pray? If so, would you mind describing it for me? If not, have you ever prayed in the past?

- Do you believe a relationship with God is possible?
- Can you describe what it means to be Catholic, in your experience?
- Do you have a personal prayer life? If so, how do you pray?
- Is God someone you would say you have a personal relationship with?
- Have you had any kind of moment when you felt particularly close to Jesus? If so, can you tell me about it? If not, have you ever wanted to?

As you listen carefully to your child's answers, try hard not to think about what *you're* going to say next. That's a mistake most of us make, in most conversations. Instead, think about what your child is saying. Ponder each of his words, and read between the words to discern what he's *not* saying.

Once he's completely finished, then it's time for an important task: repeat his thoughts back to him in your own words.

This is critical. Begin your reply with "If I understand you correctly..." and then narrate back to him what you believe he thinks. This is not a time for judgment or commentary. Your aim is simply to reflect back to him, fairly, what you believe his comments represent. Show him that you get it, that you listened, that you have a good grasp of his thoughts and beliefs.

That will set the stage for everything that follows. By this point, you will have opened up one or more conversations about faith, and begun to understand what your child thinks about the topic.

## The Five Most Powerful Questions You Can Ask

Talking with your child about the faith doesn't always mean having the right arguments or answers. Often it's just knowing how to ask the right questions. Questions are largely neutral, or at least seem that way, and don't sound "preachy." When you ask a question,

you aren't actually stating your own view. Many times, you're helping your child see that his beliefs are not as firmly supported as he might think, causing him to reassess why he's drifted away from the Church.

Evangelist Gregory Koukl calls this the "Columbo tactic," in which you "go on the offensive in an inoffensive way by using carefully selected questions to productively advance the conversation." Koukl recommends that you should "never make a statement, at least at first, when a question will do the job."

Using simple leading questions is an almost effortless way to open up spiritual discussion without seeming abrupt, rude, or pushy. Questions are engaging and interactive, and can sometimes be flattering. Most importantly, they keep you in the driver's seat of the conversation while your child does all the work. (This "Columbo" tactic was one of Jesus' favorite methods. Note that Jesus started almost all of his conversations with questions, and whenever someone asked *him* a question, he answered with a question of his own. It's a powerful tactic.)

Most questions you ask can be helpful, but Trent Horn, expert apologist at Catholic Answers, has found five to be the most powerful.

**Questions are engaging and interactive, and they keep you in the driver's seat of the conversation.**

### 1. "What do you believe about \_\_\_\_\_?"

It's easy to assume what your child believes about Jesus, God, the Church, morality, or faith. You might guess, for instance, that since your child has been to Mass many times as a child he fully comprehends what Catholics believe about the Eucharist. But this is unlikely. If he's drifted away from Catholicism, his views probably don't align with the Church's teachings, so it's important to figure out what exactly he believes from the beginning. This gets his cards on the table. It will also cause your child to reflect on this question

personally. Maybe he's never asked himself what he believes, so hearing you pose the question will allow him to identify and refine what exactly he does.

### **2. "Why do you think that's true?"**

We all have unquestioned assumptions, things we believe that haven't really been challenged. But for a belief to be truly justified, we should have good reasons or evidence to support it. Asking this particular question will gently challenge your child's belief and cause him to search for the real reasons he holds it. Sometimes when you ask "Why do you think that's true?", your child will discover that he doesn't really have *any* reasons to support his view. He just picked up his views at school, or among friends, or through the media, and he accepted them without serious consideration. That's a good thing for him to realize, because it makes it far easier for you to change his mind. If his beliefs about God or the Church are warped and unsupported, and if you're able to help him see that, you're in a much better place to show him the truth.

### **3. "How did you come to believe that?"**

One of the most common logical mistakes is something called the "genetic fallacy." This involves rejecting a belief someone has simply because of where they got that belief from. For example, my friend Matt Fradd was talking with his young son, and the boy said, "Did you know that you can fit a million earths inside the sun?" Matt was surprised. "That doesn't sound right," he said, "Where did you learn that?" His son answered, "From a cartoon." Matt was then even more skeptical and was inclined to reject the crazy statistic. But that would have been a textbook case of the genetic fallacy, rejecting a belief simply because of where it came from—in this case, a cartoon. (And in fact, in this case, the cartoon was right and the statistic was true.) So we shouldn't reject a belief *solely* because of where it came from.

That said, sometimes *where* your child got his beliefs from is important. For instance, suppose your child said, "When I found out

that the Church killed Galileo for his scientific beliefs, I decided I could never be Catholic.” You might ask, “Where did you get that idea from?” And your son may answer, “From the Internet. I read it in an atheist discussion forum.” Now again, dismissing his belief simply because it stems from an atheist discussion forum would be inappropriate—that’s the genetic fallacy. Perhaps the forum was correct. But in this case, alarm bells should be going off in your mind. Chances are, the atheist discussion forum is highly biased and probably offered a very distorted view of the complicated Galileo episode. That should make you reexamine your child’s belief from a different perspective, and invite him to do the same as well. For instance, you might instead point him to a good book on the topic from a Catholic or neutral perspective. (Later in this book, you’ll learn exactly how to respond to the Galileo objection.)

#### 4. “What do you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?”

If I told you that “my wife is a Seminole,” you might assume, especially if you’re not a sports person, that she is a Native American, part of the Seminole tribe of Indians. But what I really mean by the term is that, like me, she graduated from Florida State University, whose mascot is the Seminole. If we’re not clear on that meaning though, almost any conversation regarding my wife will be unproductive—we’ll just be talking past each other.

Defining terms is a critical step in any serious discussion. One of the most commonly misunderstood terms is “God.” If your child has trouble with

**Defining terms is a critical step in any serious discussion.**

God, or no longer believes in him, you first want to ask, “Well, when you say you doubt God exists, what do you mean by ‘God’?”

Odds are, the God they find problematic is one you would, too. That God is often some sort of cosmic moral policeman who literally lives in the clouds, brooding over the world and suppressing all joy, freedom, and fulfillment. But that’s not the Catholic view of God.

Catholics see him revealed in the person of Jesus Christ as a sheer act of love who wants us to “have life and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10, NIV), and they know he exists in heaven, which isn’t a physical place in our universe. But until you and your child are both clear on who God is, you can’t proceed to discuss his existence or nature. The same holds for other nebulous terms such as faith, religion, church, goodness, and belief. Before discussing those topics with your child, you should ask how he understands each term.

**5. “What would you say to someone who says \_\_\_\_\_?”**

The more your conversation becomes a personal showdown—me versus you—the less successful you’ll be at changing your child’s mind. It’s important he not feel like you’re personally challenging or attacking him, so don’t try to “win” the conversation. One way to do this is to pull yourself out of the dialogue and make your points through a hypothetical third person. To do this, preface your responses by asking, “What would you say to someone who...” This makes your child respond to the hypothetical third person instead of you, diffusing the chance that he’ll see the conversation as a two-way sparring match.

For example, if your child says, “I just don’t think the Mass is relevant to my life,” you might respond, “What would you say to someone who believes the Mass is deeply relevant because it offers something you can’t find anywhere else in the world: a direct encounter with God?” By using a question from a hypothetical inquirer, instead of an assertion directly from yourself, your child is less likely to become defensive or take the challenge personally.

Gregory Koukl offers a similar approach. Say, “Let me suggest an alternative, and tell me if you think it’s an improvement. If not, you can tell me why you think your option is better.” If you want more tips like these on how to master the art of difficult conversations, Koukl’s book *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Zondervan, 2009) is a must-read.

## Identify the Big Roadblocks

We could add many more questions to those above, but these will suffice to open a dialogue and get it going. Once you've begun listening to your child's responses, the next step is to diagnose what's holding him back from the Church. One really effective way I've found is to just ask directly:

**“What’s the biggest thing keeping you away from the Church?”**

It's important to phrase it this way instead of asking “What happened to your Catholic faith?” or “Why aren't you Catholic anymore?” or “Why have you stopped going to Mass?” because, as we learned earlier, your child may still identify as “Catholic” even if he isn't attending Mass or doesn't hold many Catholic beliefs. By phrasing it this way you invite your child to hone in on his biggest, most troubling roadblock to returning.

Another way to ask the same question, or perhaps to follow the one above, is:

**“What’s the one thing that bugs you most about the Catholic Church?”**

This question is particularly helpful at drawing out major *emotional* roadblocks your child has to Catholicism. Phrased this way, in terms of “bugging,” it gets at the barrier that boils his blood or triggers his disgust. It may not be an intellectual objection, but if it bugs him, it's significant and you must engage it.

## Absorb the Criticisms

Finally, in this initial phase of listening, you must be ready to absorb any frustrations your child has with the Church. There's a good chance that once you give your child permission to speak honestly, he may respond with anger, sarcasm, or dismissiveness—all toward the faith that you hold dear. Just assume that will happen.

But this is a good thing. Welcome his venting. Let him know that you won't be offended and you won't interrupt, no matter his criti-

cism. If he's been hurt in the past by the Church, give him time to describe his pain. If he doesn't think faith is relevant to his life, invite him to explain why. If he finds the Church's teachings morally repugnant, allow him to voice those concerns. Through both your words and your body language, make it clear that you just want to know what he thinks. Don't be defensive or threatened—just hear him out.

Absorbing his criticisms will accomplish a few things. First, it will give you a better sense of his main points of resistance to the Church. Diagnosing these hurdles will allow you to focus your energies on those issues rather than on topics that aren't really a problem for him.

**Welcome your child's venting—hear him out. Give him space to voice his concerns.**

Second, the venting will force him to clarify his own criticisms. Often a critique can sound reasonable in our heads—until we get it out into the open. Once your child verbalizes his critique, he may discover it wasn't quite as strong as he first thought. Inviting criticism can itself be a way to diffusing its strength.

Finally, by listening you'll convey that you genuinely care for him and his concerns. This will help your child see that instead of adversaries on either side of a religious divide, you're really standing together on a shared search.

Especially in this phase, patience is the name of the game. You need to patiently listen to your child's thoughts, and patiently absorb his pain and criticism. It's no accident that St. Paul began his famous catalogue of love in 1 Corinthians 13 with "patient" at the head of the list (13:4-8).

After getting the conversation off the ground, and hearing your child's initial thoughts, you're now ready to start actively moving the dialogue forward. That's what we'll learn next.



"For thus says the Lord God:

Look! I myself will search for my sheep  
and examine them....

I will deliver them from every place where they  
were scattered on the day of dark clouds.

I will lead them out from among the peoples  
and gather them from the lands;

I will bring them back to their own country  
and pasture them....

I myself will pasture my sheep;

I myself will give them rest....

The lost I will search out, the strays  
I will bring back,

the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal....

I will shepherd them."

-Ezekiel 34:11-16

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