

## “Back to School” ... AND to Church

Early September is a great opportunity to reach out to inactive Catholic families because their lives are focused on being “back to school”. Why not be back at Church? Parents are already outfitting their children for their first day back. They are settling in for a new season. Schedule a *Back to Church* weekend to welcome returning families in mid September. This is when the dust around the house settles. You can easily launch this campaign with interested parishioners at the end of August by using a personalized *Each One, Reach One* approach. Parishioners can invite any neighbor or family member who has children to attend the event.

**Advertise Now!** - Keep it simple. Use a school background with a cross image on top. Post signs and announce the event – to parishioners, at school, on the web and through the media:

***Back to school?... Don't stop there! Come back to church!***

They go together like milk and cookies. Come find out why Sundays are just as sweet for our families at [parish]. Join us for some food, fun and faith at [event date/time]. Lunch is served. Get reconnected with families that care. Fall back into God's embrace. You will not be disappointed.

**Organize** - Have a light breakfast at the end of August and provide childcare after Mass. Gather parents in small groups. The only tasks are:

1. identify one or two families that they might invite to attend the *Back to Church* event.
2. Brainstorm names of parishioners who are good with children to serve as guides or maybe even a religious character at the event (below).
3. Recruit a few motivated grandparents who can help serve food and stay for clean-up.
4. Get a parishioner to take pictures of the fun.

### **Host a *Back to Church* Event – Meal and Scavenger Hunt**

For Catholic parishes a *Back to Church* event can be easy. Just provide a simple meal after the last Sunday morning Mass. It can be as simple as hot dogs, baked beans, and chips. Offer a simple fun activity before bringing out the ice cream for dessert. Consider a scavenger hunt. Why? Because our greatest asset is often what we take most for granted. For Catholics this includes the church. Yes, I mean the building. Churches are still places of wonder for young children. Catholic churches are full of statuary, stained glass, symbols and other sacramentals that invite mystery and say volumes about our faith in Jesus, our beliefs as a community and our mission as a church.

**Step 1: Welcome families** - Introduce parish leaders and let them know that you will be around and available. Get everyone a name tag and have some light snack out that will not spoil appetites.

**Step 2: Create Family Teams** – Pair up families into teams of two families. Whenever possible pair a visiting family with an active parishioner family. The reason for this is that the goal is to acquaint visiting families with the parish and its people. What better way than by working on a fun project and sharing ice cream together?

**Step 3: Feed the Families** – Scavenger hunts work best when the young hunters are not distracted by hunger. Save the ice cream for after the hunt.

**Step 4: Conduct the Hunt** - Give each team a clue sheet naming items that are visible in the church. The hunt can be more enjoyable if there are parishioners placed throughout the church to answer questions and guide the hunters. Upon finding each item on the list, a guide initial the find or the team can be instructed to identify something proving that they accomplished their mission (e.g. the statue of Mary is standing with her foot crushing the head of a \_\_\_\_\_). There can also be a bonus challenge affixed to each item (e.g. Holy Water Font – extra credit if everyone in the team can bless themselves with the sign of the cross).

### Scavenger Hunt Items

#### Sample List (includes extra challenges)\*

Ambo - Who do the four creatures on the book of Gospels represent?

Ambry - How many oils? (Extra credit if the team can name the purpose for each)

Altar Stone - Why are there five crosses facing upward?

Architecture – What is the shape of the floor plan? Cross - why? Circular - why?

Baptistry - Why is the baptistry likened to a womb and a tomb (incarnation and resurrection)?

In what ways is water used to bless (sprinkling, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_)

Candles – Which one is the biggest? Why?

Censer – when is it used? What is the significance of smoke rising?

Doors – How does one enter the church as an adult? (knock at the entrance – which can be particularly significant for anyone who has celebrated Posadas?)

Paintings and Symbols – Are there trinitarian symbols (trefoil, equilateral triangle, triquetra, interwoven circles, circle of fish)? Why?

Pall – Why do we cover the casket with cloth?

Papal Flag – Does this flag suggest dual citizenship?

Pyx – Why do we send it out to people?

Reconciliation room – Why do we ask for forgiveness, if we believe that God will always forgive?

Sacrarium – Why do Catholics dispose of everything blessed or sacred directly to the earth?

Stained Glass – What scene is depicted in the windows to the left of the altar?

Statuary – Keep track of how many statues there are in this church. Why are there statues or paintings of saints all around in Catholic Churches?

Tabernacle – What is so special about this container?

Vestments - Why is white used at funerals?

### Additions and Variations

1. Have a parishioner study up on the patron saint and dress for the scavenger hunt in costume to help answer questions and greet the scavengers
2. Put out a collection basket, old picture of the church on the gifts table and challenge the scavengers to find one visible change in the church).
3. Is there a pipe organ
4. Allow guesses regarding the height of cross on the steeple.
5. Make use of all the parish grounds, parish office, prayer garden, adjoining cemetery.
6. Pews - Recall the tradition of numbered pews
7. Include an item that was donated in memorial. Why would a family do that? Would anyone do it today?
8. Find the oldest thing in the church (that is not attached).
9. Look up into the ceiling of the sanctuary – what do you see?
10. Add items to the scavenger hunt that invite interaction between the teams (e.g. find another family that chose a baptismal name to honor a beloved family member)
11. What do you notice about the church looking out from behind the altar where the presider stands? Share that with another team.
12. Where is there a depiction of the patron saint?
13. How many stations?
14. Out of what material is the altar made?
15. What are the seats called?
16. Why is there a light always lit in the church?
17. Where is Mary?
18. What is the reason for the biggest candle? What is it for?
19. Put out some bibles with sacramental items referenced. Many times even the most devote Catholics are surprised to hear how much of the meaning of our sacraments and worship space derives its meaning directly from scriptural sources.
20. How many crosses are in the church (steeple, altar stone, floor plan)?

\*There is plenty of information on churches and sacred objects in books like *The Catholic Source Book* by Rev. Peter Klein.

**Step 5: Ice Cream and Conversation** - Regather the families in the hall to share ice cream. Consider a quick debriefing of the experience by allowing children to share what they enjoyed the most. Allow anyone to ask questions about the church and what the use of various sacramentals. This event is even more effective if you conclude with

1. Announce the next family event (e.g. All Hallows Eve Party, Thanksgiving service activity, Christmas Caroling, or Alternate New Years celebration)
2. Give each family a memento of the day as they leave (e.g. booklet of blessings and prayers for the family).
3. Let parents leave their contact information to hear about future events.

**Step 6: Thank Everyone for Coming** - Provide contact information for pastoral leaders and stay around to get acquainted and personally thank everyone who came. (Thank the servers and cleaners).

**Step 7: Communicate the Fun** – Let parishioners know how much fun you had. Post pictures on the website and in the back of church.

**Step 8: Get Back in Touch with Interested Families** – Contact those who left their contact information to see if there is anything else that your parish can do for them.

By Dennis Mahaney, Office of Parish Life

For more ways to welcome back young families to your parish contact the Office of Parish Life at 847-5531.