

## Invitation to a young man

On 13 Jul 2022 Dr Jordan B. Petersen issued a challenge to churches to invite young men back to church. Released on YouTube it has already had more than 1 million views as at 31 Jul 2022. Therefore there's a good chance you have already watched that 11 minute video clip. If you haven't, the link is below:

<https://youtu.be/e7ytLpO7mj0>

This is my response to that challenge, and my invitation to any young man who comes across it.

Dear young man who is considering walking back into a Catholic Church after an absence, or perhaps for the very first time, there is absolutely no doubt that we need you; and there is absolutely no doubt that God has plenty that He wants to do in and through you, but it won't be easy at all.

Because there's a lot of stuff you need to know, the rest of this invitation is rather long.

The short version (tl:dr) is

Be prepared: do as much research as you can before you show up.

Be patient: this is for the long haul, and it will be many months before mutual trust begins.

Be neat and tidy: as you would for an official family photograph, or a visit to a grandparent.

Be sober: you want all your senses functioning properly.

Be early: aim for a minimum of 15 minutes before start time.

Be open: there is so much that you don't yet know, and things God may gently ask you to give up.

Be willing: to be gracious if someone asks for help; and to grow in the awareness of the needs of others.

Don't be afraid.

### Be Prepared.

Find out what you can about the Catholic Churches near to you. Unless you are in a rural or outback area those parishes should have websites. Some of them may have Facebook pages. What you are looking for is some background on the history of the parish, an idea of the size of the parish, and what the weekday and weekend Mass times are. Rural parishes may have one Sunday Mass a week, and another Sunday Mass at various Mass Centres in the parish area on a rotating basis. Capital city parishes could have seven Sunday Masses.

The next thing to do is to look for any Masses or funerals that have been livestreamed from those parishes. During lockdown just about all parishes eventually did do a livestreamed Mass each week, and since then many funerals continue to be live-streamed. What you are looking for is a sense of what the interiors of those churches are like, a taste of the rhythm of the Catholic liturgy, and a gut feel for which of the priests you would find it the easiest to talk to.

Familiarise yourself with the basic prayers and structure of the Mass.

<https://www.catholicbridge.com/catholic/catholic-mass-full-text.php>

The basic structure always remains the same, but there's a myriad of regular options, and a further myriad of options for feast days and liturgical seasons like Lent and Christmas.

For most people it takes about a year to notice the changes from season to season, and about 3 years to really start to appreciate it. This 12 minute video clip may help:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jUDVkyeWAQ&t=2s>

There are many terms Catholics use, and we frequently neglect to explain them. Apologies about that.

These Glossaries may help:

<https://carm.org/roman-catholicism/catholic-terminology/>

<https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/catholic-terms>

What the online Masses won't prepare you for are the regular times to sit, to stand, and to kneel. In general, just copy everyone else until you get the hang of it. If you are very new to this kind of worship, then it is OK to sit when the others kneel for a few weeks until you feel comfortable joining in.

At the beginning and at the end of Mass, and upon entering and leaving the church, it is usual to make the Sign of the Cross. This one minute video is a good introduction into how to do it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=autalzGDcy8>

Also upon entering and leaving the church it is usual to genuflect on one knee. If genuflection is not possible, then a profound bow from the waist is the next best thing. This 10 minute video may help:

[https://youtu.be/zkidNc7\\_zfk](https://youtu.be/zkidNc7_zfk)

At Communion time, only those who have been initiated into the Church (baptism and first communion), who believe all that the Catholic Church teaches, and who are not conscious of unconfessed grave sin, may go to receive Holy Communion.

That's because we take 1 Cor 11:28-31 seriously, viz:

*"Everyone is to recollect himself before eating this bread and drinking this cup; because a person who eats and drinks without recognizing the Body is eating and drinking his own condemnation. In fact that is why many of you are weak and ill and some of you have died. If only we recollected ourselves, we should not be punished like that."*

For those who aren't there yet, there are two options. One is to stay in your seat and pray quietly. The other is to join the communion line going up to the priest, and when the person in front of you is receiving communion, to then put each hand on the opposite shoulder – forming a cross across your chest – this is the accepted signal to ask the priest for a blessing. Once the blessing is received, you return to your seat. There are various prayers available to ask Jesus to visit you spiritually when you are unable to receive Him sacramentally.

Information about this may help:

[http://www.societyofsaints.net/uploads/1/7/6/9/17698361/spiritualcommunion\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.societyofsaints.net/uploads/1/7/6/9/17698361/spiritualcommunion_pdf.pdf)

As an aid to understanding the Mass, Scott Hahn put together an excellent bible study in six parts.

Should you be a young man who often asks, 'Where is that in the bible?',

this short bible study will be particularly helpful for you.

<https://stpaulcenter.com/bible-studies/text-studies/the-lambs-supper-the-bible-and-the-mass/>

When you feel you are ready to attempt an in-person Mass, find someone knowledgeable to go with you – because you are going to have a lot of questions. That someone should be either a Catholic friend or acquaintance who knows their stuff, or if you don't have one, and/or wish to take this step without notifying those in your social circle, then phone or email the parish office and ask them to recommend someone and give that someone permission to contact you. The parish office phone number and email address will be somewhere on the parish website. Sometimes that information is easier to find on the weekly parish bulletin; and most places upload parish bulletins online, although it may take a few clicks to get to where that sub-page is.

There is so much more you need to know. But what you have read this far will get you started.

### Be Patient

The average time it will take people to start to talk to you is about 6 weeks, slightly shorter in smaller parishes, slightly longer in big inner-city parishes. Why is it so? Because it takes about that long to determine whether you are a stayer or not. Some people come briefly because they are on holiday, or have a special birthday or anniversary, or if they are seeking God's help while they look for new employment, or if they have an acute need (exam, surgery, terminal illness), or if they are helping clear out a deceased estate. When people have determined that you are a stayer, and that you are not weird, they will begin to open up their hearts and want to learn more about you.

It will usually take a few more months for people to ask you to help out with small things. Perhaps a bit less time if the need is urgent. Of those small things, which are usually unglamorous, ordinary and thankless, are included: changing light bulbs (especially if you are tall); carrying boxes; helping put up and take down decorative banners; helping carry and set up chairs and tables; helping carry and put back chairs and tables; technology issues with radio microphones, mobile phones, and laptops used to power sightscreens; putting out donation envelopes on seats, gathering donation envelopes after the fundraising time is over; picking up leftover parish bulletins, straightening them, and putting them back in the pick-up area. Generally, if you observe a need and say, 'Do you need a hand with that?' you'll get a Yes response.

Whenever you start getting metaphorical ticks of approval from sufficient people, the invitations to help out will change. Some of those new invitations won't need much training, and other things will.

Things that don't need a lot of training are helping with the offertory procession and helping with the collections.

Things that need more training are becoming a lector (proclaiming scripture is more than reading a story); becoming a senior server or acolyte; becoming a catechist in government schools, joining the local St Vincent de Paul conference, assisting with children's liturgy of the Word, taking Holy Communion to the sick, hospital visitation, prison visitation, joining the wardens in various security duties. Many of these also by law require police checks and working with children checks and attending safeguarding courses.

Obviously these lists are not exhaustive.

If you want to shorten the 'getting to know you process' the following things will help:

Assisting with the working bees to make the exterior of the church look ship-shape prior to Christmas, Easter, and prior to when the bishop visits for Confirmation.

Joining one of the parish choirs or music groups; more contemporary music tends to get played at Sunday evening Masses if your locality has that time slot as an option.

Taking part in the morning teas that often happen after the final Sunday morning Mass of the day.

Normally in Lent, and sometimes in Advent, there are discussion groups you can join, which usually go deeper into the Mass readings for the upcoming Sunday.

You will also need patience whenever you decide to have a chat to the priest about what to do next. Don't ask him questions before Mass unless a) they are absolutely urgent, b) no one else can answer them, and c) they impact something to do with the Mass. Consider that he is trying to ready his mind and quiet his soul for the solemn tasks he is about to do. Consider that there's a homily swirling around in his head, as well as a big list of things for him to remember not to forget.

So if you want to approach him after Mass, do so, but make it brief, 2 minutes maximum, and not about a question you could easily find the answer to online. Making it brief is necessary because the priest is attempting to assist as many people as possible after Mass. For anything longer than 2 minutes consider an email or making an appointment to chat with him and giving him at least general clues about what you want to chat about.

Here are some online places with good reputations for answering questions.

The first one is specifically for questions. <https://www.catholic.com/>

The second one has answers and conversion stories tailored to your particular background, be it none, atheist, Baptist, Pentecostal etc. Look through the Archive. <https://chnetwork.org/>

There are two other big areas where you are likely to need patience. 1) Should you decide that you want to become a fully initiated Catholic; or if you want to relearn everything Catholic you forgot as a child or adolescent, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (R.C.I.A.) may be your path. The average time for that program is a year. 2) If prior to today you have had a short-lived marriage or are currently in a marriage which has yet to be recognised by the Church as sacramental, you may spend a few years communicating with the marriage tribunal to determine your marital status in the eyes of God - and waiting for that answer before taking

whatever the next step is. It is a far from easy process, and the outcomes are uncertain, but everyone I have spoken to - or read about - who has gone through the process has found it valuable.

If and when you do enter into some kind of regular serving opportunity, you are going to see how things could be done better or smarter. Should that happen, take advice from the business management textbooks, and wait a year before offering your constructive suggestions. Any earlier than that and it is unlikely that you will be taken seriously, and often you need to see how things play out during a whole year with both weather seasons and liturgical seasons. My general rule of thumb is that if the new suggestion can't be done by an eighty year old person, then there is doubt that it will be a sustainable change. While that may seem harsh, the truth is that most regular helpers in a church setting are in the age 70 to 90 age bracket.

At church, perhaps more than anywhere else, appearances can be deceptive. Please don't discount any of the elderly ladies there, nor anyone else. More than a few have had seven or eight children, have survived the death of a spouse and/or the death of a child, and have enormous wisdom. Some of them have been co-founders of parish-based ministries, or have had fascinating careers. You don't yet know the ones who have amazing personal miracles to share, nor the various hardships that their faith has sustained them through.

I tell you this lest you repeat the same sad recent experience. We had this nice young man show up, who had obviously recently been through a significant conversion experience, and in his joy and vigour he wanted to be with others who had the same exuberant passion for Jesus. Rather loudly he berated us all, because to him our faith looked quite dead. Since he didn't see that these people had got out of bed earlier than most, rain, hail or shine, despite their regular aches and pains, got themselves to morning Mass, and had already been at prayer non-stop for at least an hour, and many of them had been doing that for 20 years or more, he couldn't see their passion for Jesus was hidden under their patient endurance. Sadly we didn't see him again. If he had stayed long enough to look under the surface, this young man would have been inspired by what he saw, and we would have been inspired by him too, and he would have enabled us to recapture some of that first love we had for Jesus that he was so vibrant with.

#### Be neat and tidy

If you can remember that when entering a Catholic Church you will encounter the presence of God, it will help you to make efforts to be neat and tidy so as to honour Him and to also to honour the brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus that will be present with you in the pews.

If at all possible, dress in such a way as to not attract attention, because we are trying to help each other fix our attention on God. Getting distracted because it seems like a miracle that your low-slung jeans or trousers haven't fallen off yet - is not what you want for the people sitting nearby or behind you. Avoid any slogans with ideological messages because you are going into a place of prayer not into a place of heated debate.

At the major basilicas in Rome there's a no bare shoulders and no bare knees policy. Consider them useful guidelines.

You see every Catholic Church gets some very strange visitors on a regular basis. You don't want to be mistaken for one of them. Why is it so? Maybe because the local Catholic church is open more frequently than the others. Quite regularly we get needy people demanding assistance, we get semi-professional thieves, those who want to take out a grievance by destroying something, some hot-heads who yell abuse, the mentally ill who haven't taken their medication, or some passionate orator who thinks their skills can immediately convert everyone out of our church and into to their church.

As an example, recently a youngish chap in workman's gear was on his way into the church with a takeaway coffee in one hand and long rainbow-coloured socks. Since we observe a rule about not eating and drinking for an hour prior to Mass, someone walking in with a coffee was strange. In an era of protests about gender identity politics, the rainbow socks had me on the alert too. Thankfully all he wanted to do was pay a visit to the chapel

dedicated to the mother of Jesus, and his only problem seemed to be how unchurched he seemed to be. But it could have been very different, and it could have been very confrontational.

### Be sober

Sitting next to someone in church who has had too much to drink, or who is high on something, is rather unpleasant. Strange smells and odd behaviours induce fear into those sitting nearby. At the late at night Masses on Christmas Eve this can be a particular problem, especially if the church is on the way home from the pub.

If you are sober your senses are unimpaired and therefore you can receive more of what God wants to give you at Mass than if you aren't sober.

When you are sober, and much stronger than someone of retirement age, sometimes you will be needed to help some of these stranger ones out of the church, and if necessary, bundle them down to the police station. Unfortunately this could happen more often than you are prepared for, so do a little bit of study about ways to calm agitated people down, and study safe ways of physically handling them respectfully. After each time you are called upon for things like this, do more study.

### Be Early

You need to be early for three main reasons; as part of your preparation to attend Mass, to have sufficient observation time, and to be on hand and available for those small, usually, thankless tasks.

The earlier you are the easier it will be to park, and the closer you will be able to park to the Church, and therefore the less parking stressed you will be when you enter the church doors.

Often there are people near the doors who are part of a greeting ministry. Usually they can answer basic questions, especially the 'where do I find the toilets?' question. But what you need is time to observe who are the people going hither and thither doing stuff or organizing stuff, because they have the answers to questions you haven't even asked yet; they are also the people most likely to be looking for helpers.

Finding a seat is actually a potential minefield. People are creatures of habit, and when they go to church they choose to sit in the same seat, or as near to it as possible. In fact, whenever we are trying to jog a person's memory with a physical description of someone else at church – when all else fails, we describe where they usually sit, eg the guy who comes in on his own and normally sits just behind well-known person A at the vigil Mass. If you are unlucky on your first visit to a church you will come across a very possessive so and so, who says, 'you are sitting in my seat!' It happens. Please forgive us.

Be aware that sometimes there are very good reasons for a person needing to sit in a particular seat. e.g. they need the end of the row because they are going to be a reader and don't want to clamber over others, ditto for those who take up the collections, sometimes it is the best seat for someone trying to connect to the t-loop with their hearing aids, or sometimes it is the best seat for someone with a medical condition who needs fast access to the toilet, choirs normally have a designated area, etc. You can forestall this if on your second and third visits to the church you hang around the back of the church observing what goes on, and only take your seat 2 or 3 minutes before Mass starts. That way you can be reasonably sure you are claiming an available seat. Generally if people need a particular seat location, they arrive early enough to stake their claim on it. Feel free to test out various available locations until you find the one that suits you best; and work out what your plan B seat location is too.

After those initial hurdles are out of the way, you can then offer brief greetings to those at the door of the church, acknowledge in some way those sitting in your vicinity, and attempt to become present to the One in the tabernacle Who is present for you. It's the time to let go all your concerns and preoccupations until you are outside the church and back on your way home afterwards. It takes a lot more than 60 seconds to do this letting

go. But the more you are able to do this, the easier it will be to enter into that deep interior participation in the Mass, which is what we are called to do.

That's why sacrificing some of that interior preparation time to help move a table, or to get a short instruction on what to do in the offertory procession etc is a real sacrifice.

Truly, the vast majority of those small, usually thankless tasks that need to be done, need to be done before Mass. Afterwards everyone tends to evaporate unless there's something like a morning tea or barbeque to keep them around. You can be sure that if there are Afters, there will need to be a lot of preparation beforehand, and this is where you can really shine – if you want to.

### Be Open

Coming into church with a scornful, defensive or argumentative attitude is counterproductive. Sufficient humility that says, 'God, if You are here, show me' is what's needed. You don't have to be willing to believe all the Church believes and teaches from the get-go; but you do need to be open to learning about and discovering what you currently don't know and don't understand and currently don't know how to value.

A butterfly is more likely to land on an open hand than on a closed fist.

Even if you don't notice anything, maybe others will. True story: 'Mum?' says little girl. 'Yes dear' replies her mother. 'Can we go back to church this weekend?' says little girl. 'I suppose so, but why?' asks her mother. 'Because you are nicer to be with when you have been to church' says little girl.

Sometimes what you hear at church will really challenge you; and invite you to change. Sometimes this will be experienced as a happy surprise; sometimes it will begin a massive tug-o-war in your heart and mind. Whenever that happens try to remember Hebrews 3:7, 'If today you hear His voice, harden not your heart'.

### Be Willing

Since I've been on the other side of the fence, I know how important this is, and how frequently it is necessary.

It is 5 minutes to Mass start time and all the rostered readers haven't shown up. A quick glance across the congregation shows that no one else on the regular reader's roster has arrived. It's either get the reader who has arrived to do double duty, or to find someone willing to fill in at short notice. I kid you not, the vast majority of those approached to fill in will say No. If someone asks you, say Yes, and then find someone nearby with a Sunday missal (with the readings for that Sunday in it) and get the gist of the reading in 60 seconds. Of course, minimal preparation like that is not ideal – far from it -, but a male voice carries better and is also picked up better by hearing aids than a female voice.

It is 5 minutes to Mass start time and all the regular people who don't mind being asked to take up the offertory procession are missing. So one of the wardens goes around some of the regulars to ask who is willing to help. Going through 10 sets of people before getting a Yes is unfortunately normal. Human beings have a fear of being in the spotlight, even if it is only for 30 seconds. If someone asks you, say Yes, and go with them to get as much instruction in the remaining time available as possible, then return to your seat for the start of Mass. As soon as the collection time after the homily begins, go to where the head warden is, and you will get a few more words of instruction before it is go-time.

If you have been willing and said Yes a few times, and if you did OK, you will become a go-to person when that irregular but regular situation crops up again – but only if you have become noticed as a regular at that particular Mass time. If you regularly go to different Mass times, it's going to take longer to become a go-to person.

Be willing to contribute financially, even if it is only a little. Consider that there is a light bill, an electricity bill, an insurance bill, salaries, repairs, supplies, technical equipment, as well as cleaning and other maintenance costs that have to be covered.

Be willing to see a need and do something about it. The most common example of this is the elderly person, who either because they forgot to bring it or who thought they could cope without it, needs a walking stick but hasn't got one to hand. Gently offering to assist them to their cars is an easy way to be of service to them – as long as you accommodate yourself to their pace; as is helping someone get a walking frame or wheelchair into the boot of a car. Should you do this, I promise you that you will begin to look upon such opportunities as a privilege.

### Do Not Be Afraid

You will come across sinners and saints, and everyone in between, when you cross the threshold of the church. Be prepared for occasional sub-standard behaviour; and be prepared to forgive them when it happens.

Often you won't see it coming until it happens.

Sometimes it will hurt abominably, but don't let it sideswipe your faith in God.

Fear is the enemy of trust, and the opposite of faith. To please God you need both faith and trust.

As a young man it is likely that you will be afraid that God will ask you to give up your girlfriend, or aspects of your relationship with your girlfriend, or to go off and be a missionary in a far off and dangerous place, or to be like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or to become a religious or a priest.

The truth is that if God asks you any of these things, and anything else that currently breaks you into a cold sweat, He will only ask you when your relationship with Him has grown to the point where a Yes has become possible. If and when such a Yes has become possible, remember the words of St Therese of Lisieux, 'Whatever God asks of me always makes me happy' or the words of Pope Benedict 'Do not be afraid of Christ. He takes nothing away and He gives you everything.' Or 'The world offers you comfort. But you were not made for comfort. You were made for greatness.'

At times you will wonder whether you are needed or not. When that happens find yourself a bible and read the three letters of St John. He often refers directly to young men, and to the unique place they have in God's church. Should you not have a bible, this link to a good online bible will help:

<https://www.catholic.org/bible/>

Sadly young men in church often feel like fish in a barrel. Enter well meaning person. The church tells us that we should encourage vocations. Aha! There's a young man, I should go over and do my duty and ask him if he's considered becoming a priest. AArrghhh! The only time someone ever has the right to ask you that question is if they have truly taken the time to get to know you, to know the gifts and talents God has given you, and to be able to recite at least 3 well considered reasons why you specifically have what it takes to become a good priest. To those well-meaning persons doing their 'duty' you can say:

'What matters most is that I do God's will for me, don't you agree? Please pray for that.

At the moment He seems to be calling me to be the best teacher, engineer, doctor, soldier, clerk, artist, plumber, student (insert whatever is appropriate for you) that I can be.

And we all need holy (insert occupation)s, don't we?

If God has anything more for me, He has yet to tell me about it.'

The God Who wants our love and an eternity with Him in heaven also wants us to love each other.

These two loves will transform our lives. The way to keep that love growing and enduring is going to church.

[www.societyofsaints.net](http://www.societyofsaints.net)