

# WELCOME HOME CATHOLICS



## How to Promote Host and Sponsor WHC

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Week 1-6 Handouts (distributed separately)	
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# Welcome Home Catholics

## Introduction

If you are ever asked who started this welcoming ministry, the answer is simple: Jesus, the Good Shepherd (*John 10*). In St. Matthew's Gospel, Our Lord catches His Disciples' attention with an intriguing question:

*"What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost (Matthew 18.12-14).*

St. Luke recalls the same parable with a slightly different emphasis:

*Who among you if he has a hundred sheep and loses one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in the wasteland and follow the lost one until he finds it ... I tell you there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent (Luke 15.4-7).*

Each inactive baptized Catholic is precious to the Lord. Like living stones, when they are missing, His Church is not complete. Like those stray sheep, some simply wander off. Others are caught in a briar bush or have fallen into a crevice and can't get free. They need help to rejoin the herd and that's when WHC volunteers come in. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and, in His stead, our pope, bishop and priests are our shepherds. But every shepherd needs a few trusty sheep dogs, not to bark at the stray sheep, but to gently nudge them back into the herd.

Promoting WHC and presenting the six weekly sessions are like two sides of the same prayer card. Both are equally important. Effective promotion will increase turnout for your WHC season. Conversely, effectively presenting the six weekly sessions will build word of mouth among returning Catholics and give you momentum to more effectively promote your next season. So, let's start with a few time-tested suggestions on how to effectively market WHC.

# Marketing WHC

## Welcoming

Job one for any parish serious about offering WHC is to review hospitality. This is WHC's foundation. If you're a cradle Catholic, you were first welcomed by your parents. For others, it might be a spouse, friend or casual acquaintance. Like any human endeavor, some parishes greet new faces better than others. But, the last thing you want to do is invite inactive Catholics to return and then not greet them when they show up! It's all about that first impression. Let's start with a few essential suggestions:

**Greeters:** Many Catholic parishes have established a greeter's ministry. While the ushers concentrate on welcoming existing parishioners, greeters keep an eye out for new faces. A smile and a handshake at the entrance door or (depending on the weather) inside the door can go a long way towards making that crucial first impression a friendly one.

**Sign Up Book:** should be placed prominently in the church entrance way. The greeter can gently suggest that the visitor sign in with their name, where they're from and a phone number. This is an easy way to obtain basic contact information so WHC volunteers or a designated parish staff person can follow up about registering.

**Pastor Greeting:** For years, I've noticed that parishes most successful at welcoming inactive Catholics have priests who personally welcome visitors at Mass from the altar. Some even effectively call out by name visitors who sign the directory. A simple exchange can let them know they are welcome such as "Jack and Jill, we're so glad you've joined us today. Are you from our neck of the woods or visiting? ..."

**Registration cards:** Can be left at the end of each pew with small wooden pencils. The celebrant can close out his welcome from the altar by inviting visitors to sign a registration card so they can stay in touch with future parish events.

In addition to the basics, there are other ways to raise the bar on your parish hospitality.

**Periodic Receptions:** give newcomers a place to connect with the clergy and lay leaders. This could be an informal "donuts after Mass" or you might opt for a quarterly reception with snacks and name tags.

**Return phone calls:** This may seem obvious but there are parishes that aren't doing it. I talked to a young father once who called his local parish twice to schedule his infant son's baptism, didn't reach anyone and couldn't leave a message. Even the smallest parishes with limited staff can have an answering machine. The message should also include Mass times and the Confession schedule.

**Bulletin Board:** should include registration cards and up to date information about upcoming events.

**An adequate sound system:** Can everyone hear what's happening on the altar?

**Music:** Whether you have a choir or not, select hymns that are easy to sing. Encourage everyone to join in. God doesn't expect us all to have a great singing voice. Just make a joyful noise.

**Children's Liturgy:** is age appropriate for those too young to receive communion or understand the homily and gives Mom and Dad a refreshing break on the day of rest. This is an excellent way to encourage regular attendance and participation by young families who are your parish's future.

## Who

An estimated 20-26 million inactive baptized Catholics living in the U.S. While there are many reasons why they have left, the most common is inertia. Young Catholics often drift away from the sacraments when they move to a new location to go to college or start a career. They are away from their family's influence for the first time, but not yet at child bearing age. Other common categories are:

- 1) **Recently divorced Catholics:** "Neither fish nor fowl" ... no longer legally married, but not yet comfortable with single life. Often, they are annulment candidates.
- 2) **Members of Mixed Marriages:** we have often seen cases where parents of different religions spiritually cut their babies down the middle by attending Mass one Sunday and another denomination's services the next.
- 3) **Women and Men Victimized by Legal Abortion:** often carry a deep sense of shame and mistakenly believe they are unworthy of God's love and forgiveness.
- 4) **Catholics Estranged from Their Pastors:** for various reasons or who receive inaccurate information about their status as Catholics.
- 5) **Those with Doubts:** or questions about faith are the smallest percentage we see.

## What to say (and not say)

**Do** tell them that they are welcome. As in all human encounters, the first impression is formed in the first ten or twenty seconds. A smile and a warm word or two is the best start.

**Do** find positive areas of common interest. You might live near each other, drive similar cars or pull for the same football team.

**Do** get some basic contact information such as a phone number and email address. It's also a good idea to have a visitor's pamphlet available near the Church entrance.

**Do** invite them to upcoming parish events or faith-sharing groups. Otherwise, why would they think they are welcome to come back?

**Do** let them know they can call you for more information. Like a good waiter, be available without "hovering over" the returning Catholic.

**Do** let the returning Catholic see that you are enthusiastic about our faith and open to sharing our faith.

**Don't** put them on the spot about not attending Mass. That discussion is best left to the confidential dialogue offered at the start of each WHC session.

**Don't** discuss the person's specific sins even if they initiate the discussion. This is best handled by the priest within the Confessional seal. Of course, we are all sinners whether we are returning or already practicing.

**Don't** forget about them after the initial contact. It's a good idea to follow up with a low-key phone call.

## When

**When** the moment is ripe. A great non-judgmental leading question is: "What parish are you in?" If they say they don't have one, they become a good prospect!

**When** the returning Catholic is recovering from a traumatic event that forces them to reevaluate their priorities and focus. Of course, we all quicker to turn to God during times of crisis. Adversity is among God's most fruitful gifts.

**When** the returning Catholic is ready and only when he or she is ready, like the proverbial apple falling from the tree, like the Incarnation itself "in the fullness of time."

## Where

The simple answer is "anywhere." I have visited with returning Catholics on airliners, in doctor's offices, over lunch counters and even during a marathon run. I was invited back to the Church following a TV interview. That was nearly forty years ago and I'm still here!

Of course, the best point of contact is the Mass itself which is why it is so vital for ushers to be ready to welcome visitors and record contact information.

Other obvious points of contact include the rectory, so the parish receptionist is a key minister of hospitality. Every day, they field questions about the sacraments by phone, email and in person.

## Why

Our Lord urges us to freely share what He freely gave us when He instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper and prayed for us to His heavenly Father: "that they may be one as we are one (*John* 17.11). Inviting our inactive brothers and sisters home is as much about saving *our* souls as theirs.

While returning Catholics have many reasons to come home (*see Week 1 Handout: Why Catholics Return*), the number one reason is hunger for the Eucharist. Their gateway is the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Our message is simple: "The door to the Confessional is open and the light is on." Through simple, common sense dialogue, we seek to knock out the cobwebs that are obscuring God's light, the path to reconciliation and the Eucharist.

Sometimes returning Catholics with children are seeking *Baptism*. Some returning Catholics who married outside the Church are seeking the *Sacrament of Matrimony*. This often involves referral to the

Tribunal or an authorized clergy or lay minister for an annulment evaluation. Some baptized returning Catholics have never been confirmed and should be referred to *RCIA* (Right of Christian Initiation For Adults). With God's help, we can hopefully reach the inactive Catholic before the *Anointing of the Sick*. But, sometimes a terminal illness becomes the first opportunity for contact.

## Pacing

The second suggestion is for a parish to pace itself. I have seen more than a few parishes, with sincere intentions, hit the proverbial wall by attempting to host in each of the three seasons: Christmas, Easter and after Labor Day. A glance at the calendar shows why this is not practical.

Experience demonstrates that your parish will need at least six weeks to effectively promote an upcoming WHC season. Since the series run six weeks, that's right at three months from start to finish. So, a parish hosting after Labor Day would find it next to impossible to also host after Christmas since promotion would start almost as soon as the Autumn Sessions were ending. Also, a parish hosting after Christmas would equally struggle with promoting an Easter Series, especially when there is an early Lent. In addition to these obvious scheduling issues, there is also real potential for volunteer burnout. Even pro athletes need time to recharge.

## Rotation

Pacing is why it's best for a parish to host no more than twice a year. Experience shows WHC can reach more inactive Catholics when a deanery has more than one parish rotating the hosting duties. During an "off season" a host parish can effectively sponsor the current series at a neighboring parish through an ongoing promotional campaign (as we will see later). Simply put, Sponsor Parishes help promote the upcoming Series held at the Host Parish. In a hypothetical example, Deanery X could have Parishes A and B sponsor an Autumn Series hosted at Parish C. Then Parish B and C could sponsor the Christmas Series at Parish A. Finally, Parishes A and C can promote the Easter Series hosted at Parish B.

## Advantages of A Deanery-wide Approach

Remember the old adage: "Many hands make the work light." A deanery pooling resources and volunteers as one unit can be vastly more effective in reaching inactive Catholics than several parishes operating independently. Working smarter beats working harder. The deanery-wide approach:

- 1) Avoids "reinventing the wheel" since this approach has worked here for years.
- 2) Provides a consistent message to all inactive Catholics throughout the Archdiocese.
- 3) Provides continuity of mission when pastors are reassigned or lay volunteers move.
- 4) Provides synergy with other deanery-wide ministries (ie: OCIA, Respect Life, MOSJ).
- 5) Provides better opportunities for advertising (ie: Catholic Week, Archangel Radio).



- 6) Provides a larger pool of volunteers to spell each other and fill in over the long haul.
- 7) Provides a natural and symbiotic companion program to parish-based OCIA.
- 8) Provides numerous parishes a chance to host/sponsor, providing diversity with unity.
- 9) More volunteers can be more accommodative in terms of age and gender.
- 10) Includes smaller parishes that lack resources to advertise by themselves.
- 11) Reaches many more inactive Catholics than any one parish-based program.
- 12) Collaborates with rather than competes with other parish-based programs.

## Promotion

Job one in this welcoming ministry is getting your inactive Catholics in the door. There are two basic ways: reaching them directly and reaching them indirectly through your parishioners. First, let's examine the direct approach.

### Reaching Inactive Catholics Directly:

**Signage:** a most effective, yet simple, promotion is an easy-to-read sign advertising your upcoming *Welcome Home Catholics* sessions that is planted on the parish property and visible from the nearby roadway. I have had more than a few returning Catholics attend sessions simply because they saw the sign and were moved by the Holy Spirit to respond. You can increase visibility with a 2 X 6 foot vinyl white banner with large letters. If you mount two back-to-back, you can hang them perpendicular to your Church to attract motorists from both directions.

Another low-cost way is social media. With your pastor's approval, you can post on Facebook, Twitter and other outlets, the same promotional items for in parish use that we will discuss later. I routinely do this since it just takes a few seconds to post a previously vetted item.

Another way to reach inactive Catholics directly is advertising. The sky's the limit, but so is the price tag, especially for billboards.

A way to save money on billboards is to find an ad company willing to give you a sharply discounted rate on a vacant billboard until the next regular customer comes along. Advertisers call this a remnant program. The ad company often will accept a sharply discounted rate rather than no revenue at all if the space remains vacant.

Newspaper, radio and TV advertising can also be expensive especially since many people seeing your ad aren't even Catholic. Of course, Catholics COME Home radio and TV ads effectively reach inactive Catholics directly. When they pull up the CCH website, they are encouraged to contact their local parish. That is where WHC comes in since we are parish-based.

### **Reaching Inactive Catholics Indirectly:**

You may often find greater success in marketing WHC *indirectly* through your parishioners, especially those who are passionate about sharing their Catholic faith. Practicing Catholics living their baptism understand that it's not enough to attend Mass each week and receive the sacraments. Through our baptism, we are also empowered to spread the Good News of the Resurrection to those around us.

Virtually every parishioner has inactive Catholic family members, friends, co-workers, neighbors and acquaintances. They are in the best possible place to connect with them since they are in daily contact. That certainly doesn't mean we can expect any parishioner to bring in several inactive Catholics at once. As Catholics, we do know miracles happen, but not every day!

## **The 80/20 Rule**

The 80/20 rule that we see in many social situations certainly applies to parish life. Research shows that about twenty percent of parishioners do eighty percent of the heavy lifting of parish life. Tithing and volunteering time for parish projects are two examples. So it is with WHC. That twenty percent is your "target market." Your parish's "twenty percent" can be your referral network for a successful Season. In addition to the 80/20 rule, there is also ...

## **The Rule of Seven**

A time-tested marketing adage is that a prospect needs to see or hear your marketing message at least seven times before they take you seriously enough to potentially take action. Your parish's "twenty percent" are your best prospects who need to hear your message seven times. Of course, all your parishioners should take action, but many likely will not.

The number seven isn't magical. Six times is better than five. But, the simple reason why we need repetition is that we are human. Experience teaches that we need to hear and see a message multiple times before it sinks in to our consciousness. That's why advertisers pay top dollar to run lengthy ad campaigns. One commercial is simply not enough to get any message across effectively. We even see this need for repetition in our liturgy. Notice how many times we invoke the Holy Trinity or ask for mercy during just one Mass. (We will have more to say about our beautiful Mass when we get to the sections on offering the WHC sessions.)

I have learned over the years that people want to see if you are in for the long haul before they commit their own valuable time and energy to this ministry. That is true for active parishioners (the "twenty percent") and inactive Catholics. This is where the Rule of Seven comes in. Your "twenty percent" and your inactive Catholics need to hear and see your message at least seven times. These promotional opportunities fall into two basic categories: "in parish" and "outside the parish."

## In Parish

**1) From your pastor.** Simply put, your pastor is your most important resource in promoting a successful WHC campaign. Parishioners naturally take their lead from the pastor in determining what is and what is not important for them to pursue. A few words of encouragement from the pastor can make a huge difference in building word of mouth about your upcoming WHC series.

Your pastor may also invite you or another team member to speak to the parish before or after Mass or during another group meeting. That certainly can be effective, but, likely not as effective as a few words from the pastor himself.

**2) Word of mouth:** This obvious technique's effectiveness cannot be overstated. Remember, it's the only advertising Jesus Himself used during His earthly ministry. Enough said! Getting people talking about WHC and who would be a good fit as a volunteer or attendee is what effective promotion is all about. It's the reason for all of the other promotional "arrows in the quiver" that follow below. As we said earlier, good word of mouth starts when the previous WHC series is successful and parishioners meet the new returning Catholic(s). Conversely, brand new host parishes can effectively build strong word of mouth simply because the program is new and naturally worth the extra attention that an existing program might not get.

Another effective form of word of mouth is one-to-one invitations. In fact, that's precisely how I came back to the Catholic Church in 1982 (Ask me about it sometime and I will be glad to tell you the whole story!). Simply put, you are most effective in evangelizing to inactive Catholics within the four-square yards you occupy each day. You come in constant contact with them because they are all around you. Of course, this is true for your volunteers as well. Inactive Catholics are your family members, co-workers, friends, neighbors and folks at the gym. An invitation can even come during a business transaction. For example, a friend of mine sells diabetic shoes. Before or after business is transacted, he can start a conversation about coming to know Christ with the subtlest of comments such as "What a beautiful day the Lord has made for us." A person with a natural interest in Christ will respond positively and the conversation is underway with a natural follow up question such as "So, where do you attend Church?"

**3) Referrals:** Are most effective when they come from someone who has already completed the WHC series or one of their family members or friends. Remember, inactive Catholics are just like everybody else. They don't live in a vacuum and they know a lot of people. We are very quick to refer our friends and acquaintances to a good restaurant or movie. How much more important is it to refer them to a program that can help them get back onto the path to eternal life!

**4) Signage (attachment #1)** As previously stated, I know signs work because that's how many attendees find out about us. Parish signs are similar to those realtors use: waterproof white plastic with bold black letters and a sturdy metal stake to securely plant them where they will be seen. Signs are inexpensive, easy to install, highly visible and they get people talking. An easy way to keep the message fresh at little or no additional cost is to print them with different messages on each side. One side can read: "Evangelize! .... Welcome Home Catholics" and the other side: "Welcome Home Catholics ...Here's Your Sign!" If you rotate sides every few weeks, your parishioners and visitors will see new messages.

A 6 x 2-foot vinyl banner can serve two vital purposes. First, during your promotional campaign, an eye-catching banner will get people talking. Second, on nights you host, post the banner above your meeting place so your attendees, new to the parish, can more easily find you. This is true for all six weeks since it's not unusual for new attendees to show up later in the series. This eliminates the disappointment of getting a phone call from a potential attendee who showed up one night and couldn't find your session.

**5) In Parish Handouts:** These include the two *FAQs Summaries* (attachments #2 and 3). One is customized for potential attendees and another for potential volunteers and parishioners. the *WHC Tri-fold* brochure (attachment #4) gives your parishioners and visitors a brief overview of the program, who is offering it and why. That's why we call it the "Who, What and Why" piece. It is the companion piece to the *WHC Sign Up* sheet (attachment #5) which is the "When and Where" piece. The *Sign-Up Sheet* can be used as a stand-alone flyer or as an insert in your bulletin. The *WHC Bulletin Item* (attachment #6) gives a quick overview of the current season's biblical theme (more about the biblical theme later). *WHC Ambo Announcements* (attachment #7) can direct your parishioners' attention to the current bulletin item or can be written to stand alone. This provides flexibility and freshness in scheduling your messages.

## Outside the Parish

**6) Diocesan Newspapers:** Virtually every diocese has a publication. Some will run your notices for free and others as paid ads. Some offer a combination of both. Diocesan publications are a great way to get your WHC message across to practicing Catholics, your main referral source.

**7) Catholic Radio:** We are blessed with hundreds of local Catholic radio stations whose central focus is to evangelize both practicing and non-practicing Catholics, people of other faith traditions and no faith at all. There are several ways these stations can help you reach your target market. They often look for lay leaders like yourself to interview. They also run community calendar announcements similar to the Ambo Announcements we discussed above. They also run paid advertising.

**8) Catholic TV:** In addition to the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), there are many cable TV outlets devoted to Catholic programming. These opportunities outside the parish are a great way to reinforce the messages your inactive Catholics and parishioners are receiving at Church.

Of course, I don't have all the ideas about how to best market WHC. Ideas that work in one parish or diocese, might not work as well in another. As Jesus taught us, you can tell a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7.16). Go with what produces results and don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone.

It bears repeating that one of the most effective ways to build attendance is the word of mouth that comes from the attendees who benefited from your last session. Promoting and offering the WHC series are co-dependent. Successful promotion can lead to a strong turnout which can lead to an effective series which builds enthusiasm and support for the next promotional cycle.

## Hosting the WHC Series

The first thing to remember about offering the Six Week WHC series is that every returning Catholic is unique and precious to the Lord. Unlike corporations in the secular world, the focus is not on generating a big turnout, it's on bringing inactive Catholics back to the sacraments one soul at a time. Jesus Himself summed this objective in His parable of the lost sheep (*Matthew 18.12-14; Luke 15.4-7*). If you spend a few months promoting and then hosting the WHC series and one person comes back to the sacraments, you succeed way beyond our human understanding. Eternal salvation is everything in the world to that returning Catholic. Consider the starfish analogy:

*"A young boy picks up a small starfish off the beach and tosses it gently back into the water so it can live. A cynical adult passing by tells him that his efforts didn't matter because there were thousands of starfish on the beach and he had only saved one. The little boy answered: "It mattered to that starfish."*

Don't focus on the starfish out of reach. Focus on the one that is right there with you. This bears repeating: don't focus on the starfish out of reach. Focus on the one that is right there with you!

Inactive Catholics often first show up on the third, fourth, fifth or even sixth week, come back to the sacraments and become active members of their parishes. It makes little difference which session they first attended if they return to the Lord's table. The vital fact is that they DID return! We want a good turnout and, yes, it is of course better if a returning Catholic attends all six sessions. But our main goal is not to build attendance at the WHC sessions. Our goal is to bring people to Christ.

So, if you are approaching the start of a six-week series and no one has pre-registered, relax. As St. Teresa of Avila reminds us, patience is a defining virtue of our Catholic faith. Look how long we waited for the Incarnation! All too often I have seen WHC teams who did very little promotion who then panic at the thought of no one showing up for Week One. Some parishes have even folded the tent after just one night. Ask yourself "Why should any inactive Catholic return through a program that simply folds like a house of cards?" Does that look or sound like the path to eternal life? Consider something as ordinary as a bus or train line. If no one gets on board at the first stop, does the driver quit and return to the bus depot or does he continue on his assigned route?

The truth is we can have fruitful sessions even when no one shows up. This is an opportunity for your team to pray for those not yet hearing the Lord's gentle knock and to follow those prayers with action to prepare better for the next week or next series. All good things happen in the Lord's time, not ours.

## First Contact

The phrase "First Contact" raises a relevant yet comical point since it sounds like an encounter with a space alien. First contact with an inactive Catholic is nothing at all like that! They are just like us in every way except one profoundly important way: they are not yet receiving the sacraments. They don't bite. In fact, I have not made first contact with an inactive Catholic who was even angry. If they were, they would not be contacting us in the first place. There are two basic kinds of first contacts: preregistered and unregistered:

**Pre-registered:** Of course, it is always good for attendees to pre-register since this gives you a ballpark headcount to plan seating and make sure you have enough handouts. Inactive Catholics can contact you by email if your email address is in your promotional material. But, most first contacts come by phone or sometimes text.

Phone use raise several points that may appear self-evident, but are often overlooked. First, your promotional items should list the designated contact's phone number instead of the parish number. If the inactive Catholic wanted to contact the parish directly, he or she probably would have already done that. The entire thrust of WHC is to give the returning Catholic a fresh opportunity to talk to you, a lay person. Also, that first phone call can help you make a good first impression and help the returning Catholic feel welcomed. A parish receptionist, no matter how personable he or she may be, often doesn't have time to do that. They need to move on to their next incoming call.

Its best to use your cell number instead of your home number. If you're out for the day, you might not get a home number message until it's too late to call back. Using your cell number, you can either take the call right away or, if you're busy, return the call the same day. If the returning Catholic leaves a message, that's an opportunity to first say a prayer for him or her.

You want to keep that first contact as simple as possible, sticking to the "who, what, when, where and why" questions about the upcoming series. Save detailed discussions for the sessions. Of course, every rule has exceptions. Of course, it's perfectly fine to answer a simple and logical question like "what time is Confession?" It's also important to let them know there is no dress code and that it's perfectly fine to come as they are. I have had janitors attend in their overalls and ER doctors show up in scrubs. It makes no difference what they wear. Also, let them know you are looking forward to meeting them. Before ending the call, make sure you have the inquiring inactive Catholic's contact information in case you have to follow up later. If someone pre-registers weeks before the sessions, it's a good idea to give them a quick call a few days before the first session to jog their memory. This is now a common and welcomed courtesy among professionals such as doctors and dentists. Its just as helpful for our new attendees.

**Unregistered:** Many enthusiastic and sincere returning Catholics do not pre-register. Perhaps there is a commitment fear that is alleviated by not registering. Maybe their schedule is uncertain. Perhaps it's a spur of the moment decision. Whatever the reason, let the unregistered guests know they are most welcome and that you are glad to see them. Of course, all guests should sign the attendance sheet and list their contact information. But, this is particularly important for unregistered guests.

## The Six Weekly Sessions

**Week One: The Journey** A good practice is for you and your team members to arrive about twenty minutes before the first session. That way, if someone shows up early you will be relaxed and ready to greet them to make that all important good first impression. Early arrivals do happen, especially if he or she is coming a fairly long distance and misjudges the travel time. Arriving early, also gives you time to get your materials in order before your guests arrive. Here's a check list of items for the first session:

- 1) Sign Up Sheet
- 2) Folders containing the Week One handouts (See attachments). I use the folders with two pockets available in the office supply stores, that provide plenty of room for the attendees to keep all, their handouts for the six weeks together for future reference.
- 3) A key handout is a summary of the *Catholic Catechism* that we provide to each attendee. Purchased in bulk they are inexpensive and help answer the more basic questions about our faith. Also, the abridged version runs about seventy pages, a lot less intimidating than the unabridged version that is well over a thousand pages.
- 4) Nametags: This is important for a fairly large group. But even a group of two or three attendees and two or three team members could benefit from name tags on the first night.
- 5) Extra pens and paper for note taking. I routinely will put a blank page or two in each folder.
- 6) A fresh pot of coffee and some tea. This is important on the first night because you obviously won't know your guests' preferences. I often find that very few guests are night time coffee or tea drinkers, but it is better to have some available on at least that first night.

Here's a brief outline of the first Ninety Minute WHC session:

- 1) Welcome: This can be very brief and to the point.
- 2) The Holy Spirit Prayer and a brief explanation that it is used traditionally as a beginning prayer which this first night certainly is.
- 3) Brief self-introductions by each team member and guest.
- 4) A brief comment about the confidentiality of each session to put your guests at ease.
- 5) Presentation of the topic: "The Journey."
- 6) Team Member Sharing. Each team member can go into some detail about their own situation: whether they were an inactive Catholic in the past or a cradle Catholic who never left, what they are doing now in their faith journey, their prayer life, study habits and ministries. Ideally, by opening up, the team members can "prime the pump" so the inactive Catholics can feel more comfortable with sharing their own thoughts.
- 7) Sharing: This is certainly going to vary from one individual to the next. Some are very quiet, especially at first. Others are more verbal. In general, you want to gently encourage quieter attendees to open up and steer gently away from anyone who dominates the discussion.
- 8) Handout review: If you come to a lull in the conversation, you can turn to your handouts for brief discussions of each topic. This will take the focus off your guests so they can relax and open up about any questions they may have or particular concerns. Very often, the handouts will prompt new questions or comments.

- 9) Preview the upcoming five sessions, especially Week Two to illustrate that all six weeks are really parts of one conversation about returning to the Lord.
- 10) Closing Prayer: You certainly can choose which closing prayer to use. I've often used *The Lord's Prayer* and pray it slowly to emphasize each word that Jesus Himself chose for us.

### **Week Two: The Way:**

Once again, we start with the Holy Spirit prayer and a reminder that everything discussed in the sessions are to remain confidential. Assuming your Week Two attendees were present for Week One, you now have a good handle on the impediments that have separated them from the sacraments. For example, if you have a candidate for an annulment, this is certainly a good time to provide information approved by your diocesan tribunal. If someone needs to be confirmed, are interested in a church wedding or has a child yet to be baptized, Week Two is a good time to begin these discussions.

By far, your largest category will likely be inactive Catholics who simply need to return to the healing mercy of the Sacrament of Penance. While you certainly can answer their basic questions and let them know priests are easily available, save the detailed discussion about Reconciliation for next week.

Once everyone's questions and comments are adequately addressed, you can present this week's material on the opportunities available in the parishes. You can use the Week Two summary as an outline or use that as a handout for the attendees to take home. This same flexibility applies to this week's suggested reflections. You can use them "as is" or substitute others of your own choosing.

Although many of your attendees were born after the Sixties, Vatican II still profoundly shapes our parish life. So, discussing Vatican II is vital for your returning Catholics to better understand this week's topic and the ones to follow about Holy Scripture and the Mass. It cannot be overemphasized enough that, while the Vatican II revisions do profoundly shape the way we practice our faith, it does not change one word of what we believe as Catholics. Its entire thrust is to worship and live the way Jesus taught us. We regularly see this return to our early Christian roots when we attend Mass. So, this is a seamless way to preview the discussions during Weeks Four through Six. You can refer to the WHC Week Two Summary, although there are certainly many other parish resources available to help you discuss parish life today. So, use your discretion as the Holy Spirit moves.

The rest of the Week Two content is quite simple. You can tie up loose ends from the Week One discussion and answer any new questions that may have surfaced since your last meeting. I am often impressed by the good questions I get from the attendees. So, I always have an unabridged Catholic Catechism handy to tackle the more esoteric inquiries. It's also a great "hands on" way to show them how to effectively use the Catechism. Using the Catechism this way will help you preview Week Four's topic, *The Word*, and smoothly transition from the first two weekly sessions' dialogue to the in-depth content of Weeks 3-6. Showing how the six weekly topics seamlessly flow together will encourage your attendees to return to learn the important information that follows.

**Week Three: The Signs:** As the sessions transition from the first two week's emphasis on dialogue to the more content-driven sessions, it's perfectly fine to have another team member lead the discussion. We all have our strengths and weaknesses and the person leading the dialogue sessions might not be the



most qualified to discuss the sacraments in depth. This might be another lay team member or even a deacon. As with the entire series, choosing who will lead each week is a decision that can vary from parish to parish. In addition to keeping the six week series varied and fresh, alternating discussion leaders can also share the work load. As St. Benedict taught: “many hands make the work light.”

In Week Three, the focus is on all of the sacraments with the exception of the Holy Eucharist which is the sole focus of Week Six. You certainly want to adequately discuss each of the remaining six sacraments with enough time to answer questions. However, make sure to reserve about half of this session for the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*. That’s because, like the Eucharist, it’s the sacrament that we can receive regularly throughout our lives. Also, it’s the sacrament that prepares us to receive Holy Communion, the high point of our liturgy and our Catholic faith life.

Perhaps no other topic is more misunderstood by inactive Catholics than the Sacrament of Penance. Much of what they heard second hand is not true. Some mistakenly think they must make an appointment for their first Confession upon returning and they don’t. Others think they are not able to make an appointment although they certainly can. Many misunderstand the priest’s role. Many worry needlessly about what penance they will receive. These questions and misconceptions can be addressed one by one here. Again, consult the companion *WHC Week Three Summary* or any of the fine parish resources available. There are certainly different ways to present this topic that will vary from diocese to diocese. A priest can present it from his perspective or a lay leader can present it from the confessor’s perspective. Of course, it’s important to emphasize that, except for Jesus and His Blessed Mother, we are all sinners. So, we are all in need of forgiveness, just as we all need to learn to forgive others. Remind your attendees that we are all in this together as we journey to the Lord.

Finally, experience teaches that sometimes attendees raise personal issues in Week Three, or later, that they should have raised in Weeks One or Two. In these rare cases, it’s best to work one-on-one before or after the sessions. This way, you can adequately address their issue and still keep the group on schedule with each week’s topic. Allowing one candidate to derail the discussion schedule would not be fair to the other attendees.

#### **Week Four: The Word**

We start by talking about the Catechism first, not Holy Scripture, since the attendees have already used it to answer their questions in Weeks Two and Three. Reemphasize here again that, except for the Holy Bible, the Catechism is our most important Catholic book. It’s very well written and beautifully summarizes our two-thousand-year old beliefs rooted in the Old and New Testaments and the early Church Fathers’ teachings. As one of its central innovations, the Catechism is a great example of Vatican II’s profound influence on how we practice our Catholic faith today.

Next, we discuss Holy Scripture, starting with the importance of knowing at least something about the Old Testament to understand Catholicism’s deep Jewish roots. A brief overview of the New Testament follows that the inspired word of God timelessly speaks loudly to us today the Twenty First Century. Then, it’s recommended that you spend about half of your ninety minutes discussing the Liturgy of the Word. This begins a three-session discussion about the mystical encounter with Jesus that is the Sacrifice of the Mass.

One of our wittier Alabama priests, calls this topic “the Bells and Smells” talk since the Mass engages all of our senses in this mystical encounter with Our Lord and Savior. Where does the word “Mass” come from? “Why does the priest kiss the altar when Mass begins?” “What is the purpose of incense.” “Why do we sit during the first two readings and then stand for the Gospel?” “Why does the altar server help the priest wash his hands?” “Why do bells ring during Consecration?”

These are just some the inactive Catholics’ questions that surface during this Week Four discussion. This is very important because many inactive Catholics, especially those who have been away for many years, have misconceptions about our Mass. Once again, the parish WHC coordinator can lead the discussion or the team members can take turns. You can use the companion *Week Four Summary* or other parish resources. Also, there are many fine Catholic videos circulating that can help your attendees better understand what we do at Mass and, more importantly, why we do it.

Of course, the Mass’s “source and summit” is the Holy Eucharist. So, discussing our central Catholic belief in Christ’s true presence in the Eucharist is central to Week Six. But, first we continue to walk through the Mass with next week’s in depth discussion of the Catholic Creed.

#### **Week Five: The Creed:**

The word “creed” comes from the Latin word “credo” that means “I believe.” That is literally what we say several times as we declare the Creed before the Consecration as individuals. Yet, appropriately, we all declare our central beliefs together as one body of Christ. As the companion *Week Six Summary* details, the Creed covers in just ninety seconds the high points of our salvation history from Creation to the “life of the world to come.” More importantly, the Creed affirms our central belief in the Holy Trinity, three Persons in One God. This central mystery is certainly a lot to bite off, so it’s good that we have a full ninety minutes to tackle this important topic.

You certainly want to leave room at the end of Week Six to explain that the Six Week series just scratches the surface of our great Catholic faith. As with any learning experience, its completion is a beginning, not an end. Invite your returning Catholics to explore their varied interests in the many parish-based ministries available including, of course Welcome Home Catholics. Year after year, the most effective WHC volunteers are returning Catholics who have completed the WHC series, are filled with the joy of the Gospel and feel called to share it with others. A main purpose for the evaluation sheet available on the website’s free download page is to identify new potential volunteers.

#### **Week Six: The Eucharist**

Of course, its very appropriate to end the WHC six week series with an in depth discussion of the Eucharist since its “the source and summit” of our Catholic faith, its where we are closest to Jesus in this world and it strengthens us to go forth and spread His Gospel to others and love and serve each other. While there are countless ways the topic can be addressed, it makes good sense to follow the same pattern we used in Week Three to examine the other sacraments: 1) as a physical sign of God’s presence 2) instituted personally by Jesus 3) administered by His only Church 4) to dispense His grace. Remember to emphasize that this is the ultimate sign of God’s presence since the Eucharist is His Body and Blood and the closest way we can enter in this world into the Trinity’s divine life.

The Eucharist is an endlessly fascinating topic, so this final session might seem to just fly by. Watch the clock so you have at least fifteen to twenty minutes to wrap up the series with some ideas on how the attendees can continue their journey's with additional study and service opportunities. The irony is that while many of your fellow parishioners who never left regular practice of the faith may limit their involvement to attending Mass and occasionally going to Confession, your WHC "graduates" may be ready to take a deeper dive into parish life. Indeed, many of our most faithful lay eucharistic ministers, lectors and lay leaders returned to active practice of the faith as adults. As the saying goes "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and those who have been away from God's love and mercy often can better appreciate this sacred gift that is our Catholic faith and can develop a deeper "attitude of gratitude." Encourage them to consult their weekly bulletins and their parish website for current information about dozens of activities underway to grow in our Catholic faith and to put it into action through service to others. It's amazing how many excellent lay apostolates are up and running.

## So Now What?

Of course, it's important for your team members who have bonded with the attendees for six weeks to let them know that you are still available to answer any questions they may have as they move to the next phase of their journey. Encourage them also to consider "paying forward" their experience as WHC volunteers at a future session. I use quote marks here since WHC never asks for money and suggests returning Catholics contribute instead to their parishes. In addition to the obvious objective of serving others and following Jesus's final instruction to "go forth and teach," volunteering with you in WHC will allow them to revisit the summaries and reflections to further grow in knowledge, faith and love of the Lord. Do ask them to pray for WHC and invite inactive Catholics in their lives to also discover the joy of the Gospel that they are now experiencing. Our prayers and actions can change hearts and, in our small way, change our troubled world. I can't imagine a better and more fulfilling place to be on a Thursday night than a WHC session!

Jesus teaches us that He is "the Good Shepherd (*John* 10.11)." In his earthly stead are his ordained cardinals, bishops, priests and deacons. But, every good shepherd needs a few good sheep dogs, not to bark at those who stray, but to gently nudge them back into the fold. Returning Catholics who embrace this amazing WHC ministry with patience, humility and, most importantly, love are the Good Shepherd's sheep dogs.

Remember, our goal is to bring people back to the sacraments, not just to build attendance at the sessions. National research shows that ministries like *Welcome Home Catholics* bring one inactive Catholic back directly to the sacraments for everyone who attends the sessions. Yet, even if just one baptized Catholic resumes full practice of his or her faith, you have had a remarkably successful season that will change the world. Just as God called one person, Abraham, to be patriarch to billions of descendants, we cannot estimate the impact just one returning Catholic can ultimately have on our world. As Jesus taught us, we leave the ninety-nine to seek out the one who is lost (*Luke* 15.4). Then we celebrate as new seeds are planted and the WHC cycle organically begins once again to save sinners and for God's greater glory (**A M D G**).

## Welcome Home Catholics



### Addendum

Here's additional marketing material in addition to the weekly handouts for Weeks 1-6 that are distributed each season via email. Your parish may choose others material as well. This entire "How To" summary hits just the basic points to get you started on the right path.

Note: The Frequently Asked Questions piece below is designed primarily for prospective WHC volunteers and parishioners who wish to know more about this ministry and how it is offered. You can very easily customize the FAQs piece for inactive Catholics/prospective attendees by simply using the first page.

### Primary Resources

The Catholic Bible

The Catholic Catechism

Vatican Council II Documents

Catholic Christianity (Peter J. Kreeft)

## Proprietary Logo

**WELCOME  
HOME  
CATHOLICS**



## Frequently Asked Questions



**What is *Welcome Home Catholics*?** WHC is a six-week program to invite inactive Catholics back to Mass, receive the sacraments regularly and share in the joy of parish life.

**Who is responsible for inviting inactive Catholics to WHC?** You are! You are the key person in the WHC process. Inactive Catholics are all around you. They are your family members, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Our duty as Catholics is to welcome them home (*Luke 15.4-7*).

**When does WHC meet?** Three seasons each year: after Labor Day, Christmas and Easter. Each series meets one night a week for six consecutive weeks. The process is confidential, informal and free. There is never pressure to participate further. Yet, an investment of ninety minutes a week can reap eternal rewards.

**Who hosts the sessions?** WHC volunteers are lay people from various walks of life who answer Christ's call to reach out to those who are away from His love and mercy. Many WHC volunteers are returning Catholics themselves who can speak firsthand about why they left and why they returned.

**What happens?** We start by sharing our various journeys home to the Lord. Why did we leave? Why did we return? This brief discussion helps identify how to follow up since our individual stories are as unique as our fingerprints. Attendees are encouraged to share their journeys but are never required to do so. Next, we see how we are each called in our different ways to love and serve the Lord. Then we review highpoints of our Catholic faith: why Jesus gave us the sacraments, the importance of learning more about our faith, especially Jesus's most sacred gifts: forgiveness for our sins and the Holy Eucharist to strengthen us.

**Then what?** "Graduates" are free to choose a parish. In addition to receiving the sacraments, many continue with more in-depth education such as Bible study. Some "pay forward" this gift of faith in various service ministries including WHC.

**Who started this ministry?** Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd (*John 10*).

**There are similar ministries like *Catholics Come Home*. How is WHC different?** Catholics Come Home produces very effective commercials yet is solely internet-based. WHC works with

parishes directly where we receive forgiveness in Confession, are fed the Holy Eucharist and grow in knowledge, faith and love of the Lord.

**Does WHC support OCIA?** Of course! Both ministries share the same goal: bringing people to Christ. While *Welcome Home Catholics* is primarily for baptized inactive Catholics, the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* is primarily for the soon to be baptized. Since people from each group are often in the same families, WHC “graduates” can bring unbaptized family members (spouses, children and siblings) to OCIA and even attend OCIA with them to learn more about our faith in a longer format.

**Is it expensive for a parish to offer WHC?** There is virtually no cost to the parishes. Volunteers coordinate the sessions and most promotional material is provided at no charge. WHC carries its own insurance like Cursillo and the Knights of Columbus. So, WHC can be offered in all parishes, large and small, as a natural companion to OCIA.

**Is WHC Insured?** Yes, WHC provides full coverage for all meetings.

**How can my parish offer WHC?** With your pastor’s permission, there are opportunities to host and/or co-sponsor WHC. A good first step is to contact a parish WHC volunteer or John Robb at (251) 605-9710 for more information.



## Welcoming the Stranger

### What to Say:

1. "Welcome! We are happy to see you. We are glad you are here."
2. "Tell me about yourself." It is helpful to find out what is drawing them back and what their specific issues before you refer them to your pastor or staff member.
3. "I would like someone to call you to give you more information about our parish. Can I have some contact information?"
4. Introduce the visitor to other parishioners, saying they are "considering registering with our parish." Use the same positive tone and approach as you would when speaking about a person who is considering moving to your area to live.

### What Not to Say:

5. "Why Aren't You Going to Mass?"
6. "You need to go to Confession." In general, its best to avoid detailed conversations on Church teaching during a casual greeting. Refer specific questions to your pastor, a designated parish contact or discuss it, of course, at the confidential WHC sessions.
7. Try not to rush the conversation. Give the person a few minutes of your time so they will know they are genuinely welcome.





