On Cannon Law

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Dear Friend,

This letter is in response to your request: first, you are looking for guidance regarding your son and second, you asked about the relevance of Canon Law for everyday life. You said you pray daily for your son and his girlfriend to return to the faith, but you are not sure what else you can do; you asked me if your son is even Catholic. I pray the Holy Spirit guides me as I write this letter to you and strengthens you as you read it.

I am going to refer to the Code of Canon Law for my response, which includes words in regards to different aspects of prayer, conversion and penance, but before diving into these let me begin with your concerns about your son.

Regarding if your son is even a Catholic, it helps us remember that baptism confers an indelible character as it incorporates us into the Church (cf. canon 849). I would like to assure you that your son remains a Catholic in the eyes of the Church even though he has expressed his disgust/disappointment in how the Church handled the sexual abuse cases and has not been active. It looks to me as though the sex scandals in the church have deeply hurt his faith. However, without knowing more than what you stated to me, I do not think he is to the point of apostasy (cf. canon 751) and you mention nothing about any formal act to express his defection from the Church (a formal act is a document that is signed by two witnesses). Your son has never done anything like that to formalize his departure from the Church. Falling away is a typical reaction by many Catholics who were shocked/hurt by the way the Church dealt with the abuse issues and the cover up by the hierarchy. It is not rare that a young person is not active for some time. Often it takes marriage along with the first child starting faith formation before young parents get more active.

There is no reason to give up hope. At this point, my friend, continue being welcoming and loving toward your son – “keeping the door open” to future gentle and calm discussions about faith if he brings something up and it would be a good strategy for you to quit making this a contentious issue. Being someone and a place where someone will listen patiently so your son can vent his frustrations at being scandalized by the pedophile issue is going to get you more satisfaction and peace than harping about his faith performance.

Now, I am going to touch different aspects of prayer, own conversion and penance and how these could have an impact on your son’s conversion without him having to hear anything from you.

Prayer is very important; please be assured that in time it will bear fruit. There are different types of prayers. Since prayer is one of my favorite topics, we could spend lots of time in future letter exchanges. I would like to know more about your prayer experience. In the meantime, however, I am going to give you five general recommendations for prayer.

First, you could offer the most important prayer for the conversion of your son, the Eucharist. To request a Mass, just approach your parish office. As canon 901 undoubtedly states, “a priest is entitled to offer Mass for anyone, living or dead.” Also, if you would like to make a change (or an addition) to your prayer life. I would earnestly invite you to participate in the Liturgy of the Hours (cf. canon 1174 §2). There are opportunities twice a day to add your own intentions during the Intercessions towards the end of the two main hours (Morning and Evening Prayer) there you can pray for specific needs. You
could ask more information in the nearest church; maybe they are praying the Liturgy of the Hours around their Masses or you could download an app in your phone and do it on your own.

Second, there are two very effective ways to foster your own sanctification. The first one is when you practice special and filial reverence to the Blessed Mary ever Virgin, Mother of God, whom Christ established as the mother of all people. The second one is a true and authentic veneration of the other saints whose example could instruct you (like Saint Rita of Cassia and Saint Laura Vicuña) whose intercession could sustain you (cf. canon 1186) as you pray for the conversion of your son; those two saints prayed and witnessed the conversion of their loved ones. You could google “Catholic Saints” just make sure they are in the official list of saints available to venerate (cf. canon 1187). The USCCB has a list of American saints.

My Third recommendation on prayer is for you to find a church or an oratory where you could go to more profoundly meditate and adore the Eucharistic mystery (cf. canon 942). This type of prayer will bring you peace and guidance on how to continue interceding for your son.

The fourth recommendation has to do with enlisting intercessors who can also pray for your son's conversion. Are your son's godparents still around? The main job of a godparent is to help the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it (cf. canon 872). I am sure they will be happy to pray (and who knows, maybe talk to him). In addition to godparents, you could also reach out to some other people who pray frequently. Do you know someone who belongs to a religious institute? The first and foremost duty of a religious is prayer (cf. canon 663 §1); maybe you would like to enlist some of these people as your prayer warriors for your son. On the other hand, for reason of your domicile, (cf. canon 102) you have a pastor. Feel free to reach out to him (cf. canon 212 §2) to express your needs; pastors of souls are obliged to oversee the preservation of the matrimonial state (cf. canon 1063). They may be able to direct you to some resources for your son and his girlfriend and their love relationship. You could also ask prayers for your son from the departed faithful in your family, especially grandparents or great-grandparents and express your gratitude for their intercession gaining partial or plenary indulgences for them by way of suffrage (cf. canon 994).

A fifth and last recommendation that I have for prayer is this: on a special occasion like Christmas, maybe you would like to consider gifting your son and his girlfriend with some sacramentals like a beautiful crucifix, a medal or a bracelet. Anything beautiful, that could appeal to the senses, a worth piece of art, a painting or a sculpture that would look good in their dwelling place. A sacramental is a sacred sign, but not only that: sacramentals produce spiritual effects obtained through the intercession of the Church (cf. canon 1166).

I have given you some ideas. However, the most important thing to do is to go deeper in your own conversion. You and I must direct our efforts to lead a holy life and to promote the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification (cf. canon 210). We are also bound by a particular duty to imbue and perfect the order of temporal affairs with the spirit of the gospel and thus to give witness to Christ, especially in carrying out the very things that we are ought to do (cf. canon 225 §2) but we do not do this alone. Married couples are bound by a special duty to work through marriage and the family to build up the people of God (cf. canon 226 §1). Your own personal example along with your marriage will be a potent light to guide your son back to the Church and a sacramental life.

A sound advice is to accompany all of our efforts with penance. Canon 1249 explains how the divine law binds all of us to do penance each in his or her own way. On penitential days, we could devote ourselves in a special way to prayer, perform works of piety and charity, and deny ourselves by fulfilling our own obligations more faithfully and especially by observing fast and abstinence. Canon 1250 states the penitential days and times in the universal Church are every Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent. Per canon 1252 please note the law of abstinence binds those who have completed their fourteenth year. The law of fasting binds those who have attained their majority, until the beginning of their sixtieth year. Our conference of bishops has determined some substitution of the observance of fast and abstinence for other forms of penance, especially works of charity and exercises of piety (cf. canon 1253) for details of these please check the USCCB website.
Friend, I hope you can see the practicality of our Canon Law and find new ways to continue supporting the faith of your family. Trust in the Holy Spirit and God’s Divine Providence; with time, love and patience your son will be able to see the richness and beauty of the Church and will fully embrace the faith in spite of our many sins.

In Christ,
Anisabel Palma