

Letters to a young Catholic: How to be real

Dear Friend,

We do not know each other, and yet I count you as a friend. Why? Because I have affection for you, I care about your well-being, and I will your good.

I write to you not from a position of perfect knowledge or absolute certainty, but from a heart where I sympathize with you on account of the challenges you face and the lack of clarity often offered to you. I have been where you are, though in a different generation and under different circumstances. I was guided into a more full and meaningful Catholic life through timely mentoring, the good fortune of substantive faith communities and good religious education. But mostly, I attribute my blessings to divine providence because I myself was far from always being intentional in seeking out a mature Catholic life, and those who formed me were not always committed to that end, either. I want more for you than there was for me, and I want you to become more confident, more open, more creative and more real than I myself have yet become. I do not write to you so that you can become like me. I write to you so that you can become truly yourself, as you were created and are called to become.

I call you “a young Catholic,” but I do not presume to know that much about you. I just turned 40, and I am assuming that you are younger than me. Leaving that aside, it is the “Catholic” part that I am leery of thrusting upon you.

Perhaps you were baptized and even completed your initiation into the Catholic Church through first Communion and confirmation, and yet you do not think of yourself as “Catholic” first of all. It may be something in the background

for you, like the state or town in which you happened to be born. You might consider it to be something more about your past – or your parents’ past – than about your future. You might be angry, frustrated or, frankly, just bored with the Church, and I get all of that. I’ve been there, and sometimes I’m still there.

You also might not be Catholic. Maybe you are interested in the Catholic faith and you are poking around for insight or wisdom. Maybe you were in the Church but you left, and somehow this letter made its way to you. Or maybe you are not quite sure what to think about yourself, but this “Catholic thing” seems like it might be part of the equation, even if only as something to figure out or get over.

As a friend, I do not begin by creating my own image of you and then expect you to fit what I imagine. I want to write to you as you and speak to you as a friend. That means I will speak honestly. I want to tell you the truth and help you to grow.



A woman prays prior to a Mass for young adults at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City in 2016. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

I have at least a dozen letters to write to you. I have not written them yet. I know what I want to say, but I will need

some time to think about how to say it all. You see, I believe I do know what it means to become a mature and committed Catholic. I know this not because I believe I myself have fully become the kind of mature and committed Catholic I hope to be, but instead, I have discovered this full portrait in my studies, in certain people I have spent time with and even in the as yet unfulfilled longings in my own practice of the Faith. But I do not want to just tell you about something as if I know something that you do not. Instead, I want to provide you real and meaningful assistance in how to become a mature and committed Catholic.

You matter in what I will write. It will take me some time to honor you with my words. From letter to letter, I will do my best to address you as personally and thoughtfully as I can, even though I do not know you yet. I will write to you as a friend.

I have decided to title each of these letters with "How to." This does not mean that I plan to write an instruction manual or step-by-step guide. In fact, there will be just as much "Why to" in what I write to you as there is "How to," because I also seek to explain the importance and even the necessity of everything I write about. I will write about things like "how to listen," "how to be uncomfortable," "how to pray" and "how to be Eucharistic," because, again, I am not content to just describe something to you. I want to help you practically seek after these ends, which are all a piece of the mature, committed Catholic life I cherish.

Of course, I cannot force you to follow this path – nor would I ever want to force you – but I am absolutely determined to empower you. If you want to seek this end, then I want to give you the means for doing so. And so, I am titling these letters with "How to" to keep me honest and on task: I intend for this to all be practical and to offer you real guidance on the way to something of significance and consequence.

With that, I can now begin to close this letter by making good on the title I have chosen for it: "How to be real." To be real means to take responsibility for becoming someone of definite character. We live in an environment that does not make this easy or likely to happen.

Think about it: What tends to be valued in our modern world today is becoming a bundle of reactions. We hear something, and we are expected to react quickly and strongly, as through social media. One political movement is shown to be corrupt and another comes promising liberation, and we are to react by condemning one and hailing the other, only to go through the same cycle next time around with new movements. An old fashion wanes and a new fashion emerges, and we must react by adapting our tastes. Schools or employers change what they value for admissions or hiring, and we react by changing what we value as good and worthy of pursuit.

When I speak of "being real," I do not mean to suggest that the point is to become static, inflexible and stubborn. What I mean is that being real is being free from the rapid and capricious changes around us, to be able to deal with these changes honestly and actually lead others toward a vision of what is true, valuable and worthy of pursuit – in season and out of season.

How do you become real and thus capable of taking responsibility for becoming someone of definite character? Through engaging in small, specific, definite practices. To make this a little too simple, you focus on developing certain habits. That is precisely what I want to talk with you about in this series of letters. Your intentions are very important – it matters what kind of person you hope to become. But intentions dissipate unless they become incarnate through repeatable actions. I use the word "incarnate" purposefully. I mean that through the kind of practices we will focus on together, we slowly become who we are meant to be in and through our bodies. Intention and desire become flesh. You and

I both know how unstable our lives and even the whole world can become in the blink of an eye – if the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it has taught us that. The antidote to that instability – if not the virus! – is to develop and grow from stable practices that lead us toward taking responsibility for being someone of definite character.

I am grateful for you – grateful that you have allowed me to share this first letter with you and grateful that you were interested enough to make it this far in my writing. We are just getting started here, and I hope that you can tell how eager I am to speak honestly with you. I also hope that you will read the next letter I write to you, which will be about “How to listen.”

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lenny". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "L" and a long, sweeping underline.

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