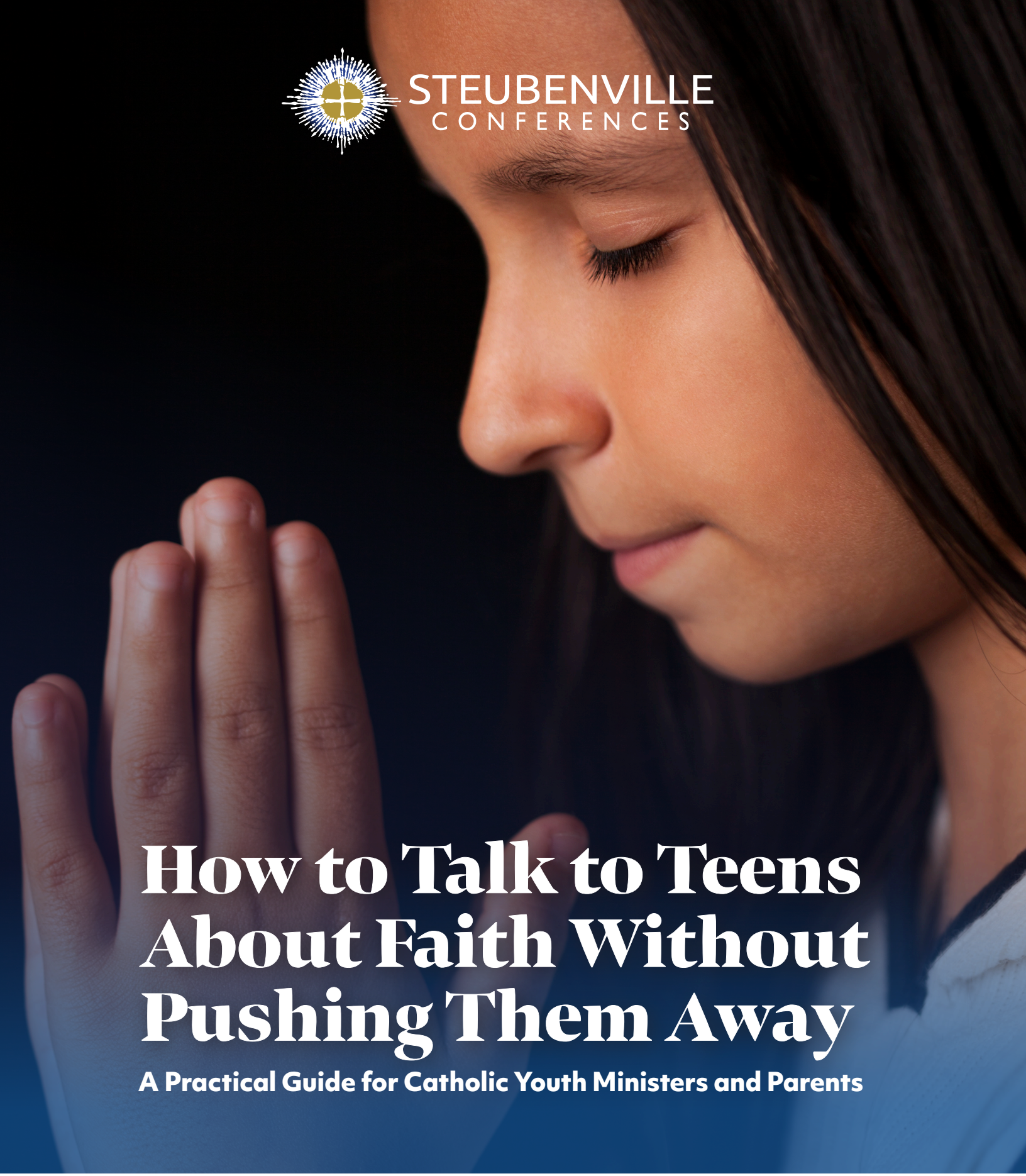


STEUBENVILLE CONFERENCES

How to Talk to Teens About Faith Without Pushing Them Away

A Practical Guide for Catholic Youth Ministers and Parents

FRANCISCAN | Live the Truth

Why This Guide Matters

Candid conversations about Jesus and the Church can feel awkward. Too pushy, and our teens might shut down. Too passive, and they might drift away. This short guide gives youth ministers and parents a simple framework for creating safe, trust-building dialogues with young people.

The Problem

Teens are busy, distracted, and often skeptical of conversations around Church topics and Catholicism. When these topics come up, you worry your words aren't landing and you fear pushing them away. We know the faith should always be shared with respect and freedom; no teen should feel cornered when talking about God. But at the same time, our teens need God in their lives now more than ever. Only he can fill that God-shaped hole in their hearts.

What You Desire

You want the young people in your life to know and love Jesus, grow in virtue, and stay rooted in the Church—without the eye rolls, shutdowns, or drifting away. You're loving them and sharing your faith with them week after week, but sometimes you're not sure if your message is really sinking in. You worry that it could even be turning them away. You need a solid strategy for leading conversations that build trust, invite curiosity, and open space for grace. At the same time, you want them to know your love is unconditional, and your relationship will endure no matter what they believe about Jesus.

How This Guide Can Help

This guide gives you practical tools to start meaningful, pressure-free discussions about God. It's simple to follow and designed for youth ministry leaders and parents alike because both play a vital role in helping young people encounter Christ.

A Detailed Plan for Spiritual Engagement With Teens

1. Pray and Prepare

- Begin by setting aside a quiet moment to pray, earnestly seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ask for wisdom to discern the needs of the teen and the warmth to build a trusting relationship.
- Carefully choose one clear and specific intention for your interaction. For example, you might want to focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the teen's current spiritual state or identifying a challenge he or she may be facing in his or her faith journey.

2. Engage Through Asking and Active Listening

- Initiate the conversation with permission-based openers. These could include phrases like, **"Would it be all right if we talked about your spiritual journey?"** or **"I'm curious to hear about your thoughts on faith—can we discuss that?"**
- Use open-ended questions that encourage the teen to elaborate on his or her thoughts and feelings. Questions such as, **"How do you experience God in your life?"** or **"How do you feel about your relationship with faith and the Church?"** can be particularly effective.
- Practice active listening by reflecting back what you hear, ensuring you focus on understanding the teen's perspective rather than projecting your expectations. This involves paraphrasing his or her statements to confirm understanding and demonstrating empathy for the teen's experiences.

3. Suggest a Thoughtful Next Step

- Present a gentle and specific next step that aligns with the teen's readiness and interests. This step should be small, voluntary, and driven by the teen's comfort level. For instance, suggest attending a youth group event, reading a particular book together, watching a video, or engaging in a shared spiritual practice.
- Express genuine gratitude for the teen's openness in sharing his or her thoughts and experiences with you. Even if the teen is not ready to take the suggested next step, acknowledge his or her honesty with a sincere, **"Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me, even if now isn't the right time to move forward."**

1:1 Conversation Template

• Begin with a Permission-Based Opener

"Would it be OK if I ask about your experience of faith lately?"

"No pressure—curious: what has Church been like for you this month?"

"Is now a good time for a short faith chat (totally OK to say no)?"

• Ask Curious Questions (Not Quizzes)

"When have you felt closest to God—or wondered if he's there?"

"What's one thing about faith that doesn't make sense yet?"

"If you could change one thing about Church life for teens, what would it be?"

• Respond Warmly and Normalize the Response

"Thanks for sharing—sounds like you're juggling a lot."

"Many people wrestle with that, and it's OK to take time."

"You're not alone—lots of saints faced doubts and questions."

Be sure you are always communicating with love. Meet them where they are and be sure they feel you are in a relationship with them for the long haul, not just short-term or contingent upon their response.

• Offer a Gentle Invitation (Small, Specific, Voluntary)

"Would you like to try a two-minute quiet prayer this week? I can text you a prompt."

"Want to sit together at Mass and chat after?"

"We've got a service hour opportunity—are you interested?"

• Affirm and Suggest a Follow Up

"Thanks for trusting me with that." or **"I'll check in next week with a quick text, if that's OK."**

Six Common Mistakes (And What to Do Instead)

- **Assuming readiness ▶ Ask permission and offer choice consistently.**
- **Lecturing ▶ Ask two questions before you give one answer.**
- **Talking to groups only ▶ Schedule 1:1 touchpoints.**
- **Rushing to correct ▶ Reflect first; clarify second.**
- **Inconsistent messaging ▶ Maintain a loving and consistent pattern of communication regardless of how the teen responds.**
- **Ambiguous next steps ▶ Offer one clear, small action step.**



Learn about Franciscan University of Steubenville's summer Youth Conferences at **steubenvilleconferences.com.**

Recommended Reading List for Catholic Teens and Adults

A Selection From Our Steubenville Conference Speakers!

Bergsma, John. *Bible Basics for Catholics: A New Picture of Salvation History.* Ave Maria Press, 2012.

Cavins, Jeff. *Walking With God: A Journey Through the Bible.* Ascension Press, 2018.

Evert, Jason. *Male, Female, Other?: A Catholic Guide to Understanding Gender.* Totus Tuus Press, 2023.

Hart, Mark. *Ask the Bible Geek: Answers to Questions from Catholic Teens.* Servant Books, 2001.

Hartfield, Katie. *Provide the Armor.* Totus Tuus Press, 2024.

Heidland, Sister Miriam James. *Loved as I Am: An Invitation to Conversion, Healing, and Freedom Through Jesus.* Ave Maria Press, 2014.

Hahn, Scott. *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth.* Doubleday, 1999.

Hahn, Scott. *Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith.* Doubleday, 2007.

Horn, Trent. *Why We're Catholic: Our Reasons for Faith, Hope, and Love.* Catholic Answers Press, 2017

Kreeft, Peter. *Because God Is Real: Sixteen Questions, One Answer.* Ignatius Press, 2008.

Kreeft, Peter. *Yes or No? Straight Answers to Tough Questions About Christianity.* Ignatius Press, 1991.

Pivonka, Father Dave. *Living Metanoia: Finding Freedom and Fulfillment in Christ.* Our Sunday Visitor, 2021.

Rice, Deacon Bob. *Sharing the Gospel With Our Lives: A Relational Approach to Catholic Youth Ministry.* Ave Maria Press, 2024.

Schmitz, Father Mike. *A World Undone: Finding God When Life Doesn't Make Sense.* Ignatius Press, 2020.

Stefanick, Chris, and McCusker, Paul. *The Search.* Augustine Institute, 2020.

Stefanick, Chris, and Evert, Jason. *Raising Pure Teens: 10 Strategies to Protect (or Restore) Your Teenager's Innocence.* Totus Tuus Press, 2010.

Weddell, Sherry A. *Forming Intentional Disciples: The Path to Knowing and Following Jesus.* Our Sunday Visitor, 2012.