

Ministering to Catholics

Introduction

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Our class on ministering to Catholics will focus on how to serve Catholics with the truth of the Scripture. This will be practical in nature and seek to equip you to better communicate with and understand those you know from a Catholic background. We will include observations of how Catholicism has affected the modern evangelical movement.

1. Overview of Catholic Population

Christ's mission to make disciples of all nations leads us to the over 1,200,000,000 Catholics worldwide. There is a great concentration of Catholics in certain regions of the world. Roughly one-third of all Catholics are Latin American, with over 75% of those Latin countries identifying with Catholicism. Most people in Western Europe are Catholic, accounting for one-fifth of the total Catholic population. About 80% of the 100 million people in the Philippines are Catholic and Catholicism has been growing in Africa where 135 million Catholics reside. However, Catholicism throughout most of Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East is below 5%. Catholicism is widespread but regionally concentrated.

In the United States, the number is over 70,000,000 or roughly 22% of the U.S. population. However, when you look beyond those who specifically claim Catholicism as their religion to those who are influenced by the Catholic faith, the number doubles. The Pew Research Center in 2015 estimated the number of people connected to Catholics in some way to be 45% of the U.S. population. These people may have been raised Catholic, may attend Catholic Mass on occasion, or have some degree of cultural commitment to Catholicism.

In the State of California, Catholicism has seen a substantial increase in followers since the 1980, particularly due to immigration from Latin America. There has been a 50% growth rate of Catholics in California over the past four decades to a present level of around three in ten people in our state, according to the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. Like the Hispanic population at large, Catholics are most concentrated in central and southern California.

This many people from a particular religious background requires a comprehensive analysis of how to serve them with the truth of God's word. The likelihood of each of us knowing a practicing Catholic is very high and we ought to give attention to the factors that could aid our ministry to them.

In addition, our class will note the wide-ranging effect that Catholicism has had over modern evangelicalism that may have escaped the notice of many of us. Protestantism grew out of Catholicism and has retained some attachment to different degrees. When evangelicals depart from a 100% commitment to the Scripture, they often drift toward the practice of religion that is rooted in Catholicism. To many, this type of religion has an appeal and can be adopted as a practice by churches without an understanding of where it comes from and where it leads. Where appropriate, these similarities will be noted in our class.

One of the challenges we may have in communicating with Catholics is the rhetoric of our fellow Christians who have preceded us.

Another challenge we may have in communicating with Catholics lies with terminology. Catholicism uses words we are unfamiliar with and evangelicals use words that Catholics are unfamiliar with. There are even words that both use, but with a somewhat different meaning. In order to talk effectively, we will note these different terms.

2. The Definition of Catholic

The fundamental meaning of the word “catholic” is “universal” and speaks to inclusiveness. This is the use of the word “catholic” in the Nicene Creed as recited in Catholic churches today when it declares, “we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

The normal understanding of the word “Catholic” today refers to a person who adheres to the religion of Roman Catholicism. It is in this common usage that we will use the term Catholic. There are relatively small number of others that use the term “catholic” and along with various “rites” (liturgical traditions and culture) of Catholicism but for the sake of this class we will focus exclusively on the Roman Catholic Church and will use the term “Catholic” to refer to its participants.

3. Types of Catholics

In spite of having one leader, Catholicism is a very broad religion. We cannot assume all Catholics are similar. The Catholic Church has been willing to embrace a remarkable number of diverse beliefs, even among the Catholic clergy and even where they deviate from the official church teaching. There are several broad categories of people who consider themselves “Catholic”:

A. Traditional Catholics

Traditional Catholics are the backbone of the Catholic Church. They attend Catholic mass faithfully and are committed to the official teachings of the church.

Traditional Catholics are not as common as we might think. They are in the minority of the people who attend mass weekly. For example, of those Catholics who attend mass weekly, only 19% believe that using contraceptives is wrong (which is the official teaching of the Catholic church). Most faithful attenders do not adhere to all the teachings of the church.

There are two subsets to the traditional Catholic group:

1) The Catholic apologists, who have become proficient in defending Catholicism against attack, from both within the church (against those seeking to weaken it doctrinally from their perspective) and from outside the church. These Catholics are a very small minority of Catholic followers but can be very vocal, particularly in the days of social media. They may or may not hold an official role in the church but function as its spokespeople.

Those seeking to minister to Catholics might encounter Catholic apologist since they are eager to talk intelligently about why evangelicals should “return” to the Catholic faith. Some of this class will address how to respond to this vocal group.

2) The ultra-traditionalists, who believe the Catholic Church should return to its practices before the Vatican II council in 1964. They view Vatican II as an unfortunate revision and would advocate the return to practices such as the mass being conducted in Latin and a clear separation from Protestantism. The ultra-traditionalists have always been the extreme and are a dying breed of Catholicism.

In the end, all variants of Catholics are either “traditional” or something else since every other type of Catholic is willing to deviate from the official teaching of Catholicism to some degree.

B. Loyal Catholics

This is a unique group because they are very committed to Catholicism emotionally but not ideologically. They are deeply loyal to the institution of the Catholic Church, but not necessarily to the teachings of the Catholic Church. They are different than traditional Catholics in this regard.

The loyal Catholic is in many ways the “average Catholic” since the majority of those who are involved in the Catholic Church are not traditional Catholics. Looking at the percentage of Americans who regularly attend Catholic Mass but do not agree with Catholic teaching on specific issues gives insight into the large number of loyal, non-traditional Catholics there are:

- Roughly half disagree with Catholic teaching that it is sin to remarry without first obtaining an annulment.

- When asked about the use of contraceptives, only 17% agree with the Catholic teaching with 66% opposed to the ban on contraceptives.
- The majority of U.S. Catholics attending Mass disagree with the church ban on allowing priests to marry (62%).
- Most believe that a Catholic living with a romantic partner without being married should be allowed to receive communion (61%).
- Most Catholics also wish women could become priests (59%).
- A sizable minority think that the church should recognize same sex marriages (46%).

From these statistics we can conclude that the average active Catholic is not fully committed to the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. The clear majority of Catholics who regularly attend Mass are committed to the Catholicism as a religion more than Catholicism as a belief system.

The significance of this category of Catholics who disagree with some of the teaching of the Church is that they do not necessarily reject non-Catholic beliefs. We will be allowed a hearing with many average Catholics even though we are not Catholic ourselves.

C. Liberal Catholics

A small but vocal percentage of Catholics are Liberal Catholics. Liberal Catholics are not just open to changes in the Catholic Church but they are *intentional* in their advocacy of bringing social change to the church by moving away from some of the traditional teaching and practices, particularly in areas of morality. Like their liberal protestant counterparts, they champion the acceptance of abortion, homosexuality, and women in church leadership. Like many, they oppose the Catholic teaching regarding contraceptives and celibate priests but they are in favor of a more aggressive weakening of many of the moral prohibitions taught by the church.

There are two subsets of liberal Catholicism that are worth noting:

- 1) So-called “liberation theologians” who are Catholic have advanced a radical economic transformation of society along Marxist lines. They view the essence of Christianity to be the alleviation of the suffering for the poor and are committed to eradicate poverty and oppression. This teaching has flourished in Latin America.
- 2) Some versions of liberal Catholics have left Catholic teaching almost completely in favor of a New Age or mystical form of Catholicism. This product varies but leads to a pantheistic view of God, co-mingled with Catholic tradition. At times, the church has taken action to oppose this but often mysticism thrives within the Catholic Church.

Liberal Catholics are far less likely to be Hispanic and they tend to be connected to universities -- even Catholic universities.

D. Charismatic Catholics

The Charismatic Movement attached itself to parts of Catholicism beginning in the late 1960s. It has since grown to have significant influence in many parishes, with an estimated number of Charismatic Catholics topping 10 million in the United States alone.

Generally speaking, Charismatic Catholics have more in common with the beliefs of evangelicals than any other Catholics, with the value of a personal commitment to the Bible. However, they typically hold to a strong devotion to Mary along with other mystical elements within Catholicism.

Charismatic Catholics have a greater chance of connecting with evangelicals through the ecumenical nature of the Charismatic Movement and therefore may have adopted some Protestant terminology, if not some Protestant beliefs.

E. Evangelical Catholics

The phrase “evangelical Catholic” can mean a couple of different things.

For many, this refers to the part of the Catholic Church that is characterized by their commitment to the spread of Roman Catholicism. This form of evangelical Catholicism should not be confused with evangelical Protestantism since it continues its adherence to Catholicism in its fullest sense. Like much of Catholicism, the words do not communicate what we might think. They are not evangelical in terms of believing in a personal salvation through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works. The role of the sacraments, the tradition and the liturgy remain central to their faith.

However, there is another segment of Catholics that include an emphasis on a personal internal commitment to Jesus, which can sound similar to an evangelical concept of a born-again experience. They also profess an allegiance to the Scripture, which also makes them appear close to us in faith. This is not so much a movement within Catholicism but the result of Catholics who have been influenced by evangelicalism.

When a Catholic begins to participate with an evangelical church, they may experience spiritual regeneration. Most will draw closer to the church where they were spiritually served but many will retain their allegiance to their Catholic roots. A few may seek to bring their new found faith in Christ to their Catholic Church but usually this is short-lived and a frustrating experience. More commonly, this attachment to Catholicism is a demonstration of a lack of appreciation for the significant issues that exist within Catholicism and the impact this has on faith.

This lack of willingness to separate from the Catholic church testifies to an immature faith (at best) and to the current trend toward minimizing the considerable doctrinal differences that exist and affect a person's life and ministry.

F. Syncretistic Catholics

These Catholics have mixed Catholicism with other religions, producing a wide variety of blended beliefs. Catholicism is often mixed in Africa and South America with the folk religions in an eclectic fashion, picking from what is desired from inherently conflicting religions beliefs. The Philippines also suffers from a large degree of syncretistic blending of pagan beliefs with Catholicism.

The United States has added these types of Catholics primarily through immigration. The Catholic embrace on an intense devotion to Mary can be an aspect of the blending of religions for some. There is also some overlap with Charismatic Catholics in respect to Mary.

G. Cultural Catholics

Cultural Catholics are emotionally connected to the aspect of Catholicism that surrounds their life in some sense. Most are not particularly religious but they consider themselves to be Catholic, or at least partially Catholic. This is primarily due to their upbringing or in smaller numbers, through their marriage.

Cultural Catholics are large in number, making up 9% of the adult population in the United States, according the Pew Research Center. Therefore, it is highly likely that each of us knows a few cultural Catholics.

Cultural Catholics rarely, if ever, attend a Catholic mass. If they do it may only be on Christmas or Easter and in a family context. They may have attended regularly when they were younger and have fallen away from the church in practice. A few may even attend a non-Catholic church but still consider themselves in some sense to be Catholic.

H. Ex-Catholics

While it seems odd to categorize "ex-Catholics" as a group within Catholicism, not all ex-Catholics are alienated from the Catholic Church. Pew reports that 9% of Americans say they were raised in the Catholic Church but unlike Cultural Catholics, they no longer consider themselves to be Catholic in any way.

However, as a matter of practice, more than half of these ex-Catholics view the pope favorably and a minority of these would still want a priest to give their last rites if they were gravely ill. So some of those who would say they used to be Catholic will exhibit some connection to the Catholic Church.

I. Those with some other Catholic connection

About 8% of Americans are connected to Catholicism even though they were not raised Catholic and have never considered themselves to be Catholic. They may have had a Catholic parent who did not bring them up in the Catholic faith. They may have attended a parochial school. They may have married a Catholic.

Catholicism affects this group to some degree even though they may be unaware of it. They may have attended Mass at a Catholic church. They certainly have observed the conduct of Catholics they were close to. In some way, most of this group has had their religious thinking formed to some degree by their Catholic connection. This is particularly true for secular people who have had no deep involvement with another religious faith.

4. Catholics who leave Catholicism

One out of every three people raised Catholic no longer identify themselves as Catholic. While this number is high, the departure of Americans from Catholicism is a growing trend. A survey by Christian Smith of Oxford University concluded that 50% of people who identified themselves as Catholic as teenagers no longer do so ten years later. More and more Catholic leaders have become concerned about this trend.

About half of Catholics who leave the church become unaffiliated with another church. Of those who do associate with another church, they are more than twice as likely to participate in an evangelical protestant church than a mainline denominational protestant church (or any other option).

The large numbers of people leaving the Catholic Church speaks to the opportunity that exists for ministry to Catholics. The principal reason given by people for leaving Catholicism for a protestant church is their "spiritual needs were not being met." There is good reason to believe this will be the case going forward. This should motivate us to be ones who are able to provide truth from the Bible that God's Spirit will use to draw them to Himself.

5. How to assess individual Catholics

The better we understand the person we are seeking to help, the more helpful we can be. Therefore, understanding a person's Catholic background is a valuable endeavor.

The best way to gain insight into the type of Catholic a person is associated with is to ask questions. Generally speaking, people enjoy talking about themselves and their opinions and perspectives and by simply asking questions they will be open to sharing about themselves.

These questions can be as simple as what church they attend and their opinions about it. Genuinely asking how their experience compares with your church experience lets you begin to discuss differences but in a way that allows them to speak to those differences. Being open about your experience will help others be open about their experiences.

However, it is important that this not take the form of an interrogation. Peppering people with questions is a put-off. Casual questions in the flow of a conversation are far less invasive. Also, do not presuppose what an answer should be. Even if you think their analysis is wrong, there is no reason to correct it because your first need is to gather information. A person's misunderstanding is helpful for further discussions.

There are many Catholics who will be reluctant to talk about their own religious experience. They may think that religion is a personal thing and they may have never even had a conversation about their religion. So the topic might be uncomfortable for them. Also, they may be aware that they do not know as much as they ought to about their religion and they may feel a healthy degree of guilt for not measuring up. Talking about their religion risks exposing them.

This reluctance to engage in conversation should not lead you to conclude that they lack interest. Rather, you may have to be patient. This allows opportunities to involve them in church activities where they can learn more without being put on the spot. People learn through a variety of means and we should be willing to adjust according to the need of the moment.

6. Conclusion

Each Catholic is their own person with their own background. Their experience with Catholicism has had some effect upon them but to what degree remains an individual matter. However, understanding the diversity of Catholicism will help our communication as we seek to serve those with a Catholic background.

As we grow in our ministry to Catholics, we will see how the specific elements within Catholicism impact our efforts. The remainder of our class will discuss how understanding these aspects of Catholicism will help us become as faithful as possible with the opportunities the Lord has provided to each of us.