

Ministering to Catholics

More Principles for Ministering to Catholics

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This series on ministering to Catholics is designed to be more than just a class on Catholicism it is to improve our ability to serve those from a Catholic background in light of their beliefs. In our last class we looked at a series of principles for ministering to Catholics where we covered the following points:

- Appreciate the advantages that Catholics have learning about Jesus
- Understand the goal of ministry to Catholics
- Let your speech always be with grace
- Identify with them in your testimony
- Involve Catholic friends with fellow believers in Christ

This class will look at several more principles of ministry to Catholics to serve them faithfully as we have the opportunity.

1. Cooperate with fellow believers in ministry to Catholics

While we may take our calling to make disciples of Christ seriously, and rightly so, we are not the only one who the Lord may be working through to serve His purposes. Others may be involved in a unique way that serves people in ways that we cannot and we should be wise to be deferential in our ministry.

Just because we may know a good deal about Catholicism should not move us to undermine the ministry of our fellow believers. This is particularly important when they have a deeper and longer relationship with the Catholic person than we do.

The best way to cooperate with others in ministry to Catholics is to communicate, rather than assume. Talking with the person who knows the Catholic better than we do will protect us from mistakes in judgment as we work in sync with each other in our ministry together. It will also build a sense of working together in furthering God's work among people.

Finally, the Lord designed His people to serve together according to their giftedness. When we function as He has designed His church we will be blessed. When we consider ourselves to be the beginning, middle and end of ministry, we will suffer in our ministry to and with others. No one has the ability or giftedness to serve independently from the body of Christ.

2. Value the journey of faith

Every Christian comes to faith in Christ through a process. Whether they have grown up in a strong Christian home or they have had no religious background at all, all believers in Christ have been moved by the Lord toward Him through a series of events and increasing knowledge. Catholics are no different.

This journey of faith is often difficult to analyze, particularly while it is occurring. It is much easier to look back and see how the Lord has worked in our lives. When people are moving toward the Lord in faith, they may not even have a clear awareness of the change that is taking place.

This process of coming to faith in Christ is so often missed by the rhetoric of Christians who presuppose that true saving faith must not only come logically at a moment in time but also must occur experientially at a moment in time as well. This perspective leads people to speak about “decisions for Christ” and causes them to press people into making a commitment to believe in Jesus.

This can be confusing for Catholics who consider themselves as having always believed in Jesus. The realization of salvation through faith in Christ apart from works is often a process that people come to in their own unique way. While there is a point where we are saved, many times the process in which that point arrives is embedded in a process that is not well understood.

As we allow people to be drawn to salvation by God’s grace, we will find God’s timetable is best. When pressing people to commit prematurely, we may be the only one who is appreciating our effort.

3. Ask questions

People will talk about themselves. Even if they are not very religious or comfortable talking about their faith, there are many parts of their Catholic background that they may be willing to talk about if you ask them. Such types of questions include:

- a. Questions about how much exposure they have had to Catholicism

Do they attend Mass? If they regularly attend, chances are they have been through the three main initiation sacraments of Baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation. Baptism is normally done in infancy, first communion at around 7-8 years of age and confirmation around 16 years old.

What school did they attend? Catholic schools, known as “parochial schools,” are designed for religious education as well as academic learning.

Also, any personal relationships they may have with Catholic leadership or more training they may have received themselves factor into the degree of their exposure.

b. Questions about how well they understand Catholicism

If you have never been Catholic, you may be able to ask a myriad of questions about Catholicism without causing a sense of interrogation since you have not been in a position to experience what they have. In doing so you will gain a sense of their confidence regarding their understanding also.

Any interaction about their experience has the potential to inform you about their knowledge of Catholicism. The more they know, or even the more they think they know, the more work will likely be necessary to help them understand the Scripture in light of Catholic teaching.

c. Questions about how committed they are to Catholicism

The more committed a person is to their faith, the longer it will take for a reevaluation to take place. Given the level of disagreement with official Catholic teaching among even priests, it is fairly common for Catholics to not be completely committed to the teaching of their church.

However, do not mistake intellectual commitment for emotional commitment. Most people remain emotionally committed even after they have been willing to disagree with the Church. This emotional commitment comes in the form of their family expectations, their sense of loyalty, and even their personal comfort level and fear of change.

d. Questions about what they think about their faith

Catholics are more likely than ever to have made some sort of evaluation of their experience. This probably is not based upon the Scripture but nevertheless, opinions have been formed which are quite possibly negative. When a person has been disaffected in some fashion, they may be more open to listen to a different perspective.

Also, it is quite probable that what they have been negatively affected by is connected to spiritual issues within Catholicism. For example, if they find the Mass boring, it is not because God or the Bible is boring. Or their reluctance to go to a priest for confession is something we can discuss from the Word of God.

Keep in mind that these types of questions should come through a natural flow of a relationship over time. We have to serve people according to their own willingness to talk and know when to leave questions unasked or even unanswered.

Also, remember that while many people have opinions and enjoy sharing their perspective, the Catholic that you are speaking with may never have had to answer these questions before. Therefore, do not be surprised if they are unable to give you a clear answer. But knowing their background and their commitment to it will help you know what things to talk about and how ambitious you can be.

4. Investigate issues together

By asking questions, you will have the opportunity to look into issues that come up that are differences between your beliefs. Or, if no issues come up, then you will be able to discuss the differences between their views and their Catholic faith. So either way, the discussion is furthered.

These discussions will invariably lead to a discussion between the Bible and their understanding of Catholicism (or at least between their understanding of Catholicism and official statements by the Catholic Church).

The value in engaging the issues together cannot be underestimated. There is no value in creating an argument about who is correct about Catholic teaching and the Bible when the information is readily available. It is far better for them to learn from their own research than it is for them to just believe what you say. They will be more likely to be impacted by what they learn and the learning process will become less about you being right and more about them learning about God. There is nothing to fear from studying about Catholicism.

5. Get them into the Word of God

Catholics were discouraged by the Church from reading the Bible until Pope Pius XII in 1943 opened the door for this and the second Vatican Council reemphasized this in the 1960s. This gave them the opportunity to read the Bible for themselves. However, it is far from emphasized the way you will find with Protestant Churches.

Anyway to engage people with the Bible is a great help for them to understand the truth of God. Since Catholic people view the Scripture favorably, there is a good opportunity to serve them by pointing them to the Word.

While they may read on their own, reading Scripture in conjunction with them will help you to engage them about the teaching of the Scripture. This certainly does not have to be in areas of conflict between Catholic tradition and the Bible. But eventually, the teachings of Catholicism will become exposed through the Word of God. This is as true today as it was during the Reformation.

Show them how to read the Bible for themselves. This is untypical for the large majority of Catholics. Even if they have read the Scripture, it is often in some context that gives them direction.

Using their Catholic Bible or a plain Bible without notes is preferable since we are not looking to replace the teaching authority of the Catholic Church with any other authority other than the Bible itself. Learning for themselves may be a new experience but the joy that comes from a personal interaction with the Word of God is priceless. Your help in encouraging this and modeling this is valuable.

6. Be focused on what is denied, not just what is affirmed

Equal words do not necessarily mean equal meaning. Most faithful Catholics will use words and phrases that we use. Many will affirm many aspects of the gospel. This leads us to mistakenly believe that they have embraced true saving faith.

This is why the Reformers focused their attention on the doctrines that came to be known as “five solas,” or five Latin phrases that emerged from the reformation to delineate Protestantism from Catholicism:

- **Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone):** God’s word is our singular highest authority on earth. This is opposed to Catholicism that recognizes the oral tradition of the church through the “magisterium” or teaching authority of the church as equal to the Scripture.
- **Sola Fide (Faith alone):** We are saved through faith in Christ alone, apart from works. This is opposed to the Catholic teaching that good works are not just the evidence of salvation but that they are necessary to work with faith (Romans 3:28).
- **Sola Gracias (Grace alone):** Our salvation comes from God alone with no ability from ourselves to produce it. Catholicism opposes the belief that God’s grace alone delivers but rather that man simply needs God’s help (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- **Solus Christus (Christ alone):** We are saved through Christ alone apart from any intermediary. This opposed the authority of the Pope as the “vicar of Christ,” as well as the need for priests or saints or Mary to intercede on our behalf (1 Timothy 2:5).
- **Soil De Gloria (To God alone be the glory):** God is the only One worthy of our worship. This is opposed to the practice of veneration to saints and relics and to the adoration of the Eucharist (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11).

Simply put, it is not just what you affirm that matters, it is also what you deny. Official Catholic teaching has denied the core of the gospel, that, “by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

However, the gospel has been so muddled in Catholicism that many Catholics are unaware of this sharp differentiation on the doctrine of salvation. It is not uncommon that Catholic people will embrace the Savior through faith alone, not trusting in their works, and not viewing this as being opposed to Catholicism.

Once again, our goal is to help them to understand the Scripture and as they are learning and not opposing the truth of the Word they will progress toward a better and fuller understanding of the Catholic Church.

7. Be willing to attend a Mass with them

There is nothing wrong with attending a Catholic Mass. If we are inviting them to our church or our activities, it will seem reasonable for us to attend their church. This is important because we have nothing to fear by attending a church that holds to doctrine that we do not believe.

You do not have to believe Catholic doctrine to attend, you do not have to fear being converted to Catholicism, and you will communicate that our church does not determine spiritual truth. In addition, it will provide opportunities to discuss the Catholic faith even more with them in light of the Bible.

Catholic Masses are conveniently held on Saturday evenings so that it is possible to attend a Mass without interfering with any church commitments. And since attendance at one Catholic Church will be very similar to any other Catholic Church, your conversations will be relevant to Catholicism as a whole and not just the practices of one church.

If you attend a Mass, I would advise refraining from participating in the Eucharist. This is not because there is anything inherently sinful from eating the wafer, as it is only a form of bread. Rather because of the errant perspective held by the Catholic Church, that it is the actual body of Christ. Similar to Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 10:25-33, where our choice of eating is affected by the wrong beliefs of others about what they think we are doing. Better to refrain than to confuse people.

8. Minister to those beyond the individual Catholic

a. Other Catholics

Once a person has followed Christ in faith, they have a wealth of relationships with people who also have been lost and need salvation in Christ. Their Catholic family and friends are relationships that God can use to deliver them. We can be very helpful in advising this new believer in Christ how to tell others of their faith.

Some Catholics can become upset that forgiveness in Christ is now so clear to them and they were so lost for so long. Others may suppress the realization that Catholicism's teaching that opposes the gospel is something that cannot be worked with. We can help each of them to realize how to best minister to those who they long to join them in their newfound faith

b. Fellow believers

When a Catholic person comes to believe in Christ they can be a great encouragement to their fellow believers. We all can learn from one another's journey of faith. The positive affect that this has upon the church is significant.

c. Future generations

Catholicism has been built upon conquests and population growth. The countries that are the most Catholic are in Latin America and along with the Philippines, these lands were overtaken by the Spanish Empire beginning in the sixteenth century. As colonialism grew, so did Catholicism.

The Catholic Church is hardly shrinking. It has grown from 650 million in 1970 worldwide to 1.2 billion today. This is largely due to population growth. For example, the largely Catholic country of Mexico has seen its population since 1970 grow from 52 million to over 130 million today.

In the United States, Catholicism is in a slow decline. The reason that it is adding fewer people than it is losing is tied to the decreased birth rate. Since 1972, the fertility rate in the US has been below the replacement rate for a population. Without examining the reasons for this drop off since the baby boom between 1946-1964, we find that fewer children are being born into Catholicism than in the past.

This is significant for Catholicism because far more Catholics migrate to other religions (mostly Protestant) than join Catholicism. It's been estimated that only 8% of Catholics come to the church as adults and most of them do so only temporarily. Also, roughly 72% of those who convert to Catholicism do so through marriage to a Catholic, rather than for reasons of faith alone.

The small number of people who convert to Catholicism shows the importance of the Church's need for biological growth. This is helped greatly by their teaching on contraceptives and abortion.

In light of this, we should remember that the person we are ministering to represents more people than only themselves. We may never know in this life all of the ways the Lord will use the conversion of a person. But there will be a greater opportunity for their family to learn the gospel if they come to an understanding of it themselves.

Conclusion

Catholicism has a large influence on the American population with 45% of people having some degree of direct connectedness to the Catholic Church. In California, this is an even higher percentage and is growing. Followers of Christ are His ambassadors with God using us as His instruments to deliver people to faith (2 Corinthians 5:20). May we represent Him effectively so that He will be gracious enough to use us according to His will to accomplish all of His plan for each Catholic person we may know.