

# Ministering to Catholics

## Spirituality

Gerry Andersen

Valley Bible Church, Lancaster, California

[www.valleybible.net](http://www.valleybible.net)

What makes a person holy? What is it that causes some people to be thought of as a “saint” and who are the role models for spirituality? The lives of the heroes of the Catholic faith have brought dubious practices to the lives of many in the Church. Furthermore, the Church advances practices that create an impression of godliness. These practices involve what is supposed to be practiced and what is supposed to be abstained from in order to avail us of the blessings of God. The result is confusion regarding true spirituality that brings godliness.

### 1. Asceticism

One commonality about those considered spiritual in Catholicism is self-denial in the extreme. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily and follow him (Luke 9:23), but this is not the self-denial we find in the practice of asceticism.

Asceticism is the avoidance of pleasures and the practice of self-mortification for religious purposes. This austere self-denial is thought to bring a higher spiritual state.

Paul spoke directly against this practice in Colossians 2:20-23 when he wrote, *“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”*

Most of the saints who began religious movements within Catholicism practiced various forms of asceticism. Their example has allowed these practices to exist even to this day. While modern times have brought a much less severe approach to the Church, nevertheless it is the same mindset that undergirds this approach to spirituality.

With regard to the practice of self-depravation, there are two forms: total abstinence and fasting. Total abstinence is the permanent elimination of something entirely while fasting is the temporary elimination or reduction of something. There are monastic orders that practice total abstinence but the typical form of self-depravation is in regard to fasting. The history of the Church abounds with people who deprived themselves of food. Cases of extreme food depravation exist but a temporary fasting from certain food is the most common form of ascetic practice in Catholicism.

Another form of asceticism is self-flagellation. Self-flagellation is that practice of whipping oneself in remorse for sin. This was a remarkably widespread practice until about fifty years ago. Testimony of the practice of self-flagellation was provided by a nun who cared for Pope John Paul II (pontiff from 1978-2005) in order to support his candidacy for sainthood.

Catholic apologist Jimmy Akin explained the Pope's practice in the *National Catholic Register* by noting, "self-mortification teaches humility by making us recognize that there are things more important than our own pleasure. It teaches compassion by giving us a window into the sufferings of others—who don't have a choice in whether they're suffering. And it strengthens self-control. As well as (here's the big one I've saved for last) encouraging us to follow the example of Our Lord, who made the central act of the Christian religion one of self-denial and (in his case) *literal* mortification to bring salvation to all mankind."

Asked about the late pope's self-mortification, Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins said, "It does seem like something from another age, but it is not. It is an instrument of perfection, not just in religious life, but in human life. Whenever a person wants to achieve excellence, sacrifice is necessary....it requires denying oneself, making extraordinary efforts."

Another form of self-mortification was the use of hairshirts, or in more extreme cases, shirts made of fine wire. The purpose of hairshirts was to heighten the awareness of sin and to resist temptation through physical discomfort.

Hairshirts have been surprisingly common in Catholic history. Many, if not most of the saints of the middle ages wore them. It came to even be widespread among Catholics in general for centuries. Today, only the Carthusians and Carmelites wear them as a rule.

Other types of depravation are practiced by certain monastic orders, such as silence and solitude, acts of intentional self-humiliation, bindings to create discomfort, separation from family, etc. The purpose is a greater union with God, a penance for sin and to lessen temptation.

Pope John XXIII wrote in a 1962 papal encyclical, "It is right, too, to seek example and inspiration from the great saints of the Church. Pure as they were, they inflicted such mortifications upon themselves as to leave us almost aghast with admiration. And as we contemplate their saintly heroism, shall not we be moved by God's grace to impose on ourselves some voluntary sufferings and deprivations, we whose consciences are perhaps weighed down by so heavy a burden of guilt?"

These ascetic practices will likely not be found or perhaps even heard of by those Catholics that we may encounter. So why are they significant?

First, these practices show the shocking misunderstanding regarding how God works to sanctify us. Paul could not be clearer when he wrote that these practices are self-made religion, not from God, and that they are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Also, some common practices among Catholics, while not viewed as extreme, are rooted in the very same perspective that led to these more appalling acts of depravation. The Catholic Church in the United States is less likely to advocate ascetic practices but even in our country we see self-depravation taught. For example, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published the *Pastoral Statement of Penance and Abstinence* in 1966, which was modified in 1983. In this statement they instruct:

- Every person 14 years of age or older must abstain from meat (and items made with meat) on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all the Fridays of Lent.
- Every person between the age of 18 and 59 (beginning of 60th year) must fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.
- Every person 14 years of age or older must abstain from meat (and items made with meat) on all other Fridays of the year, unless he or she substitutes some other form of penance for abstinence.

This explains why fish is advertised at restaurants on Fridays. The practice of Lent in the United States is mixed. About 62% of Catholics who regularly attend Mass give up something or do something for Lent. Even among those Catholics who do not attend weekly there is a 33% rate of observance of Lent in some fashion. So the practice of giving something up is quite ingrained into the Catholic religious experience.

The establishment of special holy days for people to honor is opposed by the New Testament (Romans 14:5). Each person has the freedom to choose to treat certain days differently but the Church should not make these obligatory and judge parishioners accordingly. Worse still is the requirement to abstain from food too. No one should act as our judge regarding food or drink or a holy day (Colossians 2:16-17).

This practice of fasting is of no value for resisting temptation, brings nothing in regard to the forgiveness of sin through the Catholic concept of penance, and is a man-made religious exercise that has the appearance of wisdom but is destined to perish. Any form of self-abasement is of no value in resisting temptation.

The error of asceticism is not limited to the Catholic Church by any means. It is common to religion and finds its way into Bible believing evangelical churches. Fasting is often misunderstood and practiced as a means of improving the chance of God's favor. Spiritual "disciplines" to remove supposed worldly practices are advanced as a methodology for bringing holiness. It is the man-made religion that wants to work to achieve righteousness.

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:3, "*did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*" This is the core reason why acts of spiritual depravation are useless. We cannot abstain our way toward God's favor. The Catholic confusion over justification leads to confusion over sanctification by thinking that man's activity results in God's grace, which by definition is God's *unmerited* favor.

## 2. Sacramentals

The Catholic Church is filled to overflowing with various things that assist in worship of God, in prayer and to receive blessing from God. These things are primarily objects that are known as “sacramentals” in Catholicism. Sacramentals are not the actual sacraments themselves since they do not directly dispense the grace of the Holy Spirit the way a sacrament does but they “prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1670).

According to the Catechism of Christian Doctrine, which was the official Catholic instruction for children in the United States in the twentieth century, “Sacramentals are holy things or actions of which the Church makes use to obtain for us from God, through her intercession, spiritual and temporal favors....The sacramentals obtain favors from God through the prayers of the Church offered for those who make use of them, and through the devotion they inspire.”

So in addition to the seven specific sacraments in Catholicism that deliver grace, there are an ever-growing number of ways that a person can be prepared to receive God’s grace through sacramentals. While there are the many types of “sacramentals” in Catholicism, there are some that are popular enough to warrant special mention.

### a. Relics

A relic is an object associated with a saint. It could be a piece of the body of a saint, which is considered to be a first-class relic, or it could be a piece of a saint’s clothing or something used by a saint, which is considered to be a second-class relic, or it could be an object that has come in contact with a first-class relic, which is a third-class relic. First class relics are typically held in Catholic Churches and are enshrined in the altar (the sepulcher) or in a reliquary, a container for relics.

It is against Canon Law 1190 to sell a relic. But it is permissible to purchase a relic if the relic is being safeguarded. Yet, relics can be obtained from Church sources (the religious order of the saint, the shrine of the saint, and from even the Vatican). When obtained, a donation is expected to cover the cost of the metal container that contains the relic. The value of objects associated with people who have passed away has been valued ever since the Israelites took the bones of Joseph when they departed from Egypt. The question is not so much the value placed upon these objects but rather what the view is of God’s work through them.

The issue of the veneration of relics and the use of them as enhancements to prayer was an issue in the Reformation. The Council of Trent concluded in 1563 that the holy bodies of the holy martyrs are to be honored by the faithful, “The sacred bodies of the holy martyrs and of the other saints living with Christ, which have been living members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit and which are destined to be raised and glorified by Him unto life eternal, should also be venerated by the faithful. Through them, many benefits are granted to men by God.”

b. The Rosary

The term “rosary” is used to mean two different, but related things in Catholicism. There is the rosary, which is a string of beads and there is praying the Rosary. The rosary beads are used to pray a series of prayers known as the Rosary.

The practice of praying the Rosary involves the reciting of scripted prayers. These prayers are the Apostles’ Creed, Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, and Hail, Holy Queen. When the Rosary is completed, three of these prayers are prayed multiple times: the Our Father is prayed 6 times, the Glory Be is prayed 6 times and the Hail Mary is prayed 53 times. As we can see, the Rosary is quite focused upon Mary. Indeed, the Rosary itself is considered by Catholicism to have come to Dominic, the founder of the Dominican Order, directly from Mary herself.

The text of the Hail Mary is as follows:

*“Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”*

In spite of the large number of prayers, many Catholics pray the Rosary. About a quarter of faithful Catholics pray the Rosary at least once a month, with some praying it daily. Among Hispanics the rate rises to 43% who pray the Rosary at least monthly.

Nevertheless, most Catholics who attend mass do not pray the Rosary at all. One survey put the number at 65% who never pray the Rosary. The most common reason for not praying it is the repetition. There is no doubt by any measure that praying one prayer 53 times in one sitting is repetitious.

Jesus spoke against praying meaningless repetitions and said that God does not respond according to the number of words spoken (Matthew 6:7). While it is argued that the Rosary with its repeated prayers to Mary is never meaningless, saying anything over and over will result in diminishing returns of meaningfulness. In an upcoming class we will look more closely at the problems of the Catholic doctrines surrounding Mary.

c. Other common sacramentals

There are quite a number of other types of items that are used to assist Catholics in their devotion to God, including these briefly noted below:

**Holy Water:** Water that has been blessed by a priest and is provided for Catholics to dip their fingers in to make the sign of the cross as they enter Mass. It is viewed as a blessing and as a protection from evil spirits.

**Candles:** Prayer candles are lit as a symbol of prayer rising before God, Mary or a saint.

**Pilgrimages:** Spiritual journeys are made to certain holy places for the purpose of veneration, and seeking spiritual benefit. The Holy Land and the Vatican are the most common holy sites but there are many throughout the world, including a number of places connected to some supposed apparition of Mary.

**Devotional medals:** Many Catholics wear medals, most commonly of Jesus, Mary or of a patron saint. Also, pictures or statutes may be placed in one's home.

**Palms:** Palms that have been blessed by a priest are used on the Sunday before Easter and sometimes worn during the week leading up to Easter.

**Ashes:** Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent, forty-six days before Easter, occurring as early as February 4 and as late as March 10. Ashes that are made from the previous year's palms (from Palm Sunday) are blessed and applied to the forehead in a sign of penance.

**Scapular:** A piece of cloth that fits from shoulder to shoulder as a sign of devotion, particularly to Mary.

**The Crucifix:** A cross with Jesus on it, always placed in a Catholic church, sometimes worn or placed in a home.

Evangelical churches tend to avoid much of the imagery of Catholicism. There is much less liturgy in evangelical churches than even what is found in some mainline Protestant denominations. Protestants also have a long history of opposing Catholic objects that are considered to aid worship of God.

While Bible believing churches are not sacramental in their nature this does not mean that there are not close similarities to the Catholic view that certain practices bring with them a greater access to the grace of God. Sacramentals have effectively been replaced by methodologies among evangelicals. Objects may not be religiously valued but techniques are valued and these approaches are believed to be significant in achieving God's favor.

We can see with the Rosary that even good things like prayer can be turned to become an impediment to a meaningful relationship with God. Bad doctrine combined with repetitive religious scripts will stifle spirituality.

Among evangelical churches we see methods for church growth, raising children, marriage, evangelism, worship, giving, serving, and yes, praying. These methods are very often billed as the means to God's will and the way that God will bless our life in the way we desire. We have developed our own means to receive God's grace in ways that are extra-biblical and we find people just as attached to them as any Catholic person is to a particular sacramental. Even doing things that are commanded in the Bible can be surrounded by methods that rob them of spiritual vibrancy and degrade into mere religious obligation in hopes of gaining God's blessing.

### **3. Conclusion**

The belief that doing something is an essential part of receiving the grace of God is deeply entrenched in Catholicism. They not only teach that faith is joined with works as a means to justification and receiving the grace of God but that faith plus works is also necessary for sustaining the grace of God. The Catholic declaration that salvation is not by works only means that it is not by works alone apart from faith; it does not mean that works are not joined with faith. This is a corrupted understanding of the grace of God.

When we consider how a person is sanctified, that is how we spiritually grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, works continue to play an integral part of spirituality in Catholicism. You either do something, through the sacraments or the sacramentals, or you abstain from something. The view of spirituality is why Catholics can be very religious but without knowledge.

When we seek to minister to Catholics we must realize how deep rooted man's effort is in their concept of spirituality. The more they adhere to Catholicism, the more dramatic the understanding of salvation by grace alone through faith alone really is. It is therefore understandable why former Catholics who have come to faith in Christ are some of the most committed people to the message of God's grace.

We must not lapse back into a form of spirituality that looks to anything to deliver God's grace to us other than solely the Lord Himself. The means to the end cannot be mistaken for the end itself. The institutional Church is not the dispenser of God's grace, man-made blessings are worthless, and our acts of sacrifice are no substitute for obedience from the heart. The Lord has already blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), which moves us to walk in the good works that He has prepared beforehand (Ephesians 2:10). Perhaps some of these good works are our service of the gospel to those Catholics we may know.