

Ministering to Catholics

Dilemmas of Faith

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A dilemma is a difficult choice between two or more competing options, with undesirable outcomes. For Catholics, there are several significant challenges that when considered, lead to a serious questioning of the validity of the Catholic faith. However, due to the emotional and relational attachment to Catholicism, considering these issues is uncomfortable.

Another way of describing these dilemmas of faith is through the concept of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological term describing the state of holding inconsistent ideas, beliefs or values, particularly in how it relates to behavioral or attitude change. It is the recognition of the mental discomfort that a person feels when they embrace contradictory beliefs.

How does cognitive dissonance relate to Catholics? With Catholicism, it is the consideration that certain things are so unsatisfactory that a person is led to question the validity of their faith altogether. This explains in part the difficulty that the Catholic Church faces in retaining American parishioners. Those who remain tend to justify these issues so they seem normal or ignore them altogether.

Here are a few ways that Catholicism has brought a sense of misgiving with many of its adherents. Certainly only some of these issues will rise to a level of criticism for any particular individual but these are examples of what qualms exist within the masses of American Catholics.

A. Concern regarding the wealth of the Catholic Church

There is no doubt the Vatican, the over 220,000 parishes, and the other countless Catholic organizations own a vast amount of property. It is impossible to put a value on the priceless art and architecture just in the Vatican. The holdings of the Vatican bank alone are over \$8 billion. The ornate nature of much of the property makes the Church appear lavish. Indeed, issues with church fundraising and expenditures were seminal issues in the development of the Reformation.

One of the issues Pope Francis addressed when he ascended to the papacy in 2013 was to bring reform to the financial incompetency and even corruption within the Vatican and dioceses. These financial issues have brought attention to the tension between the Church wealth and its stated mission to the poor. It is not uncommon for Catholics to sense an awareness of the divide between the Church wealth and the Church mission.

Fortunately, Jesus speaks often about money. We cannot serve God and money. The religious leaders of His day devoured widow's houses. There is much to discuss financially regarding the practices of religious leaders.

However, the sense of people feeling like they are giving money to those who are spending it on their own interests is not unique to Catholicism. Some Protestant entities are guilty of lavish spending and using church money for personal gain. Such behaviors bring into question whether church leaders are truly representing the Lord faithfully.

Yet any church that represents themselves as God's teaching authority should have that claim questioned when there are institutional financial malfeasance.

B. Awareness of conflicting beliefs of Catholic parishioners

As we noted in our past class, the overwhelming majority of Catholics disagree with aspects of official Catholic teaching. They recognize the Church teaching but do not follow it completely.

For evangelical churches that teach that the Bible is the final authority for spiritual truth, disagreeing with the teaching of a local church is not uncommon or even necessarily significant. In a way, disagreement is supported by the teaching of a commitment to the Scripture, which allows for a person to reach their own understanding of the Bible. But it is wholly different to disagree with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which considers its official teaching as equally authoritative as Scripture itself.

In other words, any disagreement with Catholic doctrine is, according to Catholic teaching, to disagree with the teaching of God. It may seem like a minor disagreement, but it is fundamentally a departure from what Catholicism considers to carry the authority of God.

Catholics are aware that the majority of their fellow parishioners do not fall in line with the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. This allows more people to settle into holding to their own beliefs and leaves them seeing the teaching authority of the Church as something that the Church does not really expect to be followed. The net effect is that by so many rejecting this core tenet of Catholicism, the Church becomes reduced to just another denomination, even though that's not how it presents itself.

C. Awareness of conflicting beliefs of Catholic leaders

When Catholic teaching comes from the "magisterium," or the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops, it is expected that the church leaders will fall in line. Yet frequently we learn of priests (and at times even bishops) who depart from this teaching authority. This can range from a disagreement over a specific teaching to departing from core doctrine of Christianity altogether.

When departure from Catholic teaching occurs with priests, it undermines this claim of authority by the church. The result is the realization that a person can depart from the official teaching with impunity, except in a few more extreme cases. If the priest who is representing the authority of the church can depart from this authority, the sense of the meaningfulness of the teaching authority of the church is weakened.

James P. McFadden, president of the National Committee of Catholic Laymen, said to the New York Times in 1986 that one of the church's gravest problems is that dissidents refuse to leave. "You don't need to be Catholic to be Catholic anymore. If you dissent, you don't get out. That's the problem. Martin Luther looks like a prince compared to these people because he knew when it was time to go."

The natural end of this allowance for departure on the part of the Catholic Church is for Catholics to be at peace with disagreeing. However, there is a difference between disagreeing about the meaning of a passage of Scripture but agreeing that the Scripture is authoritative, and agreeing with the meaning of a teaching but disagreeing that the teaching is authoritative. To knowingly disagree with the Church teaching while holding to the Church as authoritative leads to cognitive dissonance.

D. Awareness of the behavior of Catholic leaders

Evaluating a person's behavior is a biblical practice. Jesus condemned the Pharisees in part on the basis of their hypocritical actions (Matthew 23:2). 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 records moral qualifications for church leaders. People in general are able to evaluate actions that do not support the words, particularly among religious leaders. This can be as simple as observing the net worth of the Catholic Church, learning that many bishops live in luxurious residences with servants or the actions of their local priest. But the most public blight on Catholic leaders in our generation has been the sexual abuse scandals.

The sexual abuse scandals by priests in Catholicism that have come to light since the late 1980s have had a significant impact on the image of the Church. These scandals are far more than "some people did bad things." It is the volume of incidents, who perpetrated them, and what the response of the church has been.

The sheer volume of the child sex abuse incidents among Roman Catholic priests is impossible to measure due to the large number of priests in third world countries, where criminal reporting and investigation are conducted at far lower rates. However, we can gain a glimpse of the magnitude of this problem by looking at more advanced countries.

In 2017, the Australian Royal Commission estimated that 7% of Catholic priests in Australia have been accused of abusing children between 1950 and 2009, with 4,444 incidents reported. Similarly, a John Jay report in 2004 studied 10,667 accusations of child sex abuse in the United States by 4,392 priests between 1950 and 2002. Of those they were able to investigate, 80% were substantiated with less than 2% considered to be a false accusation.

Investigators have been highly critical of the cooperation they have received. Gail Furness, the senior counsel involved in the Australian Royal Commission, noted that “Children were ignored or, worse, punished. Allegations were not investigated. Priests and religious [figures] were moved. The parishes or communities to which they were moved knew nothing of their past. Documents were not kept or they were destroyed. Secrecy prevailed, as did cover-ups.”

These shocking revelations have shaken the confidence of many Catholics in the leadership of the church. 1 John 4:20 says, “If someone hates his brother, he is a liar, for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” It is evident that many thousands of Catholic priests have committed horrific acts of abuse, with the Catholic Church hierarchy playing the part of an active enabler in so many cases when knowledge of abuse was suspected.

Because Catholicism claims to be the unique authority for representing God without biblical support, we ought to examine the Catholic Church (Matthew 7:16-20). The conduct of the Church as revelations of widespread criminal abuse by priests became known should cause people to seriously question why their authority can be trusted on spiritual matters.

Shockingly bad behavior by Roman Catholic leaders is not new. The Church’s pursuit of heretics over many centuries through the Inquisition is the prime example of Church crimes against humanity. Even Catholic apologists acknowledge that thousands of people were killed and countless more tortured by the Church during this era. Other historical estimates put the number of people affected by the various Inquisitions in different regions into the millions.

The Inquisition was not just a few priests run amok—it was church-sponsored brutality over centuries. One targeted group by the Roman Inquisition were those seeking to preach the gospel of salvation through faith alone apart from works. Under the premise of being God’s sole authority for ecclesiastical teaching, the Roman Catholic Church institutionally persecuted those preaching the true gospel, even unto death.

E. The awareness of fictitious saints

Pope Paul VI issued a letter on February 14, 1969 that made changes to the Catholic liturgical calendar. Included in these changes were the elimination of feast days for certain saints that, based upon historical studies, the Church could not confidently claim to have ever existed. The most famous of these was Saint Christopher, who was a popular patron saint of travelers.

While there was some emotional reaction from this, the issue of “decanonization” was obviously controversial. How can a person go from being a saint to not being a saint? Was there a mistake made by the infallible teaching authority of the church?

There is a strong resistance among Catholic apologists to admit that a mistake was made regarding sainthood and attempts to explain the sainthood of people who seem to never have existed can be summarized as follows:

One approach has been to continue to advocate the possibility of their existence. Just because there is no evidence that a person ever lived does not mean they didn't live. However, if you cannot show that a person lived, you also cannot speak to the evidences that Catholicism points to for sainthood, such as miraculous events associated with them or a virtuous life. This is not much of a defense.

With many of these, they became referred to as a saint before 1200 AD when the Pope, through his agencies, approved of the canonization of a saint. So canonization supposedly never officially took place for many of those removed from the list of feast for saints. Of course most of the well-known Catholic saints were referred to as such before 1200 AD so this appears to be revisionist history regarding such declarations.

Another approach is to claim that the saint was just locally recognized as a saint, which is also difficult to prove even if it has any relevancy.

The bottom line is that for centuries the masses were holding feast days for people where there is no historical evidence that they ever existed. If we cannot trust the Church in earthly matters that can be independently evaluated based on historical evidence, how are we supposed to trust the Church in heavenly matters that cannot be evaluated in any sense, such as whether a person is in heaven.

F. The understanding of the Eucharist

The Eucharist is the Catholic term for the belief that when a priest consecrates the bread and wine they change to become the actual body and blood of Christ, ceasing to be bread and wine any longer. This Catholic doctrine is known as transubstantiation. This belief has led to a plethora of instructions regarding the proper care and disposal of what is considered to be Christ Himself. Note that the term "Eucharist" is also used by other traditional denominations but in contrast to Catholic theology, they do not believe in the change of the elements.

How Catholicism explains the problem that the bread and wine do not look in anyway like they have really changed is to attempt to distinguish between what it appears to be, called the "accidents" and what it really is, called the "substance." This explains why there is no scientific test that can validate the change of the elements.

This belief rests solely on one's belief in spite of there being no physical evidence for this change. Furthermore, it is inconsistent with the biblical passages used to support the doctrine for when Jesus declared "this is My body" (Luke 22:19) no disciple would have taken the word literally since He still lived in His earthly body when He spoke.

As incredulous as this Catholic doctrine sounds, it is important to note that according to a survey in 2010 by the Pew Research Center, 45% of Catholics are unaware of the Catholic Church teaching on the Eucharist being the actual body of Christ. A later survey referenced by USCatholic.org put that percentage at 50%. Therefore, when people are unaware of the Catholic teaching, they do not suffer the cognitive dissonance of believing what appears to be untrue.

G. The confusion of the gospel

Catholicism teaches God's grace, the sinfulness of man, Christ's death for sin, God's forgiveness, faith in Christ for salvation, and specifically denies salvation is by man's works. Catholicism also teaches doctrines of purgatory, confession, and penance and has specifically denied that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The result of this is confusion regarding the gospel among Catholics.

The lack of clarity regarding the role of Christ's death to deliver us from sin through faith in Him has left Catholics without a clear understanding of salvation. There is no security in the Catholic faith because only saints go directly to heaven. This unsettled state comes from wrong teaching on justification and forgiveness, confession and the priesthood, and the failure to teach the finished work of Christ's death and resurrection in the liturgy.

H. The form of godliness without the power

Directly to the lack of clarity regarding the gospel is the overt displays of religion that lead to an expectation of spirituality. In a real sense, all the trappings of religious formality results in raised expectations but without the reality. When this sense of connection with God is unmet, parishioners are faced with a dilemma: to search for spirituality somewhere else or persevere within the church.

While we have noted that roughly a third of those who grow up Catholic will drift away for various reasons, those who remain are left to deal with the void of a personal relationship with God in some fashion. Many may not have a desire to pursue the Lord and will be content to remain in a high religious environment that is devoid of spiritual substance. But there are countless others who simply are unaware of the meaningfulness of Jesus Christ and the new life He offers through faith alone in Christ alone. They have been depending to some degree on their human effort in their spiritual journey and long for the true forgiveness that Christ delivers to those who call on Him.

Conclusion

As the education level of Catholics has risen, the degree of inquisitiveness has risen also. Polls show a greater independence of thought among Catholics than ever before. No longer do most Catholics accept the teaching of Catholicism without question.

This provides a great opportunity to discuss the Bible objectively, apart from the lens of Catholic teaching. Catholic people are more willing than ever to engage the Scripture for themselves with an ability to understand it. We have no need to be concerned that they will have a similar experience of wondering how the things they read fit with their sensibilities. If they have a true spiritual interest, they will not find it empty of meaning.

May we look to engage the wonderments that so many Catholics have regarding their faith with the truth of the Scripture. Our encouragement to read it with understanding rather than ritualism may lead some to connect the many pieces of information that have been exposed go together in a way that will transforme their lives through the power of the gospel.