

Ministering to Catholics

The Mass

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The most obvious difference on the surface between Catholics and our church is the nature of the worship service. The Catholic service is known as the Mass, which comes from the Latin word *missa* from which we get the English word “dismissal.” It therefore carries the connotation of moving out. Indeed, the Mass was conducted only in Latin worldwide until November 29, 1964 when the English Mass was permitted in the United States.

This class will focus on how the Mass affects Catholics rather than an explanation of what Catholicism believes to happen at the Mass. We will look at how people whose understanding of Christianity has been shaped by the Mass will respond as they encounter our church and how to serve them as they interact with the differences.

1. The importance of the Catholic Mass

For Catholics, Sundays (along with other select holy days) are a day of holy obligation. To not attend a Catholic Mass on a Sunday is sin. John Paul II in his *Catechism of the Catholic Church* wrote, “The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obligated to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, or the care of infants). Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.”

So attending Mass each Sunday is far more than a good thing to do for Catholics, it is mandatory apart from a serious reason. This explains why the Mass is the central religious experience for Catholics. The uniformity of the Mass across Catholic dioceses means that each Catholic will have a very similar religious experience.

Note that Catholics are not forbidden to attend a Protestant service on Sunday. They are only obligated to attend Mass. Attending our church on a Sunday does not substitute for attending Mass in the eyes of the Catholic Church since only a priest can offer the Eucharist.

Many Catholics are either less circumspect about attendance at Mass or unaware. They will view attendance at our church as sufficient. But if they believe that they are obligated to also attend Mass, there are typically many options. At the nearest Catholic church to us, there are eight different service times that will count (including a Saturday evening “vigil” Mass). This gives Catholics an opportunity to attend our church on Sunday morning and still be able to fulfill their obligation.

2. The formality of a Catholic church

When a person attends a Mass, there are a few things that stand out. One of the more obvious is the formality of the Mass. For example, there are different types of clothing, known as vestments, that a priest wears, including a robe, stole, and at times a hat.

Likewise, the building is typically adorned with stained glass, statues, mosaics and tapestries, depicting Jesus, Mary or on occasion, saints. Often the layout of the church is in a cruciform style, forming the shape of a cross. There is also normally a foyer (narthex) that serves not for mingling but for separating the Mass from the outside world.

Inside the church building are holy water, pews, candles, and an altar. There is always a center aisle where the procession to the altar occurs. The focal point of the church is the altar, where the priest consecrates that Mass. The pulpit, where the reading of the Scripture and the teaching occurs, is always to the side, not the center.

What does the formality of a Catholic church bring? The sense that you are in a special place that is religiously sacred.

Contrast this to our church, with a stage of musical instruments, plants, and the pulpit at the center. The informal nature of our church, without any religious artifacts, is intended to convey that it is only an auditorium, not a spiritual sanctuary. The church building is not sacred, no special grace occurs in it, and God is not present in a different sense inside it.

Simply put, a church building without a sacred look is consistent with the New Testament, where there were no sacred buildings. To give an impression that God is somehow present in a special way inside our church building would be to miscommunicate about God. We ought to avoid any spiritual dressing up of ourselves, our building or our property in order to not lead people to a wrong understanding about who God is or where God is.

How does this affect our ministry to Catholics? First of all, generally speaking, the lack of things is less significant than the inclusion of things for people that they are unaccustomed to. There are Catholic churches that are less formal (often due to renting facilities prior to building). More often, they will accept that our church is just different than they are used to but won't feel uncomfortable because it looks like a normal building.

There may be an opportunity to talk about the doctrinal basis of why we do not have statues and vestments. Our view of the priesthood of the believer (1 Peter 2:9) has led us to avoid religious attire for pastors. Protestant churches have usually avoided statues of Jesus based upon the commandment to avoid the idolatry of worshipping an image of God. In particular, we have no appetite for making the things of this world appear holy or sacred. We worship the One who is unseen, apart from these aids to worship that are man-made (cf. Psalm 135:15-18).

3. The interaction at a Catholic church

Generally speaking, the way Catholics interact with one another before and after the Mass is not much more than what may happen as people enter a movie theater or a play. This is particularly true in cities and suburbs.

At the latter part of the Mass is a time for the “sign of peace,” or the liturgical moment for Catholics to express their unity and love for each other. Each Mass the priest will say “The peace of the Lord be with you always” and the congregation replies, in unison, “and also with you.” The priest will then say, “Let us offer each other the sign of peace” whereby the congregation will shake the hand of those around them with the words “peace be with you.”

This formula that is repeated every Mass typifies that type of interaction most Catholics experience in their faith. The brief and scripted greeting corresponds to the general sense of the duty of fulfilling obligation that surrounds Catholicism. Vibrant fellowship is conspicuously absent.

As Catholics come to many evangelical churches they experience something very different. Many will say how welcome they felt. This social interaction that exists within churches such as ours is a great blessing to those who have come from something quite different. In the words of Jesus, “By this will all men know that you are My disciples, that you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

While certainly being friendly is not always the equivalent of love and many loving people are not very outgoing, there is the appearance of love in the welcoming attitude that exists within many evangelical churches. This is one thing the Lord uses to draw people to Himself.

4. The program of a Mass

The program, or order of events is found in a book known as a “missal.” The missal can be found in the pews of each Catholic church and it contains all of the instructions and texts relevant to each day of the year. There are both missals for the daily Mass and for the Sunday Mass. You simply turn to the page for that day and follow along.

This will include the introductory order of verbal responses that are to be said (or in some cases, sung) after the priest says words also in the missal text. These words and responses are a part of every Mass.

Following the introductory part of the Mass there is the “liturgy of the word” which involves an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading and a reading from one of the Gospels. After these short readings will be a “homily” which is the Catholic version of a sermon.

After the liturgy of the word comes the “liturgy of the Eucharist.” This is the focal point of the Mass in communion. The kneeling benches on the back of the pews will be used during this part of the Mass. There continues to be scripted words said by the priest and the congregation in response or at times, in unison. At the beginning of this section will be the offering of monetary gifts that are collected at the pews.

After communion is the final portion called the “concluding rites.” The priest typically places brief announcements here when deemed necessary followed by a blessing and dismissal with a recessional.

The detailed, programmed structure of the Mass is in stark contrast to what a Catholic will find at our church. So much of what they are used to (congregational responses, kneeling, pre-packaged words, etc.) will be absent. They may even be hesitant to attend our church because of this lack of familiarity and a fear that we have a liturgy that will expose them as being unfamiliar and new.

Generally speaking, this lack of formality in our culture is viewed positively. It gives the impression of genuineness. This is one reason why inviting a Catholic to our church service can be so helpful in ministering to them.

5. Music in the Mass

While the Catholic Mass contains essential liturgical portions, it is not limited to only those prescribed parts of the service. Also, most Catholic parishes have music, typically adult choirs. Some will offer a Mass without music for those who prefer this.

It has become common since Vatican II to have parts of the congregational response or some of the prayers sung by the congregation, rather than spoken.

As with Protestant churches, the Catholic Church has undergone an evolution in the realm of music since the Second Vatican Council allowed contemporary music in the 1960s. Masses with folk guitars became popular but they did encounter a resistance to progressive music. Some Masses even include electric guitars and drums, but this is less common. At times, bishops have sought to regulate music at Mass in recent times but there is no consensus on this.

One generalization that is observable among Catholics is the lack of satisfaction regarding music within the Mass. One 2014 poll among Catholics showed only 13% rate the music at their Mass as any better than “pretty decent.” Rarely do you ever hear of Catholics lauding the music at the Mass.

Music is important to people and Catholics are no different. In the same 2014 survey, 80% felt that music was “very important” to their experience at Mass. This is one opportunity that our church has to minister to many Catholics who are seeking for something more in their worship experience.

6. The homily

The time of teaching in the Mass, known as the homily, are the words of the priest to instruct the church. This is a short sermon. In 2010, the Vatican, through the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, encouraged the priest to seek to keep their homilies to less than eight minutes. This was described as the average adult attention span. This produces simple devotional talks instead of the exposition of the Scripture.

These short sermons are up to the parish priest to teach. There is a lot of help that exists for them and therefore you will find many priests teaching things that do not originate with them. They may also repeat homilies based upon the season.

Since there is freedom to a degree, some priests are able to teach biblical truth and even parts of the gospel message. But the vast majority of homilies in our country are on topics of the season, topics of current events, topics of personal struggles or some aspect of Catholic faith. There is no one carrying a Bible to a Catholic Mass.

Masses held during the week typically do not have a homily or if they do it is very short. The Masses held during the week are about half the duration of a typical 50-60 minute Sunday Mass. They are primarily intended for the sacrament of the Eucharist, not for the teaching of the church.

Contrast this instruction to the opportunities to learn at churches like ours. Because we spend so much time and provide so many opportunities to learn the Bible, people implicitly understand that the Bible is important and ought to be known by them. This occurs by the expositional nature of our sermons as people become accustomed to reading the Bible in context and understanding its meaning.

The instruction we provide results in those who regularly attend becoming far more knowledgeable about the Scripture. Catholics have long recognized this and why those defending Catholicism avoid the subject of biblical instruction and emphasize the value of the sacraments for communion with God.

When Catholics attend a Bible teaching church and begin to learn for themselves it often triggers a sense of need within them. They will realize what they have been missing and have a hunger to learn more. They find that the Bible is understandable and a service that is focused on the Word of God over religious practices is often viewed as so much more meaningful.

There is no substitute for God using the Scripture to teach people who He is. This must be our focal point because more than any other difference that we have with Catholic churches, this emphasis on God's Word is the one thing that will truly give them the truth that will set them free (John 8:31-32). There is great joy that comes from helping Catholic people to be freed from the religious system of obligation that has ensnared them.

7. Children in the Mass

Children are a part of the Catholic Mass. John Paul II quoted the Second Vatican Council in his Catechism, “Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people,” have a right and an obligation by reason of their Baptism.”

This view has led most Catholic churches to encourage children to participate in the Mass. Some will have a “children’s Mass” or a “family Mass” or will have the children leave and return during the Mass. Typically, there is no special children’s ministry during the Mass since children are expected to attend Mass, particularly those who are in grade school and older who are eligible to participate in the Eucharist.

The result of this practice is there is a woefully underdeveloped children’s ministry in the Catholic Church. Add to this formalism that is boring to adults, much less kids, and we find more families longing for religious instruction for their children.

Our church’s vibrant children’s ministry is a wonderful opportunity to expose Catholic families to the joy of the Christian faith. The Lord may use this opportunity for them to see their children learning about Jesus and help them to understand the gospel and embrace salvation by faith alone.

8. Conclusion

When Catholics attend churches like ours there is a sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty. We should seek to be sensitive to this emotional state. For example, inviting them to events where they can get to know people in our church can be helpful. If they are from a serious Catholic background they may feel uncomfortable with our communion since Catholics are not supposed to take part in a communion that is not the Eucharist.

Also, they may feel like they are in some sense betraying their religious heritage and we can downplay the significance of a person’s physical presence in our church building. We are more concerned with their spiritual relationship with the Lord. Finally, we can help prepare them for their experience by causally mentioning what our worship service or event is like. This could bridge the degree of unfamiliarity.

The experience with the people of God is a wonderful means to help Catholics see the difference between the religion of Christianity and what a true relationship with Jesus is all about. Please consider ways that you can serve those you know faithfully and effectively.