

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **Overview**

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We cannot discuss how to spiritually help Catholics apart from understanding the Catholic Church. While this class is focused on serving Catholic people more than a study of the Catholic faith, the reality is that Catholics of all types are affected in their thinking by their experience with Catholicism. This experience has come down from the past and has surrounded Catholics with many extra-biblical practices and have formed and shaped their religious experience. Most of these practices have led to more confusion than help in understanding the Lord as He has revealed Himself in the Scripture. Observing how Catholics have been affected by these practices and the actions of their leaders will help us communicate God's truth more clearly.

### **1. A brief survey of the important eras in Roman Catholic history**

It is impossible to understand the Catholic Church apart from history. The Catholic Church has come through a two thousand year journey. Catholicism at its core views itself as ultimately the only historically based Christian faith. The Catholic apologists seek for Protestants of all types to "return" to the church because they are the singular legitimate source of all churches and sometimes refer to Catholicism as the "mother of all churches."

#### **A. The era of the united church (up to 1054 AD)**

The Roman Catholic Church technically became a distinct entity after the Great Schism of 1054 where the Eastern Church and the Western Church divided over cultural, political, linguistic, and theological differences. However, many of the foundational distinctives of modern Catholicism had been established, such as the veneration of Mary (431 AD), the adoption of the title of "Pope" by Gregory I (529 AD) and the doctrine of Purgatory (593 AD).

Before 1054, Rome was the leading church within Christendom but not the singular dominant power that it became after the Schism.

#### **B. The era of ecclesiastical power (1054-1517 AD)**

The Great Schism gave the Roman church rise to rival the Holy Roman Emperor for power over much of Western Europe. Much of the beliefs that the Protestant reformers rejected were installed during this era, particularly at the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 when the doctrines of transubstantiation and confession of sins to a priest were established.

### **C. The era of counter-reformation (1517-1964)**

The Catholic response to the reformers was fierce opposition. The Council of Trent convened between 1545 and 1563 to condemn the reformation in the strongest terms. The gospel of salvation through faith in Christ alone apart from works was condemned. The authority of the church was elevated to being equal to the Scripture, which had several books added to it.

### **D. The era of ecumenism (1964-Present)**

The council of Vatican II reassessed the relationship between Catholicism and other faiths from 1962 to 1965. The results of this council was that Mass was no longer only conducted in Latin and that Protestants and Eastern Orthodox churches were considered “separated brethren.” This new openness gave rise to ecumenical associations between Catholics and Protestants that continues until today.

These eras of Catholic Church history helps to explain the present situation where there is a willingness to join with Protestants in spite of beliefs and practices that have been opposed to them (at times, violently). From history of the Catholic Church we can also see the gradual development of Catholic doctrine over the centuries. This process of development will help us to to understand Catholic teaching in the present.

## **2. How Catholicism forms a person’s thinking**

Catholics have not learned their beliefs in the same way that we learn at our church. Catholic learning happens in ways that are less from propositional truth statements derived from an exegetical analysis of the Bible. Below are ways that Catholics learn their faith.

### **A. Through symbolism**

Symbolism is plentiful in a Catholic church. It is effective and it produces a comfort level that attaches people who have grown up in it to the church. It is transferable to every Catholic Church as well.

#### The Crucifix

The most common symbolism of the Catholic Church is the crucifix, which is the symbol of the cross with Jesus on it. This difference from the Protestant cross without Jesus depicts the emphasis between Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholicism places more emphasis on the suffering and death of Jesus, while Protestantism places more emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus. John Calvin strongly opposed the use of the crucifix and thus it fell out of usage throughout the Protestant movement.

## Holy water

“Holy water” is water that has been blessed by a member of the clergy. It is used as a reminder of baptism as Catholics enter the church and dip their fingers into it and then make the sign of the cross. It also is poured on infants in the Catholic sacrament of baptism and sprinkled on people on other occasions. This not only has no precedent in the New Testament but it leads people to wrongly believe that objects have special spiritual power or confer blessing. It also advances the unbiblical idea of the power of the clergy.

## Adornment

Catholic churches are typically ornate. Stained glass, statues, architecture, etc. make for a distinct impression. This serves to communicate the value of the building and leads people to consider church to be the place, rather than its biblical meaning of the believers in Christ.

Catholic clergy are also adorned with special robes that separate them out from the common person. They are given the title of “father” and are behind an altar. This separation between the church leaders and the congregation brings an unbiblical clergy-laity distinction. We can find this dichotomy even in evangelical churches, which may have eliminated certain titles and special attire but provide for a special deference to the “clergy” over the “lay people.” All of this is foreign to the New Testament.

We nevertheless find evangelicals willing to accept other special designations, such as “pastor.” We find preachers advocating for certain adornment that is allegedly more sanctified, such as the wearing of suits and ties. This has similarities to Catholicism, and results in unbiblical concepts being furthered.

## **B. Through personal religious gestures**

### The sign of the cross

The sign of the cross is the most common Catholic gesture, where a person touches his forehead, then middle lower chest, then the left shoulder, followed by the right shoulder, all using the right hand. This is often done along with the words “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (or Spirit)” with each of the four touches occurring on the words “Father,” “Son,” “Holy,” and “Ghost.”

This is done when beginning a prayer and always done when ending a prayer. It is done when entering Mass, in regard to the Eucharist, and at many other moments. It is used in many ways, from a ritual part of prayer, to a protection from the evil one, to receive grace from God in a sacrament, at moments of the Mass, to acknowledge respect for a church or clergy, to ask for God’s support and power, etc.

Since the sign of the cross is associated with Catholicism (though practiced also by many Anglicans and some Lutherans), Evangelicals refrain from this practice. As a matter of practice however, it is one of the least harmful rituals of Catholicism.

### Genuflection

Genuflection is the practice of bending one knee as a sign of deep honor and adoration, specifically toward the Eucharist. When a Catholic enters or leaves the Mass, or when they pass in front of the “Blessed Sacrament” (the Eucharist), it is proper to genuflect.

This is more significant than the modern “taking a knee” or “Tebowing” for it is part of the adoration of the supposed literal body of Christ Himself. The practice of kneeling is much more common in Catholic churches than in evangelical churches, where Catholic pews normally include a kneeling bench. Catholics kneel before and during the Mass, and always at the moment of the consecration of the Eucharist, where they believe the elements become the body and blood of Christ.

While Catholic body movements are seen by evangelicals in a negative light, many of them are comfortable with alternative body movements, such as the raising of hands in song. Thus the particular gestures that a person becomes attached to are essentially developed by their upbringing or initiation into the church.

### **C. Through liturgy**

The term “liturgy” refers to the function of public worship, including customs and traditions. Beyond that external appearance of the setting of the Catholic Church, the liturgy is the next layer of Catholicism that is encountered by attenders.

The liturgical calendar has special holy days of observation, where church attendance is required in addition to Sundays. Each day of the entire year is designated for a special memorial in some fashion.

There are several seasons in the liturgical year:

- Lent: a forty day period beginning with Ash Wednesday and concluding with Holy Thursday.
- Triduum: Three days that include Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday
- Easter
- Advent: A period including the four Sundays before Christmas.
- Christmas

The liturgy for each Catholic mass is very predictable. Faithful Catholics know what will come next. They know when to stand, when to sit and when to kneel. They know what to say and when to say it. The best way to describe the Catholic Mass is “ritualistic.”

The official liturgy instructs priests on what to say and when to say it, both what to do and how to do it. Their message is provided for them and the Church even writes the prayers to be recited by the priest during the Mass. The Catholic experience throughout the United States each week will be remarkably the same.

This routine will over time seem rather boring. Most Catholics participate in the liturgy without much thinking or questioning. But yet the sheer repetition still communicates nevertheless. Catholics will gain a strong sense of the loftiness of God along with (to some degree) their own sinfulness.

This repetitive experience creates a perspective that the priest is the mediator between God and man and that the Church is the dispenser of grace. This can be seen in the nature of prayer, where Catholics will commonly “say their prayers” rather than speak to God in prayer. The Church provides written prayers for a wide variety of occasions, events and purposes. A personal relationship with God is far from emphasized.

The nature of the Mass is solemn and does not lend toward relational interaction. The verbal “peace be with you” that is exchanged at each Mass functions as a perfunctory “hello” with no expectation of going beyond that. Just as the relationship with God is viewed as impersonal, so is the relationship between Catholics, generally speaking.

The impersonal aspect of Catholicism stands in contrast to many evangelical churches. While the individual Catholic can be faulted for not opting to be more outgoing, there is no doubt that the solemn nature of the liturgy dampens personal interaction. Likewise, God is presented as distant to Catholics.

Every church, including evangelical churches have some degree of liturgy, however minimal. Having an order for a worship service is essential to functioning as a church. But the problems occur when the practice of the liturgy replaces the meaning of the practice. This is a matter of human nature, where repetitive acts become common and even mundane, becoming devoid of meaning.

While Catholicism is able to explain each aspect of the Mass and its significance, the result of the liturgy is not clarity but confusion. The mind is not stimulated by the repetition, which explains why Jesus taught to not use meaningless repetition (Matthew 6:7). But the emotional comfort with the practice of repetitive religion brings the attachment of familiarity, which has served to keep people attached to Catholicism.

The lesson for evangelicals is to see that increased liturgy has a detrimental effect on understanding over time. An increase of liturgy brings more formality, which leads to a greater sense of distance from God and one another. Closeness of relationship (with God and with our fellow believers) is a critical part of spiritual learning and growth. This explains why the coming of the Holy Spirit ended the formalism of the Old Testament priestly system.

There is a reason why generally speaking, the more liturgical the church is, the less biblically informed the members are. On occasion we find influential evangelical ministers advocating for a greater degree of liturgical formalism. Just because we are able to add more invocations, readings, recited prayers, a call to worship, creedal statements and a benediction, does not mean this will serve the church. Rather, these patterns of expression serve to exalt the form of the service over the function and in the long run they render the worship service experience with an atmosphere of religion where the meaning becomes lost.

#### **D. Through the Catechism**

In response to the Protestant Reformation, Catholicism implemented a counter-reformation designed to distinguish Catholicism from the reformers. This included the founding of the Jesuits and the convening of the Council of Trent, where essential tenets of the gospel were declared “anathema,” or formally cursed. Another aspect was the establishment of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine in 1562 AD, known as CCD.

CCD is the religious instruction designed primarily for children and is often referred to simply as “catechism.” It is considered of vital importance by the Church, particularly for children who do not attend Catholic schools. It is intended to keep children committed to the Catholic faith by preparing them for the sacraments of Penance, Holy Communion, and Confirmation.

While it may appear similar to children’s Sunday School in Protestant churches, it is ineffective at communicating spiritual truth to the common child. The proof of this lies in the communication of spiritual truth to the instructors.

In 1992, Pope John Paul II produced a *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, selling over eight million copies worldwide and claiming to be “the sure and authentic reference for teaching Catholic doctrine.” All one needs to do is to sit down and read it to realize the challenge the Church has in imparting its doctrine to the average American reader. If the adults are challenged to understand the teachings, then how much more so will the following generation struggle in their understanding?

These lessons, like the rest of the Catholic faith, are essentially driven out of obligation. It is something you participate in because it is expected. The eagerness to learn is typically absent and if it were present, effectiveness of the instruction does not bring clarity. The proof of this lack of eagerness is the non-participation of adults that continue in the Catholic education into adulthood.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The result of centuries of extra-biblical and anti-biblical teaching by the Roman Catholic Church has left our fellow citizens like sheep without a shepherd. The clarity of the Scripture, along with the respect that Catholics have for God’s Word, gives us a wonderful opportunity to clear up so much confusion by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our faithfulness with the opportunities that we have will embolden us to greater enthusiasm for the harvest field around us. May we live out a commitment to reach Catholics with the gospel and help them to understand the significance of the Bible, God's one, true authority over all matters of faith and practice.