

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **General Principles for Ministering to Catholics**

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Our past two classes have focused upon how the teaching and actions of the Catholic Church has affected its parishioners. The goal of this class is not just to learn about the Catholic Church but also to serve the Lord through our relationships with those from a Catholic background. Today's class will turn to how to practically serve them effectively.

While there are different types of Catholics, there are many principles that would apply well in serving all of them. Some of these principles may hold for others outside of Catholicism but these have been highlighted because of their particular relevancy to those from a Catholic background.

### **1. Appreciate the advantages that Catholics have learning about Jesus**

Many Catholics are some of the easiest people to talk with about our Lord since they have already accepted so much of what are presuppositions for ministry to them. These existing viewpoints that are very helpful include:

#### **a. A high view of God and of Jesus**

Catholics will not just have a respect for God, their view of Him may be so high that they view Him as unapproachable, which hinders discussions of a personal relationship with God. Nevertheless, a degree of reverence for our Lord enables us to have a more meaningful conversation.

Unlike the cults, the Catholic teaching on the person of Christ is orthodox, so there is no need to discuss issues related to who He is. The affirmation of the trinity and the divine humanness of Christ are affirmed and therefore we can focus on other areas of confusion regarding the gospel.

#### **b. A respect for the Scripture and a willingness to consider it**

According to a Gallup poll from 2017, Catholics are significantly more likely to consider the Bible to be the inspired or actual Word of God, at a rate of 79% compared with only 28% of those who are not affiliated with any religion. Their view of the Scripture often gives us a mutual place of authority to go to for learning about God. We can even use a Catholic version of the Bible and have no problem in communicating the truth of God's Word with them.

**c. A personal sense of guilt of sin**

According to the Pew Research Center in 2010, 89% of active Catholics believe in sin. That is statistically the same as the 91% of active Protestants who believe in sin. In contrast, only 49% of people unaffiliated with any church believe in sin.

Even those who are Cultural Catholics believe in sin at a high rate (81%), which speaks to the effectiveness of Catholicism in communicating this concept to young people.

The average Catholic is very aware of their sin and therefore their sense of need of forgiveness is more real. Talking about sin forgiveness is much easier with those who are not in denial of their own personal need.

**d. A value placed on church attendance**

Catholics do not think that attending church is unimportant. While many may fail to actually attend, they nevertheless believe it is a good thing to do. This makes them more likely to continue to participate than many of their non-religious peers. This helps us to minister to them as they are unlikely to object to the need for church and may actually seek it out for themselves as they become more comfortable with spiritual truth.

**2. Understand the goal of ministry to Catholics**

**a. The goal of ministry is to impart understanding, not conversion**

This principle may surprise those who come from a more aggressive type of evangelicalism that emphasizes “soul-winning” but the truth is that we cannot convert anyone to faith. Conversion, or true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, is the work of God alone (Mark 10:27).

When Jesus’ disciples asked “then who can be saved?” He responded to them, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

Paul wrote in Romans 10:1 about his fellow Jews, “My heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation,” but he could only hope they would believe when he wrote in Romans 9:3, “I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh who are Israelites.”

Since we have no ability to produce conversion, there is no point in seeing this as our goal. Christ’s Great Commission calls us to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19-20) by baptizing them and teaching them to observe all He commanded. We baptize people after they have been taught and have accepted Christ. Therefore, instruction never ends. Communicating spiritual truth is fundamental to every person, whether they have believed in Christ or not.

While the unbeliever does not have the Holy Spirit indwelling them, this does not mean the Holy Spirit is not ministering to them. The Spirit of God convicts people of sin (John 16:8) and saves us by His grace alone (Titus 3:5). God is at work in the lives of certain unbelievers and they will respond to His Word as it is taught.

Therefore, all people have the same need—to submit to God and follow Him. For everyone this is by the grace of God.

Furthermore, the view of differentiating between the method of ministry to believers and the method of ministry to unbelievers is based upon our ability to discern a person's true spiritual condition. Some of those who profess to be Christians and claim to represent Him are unsaved (Matthew 7:22-23).

**b. The goal of ministry is to impart understanding, not to leave Catholicism**

While we are not able to secure the salvation of another, we may be able to convince them of why they should leave their church. However, there is no real value in just getting a person to change churches apart from a true spiritual understanding of why this decision should be made.

Indeed, it is infinitely better for a person to be a growing Christian within the Catholic Church than to be a spiritually dead person in our church. So, put first things first and help them to understand about Jesus according to the Bible.

As a person grows in their faith they will learn more and more about the Scripture. The result of this should be a reconsideration of their Catholic background and a movement toward a Bible believing church. But this is the result, not the goal.

**c. The goal of ministry is understanding, which takes time**

To expect people to understand spiritual truth immediately is a high expectation. Spiritual truth is spiritually discerned (2 Corinthians 2:14). Even when people are truly spiritually minded and seeking God, understanding comes at different times for different people.

The challenge of understanding is made more difficult when people have encountered the Bible but had it taught in ways that are only partially true. They think they understand when they are actually lacking. All of us do not know what we do not know, but when we think we know it dampens the appetite for learning.

With Catholicism, there is a sense that many Catholics have that we believe the same things. Yet there are vital areas of the gospel that are only partially grasped and many other issues that have led to general confusion about the Scripture. We need to be patient as they come to their own conclusion that what they learn from the Bible does not align with what they have been taught in the Catholic Church.

**d. The goal of ministry is understanding the Bible, not understanding us**

The biggest reason for patience is because we want their convictions to be built upon God's Word. We are not seeking to replace the Catholic Church as the spiritual authority in their lives with any church or any person as the spiritual authority. We want to lead them to the Scripture in order for them to form their own convictions about what it teaches.

**3. Let your speech always be with grace (Colossians 4:6)**

**a. Refrain from unnecessary derogatory statements about Catholicism**

Phrases such as "Catholics aren't Christians" have left many Catholics wary of those they consider to be fundamentalist Christians. Some of the literature published in an attempt to reach Catholics has been misguided, such as depicting the Pope in a demeaning fashion. How our fellow believers have spoken about Catholics has made our ability to share our faith more difficult.

Sometimes we lack care in the nuances of words when we speak, which leads us to be viewed as an ill-informed critic. For example, when we say Catholics worship Mary because they do things that we associate with someone that we worship (such as prayer), they may object by distinguishing between veneration and worship.

Even communicating accurate information to Catholics about their church can be met with skepticism because (1) they may be confused themselves about the teachings of the Church or (2) they may assume we are antagonistic.

The bottom line is that we are to honor all men (1 Peter 2:17). Speaking in disrespectful ways about people is sinful. We can discuss ideas and facts, including sharp disagreements, without being demeaning. In the end, this only results in alienating people rather than edifying them (Ephesians 4:29).

**b. Let them be the expert on Catholicism**

Catholicism is varied and complex, evolving over a very long history. Not only is it difficult to represent it, those with a Catholic background expect they should know more about their religion than a non-Catholic. They will tend to be more interested in representing Catholicism to us rather than listening to us represent it to them.

This is not only to be expected, but it can actually help our ministry since it gets them talking about the subject. First of all, if we aren't willing to listen to them, why should we hope they will listen to us? Also, their representation of Catholicism will tell us a lot about their understanding and help our ministry to them.

Be willing to ask them questions about Catholicism. It will help us learn about their background and their understanding of faith.

**c. Refrain from conclusions about the state of someone's salvation**

Our task of imparting understanding about the Lord can take place whether a person is a true believer or not. Significantly, we can impart understanding about the Lord even if a person thinks they are a Christian but are not truly a follower of Christ.

This is important because Catholics will typically consider themselves to be Christians. This belief is usually due to a misunderstanding about what a Christian is and it is unfair to expect them to change their perspective without enough information to allow for a reevaluation. Indeed, to begin speaking to a person who thinks they are a Christian as if they are not could be viewed by that person as insulting and may present unnecessary difficulties in our ministry.

Instead of a focus on the state of a person's salvation (which can be difficult to know), we should focus on God's word. Whether a person is saved or unsaved, learning more and more about the gospel, the complete good news of all of who Jesus is and what He has done, serves everyone.

**4. Identify with them in your testimony**

Our personal testimony of God's grace in our life is helpful in sharing the truth of Christ with people. With those from a Catholic background our testimony can have important benefits.

Our personal testimony helps us to identify with the Catholic person. They may have been born into the Catholic faith but we are all people looking for a meaningful relationship with the Lord. By sharing our testimony, we communicate our journey of faith, which implies that there is a journey—not simply a destiny that we were born into. To change is essential to spiritual growth and a personal testimony speaks to the need for change, as opposed to stagnation.

Our personal testimony should not be a monologue of our life before and after Christ. Unless we are speaking with someone who we have not met before and will not continue to relate with, we should look to share our testimony throughout the natural flow of our relationship. There are many pieces of how God has brought us to Himself and ways that we have learned about Christ and they should be told when appropriate.

It is particularly crucial to speak within the natural opportunities that a relationship presents since most Catholics are resistant to approaches that seem like proselyting. Speaking about your faith in even a general fashion helps to transition the conversations that you have to bring more instruction later.

Also, in our testimony we can communicate parts of the spiritual truths of the Bible that may have been missed in the person's understanding. It is a way to teach, more than just telling a story about us. Examples include forgiveness, eternal security, freedom in Christ, and the excitement of learning from the Word.

However, remember that a testimony is not the foundation for truth. Lots of Catholics and people of non-Christian religions can share their story of their spiritual journey. Our testimony is only a means of developing a deeper relationship for the sake of the Word of God. It does not prove the truthfulness of our faith since a person can be confused about his experience.

## **5. Involve Catholic friends with fellow believers in Christ**

The role of the church in outreach cannot be underestimated. God works through His people collectively. The church is the means by which the Lord uses as His instrument to reach the lost.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may *proclaim* the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

As we involve our Catholic friends with others who can serve them in their spiritual journey, the Lord can use His people to reach them. Our church has a multitude of activities to which Catholics can be invited and have an opportunity to learn from more of Christ’s followers.

These opportunities that we have to invite our Catholic friends to church activities fits well since Catholics have many group organizations, charities, etc. They may not have experience with talking about God in a personal way in a one-on-one context but they will feel comfortable in a group setting.

Once they are with a group of believers they can see the love of Christ. “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

One of the more useful ways of getting the attention of Catholic people is to see the spiritual relationship between believers in Christ. Catholicism’s emphasis on the family leaves many people feeling left out and when they see a spiritual family that welcomes them the contrast is noticeable.

Feeling welcome is important for many Catholics. For instance, Catholicism has had a particularly difficult time with their ministry to divorced people, who often feel alienated by the Church. When the Catholic rules of annulment are not followed, the divorced person is not able to remarry in the Catholic Church. This is an example of their tradition being a barrier to ministry.

By not requiring membership in order to participate with our church, we welcome Catholics who are not forced to give up their Catholic allegiance. They can “belong” without a full commitment, which allows them to learn without having a decision prematurely forced upon them. Learning in a group setting as others are talking is a less intimidating experience.

When Catholics see the real fellowship of a Bible believing church, they can feel a relational welcome that the formalism of the Catholic Church fails to deliver.

Furthermore, involving Catholics with our fellow believers extends the ministry toward them. Others in our church can help them in ways that we may not have the opportunity or ability to.

The Lord works through many people and in many ways and welcoming our Catholic friends into the church environment broadens the scope of ministry. This involvement can be beyond the direct teaching at a Sunday morning worship service. Any activity can be profitable in God's hands.

### **Conclusion**

Catholicism has set its followers on a course toward Christ. From the Catholic faith they gain a lot of truth about God, along with various doctrines that lead toward confusion about the gospel. With over 30% of people in our state from a Catholic background, we have abundant opportunities to serve these people and we can be a great help to clarify this confusion through the understanding of God's Word.

Therefore, "conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity." (Colossians 4:5). Be faithful to the Lord and seek to make disciples of Christ from those who may need your help, in the power of the Holy Spirit.