

SOME BASICS ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND SUGGESTIONS ON WHAT TO SAY TO CATHOLIC BELIEVERS

Alane Rozelle

First of all, I do not purport to be any kind of expert in Catholicism. Much of this report has come out of observations and experiences I have had from living, working and ministering in Mexico, Central America and Peru. And it is intended to generate helpful discussion because I probably have more questions than answers myself.

I will start with an extremely brief history of Roman Catholicism, then move on to differences I've noted between the Catholicism practiced in the United States vs that practiced in Latin America. After that, I will touch on some more salient or distinct differences between Catholicism and Protestantism, followed by suggestions from several sources on having a meaningful conversations with a Catholic.

- A. To begin, the Roman Catholic Church maintains that it was founded by Jesus Christ on the rock that was Peter, Peter thus being the first "pope." The RC Church claims, therefore, that it is the original and true Church, and that any schisms and divisions from it are not true. The term "Catholic", however, did not come into use until sometime in the 5th – 6th centuries. Besides the great differences between Catholicism and biblical unitarianism in theology, there is the history of how the Roman Catholic church has treated non-Catholics, or heretics and infidels, as they were called.
1. We know that the church councils of the 4th-5th centuries were rancorous and even resulted in physical abuse.
 2. Heretics and infidels were hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, burned at the stake, and more. Jews in Spain were called pigs and were forcibly converted or murdered unless they were able to escape the country in time.
 3. The Crusades were a massive violent and bloody effort to regain lands from the Muslims for Christendom. An article by Andrew Holt, Ph.D, "Death Estimates for the Crusades," stipulates, before listing sources, that modern historians concede the difficulty, even futility, of estimating the death toll from the Crusades due to the long time period and the loss of or unreliability of records. The estimates, from various sources, range from one million to nine million. Even at one million, this is a heavy and shameful loss, done in the "name of God."
 4. The Inquisition, carried out in Europe, was then spread to the colonies in the Americas. There were 3 seats of the Spanish Inquisition in the "New World:" Mexico City for all of Mexico, Central America and the Spanish East Indies; Cartagena, Colombia; and Lima, Peru for South America and Panama. I have toured the Museum of the Inquisition in Lima which is filled with replicas of the torture mechanisms. The visitor can then go below into the catacombs to see the collections of bones. As with the estimates of the death tolls from the Crusades, it is difficult to say with accuracy the number of persons who died from the Inquisitions. Be that as it may, modern estimates state that around 150,000 persons were prosecuted, out of which 3000 – 5000 were executed (less than 3%). Though that leaves 145-147 thousand persons who were not executed, they were still persecuted and tortured, imprisoned and threatened, their lives ruined. And, as with the Crusades, all done in the "name of God."

Grievous acts such as the crusades and the inquisitions are examples of what happens when religion seeks and gains power. They are like Jesus' disciples, James and John, who took offense at rejection and indignantly asked Jesus for permission to "call down fire from heaven to consume them." (Luke 9:53-54)

But Jesus rebuked them; he healed the ear of the man that Peter had zealously lopped off; he taught to pray for enemies and love them. The ways of the world are not the ways of the Cross.

B. I would now like to present significant differences that I have noticed between Catholicism in Latin America and Catholicism in the United States.

1. In the countries in which I have lived, Roman Catholicism is the official, national religion; the officially recognized church; THE Church. The Catholic Church and the government are inextricably linked in many countries. Historically, in some countries, the Church dictated government policy; the bishops or priests colluded with the political leaders. It is still true, at least to some extent, today.

Here in the United States, we do see churches aligning with certain political parties, but we don't see one particular denomination dominating the nation, as we see in Latin America. We do not have a national religion in the U.S.

In Latin America, as one Peruvian lady once said to me, they are "born" Catholic. In other words, if you're Peruvian, you're Catholic. It's part of your national identity. This connection contributes to the difficulty of conversion, of leaving the Catholic Church. In their minds, the person who "gives up" Catholicism is also "giving up" their identity as a Mexican or a Peruvian. After we had met with her over weeks and had numerous stimulating Bible discussions, she said, "I believe like you do now, but I'm still Catholic; I'm Peruvian and I'm Catholic."

In many dioceses or in small villages, the priest may dictate or run the life of the entire community. Listening to or opening the door to any non-Catholic is strongly discouraged or even forbidden. I have seen placards on doorposts saying, "This is a Catholic home. No Protestants or proselytizers welcome."

2. Catholicism in many Latin American nations is also very syncretized. Indigenous practices and beliefs have become tightly intermingled with traditional Roman Catholic practices and beliefs. When the Spanish conquistadores wanted to subjugate and colonize Mexico, for instance, they did the same thing that conquerors had done for millennia: they attacked the heart, the source of belief-- they tore down the gods, destroyed the temples, kicked out the foundations of the culture. However, this did not change the mindsets of the indigenous peoples, it just shoved their practices underground. They may have been forced to bow to a cross, but in their private thinking, they were still bowing to their indigenous gods. They continued to practice the old rituals in secret. Eventually, other Spanish priests, desiring to take a kinder approach, observed the indigenous practices and crafted bridges to Catholicism. For example, after witnessing the August-long Aztec celebrations honoring the King and Queen of the Underworld, the Spaniards merged them with their own All Saints' Days of November 1 and 2. The names of the gods and goddesses were conveniently renamed as Catholic saints, but they were still the same old deities underneath, as far as the indigenous peoples were concerned.

When I spoke to a work colleague who is Catholic, she was surprised to hear of this syncretism. The Roman Catholic church markets itself as being the same the world over, but it is not.

3. Every village or city has its own patron saint and patron virgin. There are too many versions of the Virgin Mary to keep count. In Mexico, she is Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe). In Trujillo, Peru, she is Our Lady of Socorro (Help). In El Salvador, she is Our Lady of Peace.

Statues of the saints and the virgins are paraded through the streets annually and there are special festivals. The festival day for Mexico's Lady of Guadalupe is Dec. 12. Huge masses are held non-stop, every hour, for about three weeks in the Basilica in Mexico City. The plaza in front of the basilica fills with worshippers, penitents crawling on their knees, tourists, indigenous dancers, and vendors hawking religious souvenirs.

As far as I can tell, at least by the emphasis on the saints and on the virgins, these saints and Mary are elevated even above Jesus and God the Father. In the church buildings, Mary is often portrayed seated in the center high position above a representation of a crucified Jesus or immediately beneath a representation of the Trinity, yet bigger than them. Catholics claim that they do not worship Mary, as Protestants accuse them of; they say they "venerate" her. However, synonyms of veneration include: reverence, respect, worship, adoration, homage, and exaltation. She's basically the 4th member of the godhead.

As can be seen, there is a huge amount of pomp and circumstance, awe and wonder, festival and celebration, built upon and surrounding the Catholic religion. It is interwoven in the culture, therefore, again, this makes it difficult to convert. How does a person leave their culture?

4. I have noticed three dominant depictions of Jesus in Catholic Latin America: Baby Jesus perched on Mary's arm; meek and mild Sacred Heart of Jesus; and bloody, dead, crucified Jesus. Notice the presence and prominence of Mary in all representations. She is, after all, as my Catholic co-worker declared: the mother of God! Now everyone just calls it a mystery, but I say it's confounding. How could God have a mother? It's not a mystery; it's an impossibility!
- C. Well, let's get into some other points of Roman Catholicism that aren't necessarily confined to Latin America.
1. Ignorance of Scripture—Catholic homes may not even have Bibles. If they do, it is kept in the home more like a talisman. It is not read. It can only be an authorized Catholic version which includes the Apocrypha. The Pope receives instruction directly from God and is the final authority. The priests interpret the Scripture; they tell the parishioners what to believe. There is much mystery and mysticism in Roman Catholicism.
 2. Authority of the Church: I like to listen to a Catholic radio station program to learn more about the belief system. The priest on the call-in program often replies with "the teaching of the Church" rather than "the Scripture says." They believe they are the One True Church established by Jesus. All other "Christians" might be saved by the skin of their teeth, but won't receive the blessings that Catholics of the One True Church will receive.
 3. The Sacraments: Jesus gives grace through the sacraments, so these are required. The 7 Sacraments are baptism, reconciliation, eucharist, confirmation, marriage, holy orders and anointing of the sick. Only marriages performed within the Catholic church are truly blessed by God and it's the only way that the children are sanctified. Only people baptized in the Catholic Church are "real" Christians. Now the laity may not believe these things, but these are the official stands of the Church. I've heard the priest on the Catholic call-in radio program say every one of these things. The RC Church teaches that grace is stored in a heavenly container and flows into the souls of the faithful through the sacraments. No salvation is possible unless dispensed by a Roman Catholic priest.

4. Confession, Penance, etc.: Indulgences are purchased for forgiveness. Confession must be done directly to a priest and regularly. The priest assigns prayers of Hail Marys and Our Fathers as homework to gain forgiveness. Only a priest can grant absolution—forgiveness of sins. In addition, people may perform acts of suffering in order to gain an answer to a prayer or to earn forgiveness on behalf of a loved one, for instance. I have seen people crawling on their knees for miles on pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. They may flagellate (beat) themselves with leafy branches across their bare shoulders and back. They leave food, money and token gifts at the feet of the statues of Mary, Jesus and the saints as thank yous for miracles granted. The Rosary and the Stations of the Cross are said to be “helps” for praying, but do you ever see in scripture that Jesus or any of the disciples used some kind of “aid” like a Rosary for praying? They just prayed straight to our Father God.
 5. Intermediaries: that brings up the Roman Catholic belief/requirement that our relationship to God can only be acquired through an intermediary, be it the Pope, the priests, or the dead saints supposedly living in heaven. We are too sin-laden and dirty and disgusting to approach God ourselves.
 6. Transubstantiation: I imagine that many of you have heard the criticism lobbed at Catholics that they are “cannibals” because they eat the body and blood of Jesus. It was surprising to me to discover, in talking with a former Catholic and with a current Catholic, that they were totally unaware of their own Church’s doctrine of substantiation. This belief has a long history wrapped up in a jumble of invented words and phrases that is truly confusing. Augustine of Hippo, who lived from 354-430 AD, declared: “The faithful know what I’m talking about; they know Christ in the breaking of bread. It isn’t every loaf of bread, you see, but the one receiving Christ’s blessing, that [one] becomes the body of Christ.” In 1551, the Council of Trent confirmed the doctrine of transubstantiation by stating: “by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood.” The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: “This change is brought about in the eucharistic prayer through the efficacy of the word of Christ and by the action of the Holy Spirit. However, the outward characteristics of bread and wine, that is the “eucharistic species”, remain unaltered,” whatever that means. Catholic theologian Timothy O’Malley recently stated, “If the word 'substance' scares people off, you can say, 'what it really is', and that is what substance is. What it really is, what it absolutely is at its heart is Christ’s body and blood.” Both my former Catholic friend and my Catholic co-worker stubbornly denied that this is what the mass is all about. Apparently, I should not be so surprised. A 2019 Pew Research Report found that only 31% believe that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus, and 22% of those who believe that they are just symbols, say that they know the Church teaches otherwise but they just don’t believe it.
- D. What, then, are best topics to broach with Catholics? To get help in answering this question, I reached out to Alex in Nicaragua and Edwin in Peru. I also had a lovely discussion with a co-worker who grew up in the Church of Christ but converted to Catholicism for her husband. According to her, it was all the same anyway except for the practices surrounding Mary and the difference in Communion/Mass.
1. Edwin advised that addressing the immortality of the soul is the most important point. If you can get a Catholic to see in the scripture that the dead are actually dead, in the grave, not parading around in heaven, it does away with the worship of Mary and the intercession of the saints. The dead cannot be listening to their prayers; they cannot be spirits returning to their homes on All Saints (Nov. 1 and 2); they cannot be helping us in any way, shape or form. Mary, the disciples, Paul, Mother Theresa, Saint Francis, and every Pope that has ever lived are all lying in a grave somewhere awaiting the resurrection. This leaves them with

Jesus and God/Yahweh. Edwin adds that then it can be pointed out to the Catholic that there are many celebrations and masses for Jesus in Catholicism but almost nothing for the Father who is greater than Jesus. If and when they can comprehend this, they will turn to the One God and the Only Messiah Jesus.

2. Alex suggested to approach the Roman Catholic from the historical angle. He states that in general, whether Catholics or Protestants, most people in the churches, do not know the origin of their own religion. And what they do know is usually whatever is told them by their leaders. You can see by these timelines that Alex provided, that many doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church developed over much time and are admittedly not Bible-based, yet because a pope somewhere along the line declared it to be true, the people must believe it. If a Catholic can be convinced by history and scripture that these beliefs and practices are not based in Bible truth, their eyes may be opened to wonder what else is not true. It should be extremely freeing also, for the truth releases them from constant confession, repetitive prayers, worry about sin, mandatory mass attendance, buying forgiveness, loved ones languishing in purgatory, salvation based on works, etc.

Looking at Alex' timelines, note than before 1966, Catholics did not regard Mary as Mediatrix and Intercessor. This was decreed by Pope Paul VI.

Before 1950, when Pope Pio XII decreed it, Catholics did not believe that Mary had also ascended into heaven.

Only since 1854, when Pope Pio IX ruled it, have Catholics believed in the Immaculate Conception of Mary. This is the idea that Mary was also conceived in a situation free of sin and therefore did not have original sin.

Additionally, as we already know, the concept of the Holy Trinity did not develop until the 4th century, as a result of the many church councils held between 325 and 381 AD. The church of the 1st century would have had no idea of a godhead formed out of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Alex's final point was that the first century church had no notion of a religion called "Catholicism" because that title evolved in the 4th and 5th centuries. He said that when he begins with historical points such as these, people listen a lot better than when he approaches them directly with scripture right off the bat. He has noticed that Catholics have "work-arounds" for many scriptural conflicts. For instance, they will agree that the Bible mentions "the mother-in-law of Peter," but it doesn't say that Peter had a wife!

If the person will not accept facts from history about the origin and beliefs of their religion, there's not much more you can do, says Alex. The conversation is closed. He believes this is also a good way to know what kind of person you are talking with: a thinking person or just a fanatic.

3. Mike Gendron, a former Catholic who is founder and director of a ministry in Dallas, TX, called "Proclaiming the Gospel," recommends two principles for witnessing to Catholics: resorting to the authority of Scripture and presenting the all-sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice for salvation. He states that Catholics have three authorities: the word of God which is the scriptures, their sacred tradition, and the "infallible" teaching authority of the Church, Pope, priests. He advises to help the Catholic to focus on Scripture alone. Compare the teachings in the Catechism of the Catholic Church with scripture to show them the differences. They can see that they cannot believe both, says Gendron, and so they are forced to make a decision: truth or tradition?

As for the second principle, Gendron notes that many religions teach a works-based salvation. As I mentioned previously, if a Catholic can be brought to see that Jesus' sacrifice was enough to cover all our unrighteousness, they can be freed from so much "doing."

- E. What are some things NOT to do when witnessing to Catholics? Actually, these can be applied to conversing with atheists, the average Joe on the street, or anybody with a set of beliefs different from yours.
1. Do not ridicule their beliefs and do not criticize their church. People are very sensitive and loyal to their belief system; it may be the foundation on which they have built their lives and it is part of their identity. How would you respond if a JW, a Muslim, a Hindu or any trinitarian started a discussion by making fun of all that you've stood on for a lifetime? It is not Christlike and it will only antagonize people.
 2. Watch your language. Be careful about using Christian "jargon" that may not be understood by the other person.
 3. Ask questions; be thoughtful in your reactions and responses to their answers; don't be prepared to disagree on every point. As one source said, you can disagree without being disagreeable.
- F. Above all, in our sharing of the good news of the Kingdom of God, of the one God and his Messiah Jesus, of the sleep of the dead awaiting the great resurrection, we must be compassionate and loving. Demonstrate that you really care. Build on the relationship. Pray for them often and also pray that God will give you insights on what to say. Pray for the priests too. I frankly cannot comprehend how they can truly believe all that the Catholic church teaches. They are either more deceived than their parishioners or they are great liars and deceivers themselves. Perhaps both.

I am not offering lists of scriptures here because I think we already know how to show where in the Bible it talks about God's promises, the sleep of the dead, Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, etc. The purpose of this presentation was to generate best ideas of where to start when talking with a Catholic believer.

In summary, the three main suggestions for starting a conversation with a Catholic are: showing them the historical development of Catholic doctrines such as the assumption of Mary and the trinity; comparing Catholic teachings with the scripture; and showing them that the dead are truly dead.

To learn more about Catholicism, in addition to reading books or researching online, I suggest listening to a Catholic radio station, especially a call-in program. You may be surprised by the questions that are asked—demonstrating the ignorance of people—and by the answers that are given—which are so far outside of scripture. Just two days ago, for instance, the radio priest said: "God became a man and stayed a man. He is perpetually a man." I was driving and nearly had a stroke. 😊