

Understanding & Reaching Our Catholic Friends

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The Minnesota town in which I grew up has a strong Roman Catholic culture. I grew up with the grandchildren of German and Polish immigrants and they seemed to be serious about their church. They had compelling reasons to be. Our town had a four-year Catholic women's college and a four-year Catholic men's college. There is a seminary to train Roman Catholic priests. There are five private Catholic schools in my hometown's parochial educational system. All this in a town of 25,000 people.

My best friend was Catholic. Many of my teachers, classmates, sports team-mates and fishing buddies were Catholics. The girls I dated and the neighbors all around me were also Catholics.

However, I did not grow up attending church, so all of this religious activity in my hometown did not affect me. But it was a bit puzzling.

The Minnesota town in which I grew up has a strong Roman Catholic culture.

Back in those years my impression was that the Roman Catholic Church is a much more serious religion than the churches of my Protestant friends. I thought, "*The Catholics have nuns and priests and the Pope. They have their own schools. They have daily Mass. They have a lot of rules and regulations and holy days. They're REALLY serious about God and Jesus!*"

But I also saw the disconnect between how many of my Catholic friends lived and what their church

and their families taught. So we got along well, just as long as we didn't talk about religion. And since I didn't care much for any church, this arrangement suited me just fine.

I had no problems getting along with my Catholic friends... until after I got out of High School. It began when I met four girls whose new-found faith challenged everything I believed. I resisted their repeated messages. They gave me a Bible. I refused to read the Bible for myself. But after months of resistance, I finally read that book and it changed my life. I realized I was a sinner who needed a Savior and I was crushed by conviction over my sin and pride. I humbly placed my faith in Christ alone to save me.

With great joy, I tried to explain to my Catholic friends my new-found faith in Jesus Christ, but things grew tense. I didn't really understand why, I just knew that now I "was talking about religion" and that was problematic in my hometown. When we did talk, I enthusiastically and with deep

conviction talked about the Bible and my sin and my need for a Savior and my relationship with Christ. But my Catholic friends didn't seem to share my enthusiasm.

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It became imperative that I understand my Catholic friends and their church's teachings so that I could intelligently explain my faith from the Bible. Thus began my first earnest theological study.

I had to sort out all of the similarities I now shared with the Catholics from the differences we had in theology. Catholics

believe in the Trinity and that Jesus is both God and man. They believe in Christ's literal and physical resurrection from the dead. They believe Christ is coming again. They believe in the literalness of Satan and demons and the evil of sin, and they believe in a literal and eternal heaven and hell.

So, why were my Catholic friends unhappy with my expression of faith in Christ as Savior? What were our differences?

I became even more confused when my Catholic friends explained that they believed in salvation by grace. I thought: "*That's exactly what I believe too!*" So, what exactly was the difference? I was baffled.

THE MAIN DIFFERENCE

Especially baffling was the part about grace. I sensed that this was the main difference, but my Catholic friends were saying the same thing about grace as I was. This puzzled me because we ultimately ended up at a different understanding of how to get to heaven. I said it was through faith in Christ alone. They said it involved the Church in some way.

As I studied the official Roman Catholic theology of the Sacraments,

I came to understand that to a Catholic the Sacraments were the means of receiving God's grace. The Sacraments are the way that forgiveness of sins is conveyed. These Sacraments are as follows:

- Baptism
- Penance
- Eucharist (the Mass)
- Confirmation
- Holy Orders
- Matrimony
- Anointing of the sick / last rites

The seven Sacraments, only when administered by the Roman Catholic Church, "*contain*" God's grace.¹ They are not merely symbolic but they are the actual channel of grace, the "*instrumental cause*" of God's grace.² Official Roman Catholic theology teaches that the Catholic receives more and more grace as he or she participates more and more in the Sacraments, "*by the very fact of the action's being performed.*"³ The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Sacraments are the necessary way to heaven for salvation.⁴

This is the main difference. The Bible teaches that the grace of God is His favor which is unmerited and cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is not by the righteous works we do inside the church or outside the church that we earn God's favor and gradually become good enough to earn heaven (Titus 3:4-7). We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ's redeeming work on the Cross alone. Nothing else. We cannot earn our way to heaven by the Sacraments.

HISTORIC CATHOLIC TEACHING

In my study, I learned more about the historic Catholic understanding of grace and justification and salvation. A number of Roman Catholic cardinals met at the Council of Trent, held from 1545-1563. They met to discuss the Reformers' objections to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, specifically as it related to the doctrine of justification. The Reformers distinguished between the justification of a sinner by faith in Christ alone and the post-salva-

tion inward work of the Holy Spirit called sanctification. Rome combined the two concepts into one. They taught that God justifies us through a life-long process as we grow, by the power of God's Spirit, in sanctifying grace.

The Reformers claimed that Rome rejected the clear teaching of passages such as Romans 4:1-5. After thorough discussion and investigation, the Council of Trent issued this decree: "*Canon 9*. If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone (*supra* chapters 7-8), meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema [i.e. accursed]." This curse upon the Reformers' view by the Council of Trent made the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church about salvation clear to me: they teach that salvation comes through the Sacraments and our working to earn God's grace.

QUESTIONING THIS ASSESSMENT

Not everyone would agree with my assessment. In the years since I came to Christ, some rather high profile Protestant evangelicals have returned to the Roman Catholic Church. They perceive that evangelicalism is incomplete, lacks a confessional theology maintained by a historic church leader, and is shallow in liturgy and aesthetics. Those evangelicals who have returned to Rome are aggressively urging many others to join them.

In March, 1994 a significant group of leading evangelical and Roman Catholic theologians, writers, and teachers signed a major document of agreement called *Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*. Among many issues addressed by this document, the most troubling for me is the impression that the Reformation truths fought over and defended for 500 years are today resolved. Therefore, this document calls for a moratorium on efforts to

evangelize Roman Catholics because evangelicals and Catholics are "brothers and sisters in Christ."

Certainly there are genuinely regenerated, born again believers attending Roman Catholic Churches. I know some personally. But true believers cannot be in full agreement with official Catholic theology regarding salvation by grace through the Sacraments. I also acknowledge that merely attending a Catholic church doesn't describe what that particular individual believes.

In recent years there has been a resurgence among evangelicals of a contemplative approach to spirituality. This practice draws almost entirely upon the teachings of Catholic mystics. The ecumenical ties between evangelical ministries and Catholic leaders have grown over the last three decades. On non-doctrinal issues, Catholics and evangelicals have been standing together as co-belligerents against the encroaching darkness of our culture's breakdown.

All of these things have filtered their way into the popular mindset of evangelicalism. Today, many evangelicals I meet and talk to are questioning the need to evangelize Roman Catholics.

SUMMARY & COMPARISON

To summarize, the Catholics believe that salvation looks like this:

Faith + Works = Justification (you do good works along with your faith in order to earn justification).

- I must have faith in God in order to be saved.
- I must add good works to my faith in order to be saved.
- I must participate in the Sacraments to be saved.
- Baptism cleanses me of Original Sin. The other Sacraments earn my forgiveness.
- I cannot be confident of my salvation. My eternal destiny depends on the state of my soul when I die.

To summarize, the Bible teaches that salvation looks like this:

Faith = Justification + Works (you must exercise faith, which results in justification and good works).

- I am saved by faith alone in Christ alone (*John 3:16, 36; John 5:24; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9-10*).
- I must not trust in my own good works to save me (*Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-5; Romans 3:20-22,28; Romans 4:5*).
- I will do good works if I am truly saved (*Romans 6:1-2; James 2:24*).
- I can have assurance of my salvation (*John 10:27-29; 1 John 5:13*).

APPLYING THESE TRUTHS

Understanding these truths has helped me whenever I have spoken to a Catholic about spiritual things. I understand the need to evangelize. I know that all of us are in need of salvation from our sins and hell. I never assume anyone, Protestant or Catholic, is saved just because he or she goes to church. I always seek to explain what the Bible says about our eternal destinies. I keep the conversation centered on sin and God's remedy at the Cross.

Because of my upbringing, I like "to talk religion" with my Catholic friends. And I have lots of opportunities because almost 25% of our nation's population claims to be Roman Catholic.

I am comfortable around Catholics, even when discussing these potentially divisive spiritual things. But we need to understand the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in order to reach our Catholic friends with the truth of the gospel. And may God help us in this most important venture!

RESOURCES

For more help regarding sharing the Gospel with Roman Catholics, contact IFCA International members Larry Miller or Frank Eberhardt (see their articles and contact information elsewhere in this issue) or Lyle Murphy (Grace Bible Mission, lmurphy13@kc.rr.com).

For more help understanding Catholic theology, consult *The Gospel According to Rome*, James G. McCarthy (Harvest House, 1995) and follow its indexed references to *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City, Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994). This second book is an absolutely essential reference work to own because it is the first official Catholic catechism in over 400 years and it bears the imprimatur of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI.

ENDNOTES

1 Council of Trent, session 7, "Canons on the Sacraments in General," canon 6.

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City, Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications, 1994, Paragraph 1084. This is an important book which bears the imprimatur of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paragraph 1128. Also see Paragraphs 1127 and 1131.

4 Council of Trent, session 7, "Canons on the Sacraments in General," canon 4. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Paragraph 1129.