

*Everyday*  
**EVANGELISM**  
*for* **CATHOLICS**



*Everyday*  
EVANGELISM  
CATHOLICS

Cathy Duffy

TAN Books  
Charlotte, North Carolina

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Cover design by Caroline K. Green

Cover image: Blurred background of talking people in restaurant  
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018950328

ISBN: 978-1-5051-1235-1

Published in the United States by

TAN Books

PO Box 410487

Charlotte, NC 28241

[www.TANBooks.com](http://www.TANBooks.com)

Printed in the United States of America

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# INTRODUCTION

**E**vangelism is a hot topic in the Catholic world today thanks to Pope Francis and his predecessors. But for at least a few centuries, most Catholics thought that evangelism was something Protestants do, not Catholics! Since the idea is so foreign to most Catholics, they have no idea where to start. I find that many Catholics would like to be involved in evangelism, but they need concrete ways of going about it.

I wrote *Everyday Evangelism for Catholics* to discuss how we can practice personal evangelism on a practical, everyday level—the sort of evangelism that most of us should be doing. Everyday evangelism includes the conversation with your relative who has left the Church, your friend who just doesn't get why you bother going to Mass every Sunday, your acquaintance who is grieving over the death of his mother, or your coworker who is making all of the wrong life choices and can't figure out why she's not happy. Conversations that arise from everyday issues often open doors for evangelism. But that does not mean you grasp *every* opportunity to tell people they need to start going to church. True evangelism is usually more subtle and time consuming, as you will soon see.

## **My Background**

My enthusiasm for evangelism has a long history. I was a cradle Catholic who, like so many others, left the Church as a young adult. After a few years of trying to ignore God, I ended up reconnecting with the Catholic Church briefly. However, while my relationship with God was on much stronger ground at that point, my theological formation was not.

I readily joined my husband when he decided that Calvary Chapel sounded appealing. I developed an evangelistic outlook during the twenty plus years I detoured from Catholicism into the Protestant world. Protestants talk a great deal about evangelism and many of them expect all Christians to be evangelists. As I became more and more attuned to evangelism, I found opportunities galore to practice it. At first, my conversations occurred more frequently with those close to Christianity in some way. As you can read in chapter 8, my circles gradually broadened, and within those wider circles came many evangelizing opportunities.

When I returned to the Catholic Church, I brought with me my evangelistic outlook. I soon began volunteering to work with the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) process in our parish. Within a few years, I was on staff running RCIA. One of the things I love most about the RCIA process is working with individuals. I enjoy hearing their stories, discussing their burning questions, and helping them fall in love with Jesus and his Church. (Along the way, I also picked up responsibility for adult faith formation, an opportunity to practice the new evangelization parish wide.)



Outside the Church, I found myself frequently involved in conversations about deep spiritual issues with people, both those I knew well and those I'd just met. Some of my most memorable conversations about spiritual issues have been with seatmates on long airplane flights! Working within the RCIA process helped me learn how to listen and ask good questions—both of which are key for having a worthwhile conversation.

As much as I enjoyed directing RCIA, I reached a point with my job where I was spending far more time on administration than in one-on-one conversations. I ended up resigning, but I continue to serve as a volunteer in my parish doing things that better fit my talents and bring me great delight.

One of these things is serving on our evangelism team, helping to plan parish efforts centered particularly on the Alpha program and our follow-up Discipleship Groups. (Alpha is an introductory evangelism course that is non-denominational but approved by the Catholic Church. See [alphausa.org/catholic/](http://alphausa.org/catholic/) for more information.) In addition, I host a “Got Faith Questions” table in the church courtyard most Sunday mornings through the four morning Masses. Think of Lucy’s “psychiatry” booth from the *Peanuts* cartoon strip. The table functions in a number of ways. I have a small sign that reads “Free books” and a few books from the Dynamic Catholic ministry sitting out. I keep a selection suitable for different needs—books such as *Rediscovering Catholicism*, *Rediscover Jesus*, *The Real Story* (short version of salvation history in Scripture), and *Catholic and Christian*, plus the *Pillar of Fire*, *Pillar of Truth* pamphlets.

Some people approach the table looking for a free book.

It's an excuse for me to say something like, "We've got books for people who are at different places on their faith journey. Let's see what would be most helpful to you." That allows at least a brief discussion about which book or pamphlet might be helpful. Sometimes it turns into a lengthy conversation about their spiritual journey. People approach the table with all sorts of questions from "Where's the restroom?" to "I haven't been to church in thirty years. What do I need to do?"

We occasionally have non-Catholic visitors as well. Some of them have been interested enough to engage in deep conversation about Catholicism, and at least a few are on their way into the Church. I've even been able to pray with some right there at the table. The "Got Faith Questions" table has turned out to be a fabulous evangelism tool.

I share all of this so that you can understand the diversity of experience I have had with evangelism. Our parish is on a "Divine Renovation" track. (Fr. James Mallon's book *Divine Renovation* has influenced many Catholic parishes which have prioritized mission over maintenance.) We are working to become a parish of intentional Catholics who understand that our primary mission is making disciples. It seems clear that at our parish there is definitely more interest in evangelism than ever before.

However, strategies for evangelism are unfamiliar to most Catholics. Many Catholics worry that they need to be firmly grounded in apologetics before they can evangelize. They fear they don't know enough and don't want to be pushy. They have no idea how to even begin the conversation. My hope is that this book will bridge the gap so that they will

learn how to have evangelistic conversations in everyday situations and that it will become easy and comfortable for them to do so.

### **Givens That I'm Assuming**

Many other books have been written about other aspects of evangelism, so I'm going to skim over some basic principles of evangelism that I expect most of my readers will have already encountered.

- We can't share a faith that we don't have ourselves. Only if we have a real relationship with Jesus can we share it with others.
- Evangelism needs to be motivated by love for others. We need to care enough for others that we want them to have a relationship with Jesus.
- Prayer is an essential component of evangelism. Ultimately, people are changed spiritually by the work of the Holy Spirit, not by our own wisdom, intelligence, winsomeness, or any other talents we possess. We must pray continually for broad efforts in evangelism as well as for those people we personally hope to bring into relationship with Christ. Without prayer, we labor in vain. To that end, please consider using the focusing prayers at the beginning of each chapter.
- We need to walk our talk. Nothing undermines our evangelistic efforts as much as actions that contradict the message of the Gospel.

- Evangelism is a calling for all God’s people. It might be through cloistered prayer, service, or active engagement, but all Christians are called to share the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

If you want more information on these aspects of evangelism, I recommend the following books:

- *Forming Intentional Disciples* by Sherry A. Weddell, Our Sunday Visitor.
- *The Joy of the Gospel* (Pope Francis’s encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*), available on the Vatican’s website.
- *Nudging Conversions: A Practical Guide to Bringing Those You Love Back to the Church* by Carrie Gress, Beacon Publishing.

As you dive further into this book, you’ll see plenty of other suggested reading and videos to watch concerning various aspects of evangelization. A complete list of these books can be found in the “Recommended Reading and Resources” section.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE CENTRALITY OF EVANGELISM

*God our Father and fount of all love, please develop in us a love for others that gives us the desire and courage to share the good news of salvation. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your precious son. Amen.*

Some Catholics are beginning to say that evangelism is their top priority. Some credit this burst of evangelistic enthusiasm to Pope Francis's call for the Church to become more mission-minded by sharing the Gospel with others as presented in his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). In July 2017, at the Convocation of Catholic Leaders in Orlando, Florida, *National Catholic Register* reporter Matthew Bunson observed, "In virtually every speech they heard the importance of missionary discipleship and the urgency of the task of evangelization."<sup>A</sup>

While evangelism has been part of the Catholic faith since Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28, emphasis has waxed and waned. We have seen periods when the

Church seemed comfortably ensconced in maintenance mode and other times, such as in the post-Reformation period, when explosive evangelistic efforts brought many back to Catholicism.

For Catholicism in the United States in the twentieth century, maintenance mode seemed the norm. We left evangelism to the Protestants, the Mormons, and the Jehovah Witnesses. Immigration and the baby boom brought plenty of people to the pews without any evangelistic efforts. Consequently, it seems that the general attitude was, “Why bother?”

Many had forgotten that evangelism—sharing the good news of the Gospel with others—is the mission of the Church. Too many Catholics assumed that catechizing those who were already there was the extent of their evangelistic responsibility. They catechized through schools and from the pulpit, but serious catechesis was reserved for those preparing for the sacraments of initiation, especially for First Communion and Confirmation. Many families abandoned personal responsibility for catechizing their own children, instead expecting the Church to provide that service. With the focus primarily on sacramental catechesis, many Catholics failed to realize that those attending church were rarely, if ever, asked if they believed in God, much less whether they believed in the Incarnation, salvation through Jesus’s death on the cross, the Resurrection, and other essentials. Those beliefs were just assumed to be present. Even though parishioners would repeat baptismal vows on occasion or recite the Nicene or Apostles’ Creed, some did so only because that was what everyone else was doing rather than as a statement of their own faith.

### **Saying It Is One Thing, Doing It Is Another.**

The New Evangelization—the call for new methods of evangelization as well as to re-evangelize those who are still technically considered Catholic but whose lives provide no evidence to back it up—is a response to that reality. The Church finally realized that the presentation of the *Kerygma*—the basic message of the Gospel—needed to be revitalized for modern audiences. The Church also recognized that being baptized Catholic, calling oneself a Catholic, or even coming to Mass every weekend does not guarantee that a person has a relationship with Jesus Christ. Add these souls to the millions of baptized Catholics who have walked away and do not even pretend to be Catholic any longer, and it paints a grim picture. Some have left to join other non-Catholic churches, but Protestants these days are experiencing the same membership-bleed as Catholics, so there are deeper cultural forces at work. Many baptized Catholics (as well as former Protestants) now consider themselves atheists, “spiritual-but-not-religious,” or the increasingly popular “none.”

We use the term *lapsed* to describe Catholics who have walked away from the Faith, but that seems a bit inadequate. *Lapsed* implies that maybe this is a membership that could easily be reinstated tomorrow, just as a lapsed subscription can be. However, the gulf separating many lapsed Catholics from their faith is often gigantic, a Grand Canyon rather than a gully.

While the new evangelization in the United States has focused heavily upon baptized Catholics who are not

practicing their faith, it is only a starting point. We need to be concerned about everyone. After all, the Great Commission of Matthew 28 says that we are to “make disciples of all nations.” This clearly implies that the mission field includes all of the people in all of the nations. If Catholics truly believe the good news of the Gospel—that God loves each one of us so much that he sent his son to die for our sins so that we can have eternal life—then out of love for others, we should be anxious to share the Good News with them.

### **The Great Commission**

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28:19–20a

However, it seems fairly obvious that there is not much point in trying to evangelize the unbaptized and unchurched, only to bring them into a church where too many attendees seem to be there under duress. How inspiring and uplifting is it to be seated next to someone at Mass who is not participating, who continually checks her cell phone, and who arrives late and leaves early? Given this unfortunate reality, we need to first re-evangelize those in the pews or those who visit those pews only on Christmas and Easter or for funerals and weddings.

From the parish level, this is critical to understand. Evangelism generally needs to happen from the inside out. You cannot replenish your dying parish to any significant degree by



attempting to pull in new members from among the unbaptized or other Christian denominations. They won't find it any more attractive to be there than will your reluctantly-attending parishioners. New Christians want and need to be around other Christians who are what Matthew Kelly describes as "dynamic Catholics." These are Catholics who visibly exhibit the characteristics of prayer, study, generosity, and evangelism. They have a heart for others that enables them to be warm and welcoming to newcomers. They help create an environment that is attractive to those investigating Christianity and Catholicism in particular.

"Missionary disciples" is another term that is increasingly being used to describe those who have responded to the call of the Gospel themselves and who have begun their own efforts to share the Good News with others. Missionary disciples understand that they have a mission to accomplish.

Some parishes are using re-evangelization programs that target the baptized, those already familiar with Catholic culture and language. Many have had some success in reenergizing their parishes as lukewarm parishioners have turned into missionary disciples. When that has happened with enough parishioners to be noticeable, a parish is ready to ratchet up evangelism efforts to include lapsed Catholics, the unbaptized, and the unchurched, as well as those looking for the fullness of the faith that they can find only in the Catholic Church.

A parish can't get stuck at the re-evangelizing stage forever. If parishioners aren't turning into dynamic Catholics, then the program or process probably needs to be reexamined. Maybe try something else. If it *is* working, then a parish will

gradually become the warm and welcoming place where you can begin to invite outsiders. At that point, the parish needs to shift gears to start casting a wider net with their evangelism efforts, and they need to help parishioners learn how to be part of those and other evangelism efforts.

At my parish, the Alpha course has been the tool we use both for re-evangelizing and broader evangelism efforts outside the parish. It works on a number of levels. First, it challenges practicing Catholics with the clear message of the Gospel and the necessity of having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Those trained to be hosts and helpers for Alpha courses learn how to be warm and welcoming, as well as how to interact non-judgmentally with those who might be at the very early stages of investigating Christianity. Alpha then provides an easy evangelization tool for parishioners to use as they invite friends, families, coworkers, and acquaintances to attend Alpha with them. There are a few other programs that share the goals of Alpha, but we judged it the most affordable and highest quality program available at this time.

### **Casting a Wider Net**

The current culture is producing increasing numbers of unchurched and unbaptized people who have had little to no exposure to the Gospel. These people usually have very foundational questions about whether or not God exists, whether or not this God cares about people, whether this God can hear and answer prayers, and much more. They might know little or nothing about Jesus. It wasn't always this way in the United States.

In fact, it was quite different during the settlement of America and the founding of our country, and even up into the twentieth century. Christianity was a common denominator for most of the population. People were frequently exposed to the proclamation of the Gospel, whether or not they accepted it for themselves. Diligent pastors, camp meeting preachers, and celebrity evangelists presented the Gospel from a Protestant point of view. Catholics immigrated to the United States bringing their religious heritage and culture with them. However, Catholics rarely exhibited the evangelistic zeal shown by Protestants, most likely because priests and parishes already had their hands full caring for the souls that were already part of the Catholic culture.

The culture has changed radically over the past half-century or more. While Catholics do still immigrate to the United States and bring along their faith, their children too often abandon it. The secular culture pervading the media, schools, the arts, sports, and most everything else speaks louder and more persuasively than do parents, grandparents, and the Church. Additionally, broken families, unmarried parents, unconventional families, and other fallout from the sexual revolution have drastically weakened family structures so that homes rarely function as domestic churches.<sup>1</sup>

With some rare exceptions, we no longer live in a Christian culture. People might never be exposed to the message

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<sup>1</sup> “The Christian home is the place where children receive the first proclamation of the faith. For this reason, the family home is rightly called ‘the domestic church,’ a community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity” (*Catholicism of the Catholic Church* 1666).

of the Gospel, and even if they hear it, that message often fights a losing battle with the much louder and more seductive message of our secular, materialist culture.

This has changed the landscape dramatically in terms of the task of evangelism. People rarely come to a church of their own accord, whatever the denomination. They have to be invited and brought in by others. They need to be evangelized outside the church. That means evangelization can no longer be left to the professionals on staff at the church. The laity have to become evangelists, reaching out to those they encounter and helping them come to know Jesus.

“But I can’t do that!” you might be saying.

This is a hard sale. Most Catholics are full of excuses when it comes to evangelism. They say, “I don’t know how to do that,” while meaning, “There’s no way I’m going to do that!” They have the idea that evangelism has to be an in-your-face, uncomfortable confrontation with others.

I want you to know that the best evangelism rarely happens with that approach. I believe that there are very natural and relational approaches to evangelism that anyone can use.

Generally, there is a lot of groundwork to do before someone is ready for spiritual conversion. The encouraging thing you need to know is that the process can be relatively easy and natural because the most important things you bring to the table are a love for the other person, a concern for their spiritual well-being, and a willingness to listen and invest time and friendship. This is a one-on-one investment. While I believe that these are the most important attributes you must have, knowledge is still important. You must have thought through your own faith to the extent that you can

explain why you believe in God and why you are Catholic. As St. Peter tells us in his first epistle: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pt 3:15).

While we do not need to be expert apologists, we should be learning how to respond to the typical questions that arise. We should be continually growing in our knowledge of the Faith and of Scripture so that we are prepared to answer questions.

### **It’s Not All About You**

Before concluding this chapter, it’s important to point out that ultimately the conversion process is the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot take credit for it, and we cannot take the blame when it does not happen. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts of individuals at his own pace and through His often-unusual means. Think of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in the eighth chapter of the book of Acts.

This story took place in the early years of the Church after Jesus had left his apostles and disciples to carry on his mission. Philip, one of Jesus’s disciples, was told by an angel to head south on the road from Jerusalem toward Gaza. An Ethiopian eunuch, who happened to be a high court official of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, was traveling on the same road, but in a chariot. He had come to Jerusalem to worship as the story tells it, so he must have either been a Jew or converted to Judaism. Philip was somewhere behind the chariot when the Holy Spirit spoke to him and told him to go catch up with the chariot.

Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the eunuch reading prophecies about the suffering messiah from the book of Isaiah. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading. The eunuch responded, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” He then invited Philip to join him in the chariot and explain it to him. After hearing Philip’s explanation of Jesus’s fulfillment of these prophecies and of the message of salvation, the eunuch asked to be baptized immediately. They stopped by water that was conveniently nearby, and Philip baptized him (Acts 8:26–40).

Philip had no plan and no prior knowledge of what was going to happen other than that an angel told him to set out on a particular road. While there are some amazing supernatural elements in this story, the heart of the story is Philip being used by God to bring the good news of salvation to the eunuch. Philip made himself available, and God used him. Philip found himself in this extraordinary situation, but he grabbed the opportunity to ask a leading question. The eunuch was already spiritually seeking, and the Holy Spirit had already prepared his heart to hear and accept the Gospel.

“We’re all called—every one of us—to bring the Gospel to all those we encounter. We can’t confine the love of God to our family, our parish, or our particular culture.”<sup>B</sup>

I have found that this is often the case. The Holy Spirit has been working in someone’s heart and orchestrates life circumstances to prepare him or her. A person is already

opening up to God interiorly, even though he or she has said nothing to anyone else. Then God brings someone like you into the situation and the topic of God or faith arises. Do we capitalize on the moment like Phillip, or do we squirm our way out of the situation?

One of my goals in this book is to help prepare you to capitalize on those moments by cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit. You don't have to be an expert apologist with all of the answers. You don't have to memorize a four-step plan to follow. You just have to be willing to trust the work that God is doing and love others enough to risk your own personal discomfort.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Where do you place evangelism in your list of spiritual priorities?
2. What impression do you think an outsider would get of the enthusiasm and engagement of the members of your parish at a typical weekend Mass?
3. Would you consider yourself a “dynamic Catholic,” exhibiting the traits of prayer, study, generosity, and evangelism? In which of these areas are you weakest?
4. What evidence do you see of the erosion of Catholic culture and beliefs?
5. Have you ever invited a non-Catholic to come to Mass or some other Catholic event? How did it go?