

# I WAS ONCE A CATHOLIC...

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"I was a Catholic once," said the lady a few yards from me in the parking lot. "Now I'm a Christian and you can be one as well." She preceded to hand a tract to a gentleman standing next to the opened trunk of his car. I couldn't help it. "Excuse me," I said to the lady "but could I too have a tract?" The lady's face beamed. "Are you saved?," she asked. "Of course I am; I'm a believing Catholic," I retorted. She looked at me as if I had bad breath or something.

She continued, "I was just telling this gentleman that I too was a Catholic - a Catholic for thirty-some years in fact. Now I've found Christ and I'm trying to tell everyone I know about salvation through Christ." "Wow, that's really something! May I ask why you left the Church?" I could tell that, by asking this question, my new acquaintance was getting excited. After all, she had probably been snubbed by dozens of people and now she has someone that she can "witness" to Christ. I didn't mind much either, but I tried not to show it.

"You see," she said, "I was born Catholic. I attended Mass every week, received the Sacraments and graduated from a Catholic school. Not once did I ever hear the gospel proclaimed. Not once! It was after the birth of my first child that a good friend of mine shared 'the gospel' with me and I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior and became a Christian. Now I belong to a 'Bible-believing' church and I'm sharing the gospel with whomever will listen." This shocked me. "You mean you belonged to the Catholic Church for over forty years and you never heard the gospel?," I said. She was getting more excited. "Yes, I never once heard the gospel of salvation preached or taught or even mentioned in the Church. If you don't preach the gospel, excuse my bluntness, but you're simply not Christian." I scratched my head and said, "that's strange. I've been a Catholic all my life and I bet I hear the gospel ever week at Church." Her smile quickly faded into a look of curiosity. "Maybe, I'm missing something," I continued. "Tell me what you mean by 'the gospel?'"

The lady reached back into her purse to pull out a little tract and said, "This tracts explains the simple gospel of salvation. It can be broken down into four easy steps. "First, we acknowledge that we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness. Secondly, we recognize that only God can save us. The third step is that Jesus Christ died on the Cross for our sins and to bring us to God. And the fourth and final step is that each individual accepts Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior to be saved." I thought for a couple of seconds and said, "If I could demonstrate to you that Catholics hear "the gospel" every Sunday, would you agree to take a closer look at the Catholic Church?" Now, she knew she had me over a barrel. "Prove it," she said. I excused myself for a second and ran to my car to grab a Missal. "Since you have attended Mass nearly all your life, you probably remember these prayers." I flipped open to the beginning prayers of the Mass and proceeded to show her how Catholics hear, pray and live the gospel message every Sunday. The first step in my new found friend's tract stated that we are all sinners in need of God's forgiveness. After the Greeting, the Mass continues to what is known as the Penitential Rite. I read loud the text to her while she followed reading silently. "I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault. In my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done, and in what I have failed to do." I mentioned that it is here in

this section that each Catholic states publicly that he or she is individually a sinner - not merely in a general sense - but specifically in thoughts, words and deeds. You can't get much more complete than that. I continued reading, "and I ask Blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and to you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God." The priest reaffirms this confession of sin by praying, "May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life." And the whole congregation says "Amen," that is, "I believe." The priest continues. "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy," and finishes by saying; "Lord show us your mercy and love. And grant us your salvation." I looked at her and said, "You see, we Catholics start every Mass with a public declaration of our own personal sinfulness and look to God for forgiveness." She responded, "But Catholics don't believe that God alone can save them. They believe Mary and the saints will save them." I shook my head in disagreement. "No, we don't. Remember what we had just read in the Mass. Catholics ask Mary, the angels, the saints and the whole congregation to pray to God for mercy on their behalf - just like I would ask you to pray for me to God. Does that mean that I look to you to 'save' me? No, of course I don't believe that. I'm just asking for your help. Besides the 'Gloria' of the Mass proves that Catholics look to God alone to save us." I began reading the Missal emphasizing certain words to prove my point: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth. Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father, we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us, you are seated at the right hand of the Father, receive our prayer. For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father." Likewise, the doxology spoken just prior to communion reads, "Through him, with him, in him; in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is your, almighty Father, for ever and ever."

As I looked up, I could see the lady intently reading the page. She couldn't believe that she had prayed these prayers for years and never noticed what it was saying. Yet, there it was in black and white. I continued with the third step - the acknowledgment that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and to bring us to God. The Profession of Faith reads, "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." In the Eucharistic Prayer 1, the priest prays: "Remember [Lord] all of us gather here before you. You know how firmly we believe in you and dedicate ourselves to you. . . We pray to you, our living and true God, for our well-being and redemption . . . Grant us your peace in this life, save us from final damnation, and count us among those you have chosen." The prayer ends with an appeal to God for salvation through Jesus Christ: "May, these and all who sleep in Christ, find in your presence light, happiness and peace. For ourselves, too, we ask some share in the fellowship of your apostles and martyrs . . . Though we are sinners, we trust in your mercy and love. Do not consider what we truly deserve, but grant us your forgiveness. Through Christ our Lord you give us all these gifts. You fill them with life and goodness, you bless them and make them holy." Similarly the second Eucharistic Prayer proclaims, "Dying you [Jesus] destroyed our death, rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory. . . Have mercy on us all; make us worthy to share eternal life with Mary, the virgin Mother of God, with the apostles and with all the saints who have done your will throughout the ages." Likewise, Eucharistic Prayer 3 reads, "All life, all holiness comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy

Spirit . . . Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, and ready to greet him when he comes again, we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice. Look with favour on our your Church's offering, and see the Victim [Christ] whose death has reconciled us to yourself . . . May he make us an everlasting gift for you and enable us to share in the inheritance of your saints . . . “ Lastly, the fourth Eucharistic Prayer reads, “Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior . . . In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death; but by rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life.” In this prayer, the congregation proclaims the mystery of faith: “Lord, by your cross and resurrection, you have set us free. You are the Savior of the world.” “You see, every week Catholics proclaim that Jesus died for them,” I said to the lady who was now searching for something to say. After a brief moment of silence, she shot a response back at me. “What about accepting Jesus Christ and their personal Lord and Savior?” She retorted. “They may be saying all this stuff, but they don't make a personal act of acceptance.” What she didn't know was that I deliberately didn't mention the last “step” of her “gospel.” I explained that if Catholics don't believe what they are praying, they ought not to be publicly proclaiming it. Since we can't read the dispositions of other people's hearts, we ought not to judge whether they truly believe what they are saying.

Next, I pointed out the last step - where Catholics are accepting Jesus into their hearts. Right before communion the priest holds up the host (which is now the body, blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord under the appearances of bread and wine) and prays. “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” And the congregation responds, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” I looked straight into the lady's eyes and said, “It is here that all those who are prepared to receive Jesus Christ walk up to the front of the church but they don't just believing in Christ or merely asking Jesus into their hearts.” “They don't?” She asked. “No,” I answered, “they receive that same Christ who died on the cross on Calvary into their mouth and into their stomachs - body, blood, soul and divinity - and become one with him in an unspeakable way. Now that's accepting Christ!”

She didn't have a response. I'm not sure that she had ever really thought about the Mass and Christ's real presence in the Eucharist because she appeared to be both surprised and intrigued. I gave her my phone number and invited her to a study group I was heading in the neighborhood which examined the Biblical foundation for Catholic doctrine. As we departed, I couldn't help but wonder how many other people, like my new friend, left the Church thinking that it had nothing to say about salvation. Yet the richness of the liturgy of the Mass and even more so Christ's real substantial presence in the Eucharist so outshines our separated brethren's “low church” prayer services that there is no comparison!

Credit to: Father Emmanuel Anyan