

Ten Ways to Better Spiritual Engagement with our Catholic Friends

Scott Brill – February 2014

In New England, there are tens of thousands of students all around us on our campuses who were baptized in the Roman Catholic church. Some of them are experiencing a vibrant relationship with God and are active in the life of the church, but many of them seem “sleepy” in their faith – indifferent or politely distant in response to invitations to go deeper with Jesus. How can we engage that larger group of students in ways that help them be more open to a transforming encounter with God?

1. First of all, we need to be willing to enter and experience the culture of the Catholic faith. For most of us this is going to be a cross-cultural experience. And the most important question for anyone to ask in a cross-cultural environment is the Prior Question of Trust (PQT). Simply, “Is what I am doing or saying right now either building greater trust or breaking trust down?” When we enter into an unfamiliar culture, we’re always faced with the temptation to judge it. “This is really different” easily leads to “I feel uncomfortable” followed by “I don’t like this” and eventually leads to “there must be something wrong with it.” PQT is a discipline that helps us fight that temptation.
2. Next, good cross-cultural ministers know that in order to have meaningful impact in a culture, they need to discover more about the culture and become fluent in its language. They also know that language acquisition happens best through immersion learning. You could read books and watch videos, but experiencing the culture directly helps build both trust and effective communication. So look for opportunities to experience Catholic faith culture and learn by putting yourself in real-life encounters.
These first two steps will seem like second nature if you’re Catholic (a “native speaker”, if you will), but there are two related temptations that you will face: you’ll be tempted to judge your friends for not having the same “alive” experience of faith that you do (and that’s pretty trust-breaking) and you’ll be tempted to see your “language mastery” as a symbol of spiritual superiority rather than a tool to help bring the living Jesus to life in your friends.

The next seven ways are all questions that we can use to gauge our friends’ “state of faith” and have good spiritual conversations that may help them be more open to change. I also hope that all of these questions will give you ways that you can practice point #2 and develop your “language learning” skills:

3. *Tell me about your family (or family background); is there someone in your family for whom faith is really important?* Always a good entry point into deeper conversation and may give clues as well to any negative or trust-breaking experiences they or family members may have had with the church. I’ve also found that often (like students who grew up Evangelical but have distanced themselves from faith) there’s a “praying grandma” somewhere in their family whom they admire or wish they could be more like. In more rare instances, they may bring up the “family hypocrite” who talks about God a lot but whose life does not embody the love of Jesus.
4. *Did you ever make Confirmation?* For me, this is a kind of diagnostic question that helps me know whether they disconnected from the church early in life or at

some point as a teenager they really did want to make their faith their own. Following up with *why or why not* will help you discern their experience of or interest in a personal, life-affecting faith

5. *What is the Mass like for you? What's your favorite part?* The Mass is the central sacramental experience of a living encounter with Jesus for Catholics. But not all Catholics experience that when they go to Mass. Your conversation could help make some of those connections for them. Plus, Scripture is everywhere in the Mass, and may provide a lot of connecting points for you. If you don't know much about the Mass, ask if they'll take you some time (more trust-building, and lots of follow-up spiritual conversations!). And I've had some crazy conversations when I share about my own favorite parts as a non-Catholic.
6. *When and where do you feel closest to God?* Always a good spiritual question for anyone, regardless of their faith background. With your Catholic friends, it may open doors to talk about experiencing God in a personal way, but also can give you an opportunity to talk about the critical importance of community (the Church) to that faith.
7. *Is there a picture or analogy that best describes God for you?* Andy LePeau has helped me a lot in understanding that while Protestants feel most comfortable describing God with words and concepts, Catholics are more at home with pictures or analogies. Both are needed; this question can help bring those worlds together in your friendship.
8. *Do you pray? Do you prefer a set prayer (Rosary, Chaplet of Divine Mercy, etc.) or your own prayers?* Set prayers have a long and rich tradition in Catholic faith practice. Knowing some of them can build trust bridges. Similar to Mass, though, they may be something that your friends find either moving or boring. This question can help you gauge that, as well as open doors to talk about your own connection to God through prayer.
9. *What part of your life or yourself would you most like to change? How do you think change happens in your life?* Being open to change is the most critical piece of our friends' potential awakening to personal faith. Here's a way to put that on the table in the conversation.
10. *Do you usually feel better or worse after the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession)? Why? How do you experience forgiveness?* It's my understanding that the words of Absolution (forgiveness) is the critical point of this Sacrament. Not to wallow in the guilt of sin, but to know the good news of forgiveness in Jesus. But not all Catholics experience that (and therefore often avoid the Sacrament). Being able to talk about sin and forgiveness is about as deep as you can go in a friendship conversation

One last caveat about crossing cultures: it's not easy, you'll feel uncomfortable a good bit and you'll make some mistakes. There is always potential for misunderstanding (your friends may find your interest in the Catholic faith strange, and you may need to reassure them you're not trying to turn them into Protestants), but that's OK. You can't influence from a safe distance (Jesus certainly didn't) and I believe this is the best way to be a true friend.

Pray, dive in, and have a great time!