

# Starting Out as an Apologist

People often ask, "How should I begin to train myself to defend my faith? How do I prepare for the inevitable knock on the door? I don't want to have to stand there open-mouthed." The best place to start your homework is the Bible. Almost every American home has one. It's either a well-worn, well-used book, or it's the book with the thickest layer of dust.

## Step 1. Blow off the dust.

**Step 2.** Open the Bible to the Gospels. Here is where you should start. St. Jerome, that wise, old Doctor of the Church, noted that a Catholic who isn't immersed in the Gospels doesn't know Christ (cf. *Comm. in Is.*, prol.). Knowing propositions about Christ is one thing, and it's needed, but reading his words and understanding the settings is crucial. It doesn't matter in what order you take the Gospels. The easiest way is to follow the order in the text: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three, known as the Synoptics, are much alike; they follow the same general order in the way that they present the material about Christ's life and teachings. The fourth Gospel, John's, is distinct. Beginning with Matthew, set aside a fixed amount of time each day until you get all four Gospels read. Plan to read slowly, but not too slowly. Some people take only one verse at a sitting. That's fine, if you've already gone through the Gospels a dozen times. If you're on your first reading or your fifth, you'll either want to read straight through or at least read in long stretches. That way you'll get more of an overview. Later you can do the detail work. The Gospels aren't long. The New Testament itself isn't long. The Gospels comprise close to a third of the New Testament, and in most printings they run about thirty pages each—just about right for a leisurely evening. So make that your goal: one Gospel a night. In four nights you'll have them done. Then re-read them, before doing anything else.

## After the Gospels

Next? Try Acts, which is about the same length as each of the Gospels. Then go to the epistles: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians. Work in the other epistles gradually, and be in no rush to get to Revelation. Take it last. You can get through everything within two weeks, reading no more than thirty pages an evening. Each evening's work is about equal to a thorough reading of the daily paper, which you may be in the habit of doing anyway. So now you're ready to do battle, right? Wrong. You've just begun. But you have begun, and that's the important thing. You've situated yourself and obtained an overview, but there's much homework to do.

## Read The Catechism

Next you should read a systematic presentation of the Catholic faith. Virtually all of the Church's teachings are present, either explicitly or implicitly, in the pages of the New Testament, but they aren't organized in an easy-to-remember manner. Now that you have read the New Testament and begun to absorb its material, you need to know how to organize and interpret that material. This is something we cannot do on our own. Many sects start precisely because someone reads the Bible and interprets a particular passage in an unusual way, then makes this normative for how they read everything else in Scripture. Rather than reading the passage in the context of the whole of Scripture's teachings, they lock on to a particular passage and give it a strange interpretation. They may be unaware of the rest of what Scripture has to say on the same subject, or if they are aware of it, they may twist the rest of what Scripture says to fit their interpretation of this passage.

The apostle Peter was very concerned about this problem, and addressed it in his letters. In 2 Peter 1:20-21, we find our first rule of Bible interpretation: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." By prophecy, he simply means anything that Scripture teaches (prophecy does not always mean predicting the future). For this reason, we must avoid the temptation to evaluate passages by simply asking, "What do I think this verse means?" Christ gave the Church teachers, and he did so for a very specific reason: to assist people in how to understand Scripture and its teachings. Therefore, rather than simply looking to private interpretations, we must look to the public interpretation of Scripture, which is what the Church has. We must read Scripture in the context of what the Church has historically understood it to mean, for it was the Church that Christ established as "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

There are significant dangers if we do not do this. The letter of Peter spoke highly of what his fellow apostle, Paul had written, but he cautioned that Paul's letters can be difficult: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16). So ignorant people (those who have not been taught the true interpretation of the scriptures) and unstable people (those who do not adhere to the true interpretation that they have been taught) can twist the scriptures to their own destruction. Strong words, indeed! Yet Scripture includes them so we would know that we must not

approach Scripture as an ignorant or unstable person would do, ignoring the context of how the Church has always understood it.

This makes it important to have a thorough grasp of the Catholic faith as you read Scripture. The best way to get an overview of what the Church teaches is to read a catechism. You may already have read one while growing up, but even if you have, it never hurts to review what the Church teaches. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (released in 1992) is the first universal catechism the Church has issued in four hundred years. Reading it requires some commitment, since it is seven hundred pages long, but it is well worth the effort. For those who are not able to invest that much time at once, there are many excellent shorter catechisms available too. (Contact Catholic Answers if you would like recommendations.)

### Learn the Objections

Next you need to learn what kinds of objections are made against the Catholic faith. Sit down and read the right stuff. Get samples of anti-Catholic literature, by ordering it from anti-Catholic groups if necessary.

After you learn what the charges are, you need to learn the responses. Don't presume that mastering the Bible will be sufficient. It's trickier than that.

True, you'll have to make much use of the Bible in your talks with non-Catholics. (Don't swallow the argument that discussing interpretations is worthless: it can be immensely worthwhile for everyone concerned.) But, as a rule, you'll find it difficult to know just where to look for the most appropriate verse unless you've studied arguments by other Catholics, which means turning to books other than the Bible. We recommend Karl Keating's *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, which is a full-length treatment of the disputes between Catholics and "Bible Christians."

All the major issues are discussed, and the positions of "professional anti-Catholics" are given in their own words, so you know exactly what they say to their own people. The Catholic position on each issue is proved from the Bible, early Christian writings, and plain, old common sense. Other practical books, by authors such as lay apologist Frank Sheed and Scripture scholar Fr. William Most, are also distributed by Catholic Answers.

There are also publications available to help you learn how to tackle anti-Catholic arguments. One of the best is *This Rock*. (Contact Catholic Answers to subscribe.)

### After Your Homework is Done

Let's flip a few pages on the calendar. You've read the New Testament any number of times. You've dipped into the Old Testament. You've read a catechism and learned its teachings thoroughly. You sent away for anti-Catholic literature. You have gone through Catholic books, such as *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* with yellow marker. You "know it all," or at least you think you know enough. This is a good start to your preparation as an apologist. More study will certainly be necessary, but now the fun begins.

### Today's Catchword: "Divisive"

If you engage in apologetics, which is the branch of theology that deals with how to defend the faith, sooner or later you will be brought up short by someone who says disagreeing with others about religion is "divisive." ("Divisive" seems to be the "in" word nowadays.) If you acquiesce—that is, if you give up ever mentioning differences of opinion and speak only platitudes—the result is that no mental progress is made, either for you or for others.

C. S. Lewis wrote about what he called "mere Christianity," more or less those positions on which nearly all Christians could agree. But "mere Christianity" is also incomplete Christianity, and it can be at best a way station, not a final destination, as Lewis pointed out in his book on the subject. He compared staying with "mere Christianity," with only those doctrines all Christians accept, as living perpetually in the hallway of a house rather than entering into one of its rooms, where the living is meant to be done. Even though we may have to go through a hallway to get to a room, it is the room that is our destination, not the corridor. Thus Lewis rightly declared that we have the responsibility to accept and embrace that set of particular doctrines which we find to be true upon investigation. We cannot stay in the incomplete (if ecumenically comfortable) no-man's-land of "mere Christianity."

And if that is true of "mere Christianity," it is all the truer of the "religion" upon which all people—Christians, agnostics, what have you—can agree, which, if it ever existed, would be a religion no one would be willing to die for.

The Ways to Handle Differences

Some have proposed the analogy of the world's religions being as different roads winding up a tall mountain, with God in a cloud at the top awaiting our arrival. The paths are supposedly all man-made conventions reaching to heaven, so no one religion is really any better than the others. However, this misconception overlooks one enormous truth. One religion's path was not paved by man from the bottom of the mountain to the top, but was paved by God down the mountain to man. That road is Christianity, and it is arrogant to prefer a man's path to the one blazed for our sake by God himself.

The fact is, not all religions lead to God. Christianity teaches that there is one God, that we have one life, and that human destiny lies either in an eternal heaven or an eternal hell. Buddhism, by contrast, teaches that there is no God and that human destiny lies in reincarnating to suffer until we use the Eightfold Path to kill our individual identity. Two more different religions can scarcely be imagined. The first step in true ecumenism is to understand others as they really are, their beliefs as they really are. There are differences between the Catholic and Protestant faiths. To pretend there are not isn't ecumenical—it's just ignorant. What is true on a grand scale in inter-religious dialogue is also true in ecumenical dialogue between Christians. There are real differences that divide people, and it's vitally important that those differences be clearly understood. After all, solutions cannot be found unless the problem is clear. What is truly ecumenical is to get around the squabbles and finger pointing, that so often obscured discussions in the past, to see what commonality there is and to cooperate based on that commonality, to the extent one's own principles aren't compromised. Let's admit it: There's much room for cooperation—not infinite room, since the real differences preclude that, but still much room. This cooperation can be all the more fruitful if we have a real appreciation of one another's position. Cooperation becomes almost impossible if we ignore differences. Fear of differences result in paralysis, not increased cooperation. This means, in the long run, that abject avoidance of "divisiveness" actually promotes present divisions, while honest and good-natured discussion of differences (and yes, of similarities) makes for fewer, not greater, divisions. The road to unity is paved with good sense, not merely good intentions.