How to Talk Catholic*

*and still get lunch invitations



A COMMUNICATION
GUIDE FOR MINISTERING
IN THE REAL WORLD

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In the beginning was the WORD

followed by a lot of other words

and all these words meant something important.

Because that's what words do.

They express and share ideas
that touch hearts and stir souls.

At least they should.

INTRODUCTION

When I first heard the word "apostolic," I was smitten. Its meaning is rich and rooted, and I liked how its roundness rolled from my mouth. Mostly, the word made me feel both smart and holy, a combination I guess I needed at the time.

But when you drop a word like "apostolic" into banter with the neighbors between games of backyard Corn Hole, you get ignored. Do it a second time and you won't be invited back. This is not pushback against religion or Catholicism. The same holds true for words like "ontological" and "syllogistic." Such words are like bread knives; they're keen and have a purpose in the kitchen, but you shouldn't pull them out on the bus.

I wrote this booklet because the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay asked me to. Well, I'm not sure this is what they had in mind, but God bless 'em for letting me and the Spirit hash it out. I'm very grateful for that because I'm sure I make their palms sweat at times.

It's worth pausing for a hat tip to Bishop David Ricken and his Round Table for their vision and courage in this regard. Upon deep-dive introspection, they arrived at a point of illumination: the Catholic Church is great at connecting with people who understand the Catholic Church, but not so hot at connecting with those who do not. And most do not, including many members of the Catholic Church.

Please be forewarned—we're going to have a little fun here, maybe even laugh at ourselves a bit. This doesn't mean church-speak is a trivial thing. I'll be first to advocate for Catholic literacy. Seriously. I once had a confirmation candidate ask me to explain the difference between Pentecost and holocaust. That's kind of a big deal.

Overall, however, if you're going to play in Texas, you gotta have a fiddle in the band, or so the lyrics say. And that means you'd better understand the difference between a fiddle and a violin. The Catholic Church has a habit of playing concertos at barn dances and then complaining that everyone is leaving the party. These pages offer a guide to meeting people where they're at, which is a prerequisite to walking life's journey with them.



Be like God and keep it simple.

So Moses, wandering up a mountain to solve the mystery of the orange glow, comes face to face with God. GOD. Now, I've had to come face to face with some harsh truths, but never THE TRUTH. I've been humbled when facing rejection, dejection, and imperfection. I've been brought to my knees by the superior wisdom of my wife and children. I can't imagine how face-down-in-the-dirt I'd be before God. Good Lord!

Moses, being a mere mortal (keep in mind this is all before he became Holy Moses), is overwhelmed. God is giving him his marching orders and God won't take *no* for an answer. Moses isn't sold on the plan. Stuttering and stumbling for a verbal foothold, he tries one last tactic to show God how ill-conceived this is. "Who will I say sent me?" he asks. It's a fair question. They're going to want to know if Moses is blowing smoke or if he has some muscle backing him up.

God's cheerful, delightful, and almost flippant response is, "I am who I am." That's it. Let's give that space to hang in the air for a moment:

I am who I am.

Perhaps sensing Moses' consternation, God shortens it: "Tell the

Israelites *I am* has sent me to you." (The italics are mine. God never actually emblazoned this text into stone.)

Just like that, the briefest sentence in the history of language, a sentence with only two words and three characters, becomes the most profound statement ever spoken. I am. The Alpha and the Omega. The Creator of all creation. The source of all life and love. I am. It is simultaneously a gross understatement and a profound super statement. It says hardly anything and all of everything. Genius, I am.

Here's the kicker: If God—GOD—can effectively self-identify with such profound simplicity, why can't we talk about following God without using words like "ecclesiastical," "evangelization," and "consubstantial"?

The intention here is not to incite some sort of churchwide vocabulary reform. Let's not get crazy. I might be a sunshine idealist about the Catholic faith, but I'm a rainy-day realist about the Catholic Church. Coadjutor and presbyterate, like mitres, are probably here to stay whether they're good ideas or not. But that doesn't mean we have to trim them with gold piping and parade them around the show ring at the county fair.

The purpose here is to inspire the faithful at ground level, Christ's feet on the street, to speak and write from the mindset of the audience, not from the mindset of the institution. This is, after all, what Jesus did. He spoke of wheat, weeds, wine, sheep, shepherds, and other things with which his audience could relate. He passed up the opportunity to pontificate on repressing the radiance of soul and spoke instead about not keeping your lamp under a bushel.

And that's the whole point—we're much more engaging when we sound relatable and compassionate rather than highbrow and institutional.

Be like God and keep it simple.

STUFF TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

- How do people encounter God when they're in conversation with you?
- Using only words you would use when out for dinner with friends, how many names for God can you identify?
- What's another way to say "Catholic" using only one- and two-syllable words?