

Why I Apologize

The uncertainty lies always in the intellectual region, never in the practical. What Paul cares about is plain enough to the true heart, however far from plain to the man whose desire to understand goes ahead of his obedience.

-George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Third Series, *The Mirrors of the Lord*

Tonight, there are 30 of you teens here. Between the ages of 18 and 22, twenty-four of you will have not gone to church for at least a year. Less than 12 of you will ever come back at all, and nearly all of you who do come back will only do so after you have children and want them to have a religious upbringing. The strange thing is, very few of you will leave because you are upset or mad at the Church. Only 4 will become atheists or agnostics, and at least 13 of you will actually have an expectation to come back at some point. You just never will.

A little over thirty years ago, I was one of those who left. Unlike most of my peers, however, I never planned to come back. It wasn't that I was particularly upset with Biblical teachings, I just felt that the church was messing up the teachings, and that it was spending too much time getting involved in things it shouldn't. I became what is properly called a "pantheist," as I saw the work of God in all the world's religions. I did accept that Christianity was the most focused and complete of God's revelations, and that the Catholic Church was the most focused and complete of all Christian churches. But even so, I felt the Church was too focused on a world that ended 2000 years ago and was refusing to admit the realities of today.

I had no one to talk to about these matters in a meaningful way. Indeed, much of what led to my aversion to the Catholic Church came from what people I trusted the most said and how they acted. But I've no doubt that my own pride would have prevented me from coming back even if I did come across someone who could talk to me in a meaningful way.

Still, religion did interest me, and I continued to learn more and more about the different religions and Christian denominations on my own. I took World Religions as an elective in college, read many books on the matter, and even accepted a few invites to go to church with someone just to see how they worshiped. But my disdain against organized worship lasted for a little over six years. While I will not describe my epiphany here in detail, it was extremely painful and humiliating experience, and I got to see for myself just how ironic God's sense of humor truly is. But the harder one learns a lesson, the better it is learned.

For at least 24 years, I have been going to Church weekly. I only missed a few because I was in a situation where it was physically impossible to do so, and almost all of those times were because of a military assignment. But for over 18 years, I only went out of humble obedience. None of my concerns had been addressed. Like Job, I merely accepted that there was a wisdom greater than I, and that it was my duty to obey it. But about 5 or 6 years ago, God saw fit to grant me some understanding.

But it still didn't come from the Catholic Church. A non-denominational minister with very strong ties to the Southern Baptist Convention invited me to do a one-on-one book study of C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. We only got about halfway through it together, but I continued when he was no longer able to attend. Through it, all the questions, doubts, observations and concerns that I carried for

nearly my entire life, but was unable to express, were finally given some understanding and a voice. I finally found a way to communicate them with the world.

I have since read all of Lewis's defining works and a good bit of the rest of his written *corpus*. But other than the sense of immense relief I experienced, what surprised me the most was the almost total absence of scriptural quotes. After reading many of the letters he wrote to friends, family, and colleagues, it is obvious that he was as familiar with scripture as anyone. It was not that he was contemptuous of scripture; it is just that he was seamlessly able to integrate Christian teachings into everyday discussion so well that no quotes were necessary. I believe this is a key to saving the Church.

From the research I have done, and as I alluded to before, the majority of those leaving the Church don't look at the things they do in the Church as bad, but rather as just something to do. When they finally leave the house and their parents, they find many other things to do as well. They can't do all of them, so they prioritize. Going to Church invariably winds up a few places below the top of the list, with the intention of getting back to it soon. But as life goes on, new things keep coming up. Eventually, Church becomes forgotten even if time to go to it finally comes around. At least until children come along. The children need something to do, so why not get them involved in the Church? But since the parents are not going to Church because they are excited about going to Church, apathy towards Church finds fertile ground for the next generation. I apologize because I want to break this cycle, as well as to address other reasons why Christianity is dying in this country.

After my epiphany, I started by joining Christian chat rooms for about two years. I still periodically debate theology with skeptics on Facebook and YouTube, and even started my own blog where I've posted things I hope Christians will think about -- things I hope will lead Christians to understand that Church is not merely "something to do." I spend a fair amount of time at work discussing anything Christian with my co-workers. I have helped one co-worker deal with losing her niece to Islam. I have provided reading material for one woman's atheistic-leaning son and grandson. I have also comforted a woman who was worried about the soul of her atheistic brother after he passed away. And of course, there is the youth group. I want to help prepare you for the spiritual war you are about to face. I want to wrap this up by sharing some lessons I've learned in apologizing the Christian faith.

The first and most important is that the first person you need to apologize to is yourself. Why are you a Christian? If you are not comfortable with your faith, you won't make anyone else, including your own children, comfortable with it either. If there are any doubts or concerns you have in answering this, don't let them fester inside you like I did. Seek out the answers and don't let obstacles stop you from continuing. The Catholic Church has been around for 2,000 years. I promise you that your concerns were shared by others and that there is an answer for you somewhere.

The next is to remember that apologetics is a marathon, not a sprint. Jesus gave us the Parable of the Sower for a reason. Much of what you do as an apologist will fail, but don't worry about that. The rewards for what does come of it will be worth the effort.

The third point is to recognize that, like me, everyone who left the church, as well as many of those who never were in the Church, have a story. Some won't share it, but many will if they feel they can trust you. Show an interest in the other person's story. At this point, open-ended questions and patience are a must.

And the final point I will bring up comes *after* you have their trust and know their story. Never

state a fact when asking a question will do. Furthermore, now that you get to present your side of the story, never ask open-ended questions. Use pointed questions that, based on available information, should lead to a particular answer. The old attorney adage; "Never ask a question you don't already know the answer to," is quite useful. It is better to let them realize for themselves that they have a flaw in their logic than for you to point it out, but merely hinting is never going to get them there. They need to be directed to the problem so they can see it.

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