

HOW TO TALK ABOUT RELIGION

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“I NEVER TALK about religion,” is a not infrequently heard boast of people, both Catholic and non-Catholic. I once heard a Catholic businessman attribute his success in life to that very boast. He said:

“I have always got along well with others and I have succeeded in business because I have invariably kept this rule: I have never talked about religion or politics with my friends and co-workers.”

The idea that this is a good rule to follow, at least in regard to religion, has taken deep roots in many people’s minds. They consider it a measure that preserves peace, that promotes charity, and prevents expressions of bigotry and prejudice and hatred. The truth is that the observance of this rule can represent the greatest possible failure in the practice of charity or brotherly love.

The topic is complicated by many factors, however, and this will be an attempt to straighten out some of the confusion that has resulted from them. It will deal 1) with the false reasons for which people decide never to talk about religion; 2) with the kind of circumstances that do make talking about religion useless and even harmful; 3) with the reasons that should inspire all Catholics to talk about religion when opportunities present themselves; 4) with the rules that should be observed whenever anyone does talk about religion

1.

A great many different arguments are advanced by those who are convinced that it is a good idea never to talk about religion with others. Some of them, understandingly, are based on practical considerations, or on experiences and observations that have led to the feeling that only trouble comes from entering into any conversations about religion. Other arguments sometimes used are more dangerously erroneous because they are based on a completely false notion of what religion means.

Some put up their practical argument in this way: “Fanatics are always talking about religion. I don’t want to be a fanatic. Therefore I never talk about religion.” The trouble with this argument is that it proves too much, as any student in logic could point out. There are fanatics on almost every subject that can be brought up in conversation—football, politics, raising children, clothes, food, automobiles, even the weather. If you should not talk about any topic that has produced fanatics, you would have to make it a rule never to talk about anything. Religious fanatics are therefore no argument against sensible conversation about religion.

Others bring up the practical argument that “religious discussions never get anywhere, and therefore should be avoided.” If that argument had any real force, we can be sure that the Son of God would never have become man, would never have preached a sermon, and would never have commanded that His followers make the truths He revealed known to the whole world. Experience itself flatly contradicts the statement that religious conversation never helps anyone to discover the truth.

Far worse than these mistaken practical arguments are those that are based on heretical or false notions of religious truth. The fact that these are favourite slogans of many Australians does not lessen their wrongness. One such is the idea that nobody can be certain about religious truth, and therefore nobody should argue about it. Another is the common opinion that all religions are equally good, and that therefore nobody should try to change anybody’s mind about religion. A third is the proposition that religion is a purely private and personal matter, and that therefore nobody should invade another’s privacy by bringing up the subject of religion.

It is surprising, and saddening, to know that there are many Catholics who use these arguments in one way or another. We hope that every Catholic who recognizes some of his own past thinking or speaking in any of them will read on here and come to grips with the truth on this important topic.

2.

While no thinking man or woman should accept the principle that religion should never be talked about at all with friends and companions, it must be recognized by all that there are times and places and circumstances in which it is

not prudent or helpful in any sense to enter into a conversation or discussion about religion. Such cases are exceptional; they can be quite clearly designated and described; they should not be taken as a solid argument for never talking about religion at all.

The first such occasion is that in which it is known by experience that there is no hope of having a friendly discussion on this topic; that rather it would only lead to blasphemy, or calumny, or ridicule of religious persons and things.

Sometimes a wife or husband in a mixed marriage will find that any mention of religion will only call forth a torrent of abuse against priests and sisters, or of blasphemy and profanity against God and sacred things, or of mockery and ridicule for those who believe in God. It is well known that such reactions to any mention of the topic of religion are usually no more than blustering efforts to smother an attraction for the truth, or to defend what the person knows to be indefensible. But so long as a person clings to the habit of thus attacking religion on the least provocation, it is prudent for others to say nothing at all about it. For the time being they must be content with prayer and good example as means of breaking down the person's unreasonable attitude. The same situation must sometimes be faced among one's companions at work in an office or shop.

There are other occasions in which to talk about religion would bring down upon one unnecessary suffering and even persecution. One member of a family which has a strong mistrust of and even hatred for things Catholic may secretly become a convert to the Catholic faith. He knows that no amount of talking to his family would accomplish anything, but that, on the contrary, he would be subjected to great opposition and mistreatment if he did talk about religion. He has sufficient reason to remain silent; even, at times, to conceal his conversion from his family. The same might hold in the case that a person would surely lose a job on which his livelihood depends if he were to talk freely about religion. The fact that he could accomplish no good by such talk, and at the same time would suffer serious reprisals, makes it prudent for him to be silent till the circumstances change.

For some persons it is imprudent to enter into conversation about religion for the reason that they are not well enough instructed to speak intelligently, or that they simply find themselves incapable of expressing themselves clearly, on this topic. Either of these reasons for avoiding all religious conversation can usually be removed by more abundant and well-chosen reading or instruction. All that is said below about positive reasons for not being afraid to talk about religion should be a spur to such reading and self-education.

3.

Apart from the exceptional cases, it can be laid down as a principle that religion is one of the most fascinating, most important, and most fruitful subjects about which one may speak to others. We are speaking here especially for Catholics, who possess, or should possess, very clear and certain convictions in this matter, and who enjoy an enviable and unshakable security and comfort as a result of the practice of their religion. For them the subject of religion should not be one that they have to force into their conversation, or, as the saying goes, drag in by the hair. It should enter into their talk as naturally and easily as do food and drink and clothes and work and money.

It is a fascinating subject, and therefore one that should be hard to avoid, for the simple reason that everybody thinks about the truths that religion is concerned with, whether they admit it or not. Everybody gives some thought to life after death, even if only to come to the conclusion that there is no such thing. Everybody wonders at times if there is a God, what kind of being He is, whether He has anything to say to human beings. Everybody has some ideas about why there are so many different religious denominations in the world, about whether all of them are good and true or none of them; about the value and purpose of churches and religious institutions. And it is doubtful whether there is anybody in the world who does not have some opinion, true or false, pro or con, good or bad, about the Catholic religion. Fascination for these and similar topics manifests itself in the fact that a priest can scarcely travel any distance without meeting someone who of his own accord brings up some question pertaining to religion. In view of all this it is strange that there should be Catholics who feel that the whole topic of religion should be taboo.

But the fascination of the subject is enhanced for intelligent Catholics, and all thinking people, by its supreme importance. No one hesitates to talk about what he considers important. A man looking for a job, or for a better job than he has, brings up the subject spontaneously in conversation with others. Communists, who think that world

revolutions and the smothering of all belief in God are important, are everlastingly talking about these things.

No topic can possess the urgency and importance, however, of the topic of religion for a convinced Catholic. It is a matter of heaven or hell for all human beings. It is concerned with the fate of individuals, not for a score or two of years or even for a long lifetime, but for endless eternity. Its importance overflows into the present world, because it is an elementary truth that peace on earth, decent family life, material prosperity for all, depend on the carrying out of the precepts of religion which lead men to heaven. The question should be, therefore, not whether it is useful to talk about religion, but how it is possible to avoid talk about a subject that has such far-reaching implications.

In addition to all this there is the fact that every true Christian must feel himself bound by the explicit command of Christ: Teach all nations. No Catholic may rightly feel that this command was directed only to the apostles, and now falls only upon their successors. It was a command laid upon everyone to whom the gift and knowledge of the true faith would ever be granted, to be fulfilled by each according to his opportunities and abilities. Surely the least that this means for every genuine Catholic is that, in his social contacts with others, he speak of the wonderful things that this knowledge of Christ has brought to him.

Moreover, the slightest reflection on the emptiness and futility and confusion in the lives of people who have no faith or who do not have the true faith provides an irresistible spur to the instinctive charity of the truly Christian heart. Anyone who has light while others grope in darkness wants to share the light. Anyone who has certainty of life's meaning and purpose cannot meet people who are groping for certainties without wanting to share his own. The zeal of converts in this matter, even though at times it needs tempering with prudence, should represent the normal thing for all true Catholics.

4.

There are certain rules that can be set down for the ordinary person's conversation about religion that will both help him to avoid certain faults and add to the effectiveness of what he says on the minds of others. These are the rules.

1. *Know what you are talking about.*

Great harm is done by Catholics who leap into conversations about some truth of religion without knowing the truth themselves. Classic examples are the Catholics who talk about indulgences as if they referred to release from a certain number of days or years in purgatory; or those who explain the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of Christ as if it were the same as the virgin birth of Jesus.

No Catholic should here say: "I don't know enough about these things to talk about them; so I don't ever offer to talk about religion." There is no such thing as a good Catholic who does not want and strive to know enough about at least the essentials of his religion to talk intelligently and soundly about them.

This is where good reading, listening to sermons, asking questions of those who know, must enter into the life of a good Catholic. This can be set down as a principle: "If you don't know enough about the essential truths of your religion to talk about them, you don't know enough to be saved." You have the duty of learning, therefore, both for yourself and for others. Good reading is the easiest and most effective way of acquiring that learning.

2. *Wisely choose occasions for talking about religion.*

Don't thrust the topic on others inopportunistly. There is a time for talking about football, and a time for talking about the weather, and a time for talking about your job, and so with a number of other topics. If someone is engrossed in a discussion of sport, you will do no good by over-obviously trying to change the topic to religion.

Wait your opportunity and it will come. Those you talk with frequently are bound at times to ask questions touching on religion. They will need comfort that only religious truths can give. They will make statements that require kindly correction. They themselves will bring up the Pope, or Catholic schools, or the Catholic attitude toward marriage and divorce and birth-control. These are your opportunities.

3. *Use your own personal experience in talking about religion.*

Persons who would not at first be interested in general theology or practice of the Catholic Church, will be interested in how these things affect you as an individual whom they know. So, for example, when the subject of confession comes up, speak about why you believe in it, what it has meant to you, how often you have gone in your

life without ever experiencing the horrible things that many people are brought up to think of as flowing from the use of confession.

Especially when others need comfort in sorrow (as everybody does at times) put your comfort into the form of the wonderful solace that your religion brings to you. It is through what your religion means to you as a living human being that others can learn what it might mean to them.

4. *To support your own explanations of religious truths, use auxiliaries such as good articles in magazines, good treatises in books, and the instructions of experts in religious truths.*

It is natural that you will at times feel dissatisfied with your own spontaneous explanations of religious truths. It requires a certain genius to select the clearest language and best imagery to explain something to another on the spur of the moment in conversation.

It is absolutely necessary that you do your best in this regard because of the importance of the personal element. But when you have done your best, offer a pamphlet, or a good article in a magazine on the subject, or a chapter in a book, to be read. Be on the look-out for magazines and books that you can refer to and pass on in such circumstances.

Above all, be ready, when the opportunity presents itself, to take a person who is interested to a priest for a full and detailed course of instructions in Catholic truth, or at least to an open course of lectures on what Catholics believe. Allay all unfounded fears by assuring such persons that they cannot possibly commit themselves, or be committed by anyone else, to becoming a Catholic until or unless they know all about Catholic truth and themselves choose to embrace it.

5. *Don't argue about religious truth; limit yourself to explaining what you believe, with charity and patience.*

By arguing we here mean trying to win an intellectual battle with a person; trying to prove that he is ignorant or stupid; trying to defend your own honor and wisdom. If you enter upon a discussion of religion with anybody, it should be with but one purpose in mind, to help that person or at least bystanders who are listening in. If it can be foreseen in certain circumstances that nobody will be helped by a discussion of religion, it is best to keep out of it.

Often people will throw out rather wild statements about religion just for the purpose of promoting a useless discussion. Don't rise to the bait. A good way to meet such statements is to ask questions of the person in a sincere and evident effort to understand what is in his mind. Don't start explaining what is in your mind till you know just what is in the other person's mind. A man in a train may throw off the statement: "I believe that all religions are equally good." Very probably he is just looking for an argument if he knows you are a Catholic. Instead of giving him that, ask questions of him: "What do you mean? Would you want to include Mohammedanism, Buddhism, spiritism, etc. in that? What do you mean by religion?" Let him talk as long as he wishes, and what began as an intended argument may end as a wonderful opportunity for explanation.

Above all, don't lose your head. Even when people make calumnious statements about all priests and sisters, or quote the most base interpretations of your Catholic practices, let charity and patience be your guides. Remember that they accused even Our Lord of drunkenness and other crimes, and He was silent. You prove nothing to anybody and you help nobody by becoming angry, sarcastic or bitter.

6. *In every sincere discussion of religion with anybody, don't fail to recommend prayer.*

It is not the truth itself that is hard for many people to accept; it is the consequences of accepting the truth. Only God knows how many arguments against the true religion have been raised and shouted, not because evidence of the truth was lacking, but because of a person's fondness for birth-control, or an invalid marriage, or some other sin. Only God's grace can remove these obstacles to an acceptance of the truth, and only humble prayer will win that grace. Urge its use on all who will listen.

The following pages present a few samples of objections to the Catholic religion which are often brought up by non-Catholics. The answers show how such objections or questions should be answered.

Why Catholics Do Not Attend Protestant Services

Question: Is it not intolerant on the part of the Catholic Church to forbid its own people to attend services in a Protestant Church, while at the same time it urges them to invite non-Catholics to attend Catholic services? If I, as a Protestant, accept an invitation from a Catholic to go to a Catholic Church on Sunday, I feel that it is only fair that my

Catholic friend should be permitted to attend my church with me on another Sunday.

Answer: It is an obligation of every human being to be true to his convictions of what is right and wrong in matters of religion. In the above question, the Catholic who does not accept an invitation to attend Protestant church services is being true to his convictions about religion. At the same time he is not asking a non-Catholic to be false to the principles of his religion if he urges him to attend Catholic services. That is because the principles underlying the Catholic religion and those that Protestants uphold are entirely different.

The Catholic Church rests on the principles that there can be only one true religion; that this one true religion can be known and understood as such by the human mind; that it possesses full authority to direct people towards heaven; that once it is known and understood, one may not in conscience act as if it were not the one true religion for example, by attending the services of another religious sect. It is not merely a law of the Catholic Church that Catholics may not attend Protestant services; it is a reasonable conclusion that every informed Catholic draws from his own understanding of true religion.

Protestant churches rest on the principles that every man has a right to use his own private judgment in matters of religion; that there is no authority in his church or in any other church that can bind him in a religious way; that he may go to the churches of different religious organizations without doing wrong, because he is free to decide on the meaning of religion for himself. According to these principles, which are basic to all Protestantism, a Protestant does no wrong by attending Catholic services; he is merely using his Protestant principle of private judgment in so doing. Thus it cannot be wrong for a Catholic to ask him to carry his principles into action. At the same time it would be contrary to a Catholic's principles and conscience to attend any but Catholic services.

Do Bad Catholics Disprove the Catholic Religion?

Objection: There is nothing in what I know about Catholic teaching that I particularly object to. In fact I find myself greatly attracted by many of the things I read and hear about as part of the doctrines of the Catholic Church. But I certainly could never entertain the thought of becoming a Catholic in the midst of the scandalous conduct I observe in the lives of Catholics around me. There are Catholics who go to church on Sunday and who brag about their religion. But so many of them use vile language, tell dirty stories, gossip about their neighbors, insult the girls in the office where I work, that the thought of being one of them is terrible. How can the Catholic Church be true when it produces Catholics of that kind?

Answer: Your objection is one that saints and good people in the Catholic Church have been wrestling with since the very coming of Christ into the world. Christ Himself wrestled with it when He talked about millstones that might better be hanged around the necks of those who give scandal to carry them down to the bottom of the sea. However, three things can help your mind to see these scandalous actions of professing Catholics in the right perspective.

1. Christ did not and could not found a Church that would automatically make everyone who entered it a saint. He left every individual free to accept or reject, to use or abuse the graces and helps He would make available in His Church. There have always been Catholics who rejected and abused the graces offered them by their religion, and there always will be. Christ prophesied this in the words: "It needs be that scandals will come, but woe to him by whom the scandal comes."

2. You are unfortunate in happening to be thrown among especially disloyal Catholics. But if only you could pass some time in the midst of some of the millions who are carrying out the teachings of their faith and using its graces, you would see in their lives a proof of the divinity of the Catholic religion and would experience an almost irresistible attraction toward it.

3. The salvation of each individual depends, not on what others do or don't do, but on what He knows that God wants him to do. There are some good people and some bad people in every religious organization. But while you may be repelled by bad example and attracted by good, you can still find out God's will for yourself only by investigating what He has revealed. You must do this by forgetting about the example of others and praying for an answer to one question: What does God want me to do?

Are Expensive Churches Necessary?

Objection: Why do Catholics build such expensive churches and institutions, some of them costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, when there are so many poor people in the world who could be helped by the money thus spent? I believe in Christ and in the Bible, but I remember that He said: "The Kingdom of God is within you." There is no need of these expensive churches, so long as we worship God in spirit and in truth, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Answer: True religion is based on the principle that the first and most important duty of all human beings is to worship and glorify God, the Lord and Master of the universe and the final end of all man's strivings. Since God made man both body and soul, and gave him the earth to use, and will reward both his body and soul *and* the manner in which he uses the earth, it stands to reason that both his body and soul and the earthly possessions he uses should enter into his worship of God. The soul worships God by acts of interior adoration, thanksgiving, love, atonement and petition. The body, which is intimately united to the soul, joins in its worship by external signs of adoration and prayer: by genuflections, by folded hands, by bows and signs of the cross, by self-denial and attendance at religious services. The possessions of man are utilized to support soul and body in their worship of God when some of them are given to erect churches, to adorn altars, to enhance the visible appeal of divine services. God created the whole man, soul and body, and He created all the material things man can own: therefore all must join in the worship of God.

As for the poor, they will not be neglected so long as the true worship of God is not neglected. A beautiful church raises the minds and hearts of all who see it or enter it to God, and the more they are inspired to think of God, the more they will think of the poor whom God loves. Destroy churches and the memory of God will grow dim and the poor will be more and more forgotten.

Certainly it is difficult to read the Old Testament of the Bible, especially the Book of Exodus, with the innumerable and detailed commands God directly gave His chosen people for building a temple in His honor, without recognizing that He wants the good things of earth to be used in man's worship of him. Christ Himself did not hesitate to worship in the grand temple at Jerusalem, nor to demand of a rich friend the use of "the upper room" he owned for His last religious service with His apostles.

On the Reason for Catholic Schools

Objection: You Catholics are all wrong in insisting on having your own schools. We have a great public-school system in this country, educating children for good citizenship. If Catholic children were forced to attend public schools, they would be better citizens, and would not be taught to put their church ahead of their country.

Response: There are a couple of points here on which our objector seems to be in a state of misapprehension.

First of all, a free democracy certainly implies that parents are free to educate their children in any way they please, so long as the ideals of good citizenship are safe-guarded. That has always been the tradition of our nation, and it has been set down in writing in a supreme court decision, which stated that the right of the parents in this matter ante-dates and supersedes the right of the state. What kind of democracy would it be, we may ask, if all children were forced to attend the same kind of schools?

Secondly, it is an entirely gratuitous statement that good citizenship is not taught in Catholic schools. Catholics, taking them by and large, are as good if not better citizens than anyone else. They assume their proportionate share in civic responsibilities. They pay their proportionate part of taxes (incidentally, helping to support the public schools as well as their own). They have more than their rightful proportion of young men and women in the military service, and their blood is shed just as freely in the cause of patriotism. Mr. J. Edgar Hoover has testified that the rate of juvenile delinquency among Catholic children is considerably less than among children with no religious training. What other tests of citizenship does our objector require?

As for the remark that "Catholics put church ahead of country," in only one case could this be true. If the State were to proscribe Catholicism or her teachings in the field of faith and morals, Catholics, believing that their church speaks with divine authority, would have to die rather than submit to such an intrusion on their conscience.

Under normal circumstances such as have always, thank God, prevailed in our nation, the Catholic regards good citizenship as a sacred duty. In spiritual matters he gives his allegiance to the church. In temporalities, he willingly

accepts the lawful authority of the state. The two spheres do not contradict each other, but rather they supplement each other in helping him to lead a good life.

This, in fact, is one reason why we have our own schools, because we feel deeply that in order to be a good citizen, one must first be educated into the knowledge and service and love of God.

Why Catholics Do Penance

Objection: I don't get the point of Catholics not eating meat on Friday. I hear that at certain times they are supposed to half starve themselves by fasting, too. What's the idea of punishing oneself like that? Isn't it just a big show?

Response: If a Catholic or anyone else were to fast and abstain merely as a means of showing *off*, he would certainly be worthy of condemnation. It was for this that Christ condemned the Pharisees. "Sound not a trumpet before thee as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and streets that they may be honored by men."

But Our Lord by no means condemned fasting and abstaining in themselves. In fact, before He began His public life, He Himself went out into the desert and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, as the gospel makes plain.

Christ was God, and obviously had no need of such penance for Himself. But He made use of it in order to set us an example. For we recognize clearly enough our own need of penance for sin, and our sinful tendencies, as human beings, we know the strength of our passions, the waywardness of our emotions and feelings.

Now just as the athlete keeps himself in good condition by rigorous training, during which time he foregoes soft foods and certain luxuries which otherwise he might make use of, so in the spiritual order, we must exercise self-denial and self-control if we are to harden the muscles of our soul, if we are to keep ourselves in good condition for the struggles with temptation which daily take place in our lives.

The Church as a wise mother knows well that if she leaves it up to the individual to do penance, very little penance actually will be done. So she says in effect:

Here is a minimum of self-denial which everyone should be able to undertake. Abstain from meat on Friday. Fast according to your ability at the appointed times. Do this and you will show your willingness to make up for defects and failings of the past, as well as strengthen yourself for future struggles.

Thus speaks the Church to her members. Surely anyone who is fair minded will find her words reasonable.

Obedience Only to God

Objection: I do not believe that any human being has the right to stand between me and God, or to command me to do anything in the name of God. Religion is a strictly personal relationship between me and God. That is my whole objection to the Catholic Church. It sets up a whole series of human beings, to whom I am supposed to give reverence and obedience, between my soul and God. I simply could not submit to such unreasonable authority.

Answer: You place yourself in some very sorry dilemmas by your insistence that you have to obey nobody on earth but only God.

Either you accept the truth that citizens must obey the authority of the State when properly exercised, or you do not. If you do not, you believe in anarchy. If you do, you do so only because God rightly delegates His authority to the duly constituted officials of the State. Again you have men standing between you and God who have to be obeyed.

Either you believe in the Bible as the inspired record of God's dealings with men and the revelation of His will, or you do not. If you do not, then you are dependent on your own inspirations, which are not worth trusting. If you do, you must see in the Bible that from the very beginning of creation, God appointed men to represent Him and to command people in His name. Moreover there are instances in the Bible itself of men being dramatically punished by the hand of God because they rejected and rebelled against the authority of His human representatives.

Either you believe in all the words of Christ because He was the Son of God, or you believe in only a part of them. If you believe in only a part of them, you should believe in none, because if Christ made a mistake only once, or said even one thing that is not worthy of credence, He could not be worthy of credence in anything. If you believe in all Christ's words, then you must accept the human authority He set up in His Church when He said, among other things, to His Apostles:

"Whatsoever you bind on earth, it is bound in heaven; whatsoever you loose on earth, it is loosed in heaven."