



# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CATHOLICITY OF ALPHA

The following article addresses frequently asked questions about the Catholicity of the Alpha course. Among these, some have asked, “Why is the Diocese of Green Bay using the Alpha course when Alpha did not originate in the Catholic Church?”

In this document are four questions and answers to be aware of on how the Alpha course can support our discipleship efforts in the Catholic Church. Recall that the four step discipleship process in the Diocese of Green Bay is as follows: 1. Discover Jesus. 2 Follow Jesus. 3. Worship Jesus. Share Jesus. These questions are detailed below.

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## 1. Did Alpha originate in the Catholic Church?

Alpha was founded in 1977 by Reverend Charles Marnham at Holy Trinity Brompton, an Anglican parish in London. However, Nicky Gumbel, an Anglican priest, oversaw the development and expansion of the Alpha course starting from the 1980’s to the present day. However, it sometimes takes an “outsider” to show us “insiders” how wise the Catholic Church is in her teachings. Incidentally, what Nicky Gumbel effectively integrated into the Alpha course are several discipleship principles and practices as taught by the Catholic Church.

What Catholic teachings are reflected in the Alpha course? For one, the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC, a magisterial document of the Church) addresses in detail what a Catholic discipleship process looks like. For instance, the GDC teaches that initiatory catechesis “looks to

what is ‘common’ for the Christian, without entering into disputed questions nor transforming itself into a form of theological investigation.” (GD, 68)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a document titled, the *National Directory for Catechesis* (NDC) calls for laying the foundation for pre-evangelization. In this document the U.S. Bishops remind us that newcomers and seekers are prepared for the first proclamation of the Gospel when their basic human needs are met such as security, love and acceptance. Yet, if truth be told, over the last several decades, it has become a common practice in Catholic parishes to immediately greet people with teachings and lectures. Without building relationships where people are known, loved and remembered, pre-evangelization is impossible.

With pre-evangelization firmly in place, there is a need for explicit proclamation of the Gospel. As St. Paul demonstrated, the foundation on which a discipleship process is built is none other than the person of Jesus Christ. (cf. I Corinthians 3:11) The GDC confirms this biblical truth by stating the following: “There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed”. (GDC, 50)

With great success, the Alpha course models this basic and introductory form of pre-evangelization and evangelization that the Catholic Church calls for.

**2. If the Catholic Church teaches that the Church of Christ exists fully only in the Catholic Church (*Dominus Iesus*, no. 14), then why is the Diocese of Green Bay using a non-Catholic resource?**

The version of Alpha that the Diocese of Green Bay promotes is an Alpha course with Catholic content. This is to say that whatever gaps exist between the content of the Alpha course and Catholic Church teachings- especially with regard to ecclesiology (i.e. life of the Church) –Alpha with proper Catholic content provides that necessary guidance to ensure a successful transition from the early stages of the discipleship process into full (or fuller) communion with the Catholic Church.

As for the Alpha videos, especially *Alpha Film Series*, it effectively engages people from all walks of life; including non-churchgoers. By explicitly proclaiming the Gospel within a setting of human experience and everyday life, Alpha serves as a suitable model of evangelization for Catholics and an effective introduction to the person of Jesus Christ for newcomers and seekers.

Furthermore, the Alpha training material provides valuable insights on missionary-hospitality. By serving a meal before the video presentation, this prepares Alpha participants for the first proclamation of the Gospel. Alpha leaders are trained to build on basic human needs during the meal and discussion by taking an interest in the lives of the participants. As mentioned in the response to the first question, this is what the U.S. Catholic Bishops referred to as pre-evangelization.

Again, the Alpha course, in accordance with Church teaching, “looks to what is ‘common’ for the Christian, without entering into disputed questions nor transforming itself into a form of theological investigation.” (GD, 68) It is designed to provide the milk of the Gospel, not solid foods. (cf. Hebrews 5:12-14) And to be sure, this is what many people need for their spiritual diet as they explore the person of Jesus Christ. Once people have been fed with milk, they are more likely to acquire a taste for solid foods (e.g. ongoing catechesis, doctrinal theological and the sacraments).

### **3. Why is there an “Alpha in a Catholic Context”? What gaps does the “Catholic context” part of Alpha address?**

Although the Alpha videos are kerygmatic in nature (e.g. proclamation of the Gospel), it is the eleventh session of the Alpha course, “What About the Church?” where the Diocese of Green Bay prefers a substitute video or a presentation with a Catholic ecclesiological context (e.g. life of the Church). Within this context, we believe that the Alpha course is one resource that Catholics can rightly commend and even use at the beginning stage of the discipleship process in order to deepen people’s Catholic faith.

In fact, the Diocese of Green Bay discipleship process is designed to move people through four stages of discipleship: 1. Discover Jesus 2. Follow Jesus 3. Worship Jesus. 4. Share Jesus. For Catholics, the discipleship process is incomplete without full participation in the Eucharistic celebration at Mass. Therefore, it is important that the eleventh Alpha session video or presentation address how the discipleship process is situated in the Catholic Church or, more particularly, the local parish; especially as it pertains to the third stage of the discipleship process known as “worship Jesus”.

Catholics and Evangelicals can agree on a great deal with regard to the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the inspiration and inerrancy of God’s Word, the dignity of human life and so much more. It has been said that that which unites us is infinitely greater than that which divides us. However, when it comes to ecclesiology or Christian doctrines regarding the nature and role of the Church, we do have our differences.

Since the Alpha course originated and has been developed in an Evangelical context, the eleventh session on “What about the Church?” calls for supplemental Catholic material. The Diocese of Green Bay provides a few options for the substitution of Alpha video #15. Substituting the fifteenth Alpha video with a Catholic video or Catholic presentation is a key piece for the use of Alpha within a Catholic discipleship process. Keep in mind this is not an exhaustive list of options:

- A presentation by Fr. James Mallon on, “What About the Church?” This is a 50 minute presentation that can be found on YouTube. It is advisable to present a 30 minute segment of this presentation to Alpha participants.

- A 30 minute segment from Robert Barron’s Catholicism video series has a high production value and therefore would serve as a good context for Catholics during the eleventh session of Alpha.
- Lastly, having a speaker from the local parish talk about how that parish can serve the spiritual and human needs of Alpha participants is of great value also; this, because it gives the Alpha participants an incentive to stay plugged into the parish where they experienced the Alpha course.

#### 4. Are members of the Catholic hierarchy and other key Catholic leaders endorsing Alpha?

Yes! Here are just some endorsements. Listed below are prominent Catholic Leaders and members of the Catholic hierarchy who endorse Alpha:

- **Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa**, *Preacher to the Papal Household*  
“In my opinion Alpha accomplishes an incredible task, in making people interested in faith and in making faith relevant to the modern man.”
- **Fr. Mike Schmitz**, *UMD Newman Center, Diocese of Duluth, MN*  
“Alpha is one of the best things happening in the Church today. For so many parishes, there is no event or program that we can be free to invite people to. But Alpha for Catholics gives us the chance to be the kind of missionary disciples that God has called us all to be. If any parish is looking for a place to be welcoming and engaging, they must offer Alpha for Catholics.”
- **Fr. Larry Richards**, *St. Joseph/Bread of Life Catholic Community; The Reason for Our Hope Foundation, Erie, PA*  
"To me, Alpha is one the best ways a parish can use to bring people to Jesus."

Members of the Catholic Hierarchy Endorsing Alpha:

- **Cardinal Mark Ouellet** - *Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, Vatican*
- **Cardinal Raymundo Damasceno**, *President of the Brazilian Bishops’ Conference and Archbishop of Aparecida, Brazil*
- **Cardinal Gerald Lacroix**, *Archbishop of Quebec, Canada*
- **Cardinal Christoph Schönborn** , *Archbishop of Vienna, Austria*
- **Cardinal Sean O'Malley**, *Archbishop of Boston*
- **Archbishop Allen Vigneron**, *Archbishop of Detroit*
- **Archbishop Rino Fisichella**, *President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the NE*
- **Bishop Eduardo Nevares**, *Diocese of Phoenix, AZ*
- **Bishop Daniel E. Thomas**, *Bishop of Toledo, OH*

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The Diocese of Green Bay honors all questions regarding the Alpha course. As such, please feel free to contact the Department of New Evangelization. In fact, if you have any questions, contact Joe Tremblay, Adult Faith Formation Coordinator, at the Department of New Evangelization:

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