

“Answers to the 10 Most Common Objections to Running Alpha in a Catholic Context”

by Dick Kiernan

Introduction:

The Alpha course from Holy Trinity Brompton Anglican Church of London is a course intended to share the basic Gospel message with non-Christians. It is also very helpful for new Christians to grow in their faith, and many life-long Christians say it has renewed their faith or challenged them in new ways. Still others say that it is the best evangelization training they have offered for their church members because it works and it is learned by doing when they serve on their Alpha team. The course involves ten weekly gatherings with a dinner, DVD (or live) presentation, and small group discussion, and includes a weekend overnight event. The Alpha course shares the essentials of the Christian faith in a non-threatening way. As it has spread across the world among various denominations, it has become very popular in the Catholic Church. The course is the same wherever it is run, but it takes on the flavor of the hosting church and for Catholics it is best described as “Alpha in a Catholic Context.” In practice this means that the small group experiences will often include discussions about Catholic beliefs and practices. Catholics who wish to explore Alpha should also consider the following resources:

“Alpha in a Catholic Context” Booklet published by Alpha USA

“Introduction to Alpha in a Catholic Context”

“The Impact of Alpha on US Catholic Parishes”

“Recommended Resources for Catholic Alpha Follow Up”

Following the summary paragraphs below, this document provides answers to the 10 most common objections from Catholics to the Alpha course.

Summary of Alpha for Catholics Facts:

Alpha is running in the Catholic Church in more than 60 countries and was offered at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany in 2005 and in Sydney, Australia in 2008. It has been endorsed by cardinals and bishops all over the world including Cardinal Keeler, Archbishop Flynn, and Cardinal O’Malley from the US. Overall Alpha has impacted 15,000,000 worldwide in 150+ countries and 100 languages. In the US 8000+ courses have been offered to 2,000,000 Americans, and 75+ Catholic parishes have run Alpha in New England (33 in NH). A study of recent New England converts conducted in 2007 found that 28% came to faith through Alpha.

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Summary of the Impact of Alpha in a Catholic Context:

ALPHA provides an opportunity to establish and/or enhance a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. ALPHA attendees routinely come to full sacramental participation in the Catholic Church. Most ALPHA participants become active in bible study, prayer groups, parish ministries and/or community outreach. ALPHA provides an important point of entry back into the Church for lapsed Catholics. ALPHA is lay-led, affordable, non-threatening, easy to present, and training is available. ALPHA works best with the blessing of the pastor. ALPHA powerfully revitalizes and builds parish community, fostering the new evangelization. ALPHA has a national Catholic board and team of leaders that can help Catholics to get started anywhere in the US.

10 Most Common Objections to Running Alpha in a Catholic Context

#1 - Alpha did not originate in the Catholic Church.

Bishop Ambrose Griffiths (retired) of Hexham and Newcastle, England answers this objection by saying that Catholics are making a mistake if they think they cannot learn something from other Christians.

Pope John Paul II also spoke of how we could “discover untold wealth” from other Christians. Here is the quote in his discussion of how the divisions in the church could actually benefit the church: *“Why did the Holy Spirit permit all these divisions? There are two possible answers to this question. The more negative one would see in these divisions the bitter fruit of sins committed by Christians. The more positive answer is inspired by trust in the One who is capable of bringing forth good even from evil, from human weakness. Could it not be that these divisions have also been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ?”* (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, p. 153).

The overwhelming number of conversions and healings through Alpha gives strong evidence that Alpha is inspired by the Holy Spirit and if this is true wouldn't it be a mistake to oppose what the Holy Spirit is blessing? It reminds us of the apostles in the early church being told not to preach the name of Jesus. Gamaliel in his wisdom said, *“Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God,”* (Acts 5:38,39). Opposing Alpha could be hindering what God is doing to rebuild Christian unity and to advance the Gospel.

Finally, Alpha is not a new ministry; it has been around for 20 years, and it has had wonderful results in the Catholic Church in more than 60 countries. Several Catholic hierarchical leaders from many dioceses around the world have endorsed Alpha, and Alpha has been repeatedly invited to World Youth Day.

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#2 - Alpha Does Not Teach All the Essentials of the Catholic Faith.

Bishop Griffiths (mentioned above) also addresses this concern by saying that it is impossible for a 10 week course to cover all the essentials of Catholic teaching. He explains that Alpha is only meant to be a beginning course that Catholics can build on. In a similar way, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the papal household, endorses Alpha and explains that it is meant to introduce us to Jesus, and leave it to other Church departments to follow up.

Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher to the Papal Household

“... we need a new evangelization which, while being open to all the fullness of the truth and the Christian life, will yet be simple and basic. This is the reason why I look with interest and appreciation to the Alpha Course. It seems to me that it answers precisely this need of ours. The very name shows this. It is not called “Alpha and Omega course” but simply “Alpha Course” because it doesn’t claim to lead people from beginning to end in faith; only to help them get acquainted with it, to foster a personal encounter with Jesus, leaving it to other Church departments to develop the newly rekindled faith.”

Fr. James Mellon from Nova Scotia has produced a Catholic follow up to Alpha that he calls Catholicism 201. He has had wonderful success running Alpha and he says that Alpha covers 70% of what the Catholic Church teaches. He has developed Catholicism 201 for the purpose of covering 20% of what he calls the distinctive Catholic teachings not covered in Alpha and 10% on moral teachings. There are many great Catholic programs that do not teach all the essentials of the Catholic Faith.

Consider a few excellent Catholic renewal programs: Renew, Cursillo, Life in the Spirit Seminars, Disciples in Mission. Do we expect any of these to teach all the essentials of the Catholic Church? Of course we don’t, and this reflects our basic understanding of Catholic evangelization—that conversion is a process and anyone who is expecting any one program to do this does not understand this basic Catholic concept. It is like Math—you have to learn to do basic computations before you can do Algebra, or it is like education—you have to go to high school before you can go to college. Catholic evangelization starts with Jesus and leads to all other teachings as a process.

Since the main goal of Alpha is to proclaim the Gospel, we really are expecting it to embody the kerygma (preaching for conversion) that the apostles delivered in the early church. We should also expect this kerygmatic preaching to contain the basic truths that we find in the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed from the early church. By this criteria we see that Alpha really contains a very full Gospel message, introduces the basics of discipleship, and as Fr. Cantalamessa states, “it is open to the fullness of truth.” Further below we will address the essential aspects that should be part of Catholic evangelization.

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#3 - Alpha Contradicts Catholic Teaching and is harmful to Catholics.

The Vatican invited Alpha to World Youth Day at Cologne, Germany in 2005 and then in Sydney, Australia in 2008, and hierarchical leaders from around the world have endorsed Alpha. Despite all these Catholic recommendations, there are some individuals that claim that Alpha contradicts Catholic teaching and is harmful to Catholics.

As Alpha began to spread around England and Europe in the early 1990s, Catholic Alpha leaders (and many others from other denominations) began to talk to Nicky Gumbel about the teachings of Alpha. In his desire to present what C. S. Lewis calls “Mere Christianity” –the teachings that all Christians hold in common, Nicky went to great lengths to present the Gospel and basic teachings of Jesus in ways that would honor other Christians. For example, at a training given in Washington, D.C. in 2003, Nicky explained at great length how several denominations understood the work of the Holy Spirit and how he decided to emphasize “being filled with the Holy Spirit” as the best image to negotiate the many denominational views. Nicky joked about this saying that our Pentecostal brethren were used to “shouting for the Holy Spirit” to come down, and Nicky asked them if they would be willing to just lay hands on people and quietly and gently pray for the Holy Spirit to fill their Alpha guests. The brethren agreed to try this and they were glad to report that the Holy Spirit still came even when they didn’t shout! In a similar way, Nicky consulted with various theologians about how to speak about the Lord’s Supper, and some advised him that if he found a way to negotiate this he would receive a Nobel Peace Prize! The French Bishops in fact did approach Nicky about various Catholic issues related to Eucharist and teachings about the church, and Nicky has constantly worked with Catholics to find ways to honor our Catholic concerns. Regarding this particular issue Nicky was glad to refer to the Lord’s Supper as Holy Communion and the Eucharist. After these changes were made the French bishops fully endorsed Alpha and Alpha is having a major impact in transforming the French Catholic Church and bringing many people to faith and reengaging them in the life of the parish and the wider Church. These and other edits are reflected in the various editions that have been published, and this is an ongoing process with new issues being introduced from time to time.

Recently a Catholic leader expressed his personal conviction that it is not enough to speak of the importance of the Lord’s Supper and of the reception of the Eucharist, and until Alpha is amended to speak about the fullness of our unique understanding about the Eucharist; it remains deficient and contradicts Catholic teaching. This view is really related to the desire for Alpha to teach all the essentials of the Catholic Church all at once (Objection #2). What Alpha presents about the Lord’s Supper as Holy Communion and Eucharist is faithful to what we believe, and as discussed further below, it is not necessary, or even possible, to teach the entire body of the Catholic faith in one sitting.

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4.- Alpha is Too Fundamentalist or Biblical or Evangelical or Protestant or Pentecostal or

...

There are other Catholics who find the teachings of Alpha to be too fundamentalist or too something and they are uncomfortable with this as Catholics. Alpha does in fact strive to present a full expression of the Gospel including valid practices that are part of other Christian streams, but it does so in a very balanced manner. For example, Alpha does invite people to conversion and to follow Jesus which is very common in Evangelical circles. But it also speaks about the importance of Baptism, Holy Communion, and the church in a manner which is most comfortable for Catholics and churches having a sacramental tradition. On the weekend Alpha introduces the person and work of the Holy Spirit in a manner which is more familiar to Pentecostals. Nicky Gumbel also speaks about the importance of the social Gospel in a manner which is more familiar to Catholics and other main line Christians. While all of these expressions of faith are part of the fullness of our own Catholic tradition, in practice Catholics may not fully live these out, and rather than avoiding these challenges, they are opportunities for growth (i.e. calling people to conversion and embracing the gifts of the Holy Spirit).

The inclusion of various valid aspects of the Gospel in Alpha is wonderful and part of our Catholic experience; however, it can be uncomfortable for anyone who is not as familiar with these experiences. For example, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are often experienced in Catholic renewal circles, but this may be a new experience for some Catholics. In summary, there are some Catholics who find elements of Alpha unfamiliar at first, but experience shows that they soon grow used to these elements. Here is an example to illustrate subjective judgments about Alpha: in a letter to the editor of the May/June issue of *Catholic Answers* in 2008, a Catholic from London said, *“I am certain that Alpha is not healthy for untutored minds and wonder if you have anything that I could use to respond.”* The reply from *Catholic Answers* identifies the many Catholic leaders that have endorsed Alpha as well as the various controversial reviews about Alpha that can be found. *Catholic Answers* then goes on to state that Alpha is closely related to the “Toronto Blessing” movement which included, “scandalous behavior in church: violent movements, howling like animals, shouting, compulsive laughter—all presumably gifts of the Spirit,” and then indicates that Nicky Gumbel endorses these manifestations.

Catholic Answers’ response is an example of an unverified, negative view that the writer and the editor express reflecting their general lack of acceptance of aspects of the Alpha course. I personally have been involved with Alpha for nine years and have attended numerous national and international conferences, and there has never been anything faintly resembling these manifestations in the Alpha course, nor have they been endorsed in any manner. Overall this illustrates how some Catholics may reject Alpha

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because of their subjective feelings or superficial impressions about aspects of Alpha without really understanding its value.

Alpha Objections From Catholic Factions: Progressive Catholics vs. Catholic Separatists

The problems mentioned in Objections #3 and #4 are reflective of issues occurring within the Catholic Church that has very little to do with Alpha, but have a great deal to do with incorporating the teachings of Vatican II into the life of the church. To bring clarity to this issue, in 1985 Pope John Paul II gathered the bishops of the world to discuss this issue of divisions among the church related to the pastoral implementation of Vatican II. Apparently after the council some people were reluctant to implement various reforms, while others exceeded the boundaries of these reforms and this resulted in new factions in the Catholic Church.

That same year Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict the XVI) spoke of this in “The Ratzinger Report,” and explained that those who did not accept the reforms of Vatican II were resisting the Holy Spirit’s work in the council, while those who went beyond the council were also going beyond the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These two factions of “progressive” and “conservative” Catholics have developed rhetoric and priorities that are mutually exclusive and ultimately divisive. Either of these factions may become locked into their conservative or progressive viewpoint and will then criticize anything and everything that does not include their agenda!

As a result, those who may be conservative Catholics may reject the new reforms of Vatican II including the call to ecumenism. They may become “Catholic separatists” and reject any efforts to build Christian unity, and this is why they are uncomfortable with Alpha. On the other hand, others who have gone beyond the council may develop their own independent beliefs and practices and develop a “new morality.” In many instances these “progressive” Catholics prefer to let everyone believe whatever they like, and they may begin to be more like Unitarians than Catholics. Since they are rejecting the foundational beliefs of Christianity, they are uncomfortable with Alpha.

As either of these factions emphasizes their own favorite beliefs and practices and develops mutually exclusive viewpoints, Alpha or any program that does not take on these biases will be rejected, and this causes these factions to avoid using an excellent tool for the new Catholic evangelization.

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#5 - Alpha is Too Individualistic and Ignores the Importance of Community and the Church.

Some Catholics think of Alpha as a new expression of Evangelicalism that they identify with televangelists. Some call this “me and Jesus” Christianity that is totally oriented toward the individual and ignores Christian community and the church.

In fact, Catholic teaching does emphasize that Christian living involves both the individual and community. For example, in the second chapter of the General Catechetical Directory of 1971, it repeatedly states the need for evangelization and catechesis to involve both the individual and the community.

Some people who reviewed Alpha noticed that the talks did not address the community or the church until the last talk and concluded that Alpha is too individualistic. In actuality, Alpha is highly oriented toward the community and the church. In the presentation of the Alpha course, there is a large team of people who are modeling the concept of Christian community in action. Every evening the Alpha course begins with a meal for the purpose of forming friendships. Following the DVD talks all the guests are involved in small group discussion. In reality, Alpha is a tremendous picture of the church community demonstrating its love of people outside of the church, and a superficial review of the Alpha materials will miss this reality.

These reviewers also make the same mistake regarding the importance of the church. Since “What About the Church?” is the last talk in Alpha, they conclude that Alpha does not properly emphasize the role of the church. In fact, Alpha recognizes the reality that the church is very unpopular with the un-churched culture of our times, and it begins with other essentials of the Gospel such as Jesus and then presents the mission and importance of the church at the end. Again, it is interesting to note that part III of the General Catechetical Directory concerning the Christian message says that the Gospel must be presented in an effective way and the four essential hierarchical truths of the Gospel (the Trinity and creation, the incarnation of Christ, the atonement of Christ and salvation for the world, and the grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments and the role of the church in the life of a believer) can be presented in any order, and that is what Alpha does. As a footnote to this, it is interesting that one of the strongest values of Alpha is “the love of the whole church” and the outreach of Alpha to so many different denominations shows how much the importance of the church is valued, and this shows that it is not possible to think of Alpha as being too individualistic. The Decree on Ecumenism from Vatican II calls Catholics to take the first steps to reestablish Christian unity—and our Anglican brethren from Alpha are showing themselves very faithful in this regard. Finally, in January 2008 Nicky Gumbel was invited to the Vatican to be a keynote speaker in a symposium on parish evangelization. If we think Nicky Gumbel is too individualistic and not concerned with parish life, why was he invited to speak at the Vatican about his church as a model of

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parish evangelization? Alpha actually models what the Catholic Church highly values—the discipleship of individuals who are fully committed to living out the faith in a community of believers.

#6 - Alpha Does Not Value the Sacraments.

Again, some Catholics who review the content of the Alpha course expect the full content of all the Catholic Sacraments to be included. In some ways this objection has been answered in point #2 above which states that evangelization is a process and no one course can be expected to contain the fullness of Catholic teaching. However, as Catholics we believe that the Sacraments are essential in our response to the Gospel, so let’s consider how Alpha values and includes the sacraments.

In the talk “What About the Church?” the Alpha course does recognize baptism as “a visible mark of being a member of the church” and “it signifies cleansing from sin, dying and rising with Christ to a new life, and the living water that the Holy Spirit brings to our lives,” (Questions of Life, 2006, p.205). The Alpha course also speaks about the church as a holy temple, and in this context it speaks of the Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, and Eucharist, (Questions of Life, 2006, p. 212-13).

As in previous examples above, the Alpha course demonstrates much more about the sacraments than what appears in the course inside of the talks. For instance, the Alpha weekend away may include the celebration of Mass, and Nicky Gumbel leaves it up to the host church to hold their own church service. Catholics have always been advised that the weekend away (or day away if just on a Saturday) is a time to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Eucharist. Of course, guests who are not Catholic are invited to receive a blessing, and the process of RCIA and the catechumenate can be introduced. In this way, every church offering Alpha can be true to their own traditions and convictions about the reception of the sacraments, and so Catholics can offer Alpha and remain true to its teachings about the importance of the sacramental life.

Beyond the Alpha course content and the weekend away, Catholics should consider that the living out of the sacramental graces is implicitly integrated into the Alpha course in a variety of ways. For example, Nicky Gumbel speaks about the “common priesthood of all believers,” which Catholics receive in our Baptism, and this encourages Catholics to live out their call to sanctify the world by living holy lives. (LG, #11, AA, #6-8). The emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and the talk, “Telling Others,” helps many cradle Catholics to become more fully engaged in the Sacrament of Confirmation and advance the kingdom of God as “soldiers of Christ.” The same is true of the Sacrament of the Sick as Alpha guests recognize that the Holy Spirit anoints the priest to pray for the dying, as well as equips all the baptized to pray for healing and every need following the example of the 72 others who were lay people (Luke 10; AA, #33).

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In the talk, “How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?” the topic of holy living, sexual purity, and marriage is introduced, and “The Marriage Course” which is often recommended as a follow up to Alpha, does a wonderful job introducing God’s grace in married life. In “Searching Issues,” which is a book to prepare small group leaders for difficult questions, Catholics can also be thankful that Alpha introduces the Trinity and reinforces Catholic moral teaching about pre-marital sex and homosexuality. So a closer look at Alpha shows that there really is a strong foundation of sacramental and moral theology present which implicitly values all the sacraments.

When Alpha is offered in a Catholic context it is very common to expect that the sacraments and other Catholic topics will come up. Alpha encourages the guests to “Ask Any Question,” so this is one way that these Catholic topics will come up in the small group discussions. Catholic small group leaders can be trained to use these questions as opportunities to help the guests to explore specific Catholic topics and make references to Catholic teachings. The last talk, “What About the Church?” is also an important time to introduce the RCIA process and follow up courses to help people continue to grow into the fullness of the Catholic faith. Finally, Alpha comes out of the Anglican Church and as a whole recognizes the ministerial priesthood and so Anglican priests and bishops recognize and model the Sacrament of Holy Orders, but not with exactly the same sense as Roman Catholics. Based on all these facts we see that Alpha does in fact value the sacraments and Bishop Sandy Millar, the former vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, the founding church of Alpha, states that as an Anglican priest, Nicky is actually very strong in the sacraments, but the reviewers miss this when they only see Nicky as the speaker in the Alpha course.

#7 - Alpha Has a Congregational or Protestant Theology of the Church

The theology of the church is known as ecclesiology, and Vatican II had a whole document on this called *Lumen Gentium* which means “the light of the nations.” If you compare the content of this document with Alpha’s “What About the Church?” it is interesting to find that nearly all the topics covered in this brief introductory talk overlap with this key document. The talk includes sections on “the people of God,” “the body of Christ,” “the family of God,” “a holy temple,” and “the bride of Christ.” In the statements above it has already been mentioned that Alpha comes from the Anglican Church that includes the ministerial priesthood, bishops, and synods of bishops—in other words along with the Eastern Orthodox Church they are the most hierarchical non-Catholic church in existence. Although Nicky Gumbel does not mention or emphasize the hierarchical nature of his church in this talk, his life is an implicit witness to this. Further, one of Nicky’s highest priorities is to foster Christian unity (which he speaks of in the talk on the church) and we see this exemplified by his efforts to establish a relationship with the Vatican which began in November of 2004 when he met with Cardinal Ratzinger

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(soon to become Pope Benedict XVI) and followed up with a meeting with Pope John Paul II.

In the talk “What About the Church?” Nicky mentions the universal church in the section on the People of God, and then he goes on to speak about the local church, small gatherings within their church, and finally small groups. Some critics claim that his discussion about these three groupings proves that Nicky has a “congregational” theology of the church. Congregational churches are known as independent churches where each congregation votes on all decisions. They determine who the pastor will be, what they will believe in, and they send delegates to vote on what their church denomination believes—in other words it is a very democratic model of church and not at all what Nicky Gumbel speaks about or lives out as an Anglican priest. Apparently this criticism is not valid because it has taken this small section out of the context of the whole talk.

#8 - Alpha’s Small Group is too open ended, relativistic, based too much on personal experience.

In the Alpha course the evening begins with dinner and the team focuses on forming relationships (during the dinner the team is actually taught to avoid faith conversations and primarily build friendships). The next part is the DVD presentation given by Nicky Gumbel on some aspect of the Gospel or on the essentials of discipleship, and after the DVD there is an open ended small group that encourages participants to share their questions or share their thoughts and feelings, in other words it is based on their experiences of life.

As Catholics we have another Vatican II document called, *Dei Verbum* (“the Word of God”), that declares that our Catholic beliefs are based on Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the Magisterium. These authoritative sources help us to discern everything we believe to be true, and based on this foundation some Catholics believe that any and all errors or false beliefs that any people hold must be corrected in the Alpha small group.

The audience of Alpha is made up of unbelievers, seekers, and very often Catholics who are not sure they believe in the Scriptures, and they are even less certain that they believe in traditional Catholic teaching or the teaching authorities of the church (Magisterium, i.e. the pope and bishops). So how can we speak in the authority of the church or correct people who do not believe in the church or even in Christ the Lord? Alpha follows Jesus’ example of being intentional about meeting people where they are at but loving them too much to leave them there. Alpha is a step in a process leading toward the fullness of Catholic discipleship. How do we expect this to happen?

First of all *Evangelization in the Modern World*, (Pope Paul VI, 1975) emphasized Catholic evangelization as the process of conversion. Unlike Evangelical Christians who emphasize a single moment of conversion, Catholics emphasize the entire process.

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According to this document the process of evangelization is effective if we are authentic witnesses showing the love of Christ to people. Many Catholic leaders have pointed out that in Catholic evangelization it is impossible and undesirable for any short course to contain the fullness of Catholic teaching so we work with people where they are at. The quote in point #2 above by Fr. Cantalamessa from the Vatican emphasizes this point; (Fr. Cantalamessa is the preacher to the papal household).

Next, the *General Catechetical Directory* of 1971 (GCD) lays out a number of key principles related to evangelization and catechesis. First of all, this document makes a distinction between evangelization and catechesis, and it goes on to describe four key elements that must be part of the initial proclamation of the Gospel: the Trinity and creation, the incarnation of Christ, the atonement of Christ and salvation for the world, and the grace of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments and the role of the church in the life of a believer. Following the initial proclamation of the Gospel this document emphasizes that catechesis must include a plan to teach the fullness of the faith. The latter part of the document speaks about the methodology of catechesis and it values an inductive and deductive approach. This is exactly what Alpha does: the inductive approach makes a case for the Gospel, and the deductive approach asks people to think about the message in light of their experiences to come to understand its meaning. The GCD also challenges the church to find methods that are relevant and effective in our times and many people are realizing that Alpha is doing this. It is ironic that some Catholic reviewers of Alpha overlook the GCD as it calls for the Catholic Church to foster unity with other Christians. This document is a hidden treasure that can enrich and challenge us, and Alpha intuitively embodies what the GCD calls for in an excellent way.

#9 - Alpha is acceptable for evangelization but it shouldn't be offered for Catholic catechesis.

In 1997 the General Directory of Catechesis (GDC) further developed our understanding of a

“global vision” of evangelization and called for us to incorporate all its essential aspects in its full expression (GDC, #46):

Indeed they are so important that, at times, there is a tendency to identify them with the action of evangelization. However, "no such definition can be accepted for that complex, rich and dynamic reality which is called evangelization". (105) There is the risk of impoverishing it or even of distorting it. Evangelization, on the contrary, must develop its "totality" (106) and completely incorporate its intrinsic bipolarity: witness and proclamation, (107) word and sacrament, (108) interior change and social transformation. (109) Those who evangelize have a "global vision"

(110) of evangelization and identify with the overall mission of the Church. (111)

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In other words, our evangelization must integrate the fullness of the experience of following Christ and hold in tensions all its essential elements—some quoted here and developed further in the document. As mentioned above in this article, the Alpha course and the founding church, Holy Trinity Brompton, embody all of these elements. For this reason Cardinal O’Malley of Boston gave his approval of Alpha as both a tool for the pre-catechumenate as well as for ongoing adult religious education:

Cardinal O’Malley, Archdiocese of Boston

Many of our Catholic parishioners have benefited from the Alpha program by way of its building on their initial interest in the Church, as a pre-catechumenate experience, or for others, a renewal of their desire to more deeply understand and live their Catholic faith. Life-long faith formation is a priority for our religious education programs and I am grateful for the efforts of those who seek to assist with this important work. Should pastors of our parishes wish to utilize the Alpha program as part of their religious education curriculum they can do so with my approval.

When Alpha was first offered to Catholics in the United Kingdom and then in France, various bishops and Catholic leaders reviewed the Alpha course and asked for various revisions in areas that appeared to be in tension with Catholic teaching, and Alpha is willing to continue this process to be sure there is nothing in Alpha that will hinder Catholics from coming to the fullness of our Catholic faith. In reality there are many new or renewed Catholic practices that were reintroduced in Vatican II that are new to cradle Catholics. For example, reading the Bible and evangelizing are two “Catholic” experiences with which most cradle Catholics are not familiar. This is why Catholic leaders like Cardinal O’Malley are finding Alpha so helpful, because it is helping Catholics to become more faithful to our church teaching without contradicting our Catholic faith. For a fuller understanding of how Alpha does this request the article “Introduction to Alpha in a Catholic Context” to discover 10 specific Vatican II documents and experiences that will help ordinary Catholics grow toward the fullness of our Catholic faith and embrace the lay apostolate. Alpha is doing an outstanding job in helping Catholics to be more faithful in living out the fullness of our faith in an effective and nonthreatening way.

#10 - The success of Alpha will cause Catholics to reject Catholic teaching and leave the church.

It is very true that Catholics are leaving the church in large numbers, but it is not because of Alpha. Some dioceses are reporting that less than 20% of their parishioners are attending church. This present crisis is an opportunity for the church to embrace the new evangelization, and Alpha is among the most effective tools of our times having currently reached 15,000,000 people around the world including Catholics from more than 60 countries. If we just embrace the work of the Holy Spirit which produced Vatican II we will see great renewal and “the new springtime of Christianity” that Pope John Paul

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He prayed for. (For more on this read what Pope Benedict XVI had to say in chapter 2 of *The Ratzinger Report*, Ignatius, 1985). Actually parishes that are running Alpha continually report that Catholic Alpha guests become fully engaged in the life of the parish.

Next, does Alpha cause Catholics to reject elements of our Catholic teaching? Over and over we have heard Nicky Gumbel speak at training conferences about Pope John Paul II, the new Catholic evangelization, and the need for other Christians to consider how Catholics show us that evangelization must include caring for the whole person. In this context Nicky speaks about Catholic missionaries who have built orphanages, hospitals, and schools. Nicky is not only affirming Catholic social teaching and our understanding of evangelization, but in general he is also inviting all Christians to recognize and honor the pope and some of our distinctive Catholic teachings. Nicky goes out of his way to meet with Catholic leaders. He first met with Cardinal Ratzinger in November of 2004, just months before he became the pope. As mentioned in other places, the Vatican has welcomed Alpha to the World Youth Day gatherings, and Nicky Gumbel has been a repeat speaker at the Vatican and at Catholic conferences. Nicky Gumbel has affirmed the Catholic Church so much that some people believe he is the greatest friend of Catholicism outside the Catholic Church! So we can assert that Alpha not only challenges Catholics to embrace the new evangelization and Catholic teaching, but it also invites the rest of Christendom to honor and value our Catholic faith.

Conclusion: Catholics Need to Revisit Alpha

Although the Vatican has repeatedly invited Alpha to be presented at World Youth Day events, and bishops, priests, and Catholic leaders from all over the world have embraced Alpha with wonderful results, there have been various reviewers and critics who for one reason or another may have misjudged Alpha or misinformed Catholics. However, the fruit of Alpha in the Catholic Church from more than 60 countries continues to prove that Alpha is in fact a great tool for the new Catholic evangelization. If you are still unsure—take this challenge: Revisit Alpha and examine the fruit of experiences wherever Alpha has been run in the Catholic Church. Not everyone will have been converted and there will always be a few critics, but everywhere that Alpha has been run you will find it is having a positive impact on local parishes and on individual Catholics and seekers. For more information on the teachings of Alpha request “Alpha in a Catholic Context” booklet or “Introduction to Alpha in a Catholic Context.”

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“Answers to the 10 Most Common Objections to Running Alpha in a Catholic Context”
by Dick Kiernan



Rev. Nicky Gumbel meets with Pope John Paul II in November of 2004.