

Marketing Your Catholic Bible Study

by Matthew Pinto

The idea of studying the Bible is a daunting task for many Catholics. Perhaps equally as challenging is the task of convincing your fellow Catholics to join you on the adventure. Some Catholics feel uncomfortable with sounding too “slick” or aggressive in their promotional efforts of a religious message. “We’re mixing the secular with the sacred,” they say. Still others simply do not know how to do it: They are not sure what to say from the pulpit, how to put together a flyer, or how to write an effective bulletin announcement.

The result is usually a low turnout at Catholic events.

This simply cannot continue if we are going to implement the Gospel’s call to bring God’s love and truth to a world in need. This also flies in the face of Blessed John Paul II’s call for a New Evangelization, which must involve a new boldness and innovation in proclaiming the Gospel.

The Catholic Mindset

You may have heard the phrase, “The Church moves slowly and prudently. This is why it has been around for 2,000 years.” Although this may be a brilliant approach to engaging the culture, there are times when good old-fashioned “chutzpa” and savvy are needed. For ninety-eight percent of its history, the Church primarily relied on the clergy and religious to handle most tasks where it interfaced with the world. There has been a dominant “Father is supposed to do that” mentality that is just starting to recede.

Over the past thirty years or so, the laity, in noticeable numbers, started to take seriously the call of Vatican II to use their gifts and influence in the culture for the sake of the Gospel. In short, we are still new at this “apostolate thing.”

The result has been, for the most part, substandard marketing and promotion of Catholic products and events. This has resulted in our either being outdone by the culture (and losing people to it or to other faiths who understand the power of good marketing) or simply concluding that we are destined to have a small number of people show up for those carefully planned events put on by eager church staff or volunteers.

There’s Little Virtue in Being Mediocre

In the parable of the talents, Jesus praises the man who takes the five talents given to him and doubles them. Because he was faithful in small matters, our Lord gives him more responsibility. Conversely, Jesus rebukes the man who, out of fear, buried his one talent. Christ took that one talent away from him and gave it to the one who doubled his investment (Matthew 25). Despite Scripture’s call here and elsewhere to be good stewards of our own gifts and the resources God gives us, there seems to be a perceived virtue on the part of Catholics in appearing seriously understated in our promotional material.



Over my twenty years in Catholic apostolates, I have encountered many situations where a particular person or ministry said, “We don’t want to have our materials look too good because we don’t want to appear like we have money.” Sure, we don’t want gold foil and 3-D graphics on our promotional inserts in the Sunday bulletin, but we should invest in good design. We should spend an hour brainstorming headlines that will grab attention.

Whether we realize it, we are competing against *American Idol*, *NCIS*, and *Dancing with the Stars*. We are competing against Saturday soccer games and Creative Memories evenings. We need to give people a reason to choose our offering over another.

Although we have the Holy Spirit on our side, God has ordered things in a way wherein He works through nature. So, we can't just assume that "if we build it, they will come." We need to promote it as well—and we need to do it in a manner that honors our Lord.

Just as the Church saw that its churches should be beautiful and ornate because they give honor to God, it also realized that such beauty spoke to the human heart at deep levels. And so, if marketing is good enough for Jell-O or Tidy Bowl, it's certainly good enough for Bible study programs.

Understand Your Actual Needs and Resources

In the secular world, marketing teams ask themselves a series of basic questions to determine the scope of the task at hand. From this information, they can craft the intensity and cost of their marketing program.

As Bible study leaders, we should ask ourselves similar questions so we can begin to grasp and execute the marketing task at hand.

Some of these questions include:

1. How many people do I want at my Bible study? For a variety of reasons, you may want just fifteen to twenty people at your study. Or maybe you want 450. The answer to this question will drive much of your plan. It may also be driven by factors, such as a limited budget. You may only be able to employ strategies that will reach just a few people. Once you determine your number, you can then begin to figure out the best strategies to reach these people. For example, if you only want twenty people, you may spend no money and simply make forty personal invites to friends and parishioners. If you want 200 or more, you should plan on a budget of a few hundred to a few thousand dollars to effectively get the word out.
2. From what distance, locale, region, or geographic area do I want to draw? If you are only marketing to the parish, your cost will be much less than if you're marketing to the whole diocese.
3. Is there a specific type of person/demographic I want at the study? (Women? Teens? Adults?) Knowing who your desired "buyer" is will determine not only how you craft your message, but where you place that message.
4. How much money do I have to promote? This is a fairly straight forward question to consider. If you have a lot of money, you can do a lot of promotion. If not, you generally need to rely on "guerilla strategies," which are generally low-cost, personal promotional efforts. *Note:* We Catholics too often succumb to the (generally) false belief that, "We don't have the money to market." Money can usually be found, if the idea and marketing strategies are good. We also need to start budgeting more for such promotion. As well, it is often the case that if we spend the money on marketing, the proceeds from our programs will actually pay for—in total or in some manner—the parish's personal investment. (See "Marketing Expense Ranges" below for specific marketing recommendations based on your group's financial situation.)
5. How much time do I have in advance of the study to promote it? We recommend that you "make time your friend" versus put your promotional efforts under a serious time strain. Ideally, for big events, you should send a "Save the Date" or other announcement several months in advance. For most other events, you should generally begin marketing about eight weeks before the Bible study begins.
6. Know your "buyer." What is in the heart of your potential buyer (the person who wants to have a program like this in his or her life)? What need are you satisfying? Why will they want to come? What words can you share

to pique their interest? These four questions are here so you can really tap into the mindset of your typical or desired “buyer.” By understanding how such a person thinks and what his or her needs and desires are, you can effectively craft your headlines and opening body copy and get more people to take you up on your offer.

7. Are you hungry to share the life-changing experience one can receive when the Bible is a part of our devotional life and study? Are you comfortable in the role of promoter? I put these two questions last because I first wanted to have you and your team feel confident that you can figure out the marketing by answering the questions above. Once you’ve done that, you can get a more objective answer to these two questions.

Remember, marketing is generally not that complicated. It simply requires some basic brainstorming, adopting of the obvious strategies, and then faithfully executing those strategies.

Some Words from “The Word” to Support Your Efforts

Matthew 28:19

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Reflection: We are called by our Lord to reach all nations for the purpose of leading them into a personal relationship with God. To do this, there will surely be times when we need to use the (morally neutral) things of this world for the sake of proclaiming the Gospel. These morally neutral things would include the media, our communications skills, and other vehicles of communication.



Matthew 5:15

“Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”

Reflection: The gift of faith is so extraordinary that it should not be hidden or kept to ourselves. We should proudly proclaim it and lead others wherever and whenever we can to faith.

1 Corinthians 9:22

“I become all things to all men that I might save some.”

Reflection: I love this verse because it clearly indicates St. Paul’s understanding that we can adjust our methods and approaches (but not the actual teachings) for various people depending on how they can best be reached with the Gospel. This is, in many ways, the essence of “messaging” and “marketing.” We shape our message (without changing the core truths) based on the audience.

I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.

Matthew 10:16

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”

Reflection: As a Catholic marketer, I love this verse as well. The implication here is that, as long as we guard our hearts and use honest means of communication, it is actually virtuous to use our intellects shrewdly for the sake of the Gospel.

Luke 16:8

“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.”

Reflection: This verse should place a real burden on the hearts of all Catholics who care about evangelization. The implication here is that we Catholics, who have been given extraordinary gifts by Christ, are less effective than the “people of this world” are in achieving the ends they/we desire. We are being given permission here to be industrious and savvy, as long as we operate with great integrity.

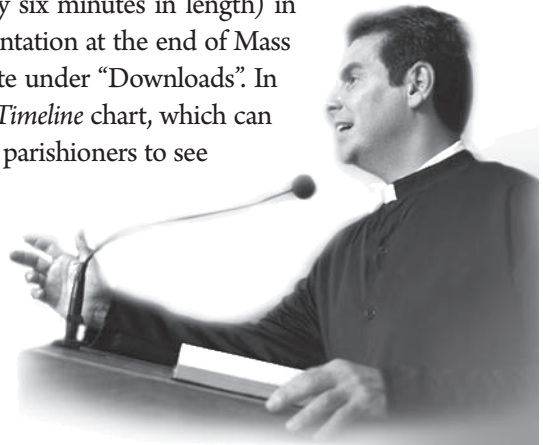
Marketing Expense Ranges

Marketing on a Budget of Less than \$250

1. Pulpit Support. This is the #1 marketing strategy. If the parish (as well as other priests and parish staff) is behind your program and promote it using “benefits” (versus features), this strategy will usually yield great results. People must see the value in coming to the study or it will be just another event in which they will feel guilty about not supporting the parish. *Note:* Pulpit support is a predisposition on the part of the pastor and parish to support the event beyond simply sharing a basic message himself or allowing a presentation or announcement. It is “the bully pulpit”, wherein something is strongly and publicly supported by the clergy in the parish.

A high-quality promotional video featuring inspiring short video clips of people who have used *The Great Adventure* system and have found it to be life-changing is available on our website BibleStudyforCatholics.com or by calling 800-376-0520. This promotional DVD can be shown at the end of Mass or in a variety of other venues.

2. Pulpit Presentation. A ready-made presentation (approximately six minutes in length) in which the pastor or lay leader makes a longer-than-normal presentation at the end of Mass about the benefits of the program is also available on our website under “Downloads”. In addition, we can provide your parish sample copies of the *Bible Timeline* chart, which can be put in the pews for the sake of the presentation. Allowing the parishioners to see the actual *Bible Timeline* color-coded chart will potentially double or triple your response because the simple, but intriguing chart makes your presentation “real” and “tangible”. It shows the congregation how practical this particular Bible study is. Call our Sales Department at 800-376-0520 and inquire about our “*Bible Timeline* Chart Loaner Program” for further details.



3. Pulpit Announcement. This differs from “pulpit support” (which is a philosophy as much as a strategy) and “pulpit presentation” (which is a longer presentation by the pastor or lay leader). Pulpit announcements are simply “ready-made” announcements that promote a given event. Ideally, the pastor would do a series of motivational, inspiring pulpit announcements himself. If not, you should have a pre-written announcement for the lector or some other person to read.
4. Custom-Parish Video Message. In addition to the excellent (but generic) message on the promotional DVD, we can create for parishes (at no cost) that are anticipating 200 or more students, a specific video “welcome”

from Jeff Cavins or one of our other teachers wherein your parish and pastor (and other key persons) are mentioned “by name” in the welcome and invitation.

5. Flyer Insert. If you are running a *Great Adventure* study, you can download templates at BibleStudyforCatholics.com.
6. Posters. Most print shops now have high-quality machines that can produce a small quantity of posters (11” x 17”) at relatively low cost (\$1-2 each for quantities of ten or less). Hang these posters in high-traffic areas around the parish, especially the vestibule. Templates can be downloaded at BibleStudyforCatholics.com.
7. Bulletin Announcements. We have an array of ready-made bulletin announcements for your parish bulletin. These announcements feature clever headlines and benefit-oriented copy and can be given to your parish’s secretary or bulletin editor all at once, thus saving you the task of approaching him or her each week with a new announcement.
8. Press Release. For local secular and/or diocesan newspapers. Ascension Press has a ready-made sample that you can use, and this also can be downloaded at BibleStudyforCatholics.com.
9. Radio Announcement. Local Catholic and Christian radio stations have community bulletin boards wherein they will make announcements about upcoming events.
10. Email Promotion. Your parish would greatly benefit by having every parishioner’s home and/or work e-mail address. Consider conducting a Communications Sunday in which your team stands outside church and collects as many e-mails as possible. Be sure to have this initiative supported from the pulpit. Have the pastor/priest explain that by providing their e-mails (which “will not be given out to any group but will be for internal parish use”), parishioners will save the parish time and money. Then, after e-mails are collected, send parishioners updates on your programs.
11. Direct Promotion to Other Parish Groups. Set up a series of short presentations to any group in the parish that will give you ten to fifteen minutes to speak at their next meeting. Simply call the parish secretary, or consult your parish directory or parish bulletin for a list of parish groups. This is also an excellent venue to show the promotional DVD and hand-out the sample charts.
12. Business Cards. Having ready-made business cards printed and ready for your current Bible study members to give out is an easy and inexpensive way to promote your study.
13. Evangelization Training. Before you can convince people to give out business cards, you may want to have a small training and motivational encouragement session on why and how people should do this. People need to feel compelled to share what they have before they will actually do it.
14. Outside Church Sign. Most parishes have a church sign on the street that shows the name of the parish, mass times, etc. These often have space for a message such as your “Upcoming Bible Study.” This is an inexpensive way to get the word out. Ask for frequent use of this in the weeks prior to your registration deadline.
15. Letter/Flyer to the Parents of School Students. These letters, perhaps from the principal or pastor, are respected and get read. The letter can, among other things, feature a link to our website where people can view the promotional DVD.



16. Tables Outside of Mass. Promote your study or event as people leave, making personal invitations and giving them “benefit-oriented” reasons for attending. This is also an excellent venue to show the promotional DVD and hand-out the sample charts.
17. Promotion on Parish Website. Many Catholic parishes now have websites. Put a promotional notice on the site. We can provide *Great Adventure* logos and other pictures, as well as a link to the promotional DVD, to punch-up the marketing of the upcoming study.

Marketing on a Budget of \$500 to \$1,500

1. Display Advertisement for Newspaper(s). Either place an ad (based on the flyer) in your local Catholic and/or secular paper, or team up with a few other Catholic Churches in your area and come up with a group ad that simply says: New Bible Studies Forming Now. If you want to reach non-Catholics as well as Catholics, you can use our more generic advertisements that are inviting to non-Catholics as well as Catholics.
2. CD. A bold, but exciting idea is to produce a Benefits of Bible Study CD in which two or three of the most eloquent, persuasive speakers in your parish record an interview, perhaps one done on a local radio station or in your own interview format. Duplicate these CDs for distribution after Mass.
3. OneCallNow.com. An excellent way to promote a parish event or offering is to use the company, One Call. This group will take (and protect) your parish phone list, upload it to their server, and send out a pre-recorded message to that list for very low fees. Ascension Press has employed this strategy very successfully.

A Strategy that Involves a Time Commitment Rather Than Money

- Parish Phone Tree. A personal invitation is powerful. Besides a face-to-face invitation, one good way to invite people is through an organized parish phone tree wherein a small group of people can quickly get the message out to many people in the parish. I would recommend a pre-written script, but one that relies on bullet points versus “lines and paragraphs”. People sound more natural using simple talking points.

Messaging

Advertising works. There is no doubt about it. Companies spend countless dollars each year to compete for the mind space of consumers. And we consumers respond: we buy their clothes, eat their food, and watch their movies. A major factor, though, in getting people to respond is to match your message to their perceived need. Unless you strike a chord with your typical or desired buyer, your dollars will most likely be wasted. So, take time to craft the right message.

One marketing rule to keep in mind is that “features tell, but benefits sell.” This means that consumers generally do not buy things based on its features but rather what those features will mean to their lives. For example, if a TV manufacturer says its TVs have high-definition quality, the reason we buy that is not for the feature itself but rather the pleasure it will bring to us—a sharper picture.

Consumers buy things based on the self-serving need that a product or service provides. I know that sounds self-centered and selfish, but it is a reality. And, frankly, it’s understandable and not necessarily wrong. If I am hungry, God wants me to eat. If I’m cold, God created me to seek warmth. So, satisfying one’s need is not a bad thing. Overindulgence is bad, but not the normal everyday consumption of products, ideas, or services.

So, when creating your headline and/or body copy, try to satisfy a need.



Although we are preparing many of the messages below in ready-made ads and flyers, here are some marketing headlines that either capture attention or satisfy a need that you can use to create these materials yourself in the meantime. In this “age of noise,” we sometimes simply have to capture attention first so we can then deliver the benefits and features in our sales copy.

1. *Curious About God?*
2. *Looking for a Little Peace?*
3. *Curious About the Bible?*
4. *What’s It All About?* (With picture of the Bible)
5. *Does Belief Really Make a Difference?*
6. *Looking for More Meaning in Life?* (Perhaps a series of promo flyers with materialistic images at the top and this headline below the image.)
7. *Do You Desire to Know God?*
8. *When Was the Last Time You Opened It?* (with a Bible above the headline)
9. *God is Calling. (Are you listening?)* Put in parenthesis underneath headline.
10. *“Holier-Than-Thou” Types Not Required.*
11. *What’s a Good Mind like Yours Doing in a Bible Study like This?* (Write copy that speaks of how some of the greatest minds of all time were devout Christians).
12. *Get Fed!*
13. *Hungry?*
14. *Discover Your Family History.*
15. *Who Cares?* (Use clever copy to explain how many people shy away from religion, and how a life of faith will satisfy the deepest yearnings of our heart. The key: Capture attention with a catchy headline and then deliver the “sales message” in the body copy.)
16. *Understanding Not Required* (with a picture of the Bible)
17. *B.I.B.L.E.* (Translation: Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth). Put the translation underneath the headline.

Matthew Pinto has been at the forefront of multiple Catholic initiatives since he began in ministry nearly twenty years ago, including such organizations as the Theology of the Body Institute, Ascension Press, *Envoy Magazine*, and [Catholic Exchange.com](http://CatholicExchange.com).



While running a successful advertising business, Matt felt God calling him to work full-time for the Church. So, in 1991, he sold his business and entered the apostolate of evangelization, first working for Catholic Answers in San Diego. He is recognized by many as one of the leading marketing strategists in the Catholic Church today.

Matt has authored or co-authored more than a dozen books and Catholic educational resources, including several multiple best-sellers. These include the *Amazing Grace Series*, which has been called a “Catholic Chicken Soup for the Soul,” *Did Adam & Eve Have Belly Buttons?* (more than 250,000 copies sold), and *Did Jesus Have a Last Name?*, the latter two being question-and-answer books for Catholic teenagers. His most recent book, *Do I Have to Go?*, is a question-and-answer book on the Mass he co-authored with youth leader Chris Stefanick.

Matt also conceived and co-wrote *A Guide to The Passion: 100 Questions About The Passion of the Christ*, which sold more than a million copies in just fourteen weeks. The book was the highest-ranking Catholic book ever to hit the *New York Times* and Amazon.com’s best-seller lists, and it has been translated into six languages.

Matt is a 1987 graduate of Temple University with a bachelor’s degree in communications and a minor in sociology. A native of Philadelphia, Matt and his wife Maryanne, live in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and are the parents of six children. He can be reached at mpinto@ascensionpress.com.

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