

## Should we be concerned about Alpha in the Church?

by

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### Despite its popularity in the Church, a former Anglican warns Alpha is not Catholic at heart

(This is the transcript of an article which appeared in *The Catholic Herald* on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2014. It has been posted for the information of *Apropos* readers on the *Apropos* website: [www.apropos.org.uk](http://www.apropos.org.uk) )

On Monday June 16 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, met Pope Francis. This isn't really news, but perhaps more interesting is that Nicky Gumbel also met the Pope at the same audience. Nicky Gumbel is of course the Anglican Vicar who is credited with creating the Alpha Course. In truth the Alpha course wasn't a creation of Nicky Gumbel, nevertheless it is certainly Gumbel who has made the course such a worldwide success (although I'm sure he would credit God).

The Alpha course presents itself as a Christian basics course, and has a now familiar format; it starts with some nice food and social time, which is followed by a talk about some aspect of Christianity, which is then followed by small group discussions. The course consists of 15 sessions over 10 weeks, and includes a weekend away (the "Holy Spirit" weekend). The course has seemingly been a roaring success, and over recent years has been gaining much support within Catholic circles. The preacher to the Papal household Fr Raniero Cantalamessa is an outspoken fan, and recently a "leadership" conference run by Nicky Gumbel managed to net no lesser speaker than Cardinal Schonborn. In many countries Alpha courses are routinely run in Catholic parishes, and it would seem that Alpha is catching on in the UK too, with a planned national conference on parish evangelisation scheduled for July 2015 with Nicky Gumbel as a key note speaker sharing the platform with none less than Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Archbishop Bernard Longley.

Should we be concerned, or should we welcome the growth of Alpha in the Catholic Church with open arms?

I think there is much good with Alpha, but the seemingly uncritical acceptance of it concerns me. I began life in the Christian ministry as an Anglican Curate at St Mark's church in Gillingham. St Mark's was evangelical Anglican, and in the 1960s was one of the first churches to experience Charismatic Renewal. The vicar at this time (long before my time) was John Collins, who put together a Christian *basics* course, which was very firmly rooted in the Charismatic Evangelical tradition. John Collins moved in 1980 to become the vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, which is now the home of Alpha, and it was his course that formed the basis of the current one.

So I am very familiar with the Alpha Course, and have used it several times in my evangelical Anglican days. Over time I moved more into the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, who are generally suspicious of the Course. And since becoming a Catholic priest, and being told that it had been adapted and was much more consonant with the Catholic understanding of faith than it had been previously, I gave it a go. And have decided not to do so again.

It is true that the primary book upon which the course is based, "Questions of Life" has been updated to sound more Catholic. It quotes various popes, and uses the word "Evangelisation" rather than just "Evangelism", and it would seem that Nicky Gumbel has quite genuinely grown in appreciation

of the Catholic Church, and I dare to hope that one day that appreciation will lead him home. However in the meantime the Alpha course remains, fundamentally, a Charismatic Evangelical course, and the theology underlying Charismatic Evangelicalism is just different to Catholicism.

To go into a serious theological study of Alpha (as opposed to Catholic theology) is beyond the scope of this article, though someone needs to do it, before the Church falls into the danger of uncritically swallowing the whole Alpha package. However I would like to give a couple of examples.

The Alpha course largely ignores the Sacraments altogether; it mentions Baptism and the Eucharist only, and them only in passing towards the very end of the course. Some Catholic advocates of Alpha have defended it for separating the *Kerygma* (the basic proclamation of Jesus) from Catechesis (a fuller instruction in the faith). Alpha, they say, is the basic *Kerygma*, and other things such as the Church and the sacraments can be added on later. But for a Catholic I can't see how this will do; the Church and the sacraments aren't just later additions to what is otherwise a Protestant understanding of faith, they are rather at the very heart of what we believe. Our *Kerygma* is the proclamation of the "Eucharistic" Jesus.

Take Baptism, for example; the Alpha course states that Baptism is "*a visible mark of being a member of the Church. It is also a visible sign that signifies cleansing from sin, dying and rising to new life*". That is pretty much it, and from a Catholic viewpoint that teaching is wrong. The Alpha course teaches that salvation comes through placing our faith in Jesus, and that Baptism simply "signifies this". The Catechism however states, "*baptism... signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the spirit*" and "*The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude*"

Then take the Eucharist. Alpha teaches: "*We do not need to make further sacrifices for our sins... at the service of Holy Communion... we remember his sacrifice... The bread and wine remind us of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus*"

Whereas [according to the Catechism] "*In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the Cross, the very blood which he poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*" Need I say more?

The truth is not only does the Alpha course downplay the significance of the Church and the Sacraments, where it does mention them it teaches a thoroughly Protestant understanding that is contrary to the teaching of the Church.

Now don't get me wrong, in many ways the Alpha course is splendid, but it is *not* a Catholic course. You cannot separate teaching on the Church and the Eucharist from the fundamental *Kerygma*.

I do not believe it is impossible for Alpha to be "catholicised", the problem at the moment however is that to use the Alpha course you have to agree *not* to change its core teaching, and much of its core teaching *needs* to be changed, so as to be true to the Church. I cannot believe it is beyond the wit of the English-speaking Catholic Church to produce a course of the quality of Alpha that is genuinely Catholic. Maybe even Nicky Gumbel would consider producing a genuinely Catholic "Alpha for Catholics" course. Perhaps he could sit down with a Catholic theologian with this aim. What we have at the moment however should be cause for grave concern.

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