

CONTENT EVANGELIST

WHITE PAPER

November 2025

Reaching Cultural Catholics: A Strategic Communications Guide for Dioceses

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Overview

According to a recent Pew Research survey, 47% of U.S. adults have some personal or family connection to Catholicism. That's nearly half of all Americans! But here's the challenge: Only 20% identify as Catholic by religion.

The remaining 27% are divided evenly into three groups: Those who identify as “former Catholics” who have left the Church, those who say they are “cultural Catholics,” and those who have other Catholic connections through family or occasional participation, such as Mass attendance on holidays.

So-called “cultural Catholics” represent a unique opportunity for evangelization because their lack of engagement isn't necessarily due to a negative view of Catholicism. In fact, while they don't profess doctrinal beliefs, they cherish the values espoused by the Church.



Pew's research reveals exactly who these cultural Catholics are, what they care about, and—most importantly for us as Catholic communicators—how to reach them. In short, **by focusing on the values they share with the Church, cultural Catholics may ultimately be drawn into an encounter with Jesus Christ that changes their perspective.**

Some will ask, is this really the right strategy? If the goal is to connect people with Jesus and his Church, shouldn't our evangelization efforts begin with Jesus, and lead directly to the sacraments? Unfortunately, we already know this approach doesn't resonate with everyone. **Some people are more open to a pragmatic strategy in which the good works of the Church lead them to the source of those good works — Jesus Christ. The destination is, of course, the same: conversion.** But the job of evangelists (read: Catholic communicators) is to create multiple strategies that reflect the myriad ways in which human beings experience conversion. If “all roads lead to Rome,” we have to acknowledge that some are expressways and others are meandering scenic byways!

What is a Cultural Catholic?

Cultural Catholics don't identify as Catholic religiously, but they say "yes" when asked whether they consider themselves Catholic "aside from religion"—ethnically, culturally, or because of their family background.

The data shows that 83% of cultural Catholics seldom or never attend Mass and 81% never go to confession. This means traditional evangelization programs that rely on parish engagement aren't reaching them. Nonetheless, claiming their Catholic identity means there is an opportunity to meet them where they are.

When asked in the Pew study what's essential to their Catholic identity, cultural Catholics prioritize:

- Having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (44%)
- Working to help the poor and needy (41%)
- Caring for immigrants (28%)
- Taking care of the environment (28%)

In short, cultural Catholics connect with Catholic values, even if they don't engage in Catholic practice. A diocesan communications strategy that reflects this reality could foster new opportunities for evangelization.



Reframing Diocesan Content Strategy

Strategy #1: Launch a Values-Driven Content Hub

Create a section of your diocesan website (or even a standalone site) that leads with Catholic values rather than Catholic practice. Think of it as Catholic social teaching for the spiritually curious.

Content themes to develop:

Service and Justice: Stories about diocesan Catholic Charities work, immigration support, affordable housing initiatives, food security programs. Not "come volunteer at your parish," but "Here's how our Catholic community is addressing homelessness in our community."

Environmental Stewardship: How parishes are implementing sustainable practices. Lead with impact metrics and *Laudato Si'* values, and demonstrate results through cooperative effort.

Community Impact: Feature profiles of Catholics (and cultural Catholics!) living out their faith through work in healthcare, education, public service, business ethics.

SEO consideration: Optimize for searches like "Catholic social justice," "faith-based volunteering," "spiritual meaning," and "ethical living."

Strategy #2: Transform Your Diocesan Publication

Consider creating a section or special edition specifically designed for broader reach.

What to include:

"Beyond the Pews" feature section: Stories of people living out Catholic values in everyday contexts—the Catholic nurse, the Catholic teacher, the Catholic environmentalist. Focus on how their faith shapes their work.

Cultural Heritage pieces: Deep dives into Catholic ethnic traditions in your diocese—Polish, Italian, Irish, Mexican, Vietnamese, Filipino communities. Food, art, music, history. Make it Instagram-worthy.

"Questions from Real People" column: Address spiritual questions without assuming theological knowledge or church participation. Think more "How do I find purpose?" and less "What does the Catechism say about..."

Social issue explainers: How Catholic social teaching applies to contemporary issues in your region such as ethical housing standards and access to affordable healthcare.

Lenten feature issue: Prior to Lent, consider publishing a special edition specifically designed for cultural Catholics:

- "40 Ways to Observe Lent in Daily Life"
- Profiles of people giving something up or taking something on
- Guide to fish fries, soup suppers, and other Lenten traditions
- Service opportunities throughout the diocese
- Make extra copies available at Ash Wednesday services

Distribution strategy: Consider placing copies in coffee shops, libraries, cultural centers, medical offices beyond parish distribution. Make digital versions easily shareable. Create standalone articles that can live on social media.

Strategy #3: Reimagine Your Social Media Strategy

Consider creating parallel content streams alongside your existing parish-focused channels:

Values-driven Instagram/TikTok: Beautiful Catholic architecture and art with historical context (not necessarily devotional context). Environmental initiatives. Service projects in action. Food and cultural traditions. Inspiring quotes from national Catholic thought leaders.

LinkedIn presence: Catholic professionals living out their faith in the workplace. Catholic social teaching applied to business ethics. How faith shapes leadership. This is where you'll find many cultural Catholics—educated, career-focused, values-driven.

Facebook community building: Create groups around shared interests rather than shared parish membership: "Catholics for Climate Action," "Catholic Book Club," "Catholic Young Professionals," "Catholic Educators Network."

YouTube content: Short documentaries about diocesan impact work. Explainer videos on Catholic approaches to contemporary issues. Virtual tours of historic Catholic sites in your diocese. Conversations about faith and doubt.

Seasonal campaigns: Build your communications calendar around moments when cultural Catholics are already thinking about Catholicism:

- **Ash Wednesday/Lent** (significant opportunity)
- **Christmas** (even if they don't come to Mass, they're thinking about the meaning of the season)
- **Back to School** (decision time for Catholic school families)
- **Día de los Muertos** (for Hispanic cultural Catholics)
- **St. Patrick's Day** (for Irish cultural Catholics)
- **Feast days** connected to ethnic heritage

Key principle: Make most of your content shareable by people who aren't comfortable publicly identifying as religiously Catholic. They should be able to share your post without worrying that they'll be perceived as overtly evangelizing their secular friends.

Strategy #4: Develop a Strategic Email Newsletter Architecture

Consider creating tiered newsletter offerings to reach different audiences:

"Catholic Community Impact": Monthly newsletter focused entirely on service, justice, and community impact. Stories of how diocesan or Catholic Charities programs are making a difference. Clear calls to action for low-barrier participation (donation, signing a petition, attending a service event).

"Explore Catholic Heritage": Quarterly cultural newsletter about Catholic history, art, architecture, and ethnic traditions in your region. Partner with local museums, historical societies, and cultural organizations.



"Questions of Meaning": Newsletter addressing spiritual searching, life transitions, ethical dilemmas. Think "Tiny Buddha" or "On Being" but from a Catholic perspective. Light theological touch.

"Lent & Easter Journey" (seasonal): Special newsletter series that begins before Ash Wednesday and runs through Divine Mercy Sunday. This captures people during their most engaged season and provides 8-10 weeks to build relationship.

Acquisition strategy: Place signup forms in unexpected places—diocesan Catholic Charities, hospital chaplain offices, Catholic schools (for alumni), sponsored community events, and especially at Ash Wednesday services. The key is asking for an email address without asking people to identify as Catholic.



Diocesan Ministries as Entry Points

Your diocese likely runs ministries that naturally align with what cultural Catholics value. Consider marketing them with this audience in mind.

Catholic Charities and Social Services

This is your strongest bridge to cultural Catholics. People who never attend Mass will volunteer at a food pantry or donate to refugee resettlement.

Communications approach:

- Lead with impact stories and data
- Make volunteer opportunities as easy as possible to find and sign up for
- Create giving options tied to specific programs, not general diocesan operations
- Feature volunteer testimonials from people of all faith backgrounds (or none)
- Use language like "our Catholic community" rather than "our Catholic Church"
- **During Lent:** Promote service opportunities as a way to observe the season. Track total volunteer hours and impact during Lent. Celebrate it publicly.

Catholic Schools and Universities

Even cultural Catholics often value Catholic education for their children or themselves.

Communications approach:

- Emphasize academic excellence, character development, service learning
- Highlight diversity and inclusion
- Feature alumni (including cultural Catholics) who credit their values to their Catholic education
- Offer adult education programs on Catholic art, history, and thought—not just theology and sacraments
- Create alumni networks that offer community and professional development, not just fundraising asks
- **Special focus:** Many cultural Catholic parents first re-engage when considering Catholic school for their kids. This is an opportunity to welcome them back.

Healthcare and Hospital Ministries

Catholic healthcare is often the only touchpoint many cultural Catholics have with the institutional Church.

Communications approach:

- Tell stories of compassionate care rooted in Catholic values
- Highlight community health initiatives and charity care
- Feature healthcare professionals explaining how their faith shapes patient care
- Offer healing services, grief support, and spiritual care that doesn't require Catholic identification
- **During Lent:** Promote health-related Lenten practices (fasting from junk food, taking on exercise, stress reduction) as spiritual disciplines

Content Themes That Resonate

Based on the research, here are content themes to weave throughout your diocesan communications:

Personal Spirituality

44% of cultural Catholics say having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is essential—higher than the percentage who say receiving the Eucharist is essential.

Content ideas:

- How people find God outside church walls
- Catholic spiritual practices/contemplative wisdom for busy lives
- Personal faith journeys (especially messy, non-linear ones)
- **Lenten angle:** "Lent as a spiritual reset—40 days to reconnect with what matters most"

Heritage and Culture

32% of cultural Catholics cite having a Catholic background (heritage, culture, family) as the reason they identify as Catholic.

Content ideas:

- Catholic ethnic heritage series
- Historical deep-dives into Catholic contributions to your region
- Cultural festival coverage and promotion
- Food, art, music, and traditions
- **Lenten angle:** Ethnic Lenten traditions (Polish Stations of the Cross, Mexican Via Crucis, Italian Friday feasts, Irish traditions)



Relationships and Community

27% of cultural Catholics cite relationships with Catholics as the reason for their identity.

Content ideas:

- Interfaith marriage stories
- Multi-generational faith in families
- Community-building events and opportunities
- **Lenten angle:** "Lent together"—small group opportunities that don't require parish registration or Mass attendance

Values in Action

41% say working to help the poor is essential; 28% say caring for immigrants; 28% say environmental care.

Content ideas:

- Diocesan social justice initiatives
- How-to guides for ethical living
- Profiles of Catholics working for systemic change
- Catholic social teaching applied to local issues
- **Lenten angle:** "Give up something, give back something"—connecting personal sacrifice to social mission

What NOT to Do

- ✗ **Don't lead with obligation:** "All Catholics should..." or "Real Catholics must..." will cause immediate disengagement.
- ✗ **Don't make everything about Mass attendance:** If your call-to-action is always "Join us for Sunday Mass," cultural Catholics will tune out.
- ✗ **Don't use insider language:** Assume your audience doesn't know what OCIA, Adoration, or the Liturgy of the Hours means. Write for outsiders.
- ✗ **Don't require full commitment for partial participation:** Let people engage at the level they're comfortable with. Someone who gives up coffee for Lent and donates the savings is living out their Catholic identity.
- ✗ **Don't miss opportunities for connection:** Ash Wednesday, in particular, represents a significant annual touchpoint with cultural Catholics. Strategic follow-up can extend that connection.
- ✗ **Don't use guilt-inducing language:** Focus on invitation and welcome rather than judgment about absence.
- ✗ **Don't ignore the abuse crisis:** 62% of Catholics (including cultural Catholics) say clergy sexual abuse is an ongoing problem. Your communications must acknowledge this reality and demonstrate accountability.

Measuring Success Differently

Consider adjusting your metrics when reaching cultural Catholics by tracking:

Digital engagement:

- Website traffic from new visitors (not just repeat parish visitors)
- Email open rates for values-driven content
- Content shares by people who don't follow your account
- **Lenten spike:** Compare engagement during Lent to baseline

Event participation:

- Attendance at service events, cultural festivals, educational programs
- Volunteer sign-ups through diocesan service ministries
- Registration for programs not requiring Catholic identification
- **Ash Wednesday specifically:** Number of ashes distributed, email addresses collected, Lenten email series open rates

Community connection:

- Stories of people who re-engaged after years away
- Partnerships with secular organizations
- Media coverage of diocesan impact work
- Testimonials from cultural Catholics
- **Lenten impact:** Total volunteer hours, donations from "Give Back" campaign, Holy Week attendance

Financial support:

- Donations to specific programs (even if not to parishes)
- Legacy gifts from cultural Catholics
- Corporate sponsorships for social mission work
- **Lenten giving:** Track donations during Lent separately—many cultural Catholics will give during this season even if they don't give at other times

Making the Case Internally

To gain stakeholder buy-in from diocesan leaders, point to these arguments:

1. **Mission and evangelization require meeting people where they are.** Jesus didn't wait for people to come to the temple. We can reach cultural Catholics where they already are—online, in service, in search of meaning and community.
2. **These are OUR people!** 47% of U.S. adults have some Catholic connection. These aren't strangers—they're former parishioners, children of parishioners, people who went to our schools. We have relationships we can build on.
3. **The landscape is changing.** Catholic disaffiliation continues. New approaches to engagement are worth exploring and represent opportunities for evangelization.
4. **They show up once a year—let's be intentional about it.** Ash Wednesday brings significant numbers of people through our doors. Strategic communication before, during, and after this day can extend connections.
5. **This is good stewardship.** We're investing heavily in programs cultural Catholics would value—Catholic Charities, schools, hospitals, social justice initiatives. Strategic communications can connect these programs to the people most likely to support them.
6. **It's both/and, not either/or.** This strategy complements existing parish-focused communications. Different audiences, different content, different entry points—all serving the broader mission.

This is evangelization for the 21st century. It's slow. It's indirect. It requires patience and trust. But it's realistic. Cultural Catholics haven't rejected Catholic identity—they've redefined what it means for them.

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