

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Ascension of our Lord – May 20, 2007 C

WHY _____ BECAME CATHOLIC. WHY _____ RETURNED TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

If you read last week's Pastor's column, you read the inspiring story of why Mitch and Kathy Finley chose a Catholic education for their children. This column is now on our parish and school's web site.

I would also love to have on our parish home page inspiring stories of particular individuals who chose to join the Catholic Church and why others choose to return to the Catholic Church. Might you be the person God is calling to fill in the blanks in this column's heading? I am especially looking for stories that include how converts overcame doctrinal obstacles as they made their journey into the church, e.g., Catholic beliefs about Mary, the Saints the papacy, confession etc.

If you have a story of *conversion* to the Catholic Church or a story about your *return* to the Catholic Church, consider sharing it with me. If you are a person who returned to the church—especially after spending some time in other churches, I would love to hear:

- Why you left the church
- Why you returned to the church.

Three Common Obstacles to Joining the Catholic Church

When non-Catholics think about joining the Catholic Church. Many, if not all of them have to overcome certain obstacles as they journey into the church. I am sure that those of you who are converts could help me to name some of those obstacles. From my years of working in this ministry, I can name the following obstacles—I am sure you can add others.

Obstacle #1—Loyalty to Family. Some non-Catholics who actually attend the Catholic Church with a spouse never formally join the Catholic Church or postpone doing so for many years out of loyalty to parents. They feel that if they formally joined the Catholic Church it would hurt the feelings of their parents.

Response. Formally choosing to leave the Faith Tradition of one's childhood can be an emotionally wrenching experience. It certainly was for the Jews who left Judaism to become Christian. As I listen to converts tell their stories on the *Journey Home* program on EWTN on Monday evenings, many of them talk not so much about leaving their childhood Faith Tradition as much as coming into the "*fullness of the Christian Tradition.*" The Catholic Church was founded by Jesus. Its roots go back all the way to the Apostles. Catholics believe and teach that our church holds the fullness of the

message that Jesus came to impart. Hence, the reason why many non-Catholics who spend a good deal of time studying Catholicism, studying the Early Fathers of the church believe that in entering into Full Communion with the Catholic church they are embracing the *fullness* of the message that Jesus came to believe. Most converts feel grateful for the teachings and formation they received in their churches while growing up. Also, many Protestant church have much to teach Catholics about elements of Christianity e.g., how to develop in their members a love for the scriptures, and how to help individuals have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Obstacle #2. Misinformation about the Catholic beliefs. A few weeks ago, two Jehovah Witnesses came to my door. During the conversation I asked: "Who do you think founded the Catholic Church?" One of them answered Constantine (a Roman Emperor who lived in the fourth-century). I was amazed to think that this is what these people believed. Most converts will testify that they grew up with lots of misinformation about Catholic beliefs especially about Mary, Saints and the Pope. Others grew up with lots of anti-Catholics feelings.

Response: Unfortunately because many Catholics are not properly informed about the Catholic Church they are unable to respond to questions about the church or to rebut the false information that many non-Catholic co-workers, neighbors and others hold about the Catholic Church. Also a big reason why many Catholics get easily drawn away from the church is because they were never properly formed in Catholic beliefs and practices. Thanks to EWTN and good apologetic courses more and more Catholics are able to defend their Catholic faith from attacks and misinformation.

Obstacle #3. Poor Example of Clergy and Laity. A major reason some non-Catholics do not think about joining the Catholic Church, is the poor example of the clergy and other Catholics. The recent sex scandals dealt a most serious wound on the church. Why join a church that protects pedophiles. Also, when non-Catholics see their Catholic bosses, co-workers, neighbors etc. behave in a non-Christian ways, they may quickly put aside any thoughts they had about joining the Catholic Church.

Response: The Catholic Church (and indeed all churches and religions) always were, is and always will be imperfect and sinful. The imperfect and sinful face of the church especially in her leaders can be a huge obstacle to some people who are considering inquiring into the church. Yet, in recent years, one of the amazing convert stories is that during the height of the sex scandals, several Protestant clergy were being led by the Holy Spirit and their own

personal study to join the Catholic Church. They joined the church not because she was perfect but because the Holy Spirit and their study led them to believe that the Catholic Church was the *one true church founded* by Jesus Christ. Many of these stories are told in the three *Surprised by the Truth* books. Ideally, inquirers and seekers should not join a Christian church just because the community is welcoming, the pastor is nice, his sermons are inspiring and the music is uplifting, but rather, because one's study has led them to the conclusion that this is the church which *Jesus* founded.

Three Catholic Beliefs that Pose a Problem for Many non-Catholics

I will now briefly look at some specific Catholics that were an obstacle to many converts and continue to be an obstacle to other inquirers.

Mary

Especially in the past, some Catholics seem to give more attention to Mary than to Jesus. Many gave the impression that they *worshipped* Mary especially when her statue is carried through the streets and when others are bowing down before statues of Mary, kissing her and praying rosaries to her as if she was the source of divine grace. Others have problems with Marian beliefs such as: Mary the Mother of God, the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Assumption of Mary into Heaven at the time of her death.

Response: If beliefs and certain practices about Mary are an obstacle for you when it comes to inquiring into the Catholic church, I would greatly appreciate if you would read the article I have written on Mary titled: *Mary, the Mother of Jesus and Our Mother*. This article can be found on our parish web site. Click on *Catholic Beliefs & Practices*, then click *Catholic Beliefs* and go to the above mentioned article. This article deals very concretely with many of the problems that non-Catholics have about Mary. Briefly, Catholics *honor* (don't worship) Mary because of her unique privilege of being the mother of Jesus. We call her the Mother of God because Jesus was both human and *divine*. We ask Mary and the Saints to intercede for us just as we ask our faith friends on earth to pray for us and we apologize for Catholics whose extreme zealous love for Mary makes it look like our church leadership honors Mary more than it honors Jesus. If you are interested in how the Catholic Church sees the *Saints* also visit our parish web site and click on *Catholic Beliefs & Practices*. Then click on *Catholic Beliefs* and go to the article: *Sainthood in the Catholic Church*.

The Papacy

Many non-Catholics find the Papacy to be a serious obstacle to their coming home to the Catholic Church. Some who were raised in an anti-Catholic home may even view the Pope as the anti-Christ. Catholics believe that when Jesus founded the church, he made Peter the head of the church. Catholics reason that if the first Christians needed a leader who had the final say about matters of beliefs, surely succeeding generations of Catholics would also need a leader who would protect the teachings of Christ and hold

together the unity of the church. For more on this Catholic belief also visit our parish web site and click on Catholic Beliefs and Practices then click on *Catholic Beliefs* and go to the article—*The Pope and Papal Infallibility*.

Confession

Many non-Catholics cannot understand why Catholics confess their sins to a priest—who himself is a sinner. In John 20:22-23, Jesus clearly gave his Apostles the power to forgive sins. If Jesus wanted people to *only* go to God with their sins why would we find in scripture the words:

“Whose sins *you* forgive, they are forgiven them.”

Catholics actually do believe that one can go directly to God with one's sins, but that one needs to bring serious or mortal sins to the church for absolution. This is the practice of the church going back to the earliest years of the church's history.

I am sure that there are many other beliefs of the church that are obstacles for potential converts. Perhaps you can share with me your thoughts on other obstacles. I would love to hear from you.

Resources for Non-Catholics Interested in the Catholic Church

Surprised by the Truth. These are wonderful stories of how several Protestant ministers were led into the Catholic Church by the Holy Spirit and through their own personal study. In these books you will read how these converts worked their way through the many obstacles that other converts and inquirers encounter as they looked into the Catholic Church. Books 2&3 in this series have stories of Catholics who fell away from the church and joined other churches, were also led by the Holy Spirit and their personal study to return to the church.

Copies of these books are available in the parish office or you can order them online.

Essentials of the Faith by Fr. Al McBride. This is a clear, easy to read 200 page catechism on Catholic beliefs. It also has Catholic prayers and an excellent glossary. Copies available at the parish office.

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults. This 600 page book is also very readable and offers the reader a clear presentation of Catholic beliefs.

The Journey Home Program and Network which airs on EWTN on Monday evenings at 8 PM

Intercessors: Keep praying as we search for a new school principal

Have a blessed week,

