



Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 12, 2010 C

WHY CATHOLIC? WHY NOT CATHOLIC?

This weekend, we pitched a new program called *Why Catholic?*. It is intended to help Catholics and interested non-Catholics to explore Catholicism.

The Catechism has four parts:

- **The Creed:** Beliefs about the Trinity, Jesus, the Church, Mary, and the Last Things
- **The Sacraments:** Communal and public worship life of the Church
- **Morality:** The Ten Commandments, teachings of Jesus, hot topics like social justice, life and sexuality issues
- **Prayer:** One's personal relationship with Christ

This season we begin with Part Four on Prayer which is the easiest one since *all* of us, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, are in agreement about the importance of prayer.

Why are you Catholic?

My guess is that the vast majority of us do not think very often about the above question.

But isn't it worth asking the questions: *Why am I Catholic?* and *Why do I remain Catholic at a time when the church is portrayed in such a terrible way because of the clergy sex abuse scandals?* There are probably many answers to these questions, a few of which might be the following:

- I have been Catholic all my life and even I know the Church has many imperfections; I have no desire to leave the Church and join another faith tradition.
- On a deeper level, we might say: I love many things about the Church; I love the liturgy especially when it is well done; I am proud of my Church's stance on life issues and social justice issues; I like the Church's concern for the poor.

So why are you Catholic and why do you remain Catholic? I'd love to hear your answer.

Why do people convert to the Catholic faith tradition?

Many of you reading this column are converts. I would

love to hear your own reasons. Here might be some possible answers:

- On any given Sunday, we have non-Catholic spouses come to Mass with their spouse (and kids, if any). In that sense, they do worship together as a family. Some spouses are led to take a further step and formally join the Church so that they can receive Holy Communion with their family.
- Some converts are attracted to the ritual and worship life of the Church and to her teachings.
- Some converts may have become disillusioned with their own faith tradition especially because of its views on some issues.
- The belief that the Catholic Church is the true church founded by Christ. If one tunes in to the *Journey Home* program on EWTN television (Mondays at 8pm) or to Divine Mercy Catholic Radio (920 AM), one will find that the most converts (clergy and laity alike) join the Church following an intensive study—particularly of early Christianity and the early Church Fathers. They find that certain Catholic beliefs that they previously rejected, were present in early Christianity, e.g. the Eucharist and the papacy. This coming week, Pope Benedict will come to England to beatify **Cardinal John Henry Newman**, one of the most famous converts to Catholicism. Newman, an Oxford professor and Anglican priest, was moved to join the Church after his study of early Christianity and the early Church Fathers. It was not an easy move for him. More on John Newman in next week's column.

- The desire for an authority system "where the buck stops." Most of the stories one hears in the *Journey Home* program mention the desire for an authority in matters of faith and biblical interpretation. While Protestantism has many things it can be proud of, one of its inherent weaknesses is the lack of a central authority system. As a result, there are hundreds of Protestant churches in existence today, each one claiming to be the true church.

Why not Catholic? Obstacles

Again, some of you reading this article are not Catholic even though you come to Church regularly. I would love to hear your reasons for not becoming Catholic and,

needless to say, I respect your reasons. In the end, one must be led by the Spirit and intellectual conviction before taking such a leap. The following are some well-known reasons.

- Some feel a strong loyalty to the way they were raised and if their parents are still around, especially aging parents, they do not wish to hurt them.

Doctrinal reasons. The Catholic Church has many beliefs, some of which do not seem rooted in Scripture or are out of step with the prevailing winds of contemporary society. Problems with doctrinal issues may be seen as based on accurate or inaccurate information. Many converts to Catholicism will testify that they either grew up with an anti-Catholic bias or with misinformation about some Catholic beliefs. Topping the list of misguided information are: that Catholics *worship* Mary and the saints; that papal infallibility meant that the pope could never make a mistake; that the *only* way to have • one's sins forgiven is through the sacrament of Reconciliation.

For accurate information on Catholic beliefs, one can go to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or to my 28 articles on the Catechism which are much easier to read. The articles are available on this website.

- *The recent sex abuse scandals.* I assume that this most horrible and sad chapter in the Church's history has caused some Catholics to leave the Church, and others to quit attending Church thereby thwarting potential converts from joining the Church. While our Church leaders did a horrible job of dealing with this issue which impacts all institutions with children, at least we can be grateful that all parishes now have in place a very strict set of protective measures for anyone working with children.

Regarding the human and imperfect side of the Church, Peter Kreeft, a convert himself, tells the following story in his book *Fundamentals of Christianity*.

To be holy is not to be perfect yet. The Church's obvious human imperfections have been an occasion for scandal and apostasy for...centuries. But paradoxically this very fact is also a powerful argument for her divine nature. This is cleverly brought out in Boccaccio's story of Abraham, the medieval Jewish merchant in The Decameron. Abraham is contemplating becoming a Catholic. He tells his friend, the bishop of Paris, who has been trying unsuccessfully to convert him, that he has to go to Rome on business. The bishop is horrified: "Don't go! When you see the stupidity and corruption there, you'll never join the Church." (This was the time of the Medici Popes who were notoriously worldly and corrupt.) But Abraham is a practical man. Business calls. Upon his return to France, he tells the bishop he

is now ready to be baptized. The bishop is astounded, but Abraham explains: "I'm a practical businessman. No earthly business that stupid and corrupt could last fourteen weeks. Your Church has lasted fourteen centuries. It must have God behind it."

- Some seekers (including Catholics) may conclude that the Catholic Church does not meet their spiritual needs. Most seekers today are not interested in searching out the historical roots of a specific faith tradition or verifying their beliefs on specific issues. Rather, most seekers today are looking for a faith community that they feel comfortable in, that has uplifting services (good music and preaching) and that helps them connect biblical teachings with their daily lives. We live in a consumer society in which the consumerist mentality impacts our spiritual lives just as much as our material lives.

Love/hate relationship with the Church

While some Catholics may be very much in love with all aspects of the Church, many others, including clergy, would say that they have a love/hate relationship with the Church, not unlike the relationship some spouses may have with each other. The basis for the love/hate relationship will differ from person to person. Here are some impressions from different people:

We love the Church's liturgy especially when it is well done (though, here again, tastes may vary greatly). We love the Church's consistent stance on life and social justice issues. We love the rich tradition of the Church that goes back all the way to Christ.

On the other hand, we hate or dislike it when the Church messes up big time as it did recently in responding to the sex abuse issue; or when the Vatican recently put out a document placing the ordination of women on the same level as pedophilia; or when Church leaders are arrogant; or the pomposity that continues in the Church which is so far removed from the Jesus (the humble servant of God) portrayed in the Gospel; or when the Church refuses to invite to Communion non-Catholic Christians who believe that Jesus is present in the Eucharist. While many of us would say that there are aspects of the Church's life that we intensely dislike, we have no deep desire to run elsewhere for spiritual nourishment. Some of us may actually find ourselves searching in non-Catholic circles but without leaving the Church, e.g. joining an ecumenical bible study group and coming to the Catholic Church for Eucharist.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran