

# **SHORT ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CATHOLIC FAITH**

By Fr. Anthony Saroki

## **Why does God allow evil and suffering?**

Evil entered the world through the free choices of fallen angels and humans. God gave us freedom because without freedom, there cannot be true love. God brings good from evil, as He did in the death and resurrection of Jesus. He showed that life and love were stronger than death and evil. God intends one day to give us a happy life free from all evil and suffering, but in the meantime, he wants us to use our time, talent, and resources to overcome evil and alleviate suffering.

## **Do you believe everything in the Bible?**

Yes, as properly interpreted. The Bible is not one book, but more like a library of books. The Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of these books. They are written in different genres, so it is important to understand the literary style of each book. The Gospels are a kind of biography. The historical evidence regarding Jesus, both within and outside the New Testament, is greater than for most any other person who lived in ancient times.

## **Is there a contradiction between science and faith?**

Many of the greatest scientists in history such as Nicolas Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Fr. George Lemaitre (Big Bang Theory) believed in God. The same God who created the universe revealed the Christian religion. If there is an apparent contradiction between science and religion, it means that we need to understand either our science or religion better. Catholics do not believe in a literalistic reading of Genesis. We accept the scientific findings regarding the age of the universe and the progression of simpler forms of life to more complex ones in the fossil records.

Science is limited in what it studies. It cannot tell us the ultimate source of creation, nor can it tell us the meaning and purpose of human life.

## **Who is Jesus and what was His mission?**

He is the eternal Son of God the Father who, about 2,000 years ago, took a human nature in the womb of Mary of Nazareth. His story is told in the four Gospels. He announced the Kingdom of God, that is, God's loving rule. He taught the truth about God and humankind. He healed the sick and cast out demons. He came to gather all people into God's family and overcome evil, suffering, and death through love. He died to take upon himself the eternal consequences of our sins and he rose again to open the gates of heaven. With the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit

upon His disciples. He established a Church in which people could enter into an intimate, saving relationship with God.

### **Are Catholics Christians?**

Yes. Catholics beliefs, practices, and leadership structure are historically continuous with the Church of the first century. The word Catholic means “universal.” In a letter dated 107 A.D., St. Ignatius of Antioch used the term to describe the worldwide family of Christians. People who today refer to themselves simply as Christian trace their distinctive beliefs to the founders of the Protestant faith communities, the first of which was Martin Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Why is the Pope the leader of the Catholic Church?**

The Pope is the successor of the apostle Simon Peter, who died in Rome. After Simon confessed his faith, Jesus told him, “And I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16: 18-19) There is a direct line of succession from Peter to Pope Francis.

### **How can the Pope be infallible?**

Popes make mistakes. Some have done evil things. Infallibility refers to something very specific, that is, when the Pope formally defines dogma. It is very rare for Popes to invoke infallibility. Most doctrinal controversies in Church history have been resolved through gatherings of bishops from all over the world called Councils. Jesus promised He would lead the Church into all truth. The Pope’s infallibility is part this larger protection that Jesus gave the Church. It is important especially when there is disagreement among Christians about what the Bible teaches.

### **Isn’t the Bible the sole authority for a Christian?**

Who put the Bible together? In the early Church, there was some disagreement about which writings should be considered part of the New Testament. These disagreements were settled by a gathering of Catholic bishops in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Council of Hippo. It is the authority of the Church which tells us which books are inspired by God in the first place. Moreover, nowhere does the Bible teach that the Bible is the sole authority. There is also the problem of interpreting the Bible. How does one decide which of two contrary interpretations is correct? Jesus told the apostles, “whoever listens to you listens to me” (Lk 10:16).

### **Do Catholics believe that they are saved by their good works?**

No, the Church teaches we are saved by the gift of God. “The grace of the Holy Spirit has the power to justify us, that is, to cleanse us from our sins and to communicate to us ‘the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ’ and through Baptism.” (CCC 1987) We are free to respond to this grace. We accept and persevere in the new life God gives us through faith and love. (CCC 2002)

### **Why do Catholics worship Mary?**

Catholics do not worship Mary. They honor her because she is the mother of Jesus. She was greeted by the angel as “full of grace” (Luke 1:28) and praised by Elizabeth as being “blessed among women.” (Luke 1:42). On the cross, Jesus made Mary our mother when he entrusted her to the beloved disciple (John 19:20). The power of her intercession was shown at the Wedding at Cana, when Jesus performed his first public miracle at her request (John 2:1-12).

### **Why do Catholics believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist?**

In the Gospel of John, chapter 6, Jesus explains that he would give his flesh for food and his blood for drink. Many of his disciples left him because of this teaching, but he did not say to them that he was only speaking symbolically. Historical documents from the first few centuries show that Christians universally believed that in the Eucharist Jesus was really present under the appearance of bread and wine.

### **Why should we go to Mass on Sundays?**

Jesus instituted the Mass at the Last Supper. He took the bread and said, “This is my body.” He took a chalice filled with wine and said, “This is my blood.” Then he said, “Do this in memory of me.” (Luke 22:20). From the very beginning, Christians gathered on Sunday to celebrate the Mass. Sundays were important because Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday. If we love Jesus and are grateful for his sacrifice, we will do what has asked us to do and celebrate the Mass each Sunday. He feeds us with His word and body. Our relationships with God, and with our brothers and sisters in the faith, is strengthened by participation in the Mass.

### **What about the priest sex abuse scandal?**

The sexual abuse of minors by some priests, and the failure of bishops to remove them from ministry, was a terrible evil. About 1.7% of priests that served in the past have had substantiated allegations of sex abuse against them (John Jay Report). This percentage is no higher than the incidences of sex abuse involving public school teachers. The Church has taken serious steps to make parishes a safe place, including reporting any new allegations to law enforcement.

### **Why can't women be priests?**

Priests continue the ministry of the apostles. Jesus chose only men to be apostles. He was not bound by his culture, as he interacted with women in many ways that were against his culture, including having women be the first witnesses to the Resurrection. A priest is an icon of Christ as the husband of the Church and so his maleness makes him a more appropriate symbol of Jesus, who was a man.

### **Why do Catholics call priests "Father"?**

When Jesus said "call no man father" (Matthew 23:9), his point was that people should not use titles to give themselves glory that is due to God alone. But the title "father" can be appropriate to express a relationship. We call our male parents father. In a real way, they mediate God's fatherhood. In the Bible, St. Paul refers to himself as a father to new Christians, (1 Corinthians 4:15) and St. Stephen (Acts 7:2) and St. Paul (Romans 4:16-17, 9:10) both refer to Abraham as father. When Catholics call priests father, it is not an honorific, but a term of affection, recognizing that they mediate the fatherhood of God in a spiritual way by guiding and caring for God's people.

### **How come priests don't marry?**

Some priests are married. The norm is that the Roman Catholic Church ordains men who have the charism (gift) of celibacy. This is something they freely choose after many years of discernment and formation. Jesus praised those who give up marriage "for the sake of the kingdom" (Matthew 19:12) and Paul recommended celibacy as a way to serve God with an undivided heart (1 Corinthians 7:32). Not having their own family, celibate priests are able to put the care of God's family first. They also remind married people that marriage is not their ultimate vocation. All of us are called to be "married" to God in heaven.

### **Why confess to a priest?**

Jesus gave his apostles the authority to forgive sins when he said: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:23). Priests continue this ministry. When we confess to God in prayer, we do not hear anything back. But through the priest, Jesus is able to tell us that we are forgiven.

### **What about the Crusades, Inquisition, and other bad things the Church has done?**

The Church is made up of fallible human beings. It is a hospital for sinners. Jesus included Judas among the Twelve Apostles and taught that the Church throughout history would have a mix of good and bad people (Matthew 13:24-30). The doctrine and sacraments of the Church

are holy because they come from Jesus Christ. Those who live by these are the saints. They are the true measure of the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Catholic faith.

### **I'm too busy to be involved with a church.**

Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (Matthew 6:33). When you put God as first place in our life, everything else falls into place. You will have a greater clarity about how to go about your work and family and social life, and your time will be multiplied.

### **Church is boring.**

Church is about a relationship with God and relating to others who want to be closer to God. Relationships are not always exciting or fun, although we do tend to have a lot of fun at our parish. Sometimes relationships seem like work. But authentic relationships are worth it. Most people who take the time to really engage the teaching and life of the Church find that they are happier because of doing so.

### **If two men (women) love each other, why shouldn't they be able to get married?**

The purpose of marriage is to unite a man and woman to one another and to the children that come from their union. This is revealed not only by God in Scripture, but also in the design of the human body. The primary interest of society in marriage is not the romantic love of the two people, but to encourage the ideal environment for the generation and raising of children. People who are attracted to members of the same sex should be loved and respected. They are welcome to participate in parish life and, like all members of the Church, are invited to grow in the virtue of chaste love, which integrates a person's sexuality according to God's plan. It is possible to be celibate and to live a love-filled, joyful life, as Jesus did.

### **I'm divorced and remarried. Can I still go to church?**

Everyone is welcome to attend Mass and pray with us. A priest of the parish would be happy to meet with you to discuss your marriage situation. You should meet with a priest before receiving Communion.

### **Shouldn't the Church sell all of its art work and give the proceeds to the poor?**

The Catholic Church provides more relief to the poor than any other organization in the world. The art at the Vatican is kept in trust for the benefit of all. Millions visit each year to appreciate the beauty of the art. If it were sold at auction, it is very likely a private collector would not make the art as available as it is now. When the Church uses beautiful vestments, vessels, art, and architecture in the worship of God, it is a way to show our love for God and to lift our minds and hearts to recognize that he is the source of all beauty, truth, and goodness.