

Catholic Culture: Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Being Catholic... But Were Afraid to Ask

Below is a summary of answers Fr. Rick Wilkinson gave to questions that were submitted prior to and during the Catholic Culture session on April 15, 2009. While the actual responses were much more in-depth, there is no way to include everything that was said and discussed in this summary

It should be noted that, true to the nature and intention of the discussion, Fr. Rick added some humor while addressing the very serious nature of the questions asked. So as not to lose the levity which makes these discussions so engaging, some of the humor is included in this summary – often indicated by a smiley face (☺). This is to ensure that no unintended offense is taken when the spoken comments are transferred to writing.

Why does the cross on the chapel porch wear a purple scarf? Is it always there or is it just a Lent thing?

Purple is the liturgical color for Lent, the cloth is a decoration of the cross reminding us that is Lent, a time of repentance and turning back to God. On Palm Sunday and Good Friday, the cross is draped in red, the color of martyrs, representing the blood shed for the faith, and in Jesus' case, for the salvation of all. The Easter season is white, the color of resurrection and new life.

Why are Catholics always saying "And peace be with you" to everyone around them?

"Peace be with you" is an early Christian greeting, following our Judaic ancestors greeting of "Shalom." St. Paul started many of his letters to the early faith communities with this salutation. Our Muslim brothers and sisters similarly greet one another with "Assalaam-alaykum."

Do you have to be Catholic to take Holy Communion at Our Lady Queen of Peace?

The Catholic Church understands the Eucharist, (Holy Communion) to be the real presence of Christ – his body (bread) and his blood (wine) – not just a symbol. The theological word for this is transubstantiation. The Catholic Church teaches only those who are in communion with (in union with; part of) the Church, should partake in the Eucharistic meal (Holy Communion). There is no litmus test to determine who is Catholic and who isn't. The priest or communion minister will distribute communion in good faith and not ask if one is Catholic or not. Sometimes at Our Lady Queen of Peace, on special occasions like the death of a co-worker or family member, or a wedding, members of the wider St. Edward's community who are not Catholic will receive, with the understanding that they do so out of respect for the Eucharist, recognizing that for Catholics it is the real presence, but also desiring to share in the occasion that brings us together, either by our grief, or our joy. Jesus was always welcoming.

Do people still go into those little booths and confess their sins? If so, where are the little booths and who's listening?

Yes they do. That's where the priest hides the altar wine. ☺

Actually those booths are called confessionals, and most confessionals today offer the option of going to confession (the Sacrament of Reconciliation) anonymously behind a screen or face to face with a priest. A priest is the only one who may celebrate the sacrament in the physical place of Jesus, absolving sins and reaffirming God's merciful love.

Exodus 20:3-6 says, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." How is this reconciled with pictures and statues of Jesus and the Saints and people praying to the Saints for interventions?

Catholics do not worship saints; we pray to them as intercessors to God. There is only one God. Statues are representations of Jesus and/or saints. They are reminders, much like the picture of a loved one. Saints are people who the Church recognizes as having led exemplary lives. They are models that can help us be more faithful in living out our Christian faith. In times of trouble or need we often ask our family and friends to pray for us; saints act in a similar way. Some Catholics may act as though a saint is God, but they are mistaken. God will set them straight on the other side. ☺

What are the candles for that people can buy?

People light candles as a sign of devotion to a saint, or in memory of a loved one, to ask a favor of God (or through a saint). Other reasons might be to express gratitude for a blessing or prayer answered. Churches usually don't make money selling candles; they usually break even, and they sometimes lose money because some people light the candles without paying for them. Can you believe that?

What's with the holy water when people come in the chapel? What's it suppose to do? Can a non-Catholic touch the holy water?

The holy water is blessed and represents the waters of our baptism. Catholics bless ourselves, making the sign of the cross as we enter a church, to remind us of our Baptism and our baptismal promises. Water is a popular 'sacramental,' meaning making the ordinary sacred. Other sacramentals include oil, fire, bread and wine. Non-Catholics can certainly touch the water; I suggest that you test it first to make sure you don't sizzle. If you do sizzle, back away quickly. ☺

What are the "gifts?"

The seven unmerited gifts of the Holy Spirit that come from scripture are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. Jesus received these at his baptism, his disciples at Pentecost, and all members of the Church through baptism.

We also present gifts at the offertory in mass. These gifts are the bread and wine for communion, which are God's gift to us which we in turn offer back to God by becoming what we eat, the Body of Christ. The gifts also represent the gifts we all bring to our faith and our faith community.

If you wish to become Catholic and have been divorced in the past can you still take classes to become Catholic and baptized. And if not, why?

It depends. The divorce would need to be annulled, either by annulment process, which could be rather involved, or not, depending on the circumstances and 'form' of the first marriage. Annulment means that first marriage was not sacramental.

If the answer is no, then what happens to people that are already of Catholic faith and they divorce?

They need an annulment to remarry. Divorce itself does not separate one from the Church. Divorce and remarriage without an annulment makes one not in communion with the church and one should not receive sacraments. The second marriage is not recognized.

How does the Catholic Church support its opposition to birth control (other than natural family planning)? Is there a passage in the Bible that is referred to, or is more like the Catholic stance towards abortion in that God created life and we should not try to prevent or terminate life?

There is no explicit condemnation of contraception in the Bible, although Christian prohibition of artificial contraception came quite early in the Church's history. As early as 215 A.D., sexual intercourse in marriage was understood only for the purpose of procreation. St. Augustine supported this understanding of sexuality in marriage as justified only for the pro-creative purpose. The Church now has a much more positive view of sex and sexuality; we understand it as unitive (loving expression of union) within the life of a married couple who is open to procreation.

The basic tenet of Catholic Social Teaching and moral theology is the dignity of all life from the moment of conception to natural death. Artificial contraception prevents life. Abortion terminates life.

If a person attends mass but is consistently left feeling spiritually unfulfilled or full of questions, where should he/she start with trying to find God and developing a spiritual self? Prayer? Priest? Bible? I'm sure it depends on the person, but I always feel lost about what the next step should be.

A spiritual friend or mentor or director is helpful to all of us as we grow in our faith and relationship to God. Mass is a sacramental ritual that celebrates our faith and God's gift of self to us and a community of faith. Mass should "feed" us with the word of God (and how the homilist opens that word and helps apply it to our lives), and the Eucharist "feeds" us with God's very self in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It helps to prepare ourselves before mass by reading the Sunday readings, trying to be present to the words we hear in mass and the community of faith that is surrounding us. Try different styles of prayer; one size does not fit all.

What's in those cruets the priest uses during Mass?

There are two cruets; one contains wine and the other water. At the offertory, the priest pours a little water into the wine, while praying "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

What's the priest/brother hierarchy and the difference between the two types of priests?

There is no hierarchy between brothers and priests. Brothers are consecrated lay religious, who make the vows of celibate chastity, poverty and obedience. They do a variety of pastoral ministries and live in community.

There are religious priests and diocesan priests. Priests are ordained by a Bishop. They work in collaboration with their Bishop for the pastoral and sacraments needs of the People of God. Only a priest is able to celebrate mass (Eucharist), hear confession (the Sacrament of Reconciliation), anoint the sick. Their ministry is both pastoral and sacramental. Religious priests also take the three vows of celibate chastity, poverty and obedience and we live in community. The vow of poverty means that we

own nothing personally and live from a common purse. This means a salary does not go to the religious brother or priest, but to a common purse from which each receives according to his needs. Diocesan priests do not take the vow of poverty and can own property etc. The diocesan priest vows obedience to his Bishop; the religious brother or priest vows obedience to his (elected) religious superior. They still need the permission of the local Bishop to work and exercise their ministries in the diocese.

Can you go to Communion without going to Confession first?

Yes, if you are not in the state of mortal sin. If you are carrying a few venial sins, then you may go to communion, with the understanding that you will go to confession as soon as you can.