

Fr James Martin SJ - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about Faith and Religion

The fourth of five excerpts from a talk given by him at the recent World Youth Day in Lisbon

6. Why Be a Catholic?

So maybe you say: “Okay, I can accept that Jesus was divine, and I believe in the idea that the Christian religion has a lot to offer. Why the Catholic Church? How can I want to be a part of the church with all those sex abuse scandals? And the fact that women can’t be ordained, what about that? Other Christian churches do that. Worst of all, the way you treat L.G.B.T.Q. people. Aren’t they supposed to be ‘disordered’?”

These objections—not philosophical or theological questions—are the main reasons that most people shy away from the Catholic church. And let’s be blunt: the visceral reactions to sex abuse scandals, homophobia, misogyny aren’t about being anti-Catholic; they are about being a thinking and feeling person. Who wouldn’t be offended by those things? As Pope Benedict XVI said in 2010, the greatest threat to the church, or what he called its greatest persecution, was from “*sin inside the church.*” Ten years earlier, in 2000, during the Jubilee Year, St. John Paul II asked for forgiveness from God for a whole host of sins: antisemitism, as well as sins committed against Christians of other faiths, women, the poor and so on.

So why belong? Well, let’s start with why you would stay if you’re already Catholic.

Beyond these scandals are other things that drive people away: hypocritical bishops and priests who live what they perceive as lavish lifestyles, out-of-touch statements on sex, women, L.G.B.T. people, and so on. And then something else we have to admit: priests, sisters, brothers, lay leaders, bishops, Catholic leaders of every type who are, to use an underused word, mean. A lot of young people want nothing to do with the Catholic Church, even if they believe in God, love Jesus and see the need for religion.

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For me, baptism is a really important part of this. And at your baptism, God called you into the church by name. Even in the face of these scandals, you’re called to stay. It’s something like your family. Your family isn’t perfect, maybe dysfunctional, maybe really messed up. But it’s still your family and you love it. Or maybe it’s like your country. If you don’t like whoever the president or prime minister or even king is, that doesn’t mean you pack up and leave. Plus, the church needs you right now, to help it change and grow. How can you leave if God has called you into the church? Finally, if you’re Catholic and believe in religion, to paraphrase Peter, “*Where else*

would we go?" The search for a religious community without sin is a search without end. So, one reason to stay: God asks you to.

Why join if you're not baptized? Well, you can just ask the tens of thousands of people who do join every year, and who know that it's a sinful place, but also know it's the place where you still encounter Jesus Christ in the Mass, still experience the Holy Spirit through the sacraments and still come to know who God is through the community. But people join for many reasons: for the unbroken line of tradition back to the apostles, for the great theological treasures of the church, for the spiritualities of the religious orders, for Catholic social teaching, for its work with the poor and many other personal reasons. For in the midst of sinners you meet saints, both living and dead, and encounter their stories.

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The Rev. Andrew Greeley, a Catholic priest and sociologist once said, *"We've done our best to push people out, and they keep staying. Why?"* His answer: the stories. To begin with the stories of the saints and the blessed, who, as one of the Mass prefaces says, *"by their way of life offer us an example, by communion with them, give us companionship, by their intercession sure support."* As the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner said, the saints show us what it means to be Christian in this particular way. But we join not only for the stories of the saints, but those of our fellow Catholics, one another, in whom we encounter God and who lead us to God. In coming to know other people, in their totality, as part of what Pope Francis calls the *"culture of encounter,"* seeing them face to face and hearing their stories, which you're doing here at World Youth Day, we come to know God better. That's part of what our church is.

And you can see that best from the inside. One of the most beautiful homilies I've ever heard was from Pope Benedict during his visit to the United States in 2008. During his homily at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, he used the image of stained glass to help us understand that:

From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendour. Many writers - here in America we can think of Nathaniel Hawthorne - have used the image of stained glass to illustrate the mystery of the Church herself. It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. It follows that we, who live the life of grace within the Church's communion, are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.