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**FAQ'S
ABOUT THE Roman Catholic Church**

"I have collected a group of Frequently Asked Questions about the Roman Catholic Church. Each question is important. And each question needs more than a simple answer. What I have tried to do in my responses is offer a summary answer to the questions. Each question deserves a much fuller development. Follow-up can take place with your own study, for example, of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, or by sitting down with a knowledgeable source, such as your parish priest or a lay ecclesial minister, and having a more detailed conversation. My hope is that these questions and responses represent a beginning for your reflection and consideration."

Fr. Louis Cameli

1. Why does the Catholic Church have so many rules?

The impression for many people is that the Catholic Church has a million rules and regulations. In fact, life in the Catholic Church is pretty simple. It is a matter of (1) shared faith in Jesus Christ; (2) prayer and worship together especially through the sacraments; and (3) trying to live as God wants us to live in loving service to him and to one another. We are an organized or structured community, and this is a great benefit. Our structures help us to stay faithful to our faith, our prayer, and our service. If there is a particular rule or regulation or tradition that you wonder about, you can be sure that it has to do with the three simple elements we noted above.

2. I'm divorced. Why can't I go to Holy Communion?

Being divorced in itself does not disqualify you from receiving Holy Communion. There may be a problem if you have been divorced and then re-married. If you were validly married in the Catholic Church, obtained a civil divorce, and then re-



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married outside of the Catholic Church, there is a problem. Unless you have obtained an annulment of your first marriage, the Church considers that first marriage still binding and the second marriage as invalid. You have stepped away from the Church community's standards for marriage and, consequently, you are in what is called an "irregular" situation. In that case, you should not receive Holy Communion, because you have made a significant decision that puts you outside the practices of the Church and God's law. Now, you can try to address that situation and "regularize" your second marriage by moving through the annulment process. Each situation is distinct, and you need to talk with a priest or other professional minister about your situation. People who have addressed these issues through the annulment process report finding much healing and peace.

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3. How can I trust the Church after all the sexual and financial scandals?

The word "scandal" means "stumbling block." And in our day, there is no doubt that there are many such stumbling blocks to faith and to belonging to the Catholic Church because of the sinful and criminal behavior of those in positions of responsibility in the Church. Although theft and financial mismanagement are certainly deplorable, what really pierces us to the heart as parents and as those who love children are the cases of the sexual misconduct of clergy and other church workers with children and young people. Some bishops and church administrators compounded this unspeakable damage by their inaction or active concealment of these sins and crimes and so placing other children at risk. As a Church we are facing this overwhelming sadness with honesty and will continue to do everything possible to avoid the same thing happening in the future. In whatever way possible, the Church must foster the healing of all those who have been victimized.



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Given the gravity of the scandals, is faith and belonging to the Church still possible? A word about the Church's self-understanding may help. The mystery of the Church is that it has a divine and a human element brought together. It is also a holy community that depends on God for its holiness. At the same time, the Church is a community made up of sinful people as well as those who are saintly. The very earliest community of disciples around Jesus contained people who abandoned him, denied him, and even betrayed him. Sadly, this can still happen today; and, sometimes, it does. We must strive to be a community of rigorous honesty acknowledging both the sin and the grace at work in us.

Some current portrayals of the Church suggest an institution that is completely defined by sexual abuse and financial misconduct. Although the elements of sin and failure are real, there is more that fills out the picture. Truly holy and committed people are at the heart of the Church and represent its truest nature. Through the Church, the holy and the dedicated accomplish great and good things—education, health care, social services, outreach to the most marginalized people, the protection and nurturance of all human life, work on behalf of justice and peace, and contributions to beauty in this world through art, literature, and music. In the Catholic Church, we identify ourselves as the pilgrim people of God. That means that we are on the way, that we have not yet arrived at our destination, that along the way we may temporarily lose our direction or stumble. We believe, however, that ultimately our direction is in God's hands, the Father of Jesus Christ, who is leading us home. Christ is the Founder of the Church, which was born of his side on the Cross as he fulfilled his Father's will for our salvation.

4. Why is the Church against science, for example, stem cell research and contraception?

It's a common perception that the Catholic Church is against science. In fact, the opposite is true. Church-led universities in the Middle Ages and scholastic philosophy laid the groundwork for the scientific method and the scientific revolution. Numerous scientists have found inspiration for their work in their



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faith. Even some priests, such as the Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel, the founder of the science of genetics, have made important contributions to scientific understanding. The Catholic Church firmly believes that God gave human beings stewardship of this world and that means pursuing knowledge of it (science) and using its resources with respect and restraint.

The Church is not against stem cell research. The Church is against a form of stem cell research, embryonic stem cell research. That form of research involves the destruction of human embryos (which are human beings in their earliest stage of development). A respect for all life from conception to natural death dominates Catholic thinking and gives a truly human direction for the efforts of science and technology.

Artificial contraception is not so much science as the use of science to interfere in the love-making and life-giving potential of a married couple. There are natural forms of limiting births to achieve responsible parenthood, natural means that do not interfere with a couple's love but actually enhance it.

5. Why isn't the Catholic Church more biblically based?

Actually, the Catholic Church is very much biblically based in three ways. First, the Catholic Church as a structured community has its origins in Christ's will for the community of disciples that he left in the world to carry on his mission. For example, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter: *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.* The ministry of Peter—a ministry which provides a sign of unity for the Church, a guarantee of fidelity to Christ's will for the Church, and a source of confirming encouragement—this ministry is continued through the Pope, who is Peter's successor.

A second way the Church is biblically based is through the Church's worship. The *Lectionary* is an arrangement of the Bible so that in course of our worship



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together, especially at the Eucharist or in the Mass, we hear and reflect on the whole Word of God. Besides that, every day through the *Liturgy of the Hours*, the Church's official daily prayer, the Psalms are prayed and readings from Scripture are offered.

Finally, the teachings of the Church which by the guidance of the Holy Spirit authentically present God's Revelation are based in the Word of God found in the Bible. The Holy Spirit guides and directs the Church as the community of faith deepens its understanding and appreciation for God's Revelation.

6. The Catholic Church seems to be against gay people, and yet Jesus doesn't say anything about homosexuality. This doesn't seem to make much sense.

The Catholic Church is not against gay people, that is people who identify themselves as having same-sex attractions. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is an authoritative summary of Catholic teachings, makes a number of important statements about people who have same-sex attractions. The *Catechism* states that the origin of homosexuality remains unknown and that there a good number of men and women who have these tendencies. According to the *Catechism*, "They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives..." (see numbers 2357-2359) The *Catechism* also says, "Homosexual persons are called to chastity." In other words, in Catholic teaching, the only appropriate setting for sexual activity is in the context of the sacrament of marriage. All those who are not married are to refrain from sexual activity. The *Catechism* goes on to offer some suggestions how homosexual persons can live chastely.

The teachings of Jesus do not explicitly refer to homosexuality (which, by the way, as a specific term dates back only to the nineteenth century and in a medical context). Jesus does teach about marriage and the authentic love to which all



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Christians are called. This forms the basis for the Church's teaching on sexuality, including homosexuality.

7. Why are women unequal in the Church, for example, they can't be ordained priests?

The place of women in the Church (and in society in general for that matter) needs to advance. Pope John Paul II was quite clear on that point, and Pope Benedict XVI has followed the same direction. Equality in the Church and the question of ordination are two different issues. Saint Paul writes: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* Galatians 3:28. In Christ, there is radical equality, and we need to embody that in our structures of living together in the Church. We need to do that much better than we have in the past. On the matter of ordination, the Church has definitively said that it does not have the authority to ordain women, that is, to change the sacrament. This is not a matter of equality or inequality but rather something that has to do with sacramental signs and symbols. Men and women as men and women mean something special and unique for each other. That difference in meaning is drawn into the sacramental sign of priesthood. Theologians are reflecting on the sacramental sign, and their efforts should yield even greater clarity in the future.

8. Wouldn't married priests be good for the Church, because they would understand the problems of ordinary people much better?

The question of celibacy or married priests receives a lot of coverage in the popular media, probably because it remains such a mystery in a sexually permissive culture such as our own. Also, it would seem to be more practical to have married priests, since there might be more vocations to cover the shortage of clergy and, as the questioner states, they might understand the problems of ordinary people better.



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First, a bit of clarification is in order. The discipline of celibacy is part of the Western or Latin Rite part of the Church. In the East, there is a married clergy. This means that there is no absolutely necessary connection between celibacy and priesthood. There are reasons, however, that suggest the connection is a very logical and helpful one. These reasons form the basis for the discipline of celibacy in the Western Church.

The long-standing tradition of a celibate priesthood in the West has its own purposes and rationale. For example, celibate clergy represent a particular sign and form of dedication and commitment to Jesus and the Church, just as married couples do in their own way through the sacrament of marriage. Dedicated celibate clergy, who are free of responsibilities for wife and children, can make themselves available for a wider range of ministry in the Church, for example, by moving around more freely.

Would a married clergy understand the problems of ordinary people better? When people have consulted wise and experienced celibate priests, they report that they have been understood and, additionally, they have found someone who is very invested in their life and concerns. Practically speaking, it doesn't seem to make a difference.

9. Why does the Church make religion and spirituality so complicated? Can't I just believe in God and live a good life? Isn't that enough?

Things are not as complicated as they may appear. See the response to the first question above for the core and simple elements of the Christian life lived out in the Catholic Church. They include faith in Jesus Christ, prayer and worship, and loving service of God and one another.



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This question is really about going it alone in the life of faith. In other words, the question inside this question is: why do I need the Church anyway? Can't I just get by on my own faith and my own way of living a good life? The answer to this last question is No, because we need the Church or the community of faith to be with us on our journey.

God did not make us to be alone. When we go to God, we do so together. Take, for example, the matter of faith. It's easy enough to get some very distorted ideas of what true faith is all about. We need the traditions and support of the community of faith, in other words, the Church, to keep us on track, to keep us faithful in our faith. The Second Vatican Council expressed it this way: *God did not decide to save singly one by one as it were, but to gather to himself a people.* The Bible from start to finish is the story of God's involvement not just with individuals but with a people—the people of Israel, the company of disciples around Jesus, and the community of the Church that Jesus left behind to continue his mission on earth.

10. Why should I confess my sins to a priest who is a sinner just like me and maybe an even bigger one?

It's true that the priest to whom we confess our sins may be a sinner just like us and, perhaps, an even bigger one. But that fact begs the question. The real question here has to do with the power of forgiveness which belongs only to God. The fact is that God has entrusted the power to forgive sins to his Church. The priest does not forgive sins, but God forgives sins *through* the priest who pronounces the words of forgiveness or absolution in the name of Jesus Christ. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his apostles and gospel of St. John says: *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* (John 20:21-23)



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From a very human perspective, we need to be able to give voice to our sorrow and regret for our sins by confessing them. Again from a human perspective, we need to hear the comforting and reassuring words, “You are forgiven.” All this happens through the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation.

11. Why would a priest or representative of the Church treat someone badly at the time of a funeral or a wedding or a baptism?

Just about every family has a story of something not going well at time of a church celebration of a decisive life moment—a birth, a marriage, or a death. Sometimes, the cause rests squarely on the shoulders of a priest or other minister. Their insensitivity or impatience or whatever can lead to truly unfortunately situations. Something else, however, also needs to be acknowledged. These decisive life moments are also often fraught with all kinds of tensions in families. Sometimes in these special moments, inappropriate behaviors surface that have little to do with the religious celebration but a lot to do with unresolved family history. On occasion people who are unfamiliar with Church law or the liturgy make a special request (or demand) that cannot be honored because it is not in conformity with the Church’s worship. When they are refused (and, of course, that can be done either brusquely or with some explanation), they may feel offended or resentful. In a Church made up of sinful human beings, both the ministers and those who are served can contribute in different ways to sad situations surrounding what ought to be joyful or consoling moments.