

Owning Your Catholic Identity

Jessica: There's Amy and Mike. It's a shame they'll be going to hell.

Candice: Why do you think they'll be condemned? Aren't they saved?

Matt: I saw them waving their hands like Catholics do, and you know Catholics aren't even Christians. They worship statues and Mary, and have to do whatever the Pope tells them. They're not even allowed to read the bible! Pastor Bob says they're going to hell.

Steven: There they are. Let's ask them about it. Hey, Mike. Hi, Amy. We were just talking about your religion. You're both Catholic, aren't you? Would you mind if we ask you a few questions?

Mike: Sure, go ahead.

Jessica: OK, I'll start. What's that thing you do with your hand? You know, when you touch your head and your shoulders?

Amy: Chasing flies? That's called the Sign of the Cross. As Catholics, we pray with our whole bodies, when we bless ourselves with the Sign of the Cross, we're praying with our hands as well as our hearts and our voices, sort of like you might do when you lift up holy hands to the Lord. By the way, we do that, too.

Mike: You know, the Sign of the Cross was a way that Christians during the first couple of centuries after Jesus recognized each other, sort of like a secret handshake during the persecutions, so when we make the Sign of the Cross, we're witnessing with our bodies just like the early Christians did. A lot of them died for the cross, and lots of them even died *on* the cross, so when I make the Sign of the Cross, I'm honoring their memory, too. The early Christians made the sign of the cross on everything. They even crossed their dishes before they ate, and crossed their beds before going to sleep at night!

Amy: Since our prayers are centered on the Trinity, we usually begin and end our prayers by making the Sign of the Cross while we say "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." We touch our forehead to remind us to think about God; our heart to remind us to love God, and our shoulders to remind us to work for God's kingdom.

Candice: Why do you pray to dead saints? Doesn't scripture say "Let the dead pray for their dead?"

Mike: We don't pray to dead saints. We pray to *live* saints! Jesus came to bring eternal life, so when someone who believes in Jesus and lives a good life reaches the end of their earthly life, they don't really die. They're transformed and live in heaven for all

eternity.

Matt: OK, so why do you pray to *live* saints?

Amy: To honor them, and to ask them to pray for us. When we pray to the saints, we're honoring people who lived their lives the way God wanted them to, and we're asking them to pray for us, just like I might ask you to pray for me if I'm sick or having a hard time. They don't need our prayers any more if they're in heaven, but the Bible tells us that they pray constantly, so they can pray for those of us who still need prayers. We call that the Communion of Saints, where those in heaven, on earth, and in purgatory can pray together.

Steven: Why can't you just pray directly to God?

Mike: We can, and we do. All our prayers go to God. But it helps to have friends praying with us, too. We can all pray for each other, but the saints' lives on earth are over and they don't need prayers any more, so we ask them to pray for us.

Jessica: What's this stuff about purgatory? People who are saved go straight to heaven.

Amy: Do they? Even St. Paul wasn't sure he was going to heaven. The Bible tells us that only the perfect can enter the presence of God. I don't know about you, but I know I'm not perfect! When I die, I might need some more preparation to let go of my sins and turn completely to God. That's what purgatory is for.

Mike: Yeah, it's where I'll be purged with God's love, "washed in the Blood of the Lamb," until I'm perfect enough to enter God's presence. Purgatory is a happy place because every soul there knows that he or she will someday get to heaven. It's guaranteed! It's not like hell, where there's no hope of redemption at all, or earth where we really don't know for sure.

Candice: Won't Catholics go to hell for praying to idols?

Amy: Do you have a picture in your purse, maybe of your of your boyfriend or your mom and dad? (*Candice nods*) Do you love that picture? Of course not! But the picture helps you to focus, to remember what they look like, to remember why they're special. Well, statues of the saints do that for us. They help us to focus our thoughts and our prayers, and they remind us of the good lives the saints lived, to help us to follow their example.

Mike: There's another reason, too. We don't only pray with our hearts and our minds and our voices, but we pray with our talents, too. A singer prays in song, a writer prays in words, and an artist prays in art. When I look at a statue or a picture, or listen to music while I pray, I'm joining in with the prayer of that artist or musician. His prayer is inspiring my prayer, so we're really praying together, and Jesus said whenever two or more gather in His name, he's there, too.

Matt: Didn't God command us not to make statues?

Amy: No. In fact, God commanded Moses to make golden angels to put on the Ark of the Covenant, and Solomon had statues of angels and oxen all over his temple. God commanded us not to *worship* statues, and there's a big difference between worshipping an idol, and praying before a picture or a statue that we know just represents and reminds us of a person who really lived a saintly life.

Steven: You can make all the excuses you want, but Catholics aren't really Christians because you don't read the Bible.

Mike: But we do! In fact, at every Sunday Mass we hear four scripture readings: one from the Old Testament or the Acts of the Apostles; one from the Epistles; a Psalm, and a Gospel passage. The cycle of readings runs for three years, and if you go to Mass every day for three years you'd hear pretty much the whole Bible. Plus, we have scripture study at our church for teens and adults, and a lot of Catholics read the Bible every day.

Jessica: Well, you don't follow it. Catholics do all sorts of things that aren't in the Bible.

Amy: Like what?

Candice: Like baptizing babies. That's not in the Bible.

Mike: You're right. It isn't in the Bible. But the Bible doesn't tell us not to baptize babies, either. God told the Jews to circumcise male babies to bring them into the faith. Jesus said to bring the children, even infants, to him so he could touch them. Peter baptized Cornelius and his household, and that probably included babies. But since we're not sure, we look at what we call Sacred Tradition. That means we look at what the people who knew Jesus and the apostles did, and their writings tell us that they baptized babies, so we do, too.

Matt: What about when you have Communion? Isn't yours different from ours? Don't you think it's special?

Amy: We believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus, but that *is* in the bible. Jesus said he is the bread of life, and that we have to eat his body and drink his blood. The actual word used in the Gospel means "chew." When we receive what we call the Eucharist, we actually take the body and blood of Jesus into our own bodies. At Passover, the Jews had to eat the flesh of the lamb to complete the sacrifice. When we receive the Eucharist, we complete the sacrifice of the cross by eating the flesh of the Lamb of God.

Steven: But that's not what Jesus meant!

Mike: Are you sure? Jesus said we had to eat his flesh and drink his blood. If he didn't

mean it, why did he let some of his followers walk away? Why didn't he call them back and tell them that they misunderstood his message. The reason is that Jesus really meant what he said, that we have to eat his body and drink his blood to have eternal life.

Amy: Everyone in the early Church knew it. St. Paul said that anyone who didn't believe that the Eucharist really became the body and blood of Jesus was guilty of sinning against the Body and the Blood of the Lord. All of the early Church Fathers knew exactly what the Eucharist is ... the true Body and Blood of Jesus.

Jessica: I'll have to think about that one. But why do you do so many things that aren't in the Bible?

Mike: Because the Bible tells us that not everything was written down. That's at the end of John's Gospel. And St. Paul says to follow the instructions he gave us, both orally and in writing. Even the Gospels were stories told by the elders before anyone wrote them down, so the Bible itself is part of Sacred Tradition.

Candice: Is it Sacred Tradition that tells you to do everything that guy in Rome says?

Amy: You mean the Pope? No, nothing tells me I have to do everything he says. If he tells me to kill somebody, I don't have to do it. The Pope is a sinner just like me, and I don't have to listen to him if he tells me to do something that's sinful, or something that's none of his business. I do have to listen when he talks about faith and morals, because in those areas the Church is protected from making mistakes by the Holy Spirit.

Matt: Where did you get that idea?

Mike: From the Bible. Jesus knew He wouldn't be on earth much longer in his human form, so he gave Peter the Keys of the kingdom of God on earth. In Jesus's time, cities had walls around them, so the keeper of the keys was the most powerful person in the kingdom besides the king himself. He had the power to decide who could come into the city and who had to stay out. That's why we say St. Peter stands at the pearly gates of heaven, because he has the keys given to him by Jesus.

Amy: Back then, the keys of a kingdom were held by the Prime Minister, and if the Prime Minister died while the king was away, the other ministers would get together and elect a new Prime Minister. Today, the ministers of the earthly Kingdom of God, the cardinals, get together to elect a new Prime Minister, a new Pope, whenever the old one dies. Jesus also told the apostles he would send his Spirit to guide them and protect them, that the gates of hell would not prevail against them. It's been that way for two thousand years, and even though we've had some pretty rotten popes, none of them has ever made an error in teaching faith and morals.

Mike: Jesus also gave the apostles the power to bind and to loose. In Jesus's time, that

meant the power to make a contract that was binding on the whole kingdom. So the Church through the bishops and the Pope has the power to tell us what's right and wrong in matters of faith and morals. When they say that sex outside of marriage, or abortion, or artificial birth control is a sin, it's because God gave them the power to make that decision.

Steven: But isn't that meddling in something that's none of their business? Doesn't a woman have a right to choose whether to have a baby?

Amy: Of course she does. But she has to make that decision *before* she gets pregnant, not after. Once she has a baby inside her, the choice involves someone else – her baby. And that baby has just as much right to live as she does. Scripture and the early Church Fathers agreed. If she doesn't want to have a baby, she shouldn't be having sex when she can get pregnant.

Jessica: You say she has a right to choose whether to get pregnant, but doesn't the Pope say birth control is a sin?

Mike: No, the Church says *artificial* birth control is a sin. There's a big difference. God created sex as a way for the human race to keep going, to "be fruitful and multiply." When we take the possibility of creating life out of sex, or when we take sex out of marriage and use it for selfish reasons, we're dishonoring God by misusing the creative power God gave us. The Church says it's OK to postpone having children, or to control the number of children a family has, by using Natural Family Planning. That's also why gay sex is always wrong, because children aren't possible in a gay relationship.

Candice: OK, you've made some pretty good arguments, and you do know what you're talking about. But I still don't know if you're saved. Are you?

Amy: St. Paul didn't even know if he was saved. He said he had run a good race and was confident, but he wasn't sure. He told us to work out our salvation in fear and trembling. He needed to work on it every day of his life, and I need to do the same thing.

Mike: But that doesn't mean we earn salvation. Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. We are saved because Jesus died for us, and all we have to do is accept Jesus as our Savior and we're saved. But faith alone isn't enough. We have to accept salvation by living our lives the way Jesus wants us to. We're not saved by our good works; we do good works because we're saved.

Amy: So to answer your question, we *were* saved by our baptisms; we *are* saved because we accept Jesus as our Savior; and we *will be* saved if we live our lives as Jesus wants us to. We were cleaned of our sins at baptism, and we clean ourselves again every time we go to confession.

Matt: Yeah, what's this confession business? Why do you tell your sins to a priest?

Mike: Because Jesus gave them the power to forgive us. When we're baptized, we are washed clean. But what happens if we sin after we're baptized? Sin is something I have to fight every day. It's not enough to just say that I believe in Jesus, because even the devil believes in Jesus.

Amy: And when I sin, my sin doesn't just hurt me, but it hurts the whole Church, the Body of Christ, so I need the Church's forgiveness, too. When I confess my sins, the priest tells me that God forgives me, but he also forgives me on behalf of the Church, and the Bible tells us to confess our sins to one another, which means the Church.

Steven: What about Mary? What makes her so special?

Mike: Of all the people who ever lived, there were only two who did *exactly* what God wanted them to do every moment of their lives, and they were Jesus and his mother, Mary. She risked her whole life to do God's will. She gave birth to him in a manger, raised him, taught him his faith and his humanity, followed him, and even stood at the foot of his cross and laid him in his tomb. She was the only person who was faithful and true to him his entire life, and then she waited with his followers for his resurrection, and then for his Spirit to come at Pentecost.

Amy: The Gospel of Luke records some of Mary's words, and every word she said points to God. "Be it done unto me according to His will." "My soul magnifies the Lord." "All generations shall call me blessed." "Do whatever he tells you." Mary's whole life, the whole purpose of her existence, was to lead us to her son, Jesus. She gave birth to him, she stood at the foot of the cross, and she waited with the apostles for the Holy Spirit. We don't worship or adore her; that's reserved only for God. But we do honor her more than any other human because she points us perfectly to Jesus.

Jessica: OK, I guess maybe Catholics are Christians after all. I mean, I don't agree with all you said, but you did give us some things to think about.

Mike: We just hope you're willing to consider that we really do have reasons for the things that we do. Jesus wanted us all to be one, as he and his Father are one. When we work against each other, we're doing the Devil's work. We should be working together to spread the Good News. That's what Jesus wants us to do.