

## WHY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

“Father, I’d like to ask a question?”

In unison, the people gathered around the refreshment table, turn to listen.

“Sure Dave?”

“Well, I’m wondering, and this is, I guess, a pretty generic question, but, why ... church ... why specifically the Catholic Church? Why not everyone worshipping their idea of God on their own. After all, I’ve always considered faith something personal ... you know ... between me and God.”

The group looks at the priest expectantly.

Gently, Ben clears his throat. “Why don’t we take our seats,” he says. “Give Father a moment to collect his thoughts.”

**Tonight is the second session of this year’s RCIA class. For those of you who may have missed the first class and just joined us, while the class is the responsibility of "Uncle" Joey and Ben Foster, the pastor of St. Katherines, Father Bob Scanlon and his associate pastor, Father John O'Malley have joined us tonight. Everyone has gotten a cup of coffee or some other refreshment and the class is about to begin. It seems however, one of the participants, Dave Palmer, just asked a question that is probably quite common among many who question the need and the place of structured religion in their lives. And from the reaction of the group, I can see he is not the only one asking it.**

*Let's grab a cup of coffee and take a listen to the discussion?*

Topping off his coffee cup at the refreshments table, Father Bob walks to the front of the class.

“Well, in the Third Commandment, the Church considers that a command for a collectively shared form of action and worship. Something that goes back to the first days of the Church. After all, it's tough to love others if you don't relate to them on some concrete, or maybe, communal, basis. As a people, we need the support of one another ... something Jesus recognized and encouraged.

Pausing to sip his coffee, the pastor smiles gently.

Does that answer your question, Dave?”

“It does,” Dave says, nodding his head.

“Any other reasons, Father,” Tony Rice asks?

Seems the question is on more than one person's mind.

“Well, I could say that's the reason we have this course of instruction in the first place, but I'll offer you this. First, the Church was established to maintain a uniformity of both belief and doctrine. Jesus founded what is now the Church in Rome

on Peter the apostle, and his successors, and promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide the church, in all truth.

Ambling down the center aisle of the room, Father Bob continues.

“To accomplish this the church has a particularly important function, or maybe, office. Called the Magisterium, with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, at its head, it is the teaching authority of the church. An authority given the church by Jesus Himself. Its purpose is to set forth clear and uniform doctrine on matters of faith and morals. One teaching that is universal for all, not dependent on the opinions and beliefs of varying individuals. The position of Rome on matters of faith and morals is uniform in all Catholic churches throughout the world. Granted, some slight differences in observances and practices may occur in various cultures, but the doctrine, or dogma, is the same for all.

“Secondly, there is a consistency of the form of our worship; the communal prayer we call the Mass. And although spoken in various languages around the world, its form is uniform, the same everywhere.

“And third, to comply with Jesus’ words regarding our responsibility to, and concern for, others, it is more effective to address our efforts on behalf of others as a community. The church is engaged in so many areas of education, health care, charity, and other services to those in need that we function far better as a church than as simply individuals.”

Pausing, again the pastor sips his coffee. “Does that satisfy your question, Tony?”

“Yes Father ... it’s a good answer. Thanks.”

“Any time, Tony. My door is always open, so to speak,” the priest says with a grin. “And be assured, we will look at the various functions of the Church in more detail as we go through these session.”

“Fair enough.”

A third member of tonight’s participants in tonight’s session raises her hand. With a gentle smile, Father Bob recognizes her.

“Yes, Sandra?”

“Would you please explain this idea that the Church is infallible; I believe that’s the word I’ve heard?” Sandra Bradshaw asks. “I believe the Holy Spirit is perfect, but the people who are in charge? I have trouble with that.”

“Good question ... what caused you to ask it?” the priest says softly.

“Last week I was working with several nuns, and two of them were discussing some matter they said was an infallible teaching and must be believed.”

Pausing a moment, the look on the pastor's says he's considering his response. Clearing his throat, he looks at Sandra and the class.

“Sandra, I know Ben and Joey have a fairly extensive examination of that topic planned in a future session. I'd like you to wait for that because they have structured it well, and I don't have all the scriptural references at my fingertips to adequately answer your question.”

Pausing a moment, a sly smile ambles across the priest's face.

"However, I will offer you a short answer ... don't want you thinking I'm trying to evade your question.”

Smiling gently, Sandra nods her head, saying nothing.

“You used the term ‘no wrong.’ Another word for ‘no wrong’ would be, impeccable – being perfect. That is precisely not what infallible means. It applies only in matters of faith and morals, and doesn't apply to the Pope, or any individual member or either the clergy or the laity.”

“Not the Pope,? Comes as a question from the back of the room.”

“... uh, let me clarity that, Father says quickly. “... not the individual, outside His official office. Not the fallible man, himself.

Pausing a moment, Father then continues. .

“For instance, if the pope says to bet the mortgage on Saintly Lady to win the Kentucky Derby ... I’d advise you to keep your money in your pocket, like I would. The pope probably doesn’t know any more about horse racing than I do.”

"And just how much do you know about horse racing," Janice asks, a wicked grin ambling across her face.

"Well, enough to put a couple bucks on Secretariat in the Belmont in 'seventy-three," the priest replies, giving Janice a wink.

Faint chuckles roll through the room.

"Where is the justification for the idea of infallibility found in the Bible," Devin Crosby asks

“Well, like I said, I don't have all the scriptural chapter and verse right here at my fingertips. But you will find it the gospel of John when Jesus promises the apostles, ‘I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.’

“... that one I have memorized,” Father John chuckles.

"That's in the fourteenth chapter of John, verse twenty-six," Joey interjects, setting down the Bible always available to answer just such questions.

"Thank you, Joey," Father says, smiling and giving him a slight nod of the head.

"May I offer something," Ben adds, opening the Bible Joey just set down.

"Certainly, Ben."

"And in chapter sixteen of John's gospel, verse thirteen, Jesus also says, 'When the "Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth' ... a second affirmation of that infallible guidance from our Lord."

"If the Pope proclaims on a matter of faith or morals, speaking as the supreme teacher of the Church, from the 'chair of Peter' as it is called, that pronouncement is infallible," Father John says.

"So only the pope can speak with infallibility," Clarice Evert asks?

"No, actually, if all the bishops of the Church speak in one unified voice, on matters of say, the death penalty, abortion, the perpetual virginity of Mary the mother of Jesus ... matters of faith or morals ... they are infallible, they are not teaching error."

“As I said, Ben and Joey have a more extensive presentation on this topic. There is more to this concept than I have offered here. I suggest you wait for that. But I do hope I answered your question. If you're still wondering, I suggest reading the chapter Ben and Joey cited.”

Devin's and Sandra's smile, Dave's nod of his head, and looks of satisfaction on the faces of the group indicate Father Bob's words have addressed their concerns ... for now.

“Okay,” Ben says. Let's take a break.