Additional Questions with Some Answers, July 2018

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(1) **Does the Bible say anything specifically about abortion? What about for health reasons or history of having a mental illness?**

There is much to say regarding abortion. For brevity, I will make a few comments and give a few resources on the topic.

The Church recognizes that every single life – from the moment of conception to natural death – is sacred and is worthy of dignity and respect. Those people who are innocent, who have no voice, who are persecuted, who are marginalized and who are treated unjustly in any way are people we have to protect (and this is not limited only to the unborn).

For a child in his mother’s womb, he is a human person from the moment of conception. And as a person, we must protect him and treat him as the sacred child of God that he is. It is true that the tiny embryo 4 weeks after conception is dependent on his mother to survive but a child 2 years after he is born is also completely dependent on his mother to survive. It is true there are differences between an embryo who is 4 weeks old from the time of conception, a fetus who is 36 weeks old from the time of conception and a child who is 2 years of age (based on his birthday) but these differences are related to stages of development. (Just like a 2 year old child, a 13 year old adolescent and a 40 year old adult have differences based on stages of development.) At every stage of development in life, from the moment of conception, you are a human person. You have a soul given to you directly by God. You are infinitely loved by God. And every human person deserves our love, care and protection.

If an innocent person is killed directly and intentionally, it is always immoral. With an abortion, there are various methods, but all involve intentionally killing a human person and it is always immoral.

(Please note that there is also what is called a “spontaneous abortion” – more commonly known as a miscarriage. In these cases, there is also the loss of a life which we mourn but this tragedy is not immoral as it is unintended.)

When we speak of abortions, it is important to be aware that the vast majority of abortions that are done today are not done as a result of the mother being raped or because the mother has a medical issue. But even in these uncommon circumstances, intentionally taking the life of an unborn child is still always wrong and immoral. Why?

The Church teaches that a good outcome or good intention can never justify doing an act that is evil (the ends do not justify the means). If the action we are taking is evil, it does not matter how “good” the outcome may seem, the action is always wrong. For example: I want to pass a course in college. This is a good goal but this does not justify me cheating on my exams. Another example: Wanting to buy a nice home for your family does not justify robbing a bank. With abortion, this is killing an innocent child. There is no reason or intention, no matter how good it may seem, that justifies this action – it is never morally good.

So much more could be said on this but to not make this reply too long, if you have other specific questions on this topic, please email me and I can respond.

As to the question if the teaching that abortion is wrong is in the Bible –

Implicitly yes because when we take what God teaches us about life, we can infer the teaching on abortion.

(a) The Bible teaches that every human being is made in the image of God and every life is sacred. God loves all of us from the moment of conception and never stops loving us. We see Jeremiah discussing how from the womb God knew him (Jeremiah 1:4-10) and we see St. John the Baptist while in Elizabeth’s womb being excited that he was in the presence of Mary and Jesus (Luke 1:44).

(b) God commands us in the Ten Commandments to not intentionally take the life of an innocent person.

(c) If all life is sacred, including the life of the person in the womb, and we are not to intentionally kill another, then abortion is wrong.

Many more things could be said using the Bible but to keep this response short, here are some links you may find helpful:

(A) article on the Bible and abortion: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resources/abortion/catholic-teaching/the-bibles-teaching-against-abortion>

(B) Church Father quotes on abortion: <https://www.catholic.com/tract/abortion>

(C) This is a more advanced discussion but I list it here because I do hear some objections related to our teaching against abortion using the Old Testament and this article addresses some of these points: <http://www.catholicstand.com/does-the-bible-condone-abortion/>

(D) I would also strongly recommend a book by Trent Horn called *Persuasive Pro-Life* (in it he is giving a defense of the Catholic teaching against those who may argue for abortion and addresses many arguments thoroughly). Trent Horn also has some YouTube videos where he answers pro-life questions so you can search that site for him.

(2) **Are there any woman prophets?**

Yes.

To give just a few examples:

In the Old Testament, there are several women called prophetesses (women prophets) and a few examples are Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14). The Jewish Talmud also consider others to be prophetesses though not explicitly called this in the Bible (some of these are Sarah, Hannah the mother of Samuel and Esther).

In the New Testament, Anna is a prophetess (Luke 2:36). Both the Virgin Mary (Luke 2:46-55) and her cousin Elizabeth give prophecies (Luke 2:41-45)

(3) **Why are only men allowed to have leadership roles in the Church?**

It depends on what you mean by “leadership roles” as to how to answer this question. In general, the leadership roles in the Church outside of the priesthood are not restricted to men.

Women can be directors of faith formation, they can be canon lawyers, they can teach at Catholic Universities. Women can be speakers, youth ministers and directors of a wide variety of ministries in the Church. And the list goes on.

We cannot forget that the most highly regarded and revered human person in the Church is a woman – the Virgin Mary. There are also many women who are canonized Saints. There are also several women who have been given the rare distinction of “Doctor of the Church.” (This term is given to those who have made an outstanding contribution to the Church and, over the past 2000 years, only 36 people have been given this honor with three of them being women). [Here is a list of the Doctors of the Church: <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/doctors-of-the-catholic-church/> ]

Having said that, it is true that the priesthood is restricted to men. So bishops, priests and deacons – all of whom receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders to varying degrees – can only be men. This is not something the pope or any Catholic invented and it is not something anyone can change. It was Christ who instituted the priesthood and the Church is faithful to all that Christ commands, including how to organize the priesthood. There are many ways to understand why it is necessary for there to only be a male priesthood, but the explanation is not, as some claim, that the Church sees women as inferior or is trying to subordinate women to men. Ultimately, it is the priesthood of Christ and it is by his authority the Church teaches what she does on this subject.

[If you want me to discuss the male priesthood further, email me questions and I can go into more detail.]

(4) **What is the Catholic definition of hell? Is it eternal? Would God really want sinners (or anyone) to suffer for all eternity?**

There are two final destinations for all human beings – heaven or hell. Those in heaven will be united to God perfectly. They will be filled with happiness, joy and peace for all eternity. In heaven there will be no pain, no suffering, no sadness and we will be with the angels, the Blessed Virgin and all the other Saints. We will see God ‘face to face’ as Scripture tells us and we cannot even begin to conceive how magnificent life will be. But hell is the complete opposite. Those in hell will be separated from God for all eternity. Their existence will be one of misery, filled with torments, unending pain and without love. Jesus warns us often about the reality of hell and the Scriptures teach clearly that hell is eternal.

Before looking more at hell, how do we get to heaven? One result of Christ’s death on the cross is that heaven became possible for each one of us. However, heaven is not guaranteed to any one of us. Eternal life is offered to us but we must open our hearts to God to be able to receive this gift.

We must also understand grace to better understand heaven. I discuss the topic of grace more in the next question but to briefly introduce it here: When Christ died for us, he also merited sanctifying grace for us. It is by this grace that we are saved (Eph 2:8). And God freely offers all of us this gift of grace but we must receive this grace into our soul and cooperate with it. Grace is God’s own divine life infused into us and it is a power that enables us to have faith, to love God and to be obedient to God. If we die with grace in our soul (what the Church refers to as being in a state of grace), then when you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, God has promised that you will receive the gift of eternal life.

So heaven is not something we can earn but, by if we have received the life of God into our soul in this life, then this power of God that is in us will enable us to enter the kingdom of heaven in the next life.

What about hell? If, in this earthly life, one has refused to love God, one has been unfaithful to God, one has turned away from God or one has refused to obey God, then that person is rejecting not only God but his gift of grace. And if one dies without grace in his soul, when he stands before the judgment seat of Christ after death, he will have freely chosen to be separated from God for all eternity. It is not what God desires for anyone but, because of love God, does not coerce us. We have a choice in this earthly life – to choose God or reject him. At the same time, because of love, God did not create us as robots who simply do what we are programmed to do. God gave us free will so that we could choose to return God’s love with love or reject him. If we reject God either in our thoughts, words or actions and remain unrepentant of this at death, we have freely chosen to remain separated from God in the next life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’.” At every moment of our earthly lives, God offers us his grace and God continues to offer this to us until the moment of death. Grace is not withheld from anyone by God, but we can refuse to receive it OR, having received it, we can lose this grace by turning away from God.

Hell is real and this is why God warns us through the Scriptures and the Church that this earthly life has eternal consequences. Because of God’s love for us, Christ became man and died once and for all so that heaven was possible for all of us. And now, God asks each one of us individually if we will receive God’s love and love him in return. I like the image of Jesus Christ knocking on the door of our hearts. He continues knocking until the moment of death. If we open our hearts to him, God’s grace and love will be poured into us. If this grace is in our souls at death, God will give us the gift of heaven. If we refuse God’s love, we refuse grace, and we will have freely chosen hell.

More could be said but here are some resources. If you have additional questions, email me!

Read the Catechism of the Catholic Church #1023-1029 on heaven and #1033-1037 on hell. [<http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p123a12.htm> ]

Here are two articles I wrote in the past:

On Hell: <http://www.catholicstand.com/hell-real-freely-chosen/>

On Heaven: <http://www.catholicstand.com/contemplating-heaven-our-ultimate-goal/>

(5) **When I think of grace, I think of it as forgiveness. When Catholics discuss “grace”, are you referring to something different?**

As Catholics, when we refer to “grace,” we usually are referring to “sanctifying grace.”

We do have a different understanding of grace compared to many non-Catholic Christians.

For Catholics, grace is the life of God that is infused into our soul at baptism and that is given to us when we receive the other sacraments. Grace is a supernatural power that God infuses into our soul that enables us to have faith, to obey God and to love as God calls us to love. Grace is not merely God’s kindness towards us, rather, it is something we receive and that transforms us. Grace works in us to make us holy and perfect. When we hear about the process of sanctification (which means being made holy), this happens by grace and it begins in this earthly life. From the moment of our baptism, this life of God in us is at work truly changing us – transforming us – into a new creature. Grace works in us to conform us more and more to Christ.

We do not earn grace. When Christ died on the cross, he merited this grace for us. We can refuse God’s grace but, until the moment of our death, God never stops offering this free gift to us.

Romans 5:5 says “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts” – this refers to grace.

Ephesians 2:13 says, “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” and Paul is referring to grace – how God works in us by grace to enable us to love and obey him.

Colossians 3:9-10 refers to us being renewed, putting off the old man and putting on the new – this refers to what grace does in us.

Titus 3:3-6 is a beautiful passage that shows what happens after baptism – we turn from a life of sin to a life in Christ and Paul says through baptism (being washed) we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Paul is referring to the Catholic understanding of grace – the life of God is poured into us at baptism and we are renewed, we are changed and Christ now abides in us.

John 14:23 says that God will dwell IN those who love him (this is grace – the life of God in us).

2 Corinthians 9:8 says, “God is able to make grace abound to you so that you will always have sufficiency in all things and may abound in every good work.” This again is grace – the supernatural power in us that enables us to be able to obey God and do what it is that he asks of us.

If we sin or turn away from God, we are not cooperating with God’s grace and it is possible for us to lose this gift. As I mentioned a moment ago, we first receive grace at baptism and grace can be increased when we receive the other Sacraments. But if turn away from God or commit a mortal sin, we lose grace. But even then, God never abandons us. He has given us the Sacrament of Confession so that if we lose grace and fall out of communion with him in this earthly life, we have a way back home to him. If we receive this sacrament, sorry for our sins and committed to turning from sin back to God, God will restore this grace into our soul.

“Forgiveness” though is different from grace. I have also heard people who think grace is “God’s kindness shown to us” but this is not a deep enough understanding of grace from the Catholic perspective.

How do we understand “forgiveness” and “grace”?

Forgiveness is the idea of pardoning someone for an offense. When we sin, we offend God. There is nothing I can do though to deserve God’s forgiveness for even one sin I commit. And this is why it was necessary for Christ to become man. In his death, Christ offered himself as a sacrifice of love on the cross for our sins. In doing this, he could offer himself for us, since he is truly man, and his sacrifice was of infinite value since he is truly God. As a result of his sacrifice, he merited God’s forgiveness for our sins, and he merited for us the gift of grace. Both are results of what Christ did, but they are distinct gifts. And, it is important to note, Christ died for all us. In his death, all sins have been forgiven by God and all are offered grace – both believers and unbelievers. But there is a caveat. We must freely choose to love God and unite ourselves to Christ to receive these gifts.

When it comes to understanding our relationship with God related to sin, grace and forgiveness, it may help to have an analogy.

Think of the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. In the beginning, the prodigal son was at home with his father, in a good relationship and promised an inheritance. This is like all of us who at baptism become children of God and receive our inheritance of grace, which enables us to be in a relationship with God with the promise of heaven if we persevere in grace.

In the story, the prodigal son then decides he no longer wants to be in the home with his father, so he leaves, taking his inheritance with him. We are then told though that he squanders his inheritance by living immorally. And the result of the son’s actions is that he becomes lost and dead to the father (see verse 24).

For us, if we receive grace but then freely commit a mortal sin, we lose this grace and become like the prodigal son. We fall out of our relationship with God and become spiritually dead. This is not the result of anything God did or did not do but the result of our own free choice to reject the relationship with God our Father.

In this parable, did the prodigal son’s father ever stop loving him even when he was living in sin? No. Did his father forgive the son for all he had done? Yes, and even had the son not returned home there is the sense the father had forgiven him based on the way Jesus describes the father. Jesus describes the father eagerly waiting every day for his son to return and, when the son finally does, the father runs out to meet his repentant son, embracing him without hesitation. However, the story shows how it was essential for the son to repent and return home for him to once again be a part of the family. In the parable, the father does not force the son to come back home. Though the father desired him to return, the son had to make the choice. And it is very clear in the father’s own words that before the son repented, the relationship between the father and prodigal son was damaged because, in the words of the father, the son was lost and was dead.

This is like us. Christ died for our sins so we have been forgiven by God. And Christ died so that we would receive our inheritance of grace (God’s own divine life that is poured out into our souls). And we receive both the forgiveness of sins and God’s grace at baptism. In this sacrament we also enter God’s family. But if we squander this grace by turning away from God, we become spiritually dead. We become lost. By our own free choice we are no longer in a relationship with God. But God never stops loving us. If we return to him and repent (go to the Sacrament of Confession), God will again show us his forgiveness and he will restore grace into our soul. We will once again enter into a relationship with God our Father, and, like the celebration in the parable, for us too, all in heaven rejoice when we repent and return home (Luke 15:7).

Much more can be said about grace but I recommend reading the Catechism on grace here: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c3a2.htm>

If you have further questions, email me!

(6) **Is drinking a sin?**

Merely drinking alcohol is not sinful. Jesus himself, who was without sin, consumed alcohol at the Last Supper and he even turned water into wine at the Wedding of Cana. And the Sriptures tell us that alcohol can be a good gift from God (Ecclesiastes 9:7; Psalm 104:15; Genesis 27:28 to name a few examples).

However, drinking alcohol becomes sinful when it is done in excess. St. Paul speaks to the sin of drunkenness (Romans 13:13; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:18) as do other passages in Scripture. The Catechism of the Catholic Church #2290 speaks to this describing drunkenness as a sin against temperance. Plus, the sin of drunkenness is dangerous because the effects are such that you can potentially endanger yourself or others physically, and the effects can make it more difficult for you to resist temptations so there is further risks for you from this standpoint as well.

Here are two good articles speaking to drunkenness:

(a) <https://rcspirituality.org/ask_a_priest/ask-a-priest-how-much-beer-is-ok-to-drink/>

(b) <http://www.aggiecatholicblog.org/2012/03/is-getting-drunk-a-mortal-sin/>

(7) **How do you find the Saints that are good intercessors for the different causes/needs?**

This question refers to the practice of intercessory prayer.

As Catholics, we recognize that all of us can pray for each other on earth but we also hold that this ability does not stop with death. God allows those who are in communion with him even after death to continue interceding for those on earth. (If you have questions on this or would like evidence on why Catholics believe this, email me questions!)

We refer to those who are in heaven as Saints and, while all of them can pray for any of the need we may have, there is a tradition in the Church to associate certain Saints with particular situations and circumstances.

So for example, St. Christopher is known as the “Saint for travelers” so when you or someone you know is traveling, you ask St. Christopher to pray for safe travels. St. Jude is known as one of the Saints for impossible (or lost) causes. St. Rita of Cascia is one of the Saints for difficult marriages.

You will see that even various trades/professions have Saints associated with them whom you can ask for prayers related to your job. [Sometimes these patrons had the profession they are connected to but this is not always the case]. For example, doctors have Sts. Luke, Cosmos and Damian as their patrons and these men were all doctors in their earthly lives. St. Michael the Archangel is the patron for police officers since St. Michael is a protector of the people of God. St. Gianno Molla is a Saint who lived in the mid-twentieth century and she is the patron of mothers, physicians and unborn children.

There are so many names I could list but if you want to find specific associations, search the internet by typing “Catholic Saint for \_\_\_\_” and just list what you are looking for (either the cause or the profession). Here are a few lists to get you started:

(a) extensive alphabetical listing by causes: <https://www.catholic.org/saints/patron.php>

(b) this is a shorter list than above and not exhaustive but easier to read quickly: <http://www.aboutcatholics.com/beliefs/alphabetical-list-of-patron-saints/>

(8) **What is a good book to learn about the early Church that existed after the time of the Acts of the Apostles and the time of Paul?**

There are numerous books but my favorite is called *The Four Witnesses* by Rod Bennett. This is easy to read and he tells the story of four of the earliest Church Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus – all lived before the year 180AD). This book gives an idea as to the thought of the early Church.

[Rod Bennett also wrote a book called *The Apostasy that Wasn’t* and this goes into the history of the Church in the 4th century discussing St. Athanasius and the doctrinal debates he was involved in.]

Another good book is called *The Fathers of the Church* by Mike Aquilina.

I would also strongly recommend reading the original writings of the Church Fathers. You can find many of these available on the internet. You can read Clement’s letter to the Corinthians from around 90AD (Clement wrote from Rome and was the fourth pope). You can read the letters written by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch that he wrote to various Christian communities as he was being taken to Rome to be martyred around 110AD. You can read the writings of Justin Martyr from 150AD, Irenaeus from 180AD and the writings of many, many others from the early centuries of the Church.

When you read these, it is important to review the background of each of the letters so that you know who the person is, whom they are writing to and why because the context is essential to understanding the letters. But these writings give a lot of insight into the life of the Church in the first few centuries.

Another book written by a non-Catholic historian named Rodney Stark is called *The Rise of Christianity*. It is interesting and gives insight into how Christianity spread in the first few centuries, and he also discusses what the early Church believed.

[Not related to this question but Rodney Stark also wrote a book called *Bearing False Witness* which is very good. In it he speaks as a non-Catholic who had been taught many misconceptions about the Catholic Church but then, as a historian, he investigated these things to discover the truth and writes about what he has learned.]

(9) **If the pope is be the successor of Peter – who was the chief Apostle and “prime minister” for Jesus in Christ’s Kingdom – what about the history of bad popes? If Catholics believe the pope is the leader of Christ’s Church on earth and has the Holy Spirit guiding him, how can this be true with the immoral popes that have sat in the chair of St. Peter in the past?**

At the time of Christ, he called twelve men to be his Apostles and to be leaders of the Church that Christ was establishing. Of these twelve men, it has always been held by the Church – and there is much evidence in Scripture – that St. Peter was given a special role. He was to be the chief / preeminent Apostle who was united with the other Apostles but at the same time had a responsibility to teach and lead the Church in a unique way. All of the bishops of the Church since then were appointed to be successors to the twelve Apostles and the bishop of Rome (the pope) is the direct successor to St. Peter. With his office, the pope takes on the responsibilities Peter had as well.

But the pope is a human person just as Peter was. And we see even at the time of Christ, Peter was far from perfect and was not sinless. Peter doubted and even abandoned Christ denying him three times. Peter’s sins did not take away the fact that he was called by Christ to be the chief Apostle but, because of his role in the Church, this increased the gravity of his actions. But ultimately Peter repents and returns to Christ. Then, as the faithful chief Apostle, Peter strengthens the faith and unity of those Apostles and disciples who remained in Christ and Peter boldly proclaims the gospel for decades. He calls people to give everything to Christ, and remains faithful until death, dying on a cross for Christ.

Like Peter, the popes throughout the history of the Church are human. They make mistakes, have bad decisions and even sin – sometimes even grave, heinous sins. But Christ never promised the Church that the leaders would be sinless. Christ promised that the Church would always be the pillar and foundation of truth, that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church into all truth and that Christ and the Holy Spirit would be with the Church always. So when we look at the history of the Church and at the papacy, we do see sinful men and, though tragic, there are popes who caused great scandal because of their immorality. But, despite the sins, you will never find a pope changing the doctrines of the Church or teaching the universal Church any error. Christ did not promise to keep the popes immaculate and he did not even promise that all of the popes would be in heaven. Christ promised to preserve and protect the fullness of truth in the Church and, for 2000 years, that is what he has done.

If interested, two excellent books related to the papacy:

*Pope Fiction* by Patrick Madrid

*Upon this Rock* by Steven Ray