

## 12 CLAIMS EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER

1. "There's no such thing as absolute truth. What's true for you may not be true for me."

People use this argument a lot when they disagree with a statement and have no other way to support their idea. After all, if nothing is true for everyone, then they can believe whatever they want and there's nothing you can say to make them change their minds.

But look at that statement again: "There's no such thing as absolute truth." Isn't that, in itself, a statement that's being made absolutely? In other words, it applies some rule or standard to everyone across the board -- exactly what the relativists say is impossible. They have undone their own argument simply by stating their case.

The other problem with this statement is that no relativist actually believes it. If someone said to you, "There is no absolute truth," and you punched him in the stomach, he'd probably get upset. But by his own creed, he'd have to accept that while punching someone in the stomach may be wrong for him, it might not be wrong for you.

This is when they'll come back with an amendment to the original statement by saying, "As long as you're not hurting others, you're free to do and believe what you like." But this is an arbitrary distinction (as well as another absolute statement). Who says I can't hurt others? What constitutes "hurt"? Where does this rule come from?

If this statement is made based on personal preference, it means nothing for anyone else. "Do no harm" is in itself an appeal to something greater -- a sort of universal dignity for the human person. But again, the question is where does this dignity come from?

As you can see, the further you delve into these questions, the closer you come to understanding that our concepts of right and truth are not arbitrary but are based in some greater, universal truth outside ourselves -- a truth written in the very nature of our being. We may not know it in its entirety, but it can't be denied that this truth exists.

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2. "Christianity is no better than any other faith. All religions lead to God."

If you haven't heard this one a dozen times, you don't get out much. Sadly enough, the person making this claim is often himself a Christian (at least, in name).

The problems with this view are pretty straightforward. Christianity makes a series of claims about God and man: That Jesus of Nazareth was God Himself, and that he died and was resurrected -- all so that we might be free from our sins. Every other religion in the world denies each of these points. So, if Christianity is correct, then it speaks a vital truth to the world -- a truth that all other religions reject.

This alone makes Christianity unique.

But it doesn't end there. Recall Jesus' statement in John's Gospel: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." In Christianity, we have God's full revelation to humanity. It's true that all religions contain some measure of truth - the amount varying with the religion. Nevertheless, if we earnestly want to follow and worship God, shouldn't we do it in the

way He prescribed?

If Jesus is indeed God, then only Christianity contains the fullness of this truth.

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3. "The Old and New Testaments contradict one another in numerous places. If an omnipotent God inspired the Bible, He would never have allowed these errors."

This is a common claim, one found all over the internet (especially on atheist and free-thought websites). An article on the American Atheists website notes that "What is incredible about the Bible is not its divine authorship; it's that such a concoction of contradictory nonsense could be believed by anyone to have been written by an omniscient God."

Such a statement is generally followed by a list of Biblical "contradictions." However, claims of contradictions make a few simple errors. For example, critics fail to read the various books of the Bible in line with the genre in which they were written. The Bible is, after all, a collection of several kinds of writing...history, theology, poetry, apocalyptic material, etc. If we try to read these books in the same wooden way in which we approach a modern newspaper, we're going to be awfully confused.

And the list of Bible "contradictions" bears this out. Take, for example, the first item on the American Atheist's list:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." Exodus 20:8

Versus...

"One man esteemed one day above another: another esteemed every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." Romans 14:5

There! the atheist cries, A clear contradiction. But what the critic neglects to mention is something every Christian knows: When Christ instituted the New Covenant, the ceremonial requirements of the Old Covenant were fulfilled (and passed away). And so it makes perfect sense that Old Testament ceremonial rules would no longer stand for the people of the New Covenant.

If the critic had understood this simple tenet of Christianity, he wouldn't have fallen into so basic an error.

The next item on the American Atheist list is similarly flawed:

"...the earth abides for ever." Ecclesiastes 1:4

Versus...

"...the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."

So, the Old Testament claims that the earth will last forever, while the New says it will eventually be destroyed. How do we harmonize these? Actually, it's pretty easy, and it again comes from understanding the genre in which these two books were written.

Ecclesiastes, for example, contrasts secular and religious worldviews -- and most of it is written from a secular viewpoint. That's why we find lines like, "Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything." (Ecclesiastes 10:19)

However, at the end of the book, the writer throws us a twist, dispensing with all the "wisdom" he'd offered and telling us to "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."

If a reader stops before the end, he'll be as confused as the critic at American Atheists. However, since the viewpoint that gave birth to the notion of an eternal earth is rejected in the last lines of the book, there's obviously no contradiction with what was later revealed in the New Testament. (And this is just one way to answer this alleged discrepancy.)

The other "contradictions" between the Old and New Testaments can be answered similarly. Almost to an item, the critics who use them confuse context, ignore genre, and refuse to allow room for reasonable interpretation.

No thinking Christian should be disturbed by these lists.

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4. "I don't need to go to Church. As long as I'm a good person, that's all that really matters."

This argument is used often, and is pretty disingenuous. When someone says he's a "good person," what he really means is that he's "not a bad person" -- bad people being those who murder, rape, and steal. Most people don't have to extend a lot of effort to avoid these sins, and that's the idea: We want to do the least amount of work necessary just to get us by. Not very Christ-like, is it?

But that mentality aside, there's a much more important reason why Catholics go to Church other than just as an exercise in going the extra mile. Mass is the cornerstone of our faith life because of what lies at its heart: the Eucharist. It's the source of all life for Catholics, who believe that bread and wine become the real body and blood of Christ. It's not just a symbol of God, but God made physically present to us in a way we don't experience through prayer alone.

Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:53-54). We're honoring Jesus' command and trusting in that promise every time we go to Mass.

What's more, the Eucharist -- along with all the other Sacraments -- is only available to those in the Church. As members of the Church, Christ's visible body here on earth, our lives are intimately tied up with the lives of others in that Church. Our personal relationship with God is vital, but we also have a responsibility to live as faithful members of Christ's body. Just being a "good person" isn't enough.

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5. "You don't need to confess your sins to a priest. You can go straight to God."

As a former Baptist minister, I can understand the Protestant objection to confession (they have a different understanding of priesthood). But for a Catholic to say something like this...it's disappointing. I suspect that, human nature being what it is, people just don't like telling other people their sins, and so they come up with justifications for not doing so.

The Sacrament of Confession has been with us from the beginning, coming from the words of Christ Himself:

"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.' And 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; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (John 20:21-23)

Notice that Jesus gives His apostles the power to forgive sins. Of course, they wouldn't know which sins to forgive if they weren't TOLD what sins were involved.

The practice of confession is also evident in the Letter Of James:

"Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:14-16)

It's interesting that nowhere does James (or Jesus) tell us to confess our sins to God alone. Rather, they seem to think that forgiveness comes through some means of public confession.

And it's not difficult to understand why. You see, when we sin, we rupture our relationship not just with God, but with His Body, the Church (since all Catholics are interconnected as children of a common Father). So when we apologize, we need to do so to all parties involved -- God AND the Church.

Think of it this way. Imagine you walk into a store and steal some of their merchandise. Later, you feel remorse and regret the sinful act. Now, you can pray to God to forgive you for breaking His commandment. But there's still another party involved; you'll need to return the merchandise and make restitution for your action.

It's the same way with the Church. In the confessional, the priest represents God AND the Church, since we've sinned against both. And when he pronounces the words of absolution, our forgiveness is complete.

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6. "If the Church truly followed Jesus, they'd sell their lavish art, property, and architecture, and give the money to the poor."

When some people think of Vatican City, what they immediately picture is something like a wealthy kingdom, complete with palatial living accommodations for the pope and chests of gold tucked away in every corner, not to mention the fabulous collection of priceless art and artifacts. Looking at it that way, it's easy to see how some people would become indignant at what they think is an ostentatious and wasteful show of wealth.

But the truth is something quite different. While the main buildings are called the "Vatican Palace," it wasn't built to be the lavish living quarters of the pope. In fact, the residential part of the Vatican is relatively small. The greater portion of the Vatican is given over to purposes of art and science, administration of the Church's official business, and management of the Palace in general. Quite a number of Church and administrative officials live in the Vatican with the pope, making it more like the Church's main headquarters.

As for the impressive art collection, truly one of the finest in the world, the Vatican views it as "an irreplaceable treasure," but not in monetary terms. The pope doesn't "own" these works of art and couldn't sell them if he wanted to; they're merely in the care of the Holy See. The art doesn't even provide the Church with wealth; actually, it's just the opposite. The Holy See invests quite a bit of its resources into the upkeep of the collection.

The truth of the matter is that the See has a fairly tight financial budget. So why keep the art? It goes back to a belief in the Church's mission (one of many) as a civilizing force in the world. Just like the medieval monks who carefully transcribed ancient texts so they would be available to future generations -- texts that otherwise would have been lost forever -- the Church continues to care for the arts so they will not be forgotten over time. In today's culture of death where the term "civilization" can only be used loosely, the Church's civilizing mission is as important today as it ever was.

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7. "Dissent is actually a positive thing, since we should all keep our minds open to new ideas."

You might hear this argument a lot today, especially in the wake of the abuse scandal in the Church. Everyone wants to find a solution to the problem, and in doing so some people are advocating ideas that are outside the pale of our Catholic faith (i.e., women priests, being open to homosexuality, etc). A lot of people blame the Church for being too rigid in its beliefs and not wanting to try anything new.

The truth is, a lot of the ideas for reform that are floating around today aren't new. They've been around for a while, and the Church has already considered them. In fact, the Church has spent its entire life carefully examining ideas and determining which ones are in line with God's law and which aren't. It has discarded heresy after heresy while carefully building up the tenets of the Faith. It should come as no surprise that there are thousands of other Christian churches in existence today -- all of them had "new ideas" at one point that the Church had decided were outside the deposit of faith.

The Church has an important responsibility in protecting the integrity of our Faith. It never rejects ideas out of hand, as some dissenters would claim, but has two thousand years of prayer and study behind the beliefs it holds to be true.

This doesn't mean that we can never disagree on anything. There's always room to discuss how best to deepen our understanding of the truth -- for example, how we can improve our seminaries or clergy/lay interactions -- all within the guidelines of our Faith.

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8. "Properly interpreted, the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. Rather, it weighs against promiscuity -- whether homosexual or heterosexual. Therefore, we have no reason to oppose loving homosexual relationships."

As homosexual activity gains greater acceptance in our culture, there'll be more pressure among Christians to explain away the Bible's clear prohibition against it. It's now the standard liberal party line to claim that the Bible -- when understood correctly -- doesn't disallow homosexual activity.

But this claim flies in the face of clear passages in both the Old and New Testaments. The first, of course, is the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. If you recall, two angels were sent by God to Sodom to visit Lot:

"But before [the angels] lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.' Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, 'I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.' But they said, 'Stand back!' And they said, 'This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and drew near to break the door. But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut the door." (Genesis 19:4-10)

The message of this passage is pretty clear. The men of Sodom were homosexuals who wanted to have relations with the men inside the house. Lot offered them his daughters, but they weren't interested. Shortly thereafter, Sodom was destroyed by God in payment for the sins of its people -- namely, their homosexual acts. This fact is confirmed in the New Testament:

"Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 7)

But these certainly aren't the only passages in the Bible that condemn gay activity. The Old Testament contains another unambiguous condemnation: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Leviticus 18:22).

And these statements aren't reserved to the Old Testament alone.

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:26-27)

It's awfully hard for a liberal Christian to explain this away. There's simply no mention here merely of gay promiscuity or rape; rather, Paul is weighing against ANY homosexual relations (which he describes as "unnatural," "shameless" and "dishonorable").

Liberal Christians are in a bind. How, after all, does one harmonize homosexuality with the Bible? Their solution, it appears, is to strip the Bible of its moral power, and run in rhetorical circles trying to escape its clear message.

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9. "Catholics should follow their conscience in all things...whether it's abortion, birth control, or women's ordination."

It's true -- the Catechism says quite plainly, "Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters" (1782). This teaching is at the heart of what it means to have free will.

But that doesn't mean that our conscience is free from all responsibility or can be ignorant of God's law. This is what the Catechism refers to as having a "well-formed conscience."

The Catechism assigns great responsibility to a person's conscience: "Moral conscience, present at the heart of the person, enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil.... It bears witness to the authority of truth in reference to the supreme Good to which the human person is drawn, and it welcomes the commandments. When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking" (1777).

In other words, our conscience isn't just "what we feel is right" - it's what we judge to be right based on what we know of the teachings of God and the Church. And in order to make that judgment, we have a responsibility to study and pray over these teachings very carefully. The Catechism has a section dedicated entirely to the careful formation of our conscience -- that's how important it is in making right decisions.

And in the end, whether right or wrong, we're still held accountable for our actions: "Conscience enables one to assume responsibility for the acts performed" (1781). When properly formed, it helps us to see when we've done wrong and require forgiveness of our sins.

By seeking a fully-formed conscience, we actually experience great freedom, because we're drawing closer to God's infinite Truth. It's not a burden or something that keeps us from doing what we want; it's a guide to help us do what is right. "The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart" (1784).

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10. "Natural Family Planning is just the Catholic version of birth control."

Natural Family Planning (NFP) has enemies on all sides. Some believe that it's an unrealistic alternative to birth control (which they don't think is sinful anyway) while others think that it's just as bad as birth control. NFP has had to walk a fine line between both extremes.

First of all, the main problem with birth control is that it works against the nature of our bodies -- and nature in general. It aims to sever the act (sex) from its consequence (pregnancy), basically reducing the sacredness of sex to the mere pursuit of pleasure.

NFP, when used for the right reason, is more of a tool used for discerning whether a couple has the means (whether financially, physically, or emotionally) to accept a child into their lives. It involves understanding your own body, taking careful stock of your situation in life, discussing the issue with your spouse, and, above all, prayer. Rather than cutting yourself off from the full reality of sex, you are entering into it with a better understanding of all aspects involved.

People who favor birth control point to those people who can't afford more children, or whose health might be at risk from further pregnancies. But these are perfectly legitimate reasons to use NFP --

situations where it would be perfectly effective -- and the Church allows its use.

Other people think that taking any sort of control over the size of your family is like playing God, rather than letting Him provide for us as He sees fit. It's true that we must trust God and always accept the lives He sends us, but we don't need to be completely hands-off in that regard.

For example, rather than throwing money around and saying that "God will provide," families carefully budget their finances and try not to overextend their means. NFP is like that budget, helping us prayerfully consider our situation in life and act accordingly. It's part of our nature as humans to understand ourselves and use our intellect and free will, rather than passively expecting God to take care of everything. We're called to be good stewards of the gifts we're given; we must be careful never to treat those gifts carelessly.

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11. "Someone can be pro-choice and Catholic at the same time."

While this may be one of the most common myths Catholics hold regarding their faith, it's also one of the most easily dispelled. The Catechism minces no words when talking about abortion: It's listed with homicide under crimes against the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

The following passages make this clear: "Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception" (2270). "Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable" (2271). "Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense. The Church attaches the canonical penalty of excommunication to this crime against human life" (2272).

It can't be stated more plainly than that. Some people might argue, however, that being "pro-choice" doesn't mean being in favor of abortion; lots of people think abortion is wrong but don't want to force that opinion on others.

There's that "what's true for you might not be true for me" argument again. The Church has an answer to that, too: "The inalienable rights of the person must be recognized and respected by civil society and the political authority. These human rights depend neither on single individuals nor on parents; nor do they represent a concession made by society and the state; they belong to human nature and are inherent in the person by virtue of the creative act from which the person took his origin" (2273).

The sanctity of life is a universal truth that can never be ignored. Advising someone to get an abortion, or even voting for a politician who would advance the cause of abortion, is a grave sin, because it leads others to mortal sin -- what the Catechism calls giving scandal (2284).

The Church stands forcefully and clearly against abortion, and we as Catholics must take our stand as well.

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12. "People's memories of their past lives prove that reincarnation is true...and that the Christian view of Heaven and Hell is not."

As society becomes increasingly fascinated with the paranormal, we can expect to see claims of "past life memories" increase. Indeed, there are now organizations who will help take you through your previous lives using hypnosis.

While this may be convincing to some, it certainly isn't to anyone familiar with the mechanics of hypnosis. Almost since the beginning, researchers have noted that patients in deep hypnosis frequently weave elaborate stories and memories...which later turn out to be utterly untrue. Reputable therapists are well aware of this phenomenon, and weigh carefully what the patient says under hypnosis.

Sadly, though, this isn't the case with those interested in finding "proof" for reincarnation. Perhaps the greatest example of this carelessness is the famous Bridey Murphy case. If you're not familiar with it, here's a quick outline: In 1952, a Colorado housewife named Virginia Tighe was put under hypnosis. She began speaking in an Irish brogue and claimed to once have been a woman named Bridey Murphy who had lived in Cork, Ireland.

Her story was turned into a bestselling book, "The Search For Bridey Murphy," and received much popular attention. Journalists combed Ireland, looking for any person or detail that might confirm the truth of this past-life regression. While nothing ever turned up, the case of Bridey Murphy continues to be used to buttress claims of reincarnation.

That's a shame, since Virginia Tighe was exposed as a fraud decades ago. Consider: Virginia's childhood friends recalled her active imagination, and ability to concoct complex stories (often centered around the imitation brogue she had perfected). Not only that, but she had a great fondness for Ireland, due in part to a friendship with an Irish woman whose maiden name was -- you guessed it -- Bridie.

What's more, Virginia filled her hypnosis narratives with numerous

elements from her own life (without revealing the parallels to the hypnotist). For example, Bridey described an "uncle Plazz," which eager researchers took to be a corruption of the Gaelic, "uncle Blaise." Their enthusiasm ran out though when it was discovered that Virginia had a childhood friend she called Uncle Plazz.

When a hypnotized Virginia began dancing an Irish jig, researchers were astounded. How, after all, would a Colorado housewife have learned the jig? The mystery was solved, when it was revealed that Virginia learned the dance as a child.

As the Bridey Murphy case shows, the claims of past-life regression are always more impressive than the reality. To this day, not a single verifiable example exists of a person being regressed to a former life. Certainly, many tales have been told under the control of a hypnotist, but nevertheless, evidence for reincarnation (like that for the Tooth Fairy) continues to elude us.