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Ronda Chervin

*Tell Me Why  
I Should Be a  
Catholic When...*

The Church Has Such  
a History of Evil to Her  
Name?



by

Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.

Jesus himself seems to have given a partial answer in Mark 14:3ff when some asked why a costly perfume was being poured out on his head when the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus replied that the poor are always with us, but that this was something special, since the woman pouring the perfume was anointing his body in preparation for its burial.



Traveling around the world and visiting beautiful cathedrals, one is not given the impression that the people of the towns and cities think of the cathedral as something belonging to the priest or bishop or the pope. Rather, they regard the church as theirs. Poor as they may be, they can, if they wish, visit daily their "spiritual living room," reflecting the glory of the life to come in heaven.

This attitude might be compared to the way a poor married woman might cling to the gold ring on her finger as the last thing she would sell even to provide necessities. The ring symbolizes for her how important the bond of love is, even more important than the "daily bread," which would in any case disappear within a relatively short time after the sale of her treasure.

Great Church architecture, art, music, vestments, chalices, lace altar clothes — all these indicate that important as social justice is, beauty is also a hunger of the human soul. "One does not live by bread alone" (Matthew 4:4).

Among those who became Catholics knowing full well the evils of particular Catholics in history, some of the most striking conversions are of Jewish people. Realizing that Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the apostles as well as most of the early disciples were Jewish, they are thrilled to

complete their Jewish heritage by accepting their Messiah and his Church.

Of more recent European Hebrew-Catholics we have Blessed Edith Stein, Blessed Francis Libermann, Raissa Maritain, Venerable Hermann Cohen, Max Picard, John Osterreicher, Father Alphonse Ratisbonne, and Rabbi Israel Zolli. From the United States, among the most well-known are Karl Stern, Father Raphael Simon, Charles Rich, and Father Arthur Klyber. Father Elias Friedman is a South African who was a Carmelite monk at Mount Carmel near Haifa in Israel. He is the founder of the International Hebrew Catholic Association.

For information about these and other Jewish converts to the Catholic faith see *The Ingrafting* (New Hope, Ky.: Remnant of Israel, 1987), which I edited, and four booklets [*He's a Jew*; *This Jew*; *Queen of the Jews*; *Once a Jew*], edited by Father Arthur Klyber, also published by Remnant of Israel.

Of those converts with a burning desire to help the poor who chose to work within the Church rather than to scorn her as unworthy, the one who stands out the most in our century might be Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement. At the time of her youth in the early part of the twentieth century, Dorothy had joined the Communist party hoping that social revolution could accomplish the justice that could not be found in the United States as it was. Disillusioned, she began to experience within herself a great spiritual thirst.

When she met the Catholic radical Peter Maurin, together they founded a sort of Catholic communism. They would champion the rights of workers as well as tend to the immediate needs of the poor by means of a newspaper, soup kitchens, hospitality houses, and common prayer.

Probably there is not a single Catholic saint concerned with active works to help the poor who



has not felt frustration because of the apathy of some middle-class and rich Catholics toward the desperate needs of the poverty-stricken. The response of the saints, however, was not to abandon the Church but to take upon themselves the task of instituting programs for the relief of the poor by supplying food, clothing, and shelter as well as free hospitals, schools, and the like. A model of how anger at apathy can become zealous service can be found in St. Vincent de Paul of France who organized such rich ladies as St. Louise de Marillac to go out into the streets and find the orphans, the sick, the illiterate, and help them. St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta's Missionaries of Charity have helped thousands of the poorest of the poor as do Catholic charities throughout the world. While working for social justice, we must offer immediate aid.





o some observers there is no organization in the world with a worse record than the Catholic Church! The very words "Roman Catholic," far from conveying images of great saints, remind such critics of tales of

persecutions, inquisitions, religious wars, scandalous popes of the past and despicable priests of the present.

How could a church devoted to following the teachings of the Prince of Peace be so violent? How could followers of a Savior who was so pure give in so frequently to sexual sin? How could disciples of a Master who lived so poorly luxuriate in palaces?

The earliest history of believers in Jesus was marked not by sins of violence perpetrated by Christians but by martyrdom of Christ's followers at the hands of others. It was only when Christians became politically powerful that they were in a position to resolve disputes by force of arms.

Some wars were defensive and were waged against barbarian invasions; others involved battles over religious ideas. When there was a conflict between groups professing differing ideas about the nature of the Trinity or about Christ, and each group included powerful political figures, the situation was ripe for attempts to enforce unanimity through violence!

Eventually many thought that if Church leaders themselves were chosen from the upper governing classes, greater harmony between Church and state would prevail. It was not long before one could find bishops and popes of little or no piety, chosen for political reasons.

It has always been a temptation for religious leaders of all faiths to seek the help of the state in

the promotion of religious institutions. The results seem always to be ruinous, for power always tends to corrupt. Here is an example from our times: many religious colleges want federal aid for their students. But to retain this aid, they often believe they must secularize their schools by omitting prayer from classes not directly about theology, or by tolerating dissenting forms of pluralism to avoid any possible charges concerning lack of academic freedom. You might note that contemporary examples of worldly reasoning often seem less shocking than those of the past, because our own compromises fit our cultural mind-set and therefore seem readily forgivable!

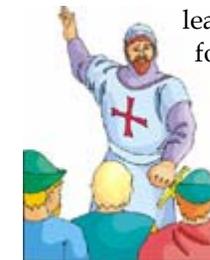
At the worst times of the past, elections of popes took months and even years as outside forces tried to poison the food of candidates deemed unlikely to further the selfish projects of princes and emperors. Other abuses included nepotism (handing out Church offices to nephews and other relatives in order to benefit the extended family in financial ways and also ensure allies) and simony (selling of holy things such as indulgences).



Although such practices seem foreign and almost bizarre to moderns, a close reading of Church history makes it easy to see how they developed from innocent to evil. To translate into contemporary life, let us suppose you were president of the United States. What would be more natural than to put into your cabinet a young nephew who was politically ambitious as well as good? This could easily lead to other members of your extended family expecting similar opportunities even if they were not especially suited for the posts in question. Or, suppose you are a priest eager to renovate your parish church. Your flock is eager to participate through contributions, but you still need a little more to purchase the marvelous organ you saw on sale a month ago. Would it seem so evil to tell the congregation that

you will say special prayers for the dead in those families who contributed more than one hundred dollars to the fund? It might seem like a bright idea until you realize that it could lead later to greater and greater abuses such as in the case of the lavish works of art found in great cathedrals now admired even by those Protestants (originally, protesting Catholics) who were so rightfully horrified by the sale of indulgences for the building of cathedrals at the time of the Reformation!

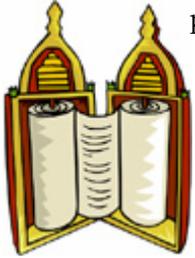
Happily in our times popes have little worldly power and the last century and a half have seen one holy pope after another. The story of the Crusades is also a sad one. There is documentation to prove that Church



leaders planned these excursions for holy reasons. They believed that if the warlike knights could be sent to rescue the Holy Land from Muslims they would cease their local feuding. The knights of the Crusades were taught to avoid all unnecessary bloodshed and certainly to avoid the sins of looting and rape so prevalent in medieval times as well as in modern times. Unfortunately, most of the crusaders fell into the temptation of indulging in atrocities in spite of all warnings to the contrary. Wars, whether religiously motivated or not, always include atrocities. After all, atheistic states such as the Soviet Union were responsible for far greater atrocities toward enemies — and citizens.

Indeed, a close reading of the Holy Scripture reveals how the chosen people repeatedly rejected the covenant and sank into immoral practices. Cycles of fervor followed by commitment to God and then by betrayal, punishment, repentance, and reform are also

characteristic, alas, of the history of all churches. Of all the sins of people belonging to the Catholic Church the ones most distressing to



potential converts concern the relationship of Catholics and Jews. In the early days of the Church, Christian Jews were afraid of Jews who had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

Later on, more and more Gentiles became Christians. As the Church became more powerful in the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine, Catholics would often see the Jews among them as potential enemies — people not united by belief in Christ who might form an alliance with the enemies of Catholic emperors and kings. Living often in separate areas of cities, partly because they themselves wanted to be with kinsmen, Jews would sometimes become objects of envy if they were rich and subjected to violence by those wanting to steal their goods.

Most terrible was the way greedy Catholics and other Christians would time their looting and killing to coincide with religious holidays that could be used as a pretext for their riotous attacks on Jews. Based on the passages in Scripture about Caiaphas handing Jesus over to the Romans for crucifixion, irrational Catholic and Orthodox rabble would rush out of church on Good Friday to persecute and even kill innocent Jewish people. Such pogroms continued well into the twentieth century and have left an enduring mark of fear even in the hearts of Jews who have never known persecution personally.

Other forms of persecution and intimidation of Jews by Catholics had to do with political motives linked to religious issues. For example, in Spain where many Jews lived for centuries in prosperity and peace, the situation changed dramatically during the centuries of Muslim

incursions into southern Spain. In those times it was feared that Arabs would take over all of Europe.

Mounting a holy war, or crusade, against the Muslims, the Spanish royalty such as Ferdinand and Isabella needed to be sure of the loyalty of all peoples in their kingdom. Could they count on the Jews? They were not sure. They worried particularly about the Marranos — Jews who converted to the Catholic faith, some because of a religious conversion to Christ but others purely as a defensive political move to consolidate their position in society. These practiced Judaism secretly in their homes.

It was not irrational to think that such phony converts might join forces with Muslims in a crisis if they thought it in their best interests. Since Isabella and Ferdinand actually favored Jewish converts as members of their court, it became critical to find out which converts were loyal and which shaky.



A way to decide appeared in the form of the inquisition. Set up to deal with Christian heretics, it was originally designed to protect the innocent by means of theological questioning by trusted Dominican theologians who were to substitute rational means for the type of torture so prevalent in all states at that time. The Church was not to be involved in punishment but only in making a judgment as to whether a person was heretical or not. Since heresy was deemed not only a danger to the Church but primarily to order in the state (that is, treason), in that heretics set up rival groups in collusion with foreign princes, it would be up to the state to punish the heretic.

Our most vivid image of the link between political factors and religious judicial procedures can be found in the trial and death of Joan of Arc. Even such unbiased chroniclers as George Bernard Shaw and Mark Twain, certainly not predisposed toward the Catholic Church, show in their portrayals how the real issue was not Catholic doctrine but political factors pitting the French allies of the invading English against loyalist French.

Going back to the Spanish inquisition, it was fear of internal traitors that led Isabella and Ferdinand to employ Dominican priests to determine which Jewish converts were sincere, with subsequent torture, death, or banishment of the insincere. There is evidence that figures about the number of Jews burned at the stake are highly exaggerated, having been written up by a disaffected ex-Catholic and then quoted ever since to blacken the record of Church practices. But even so, the picture remains terrible and terrifying.



Religious wars between Protestants and Catholics were common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Many of these wars were political more than religious. A prince who wanted to get out from under the temporal power of the pope had only to become a Protestant to acquire all the property of the Catholic Church in his lands. If there was resistance, this would lead to warfare. To people of the United States deeply imbued with ideals of religious tolerance, such wars seem incredible. Even though we also have quite a history of persecution, particularly of

Native Americans and Afro-Americans as 'well as Catholics, never have we seen anything resembling the Thirty Years' War in Europe from 1618 to 1648. Some of us view with disgust the battles going on between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, imagining they are fighting only because of distaste for each other's religion. Such is not the case. Economics and politics are the key to the violence. Religion merely parallels the long-standing inequalities in that country. It should be noted that the IRA (Irish Republican Army) has many times been condemned and its members excommunicated by the Catholic Church for its vengeful violence. Similar action has not been taken against the gunmen on the other side.

Of course, whenever a nation is convinced that its wars are just, its citizens do not think of themselves as violent. In our century we in the United States have been in almost constant war: World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Panama, the Gulf War, Iraq.

In our own century the Nazi Holocaust, attempting to rid the whole world of its Jews, has been seen by many as a travesty rooted in previous religiously motivated anti-Semitism. No matter how much documentation we have from Jewish sources of heroic self-sacrifice in the efforts of some Protestants and Catholics to save Jews, it still remains true that many Christians preferred to save themselves than to reach out to those in terrible danger. This should not surprise Catholics of our time, for how many are willing even to peacefully picket an abortion clinic at no risk whatsoever? If this is true, how harshly should those be judged who to help Jewish neighbors

during World War II would have ended up going to a concentration camp to their deaths?

It is important to read some of the documentation available about those whom the Jewish survivors of World War II call "the righteous of the nations," that is, those non-Jews who did risk their lives to help. Many members of the Catholic Church hierarchy roused the people to resist Nazism. The man who was to become Pope John XXIII forged thousands of baptismal



certificates to enable Jews to escape to Israel via Bulgaria where he was papal nuncio. A booklet entitled *Pius XII's Defence of Jews and Others: 1944-45* by Robert R. Graham, S.J. (published by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Milwaukee; longer version — *Pius XII and the Holocaust: A Reader* by Robert A. Graham and Joseph L. Lichten, also by the same publisher), addresses itself specifically to refuting the charges made by some against Pope Pius XII that he was negligent in defending the Jews, whereas in fact he worked tirelessly underground to save as many as possible.

Here is one of many telling quotations from page 2 of this booklet: "In 1937, when leaders of the Western democracies were scurrying to Munich to negotiate with Hitler, the Holy See condemned the theory and practice of the 'Nationalist State' in the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* [To the bishops of Germany: On the Church and the German Reich]. When Jews felt the cruel sting of Nazi hatred, the German bishops protested, 'Whoever wears a human face owns rights which no power on earth is permitted to take away,' echoing Pius XI's declaration, 'We are all spiritual Semites.' . . . While Britain and the United States were refusing to admit refugees to their territories, the Holy See was distributing thousands of false documents — life-saving passports to freedom — to the beleaguered

Jews. . . Catholic priests, nuns and lay people were hiding Jews in their flight to safety, and often paying for it with their lives. . . It could be asked whether these good works (praised by many European rabbis) were enough, whether it would have been better for the Pope to have denounced from the rooftops the crimes that were occurring. This thought troubled Pius XII, and he confided afterward to an associate, 'No doubt a protest would have gained me the praise and respect of many,' but he believed that such protest would only have led to more deaths whereas underground work would save lives." (Refer also to Henri de Lubac's *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944*; New York: The Miriam Press, 1990.)

Does all of this miserable history add up to a proof that the Catholic religion leads people into bigotry, persecution, torture, and murder? Of course not. What it comes down to is realizing that sin is always possible. When we, as members of the Church, commit sin by going against the Church's teachings, this does not mean that the whole Church is evil. It simply means that individual members are failing in their efforts to follow the Lord as they should, and people suffer as a result.

Some words of Pope John Paul II about the Holocaust display the Catholic sense of the Cross in its universal application:

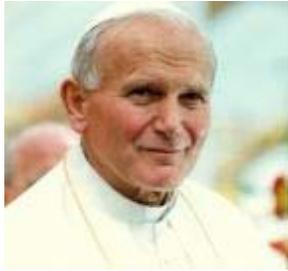
The history of Europe is marked by discord not only in the sphere of states and politics. In conjunction with political interests and social problems, these have resulted in bitter fighting, in the oppression and expulsion of dissenters, in repression and intolerance. As heirs to our forebears, we also place this guilt-



ridden Europe under the Cross. For in the Cross is our hope. . . .

Let us pray together (Catholics and Jews) that it (the Holocaust) will never happen again ... it makes us still more aware of the abyss which humanity can fall into when we do not acknowledge other people as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, of the same heavenly father.

It is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God, who has called them with an irrevocable calling. No valid theological justification could ever be found for acts of discrimination or persecution against Jews. In fact, such acts must be held to be sinful.



[This is taken from John Paul II's *On the Holocaust*, edited by Eugene J. Fisher, Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, National Conference of Catholic Bishops,

Washington, D.C., 1988.]

With all the explanations we can come up with as to why someone might think something that is absolutely wrong is justified, there still remains the fact that violence is always an appealing solution to those under pressure of their own uncontrolled emotions of fear or greed. No religious group has a monopoly on evil or on good in terms of behavior of their people under stress.

Does this mean that, since in every religion we can find a history of atrocities, we should not be part of any religious group? First of all, such a solution to the problem conceals the premise that I, by myself, am perfect and would not act wrongly under stress of any kind! In reality, most people are much better in terms of ethical actions when they are surrounded by groups who profess

principles of goodness and also provide supernatural motives for living up to these principles.

An analogy may help. Most North Americans of the United States feel proud to call themselves Americans in spite of our terrible history of negation of basic rights of Native Americans and Afro-Americans. Why? Why not flee to another country with a better historical record? If pressed, most Americans would say that it is because we believe that our Constitution is good despite the fact that some Americans have violated its spirit in the past.

In a similar way, we can love a church that teaches love even if some of its members do what is unloving. The Catholic Church, in fact, does not claim that all her members are good and holy. Quite the opposite! We are told about our need for cleansing and purification. Even popes, bishops, priests, and nuns are expected to seek sacramental reconciliation for their sins.



Within the Church we have the remedy for evil: the word of God and the sacraments. The millions of good Catholics throughout all times who have done God's will out of love for family and neighbor were living up to their faith. The ones who succumbed to evil were betraying it.

Looking back to the accounts in the gospels, would you have joined the band around Jesus yourself, or would you have stayed far away to avoid the company of Judas? If you would have joined the followers of Jesus then, be part of his Church now!

Similar reasoning may help in confronting the problem of the sexual sins of Catholics, especially those sins that hit the history books and newspapers for their scandalousness. We naturally wish that everyone who makes a good promise would keep it, especially when the breaking of it involves the victimization of others. Whenever Catholics –

single or married – sin in a sexual manner, it is scandalous and injurious not only to the victims but also to themselves. But when a priest, Sister, or Brother does so, it seems to strike Catholics and non-Catholics even more forcefully. To even imagine promising chastity is something so noble that failure to live up to it may seem even worse. Also there enters into the picture the problem of the victim often being a young person whose trust has been violated.

Sad, distressing, and agonizing as such sins are, are they reason to leave the Catholic Church or to stay away from her? Again, the failure to live up to an ideal is not a reason to throw out the ideal. When a Catholic prays the Apostles' Creed, he or she does not say, "I believe in Father X or Sister Y or Brother Z." Nor does someone enter into love relationships or marriage because he or she has only seen holy models of chastity and fidelity. Praying for God's grace, we should try to avoid all sin ourselves and we should also pray for and support anyone, whether the individual is a leader or not, who seems to be struggling with temptation or to have given in to it. How much sexual sin results from loneliness – loneliness that could have been somewhat alleviated by our friendship!

Next, under the topic of evils of the Church, comes the question of luxury of Church art or of the clergy's lifestyle in the face of the needs of the poor. Over and over again in the history of the Church, reformers have asked: "Why not sell all the gold in Church art, sell grand buildings, and give the money to the poor?" Jesus was poor, so why are his priests decked out in jeweled crowns, their standard of living higher than the people they minister to?

