

## Deacon Michael McElwee

### Religious Perspectives

#### Introduction to Roman Catholicism

“Hi, I’m Deacon Michael McElwee. I’m on the Parrish staff at Ascension Parrish which is just across the river and to extend an invitation if anyone would like to join us we’d love to have you at any time. I get to represent the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world. And we have a new, a new guy did you hear [Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio)]? Does anyone watch the news? Interesting thing we’re seeing. Some of the news reports were saying he’s the first non-European. That’s not true as Pope. Actually in the first couple of centuries there were at least three Popes who were from Africa. In the 600’s there was a Pope from Syria. So there was more diversity in the early centuries of our community.

Just a little background on Catholics. We’re about 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the global population and we are about half of all Christians. A century ago, 70% of Catholics lived in Europe and North America; today just 32%. More than 2/3s of Catholics today live in...guess...Latin America. Where’s this new pope from? Argentina, Latin America. And the Catholic Church is growing the fastest actually in Africa and Asia today. And so what we’re seeing in the choice of a pope from Latin America really reflects our demographics as the majority of Catholics now live in the southern hemisphere as opposed to the northern hemisphere.

This new pope, Pope Francis I, interesting choice of name. Francis is in our tradition of St. Francis of Assisi. And St. Francis of Assisi, besides being a Deacon by the way, was known for a number of things. And one of them was his willingness to reach out and go into religious dialogue. And there is a very significant story where he went, and you have to realize that this was during the Crusades, he went into the camp of the Sultan to discuss faith. So, and 25 years ago Pope John Paul II, it was two popes ago, convened a gathering somewhat like this, of leaders, world religious leaders, to come together at Assisi in memory and honor of St. Francis of Assisi and do what we’re doing; enter into discussion on world religions, on our faith. And they also came together and prayed. Last year Pope Benedict celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that coming together at Assisi, and they did it again in Assisi. And I think it is significant that this new pope has chosen the name of Francis. I think it bodes well for our continuing in dialogue with other world religions and traditions.

Within Catholicism we have a lot of diversity. Just like you’re doing within the military, much diversity. For example, in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, California, on any given Sunday Mass will be celebrated in 54 different languages. In our own Parrish just across the river we celebrate each year an international festival with people from our own Parrish. Last year we had 28 different nations, countries, represented, celebrating their own heritage.

The term Catholic comes from a Greek word that means universal. And one thing in our tradition is we are throughout the world and we have a lot of diversity but we do try to keep a unity with the diversity. The role of the Pope actually is a role of unity. We don’t have national

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churches. We have a universal church and it is the role, as it was in the 12 Apostles of Peter to be the unifier of the other apostles. So that's one of the roles it's not just being the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, but he has a role of keeping the unity within the diversity of our church.

One example where this comes into play would even be in the ministry, for example this ministry of diaconate. I'm a permanent deacon. And the bishops from the United States asked the Pope, the previous Pope, if we could start ordaining women as permanent deacons. Because we feel our country is ready for this. The response came back, no, not yet. Because it was felt throughout the world that this was not, the worldwide church was not ready for this but I think it is something that will come eventually.

Since the 1960's we had a council that influenced our church in a lot of ways; the Second Vatican Council. One of the things that happened was expanding ordained ministry and renewing this permanent diaconate. Deacons such as myself can be married. Sometimes people say to me, 'what do I call you? Do I call you father?' And I say, 'no, you can't call me father because I have four kids.'...anybody out there? Our priests who are called Father, take a vow of celibacy. They don't get married and then they go and live in a house called a rectory which we refer to as a home for unwed fathers...just seeing if you're still awake. Okay,

Some practical things you might want to know dealing with Catholics, in your work. Catholics are expected to worship once a week, on Sunday or on Saturday evening for mass. We're expected to fast twice a year, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, which is coming up. During the season of Lent, which we are in right now, it's the six weeks, 40-days before Easter, we're expected not to eat meat on Fridays.

Two traditions, teaching traditions in the Catholic Church that would affect military personnel would be, one, probably the strongest is the just war tradition. Are you familiar with just war teaching? It was developed by St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And basically it sets ground rules for when war is justified. And it has certain teachings such as proportionality, the damage that's caused should never be greater than the good that's hoped to be achieved, the protection of non-combatants, things like that. But that would be a teaching that Catholics would be expected to honor. There is also a pacifist tradition. But actually there was a real change probably in about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century where the church went from being primarily pacifist to the just war theory taking precedence. And it was an interesting change. Prior to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century a Christian was not allowed to be in the Roman Army. But after Constantine, the emperor Constantine in the mid-300's, you couldn't be in the army unless you were a Christian.

There's some broad strokes things. We know on most military bases you'll have two chaplains, two chapels, usually a Catholic and a Protestant. My next door neighbor a few years ago was a Lutheran military chaplain and he worked in the Protestant chapel but he said, 'you know, my tradition is very liturgical like the Catholics.' So sometimes even though there is a separation,

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there is a lot of unity as well. I've almost shot my ten minutes and I'm just glad to be here and will take questions later if you have any. Thank you."

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