

Water Cooler Conversations About Baptism

Marc Edward DiPaolo (February 08, 2008)



Going to public school was great ... until my fellow high school students found out I was a religious Catholic. Suddenly, they were worried I was a right-wing, religious fanatic. Their fears made for some interesting conversations.



Despite the fact that I grew up in a predominantly Irish and Italian community in Staten Island, I was widely regarded in high school as the go-to guy to speak to about issues of Catholicism. This was because I was one of the few people in the school who was identified as religious, and I was one of the only ones who appeared to be paying attention during “Released Time,” the Catholic equivalent of Sunday school that was held on Wednesday afternoons at one.

While I tried to keep my religious nature quiet, I was “outed” as devout during a sophomore year biology lesson, when the professor proclaimed that no religious Catholic would make a good scientist. As she argued, Catholics were too superstitious to exercise solid scientific judgment and they needed to check with the pope on what they could and couldn’t believe. While not all of what she said applied to me, the general sentiment did, so I was depressed and angered by the teacher’s seemingly unnecessary monologue. After all, I was a Catholic who had nursed a secret desire to be a marine biologist ever since I saw *Jaws* for the first time. I had wanted to grow up to be like Richard Dreyfus’ character and go down in shark cages to study Great Whites for a living. And yet, here was this teacher telling me that my superstition would prevent me from effectively studying said Great White, because I would have believed that the shark was made by God and was not produced by an accident of nature or evolution. Of course, at the time I didn’t realize that this teacher wasn’t the final authority on the subject, nor was I willing to admit the extent to which she had a legitimate point. So, I ranted and raved about this to my friends, who were quick to figure out that I was angry because I was one of those superstitious Catholics she was talking about.

It wasn’t long after my Catholicism became public knowledge that I found myself drawn into a lengthy series of overwrought breakfast and lunch conversations with my fellow students. These conversations included such fun and fancy free topics as the Inquisition, the Crusades, the Rhythm Method of birth control, and Vatican II. Consequently, it wasn’t long before I wished I had kept my big mouth shut, because I felt like I had painted a big target on my back for anyone who ever had a bad experience with a Catholic priest to take a shot at. I can remember enough of what was actually said to be proud of much of what was said by me, and by my debate opponents, just as I remember enough to make me cringe with shame at how dumb a high school kid I was. If I had a time machine now, I would most likely confront my high-school-age-self and smack him repeatedly for being insensitive, just as I would likely give my friends a stern talking to for giving me way more crap than I deserved. That having been said, while I found a lot of these conversations emotionally harrowing at the time, I am grateful to my friends in retrospect, for challenging my beliefs and for helping me hone my abilities as a public debater. I grew a lot smarter as a result of these talks, and a lot more neurotic.

During one such conversation, one of my most frequent sparring partners, David Litvinov, expressed an interest in my take on the significance of baptism. David’s interest in the topic was very personal, since he had not been baptized as a child and was a self-proclaimed agnostic. So he wanted to know if my religious beliefs caused me to doubt heaven as his ultimate destination. As it happened, I didn’t believe that agnostics were hellbound as a group, but I felt myself being drawn into an emotional and theological minefield as he began questioning me.

It was a long time ago, but I remember David beginning by saying something along these lines: “My mother didn’t baptize me as a baby because she knew that baptism wiped away the stain of Adam and Eve’s original sin. She couldn’t see how this innocent baby who never harmed anyone would be guilty of anything, so she objected to the baptism on general principle.”

“Well, I know what she saying,” I conceded. “I guess the idea is that every new generation has to bear the guilt of crimes committed by the previous generation, so the baptism is a pledge that the baby will do better at life than his sinful ancestors.”



“So are you saying I was born guilty of sins my mom committed, or guilty of sins Adam and Eve committed?”

“Well, I’m not trying to make this about you. I just think the idea makes sense. I mean, imagine growing up in a plantation where your parents or your grandparents owned slaves. It wasn’t your fault. Your parents did it. But you have to feel a little guilty for it, and a lot of people wouldn’t like you just because of ‘guilt by association.’ Just like I’m glad my German grandparents were in America during World War II, so I don’t have to worry that they were part of the S.S. or anything. But I still feel some guilt over being a quarter German. Imagine if I was all German. So the idea of ‘original sin’ makes sense to me. I hate it, but it seems about right.”

David shrugged. “Let’s say I give you that. My mom didn’t baptize me. Does that mean I’m going to hell?”

“I think some Christians believe that. I don’t. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about this kind of stuff. Who gets into heaven and who doesn’t. I think that my Church says that both faith and good deeds get a person in to heaven. So, in the Catholic worldview, God would let Sherlock Holmes into heaven even though Holmes doesn’t believe in him because God would be impressed by how good Holmes is at fighting evil.”

“But what about limbo? I’ve heard that that’s the place people who aren’t baptized go.”

“I don’t really understand the limbo thing. I’ve heard it is like Heaven but not as good, or like hell but not as bad. Nobody really says what it looks like. I don’t even think we’re required to believe in it. And I can’t take it seriously because it makes me think of that game limbo where you have to duck under the pole without falling.”

“Do you think I’m going to wind up in limbo?”

I sighed. “David, why are you asking me this?”

“What do you mean, why am I asking you this?”

“I don’t know. I feel like you’re on my back, or something.”

“I’m not chasing after you, I’m just asking you a simple question. You’re getting defensive and that says you’re insecure about this because you know there’s something wrong with the whole line of thought.”

“Look,” I said, “I think all good people, you included, have a real shot at Heaven. I’m not one of those people that thinks that Hell is bursting at the seams, or who spends lots of time congratulating himself on being better than everyone else around him. And, even if I did think you were going to limbo, who cares? Why should you even care what I think? I’m not that smart. I don’t have all the answers. If believing in Jesus or fairies or Harvey the invisible bunny makes me happy, then why should that threaten you? And why should you want to take that away from me?”



“Because people who tend to believe in Harvey the invisible Bunny tend to hate people who don’t. And they tend to burn people who don’t believe in Harvey at the stake.”

I was shocked quiet for a long moment.

“Well ... I would never do that. I’m not out to hurt anyone. I’m just trying to live my life in peace.”

We had much the same conversation on three other occasions, with little change in what was said on either side, and I was getting annoyed at having to repeat myself just as he was getting annoyed at me for not moderating my views. Then, on one morning, three months later, David came to me with a frightened look on his face.

“Marc, I just saw a movie called Warlock.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know it. Pretty good, right?”

“Well, there’s this scene in it where a witch needs the blood of an unbaptized kid to cast a spell, so he finds a five-year-old boy in a playground, kills the boy, and drinks his blood.”

I was beginning to see why David was upset. “I’m sorry about that, man. Don’t dwell on it. It’s just a silly horror movie.”

“But it got me thinking,” David said. “What if a witch singled out me to kill and drink my blood? I’m not baptized.”

“You don’t have to worry. That wasn’t a real witch in the movie. It was an actor. Julian Sands. He was in *A Room with a View*. He had a nude scene in that and it really disturbed me, so he’s freaked both of us out with his film work.”

“But what if a witch got me?”

“Dude, first of all, witches don’t exist. Second of all, you and me both need to seriously consider watching fewer movies. They’re having a really bad influence on us.”

“Marc, did you tell me once that there’s such a thing as an emergency baptism? That a regular Catholic has the power to baptize and that it doesn’t have to be a priest?”

“I think it has to be a real emergency, like someone dying in a car accident. Then I could baptize them. So, unless you think the witch is waiting outside the cafeteria for you as we speak, this ain’t an emergency.”

David looked at me with eyes pleading. “Can you take me over to that water fountain and baptize me right now?”

“No.”



“Why not?”

“Because it isn’t an emergency. Because I’m not a priest. Because witches don’t exist. Because I don’t want the whole damn school watching me as I splash water-fountain water on your forehead. Why are you putting me in this ridiculous position?”

“Come on, Marc. I know the movie thing is stupid, but it just conjured up all these anxieties I have about not being baptized. I just want to get it out of the way.”

“It won’t be official.”

“Even better. Then I will have been baptized but won’t feel like I’ll have to be Catholic.”

“No!”

“Please...”

“Fine. If it’ll make you leave me alone.” I walked David over to the water fountain, and imitated Latin words I’d heard spoken in vampire movies. “In Nomini Patri, et Fili, et Spiritus Sanctu. Amen.”

“Thanks, man,” David said.

“So, hopefully that’s good enough to keep the witches at bay and get you into heaven.”

“I thought you said I didn’t need this to get into heaven.”

“That’s what I said. But you’re the one who seems nervous about it. So stop watching crazy horror movies and stop listening to right-wing Christian radio, alright?”

“Alright.”

Afterwards, David didn’t bother me any more with questions about baptism, so I made my peace with him. Unfortunately, a rumor began spreading across the school that I baptized non-Catholics in their sleep and was an undercover recruiter for the Catholic Church, so a lot of the other students looked at me askance and gave me a wide berth for the next few months. And anytime I was thirsty and went to the water fountain for a drink, my friend Griffin would say, “Who are you going to baptize now, Marc?” and I couldn’t for the life of me think of anything funny to say in reply.



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