

Keep Catholicism Weird

Catholicism is weird. There is no getting around that.

Nor is there any need to.

The weirdness of the Catholic faith, many ancient Catholic traditions, the experiences of many of the Catholic faithful, are some of many things that make Catholicism unique and makes it stand out in the crowd. Tapping into this rich aspect of tradition, Tom McDonald recently launched the website Weird Catholic (weirdcatholic.com), which aims to catalog and appreciate the weirdness of Catholicism.

McDonald has been a journalist for most of his adult life, starting out in the realm of technology. But for the last decade he has been a religion journalist. With over 1,600 published articles in everything from gaming and technology magazines to a blog at Patheos ("God and the Machine"), McDonald's output is prolific and eclectic. This background prepared him well to start a site focusing on Catholic oddities.

Sensory, tactile, ancient

Growing up during the 1970s, McDonald was exposed to a lot of "the strange," as he put it. Books, shows and movies focused on fringe phenomena like Bigfoot, Atlantis, cryptids, UFOs and more, including his favorite – ghosts.

He started to research and write a series of posts on his Patheos blog that eventually amounted to about 40,000 words on the subject of ghosts and the Catholic faith. He wanted to explore just what the Church teaches about ghosts, and this personal exploration led to a detailed journey into what you might call weird Catholicism. "That series did really, really well, and made me realize that my long-term fascination with the unusual had quite a natural home in Catholicism," he said.

“There’s so much in our Faith that strikes outsiders as odd,” McDonald said. “Relics, for example, are something I found myself teaching to converts and teenagers. There’s a very sensible reason for the Catholic veneration of relics, but to outsiders it seems like some grotesque holdover.” When a saint’s body is exposed or goes on tour, non-Catholics may find it “appallingly medieval,” or disgusting. “In fact,” he said, “I think relics provide an amazing bridge to the past and give us a chance to move deeper into the treasure chest of our Faith.”

When St. Maria Goretti’s remains toured the United States, McDonald was surprised to find a line out the church and around the corner; this necessitated a time limit on each person’s time with the remains.

“Why? That’s the genius of our Faith,” said McDonald. “We are very tactile. We are very sensory. We are also very ancient, and what might appeal to the senses and attitudes of one generation will almost certainly seem strange to future generations. Thus, chapels made of bones seem crass and grisly to us, but that’s not how they seemed to the people who made them. They were *memento more*. [Editor’s note: Latin for “remember you have to die.”] They were devotional reminders of the immanence of death. We’ve lost that in modern culture, and I think there’s a hunger to get it back.”

Allure of the unusual

This is one of the reasons McDonald feels it is important to really hang on to the weirdness of the Faith. In so many ways, modern culture is removed from some Catholic sensibilities which are important to have.

“People are naturally drawn to the unusual because it’s interesting. If I post a wax devotional of tormented souls in purgatory, people will probably click on it because it’s just different,” he said. “If we leave it at that, then it’s a kind

of shallow tourism. We have to use these parts of our legacy to teach, to explain the depths and beauties and intricacies of an ancient, incarnational, sacramental Faith.”

The site has experienced a great deal of traffic in its short lifespan thus far, increasing all the time. When the History Channel ran a documentary called “The Last Pope,” McDonald wrote a 2,000-word dissection of its “manifold idiocies, offenses, and downright lies,” he said. The post went viral, and the site was off to the races.

The site already features a number of wonderfully weird Catholic oddities. The “About” section uses the example of Padre Pio: He bled from the stigmata, bilocated, read souls and appeared in visions. “The skeptic has to provide a long chain of explanations for each of these,” but “all we need to do is say ‘Padre Pio was a saint,’ and the miraculous phenomena explains itself.” This is Weird Catholic in a nutshell.

Some of the other titles that can be found at Weird Catholic help give a taste of what the site has to offer: “The Strange Legend of St. Christopher, and Whether or Not He Had the Head of a Dog”; “Tertullian: Ghosts are Really Demons”; “The Popish Octopus”; “The Earliest Known Depiction of Witches on Brooms, and What It Tells Us About Evil”; “The Healing Hankies of St. Paul”; “The Weatherman Saint”; “St. Cuthbert’s Incorruptible Lego Minifig”; “Go Home, Medieval Monks: You’re Drunk” and more. Each of these entries contains a wealth of fascinating information, communicated by McDonald’s playful prose.

Strange journey

McDonald, who describes himself as “spiritually Benedictine, theologically Augustinian and Ratzingerian, liturgically tradition-minded, attitudinally Fortean, politically Distributist,” has always been fascinated by the unusual side of history. His Patheos blog on faith and technology began

drifting into covering Biblical archaeology, odd Church history, relics, strange art and more. “I guess it’s just the shape of my brain,” he said. “It’s always drawn toward the unusual.”

McDonald’s faith journey gives some insight into his fascination with the strange. He came from a typical Catholic family, was an altar boy, worked at the church as a secretary and janitor as a teenager. He left the Church at the age of 18, as, in his mind at the time, “I was suddenly the smartest person who ever lived and knew none of this was true.”

About 15 years later he returned, following a crippling illness and a profound experience of God.

Like so many reverts, McDonald read his way back into the Church – but “in reverse,” as he says, beginning by reading atheists and realizing how intellectually lacking they all were. “Then I read Protestants, because I really didn’t want to be Catholic again,” he said. Through the books of Peter Kreeft – the philosopher and writer from Boston College – he was introduced to St. Thomas Aquinas, and soon found the works of Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), and the rest was history.

Signs of the Times and Prophets of Doom
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Looking into the weirdness and intricacies of Catholic history and traditions has, among other things, reminded McDonald that things can always be worse.

“I’ve been spending a lot of time with texts about the papacy in the 10th and 11th centuries, which was the most continuously dysfunctional period for the institution. I’m focusing on Benedict IX, the youngest pope, who was chased from office three times. It was madness. When you research a time like that, it’s almost comforting. You suddenly realize that people who say, ‘We’ve never had a worse pope’ or ‘There’s never been a worse time in the Church’ really can be ignored because they don’t know what they’re talking about.”

Before long, he and his wife were teaching catechism and doing sacramental formation. He has taught Church history to teenagers, RCIA, baptismal preparation classes for new parents, adult faith formation, and whatever else is needed at the parish. When he was asked to train and certify other catechists for the diocese, he went back to school to get his Masters in Theology with a concentration in Church history. This allowed him to delve deeper into the material than he had before, and really dig in to the historical elements of the life of the Church.

“We’re the oldest continually functioning institution in human history,” McDonald noted. “Nothing is unprecedented. By putting that history in front of people, my first goal is to entertain, my second to inform, but I also want it to be encouraging. We’ve survived some pretty terrible things, and there’s only one real reason for that: because the Church is the bride of Christ, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against her.”

“We’ve come to this point in time trailing an amazing, beautiful, dark, strange history, and we should embrace it all and draw nourishment from it. It should also give us hope.”