

The Gospel According to Jim

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“I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by grace for a different gospel (not that there is another). But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed!” (Gal. 1:6-9)

Reader, you must decide for yourself.

This essay will outline two very different gospels—one is embraced by Deacon Jim (me), the other by Father Jim—the wildly popular social-media guru, Fr. James Martin, S.J. Which one corresponds to the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Which one doesn't? I'll leave it up to you to let me know. If I'm wrong

and must change my views, it will be a work of mercy for you to tell me so.

There are three assertions made by Fr. Martin that seem to undergird a great deal of what he says and does as a Catholic priest. Yet, I find these assertions antithetical to what I believe I am called to do as a Catholic deacon. I hope to demonstrate below what I think are the deep flaws in the principles Martin has espoused and promoted.

“Love First. Everything Else Second.”

A long while back, I encountered Martin’s go-to phrase by which he appears to contrast “love” and “truth,” insisting that “actual love” is “not a twisted, crabbed, narrow tolerance, which often comes in the guise of condemnations, instructions and admonitions that try to masquerade as love.” Martin insists that Jesus’ approach was “Love first. Everything else later.”

Sharply contrasting “love” and “everything else” does great damage to truth. There is no authentic love without truth, and yet the expectation of “love first” is that *truth*—as part of “everything else”—isn’t what we Christians are called to lead with in our encounters with others. Rather, to “love first” seems to mean that we give people *no indication* whatever that perhaps they are in harm’s way because of how they are choosing to live.

In this sense, “love” becomes impoverished by losing its foundation in truth. This kind of love is not, in fact, authentic love. Authentic love is inseparable from truth. Truth is reality. And no one can love truly if that love is not based on reality. Hence, it is not in any way “twisted” and “crabbed” to instruct the ignorant and admonish the sinner. Doing so is not only a choice to love, but both instruction and admonition are counted by the Church as *spiritual works of mercy*.

In fact, I've recently [uncovered something](#) relevant to this subject from Pope St. John Paul II. What does *he* think we Christians are called to lead with?

It would be a grave mistake to contrast pastoral needs and doctrinal teachings, since the first service that the Church must make to man is to tell him the truth.

Therefore, the authentic gospel value we must preserve is not truth-less "love" first. No, it's *truth-love first. Everything else second.*

Community *Before* Conversion?

A similar assertion is Martin's claim that "For Jesus, more often than not, it's community first, conversion second." This deserves close examination precisely because the claim is that Jesus himself offered the sinner *communion* even *before* a person repented.

Martin flatly states that the "John the Baptist" way was to expect or insist upon conversion before welcoming people into the community, while the "Jesus way" was to welcome people into the community first and then move them toward conversion. "In time, they will gradually come to full 'communion,'" Martin says.

Martin will say that both approaches are "valid," yet as I understand his meaning, a misapplication of terms yields confusing and ambiguous results.

The key problem here is that no sufficient distinction is being made between "community" and "communion." Further, there is a conflation between the concept of "encounter" and "community."

These are errors that Jesus never makes, of course.

Remember, the first word uttered by Jesus in Mark's Gospel is the word "repent"! Why? Because the truth (there's that word again) is that genuine "communion" with both God and

“community” is utterly impossible unless and until a soul turns away from sin and toward God and community. What Jesus offers first is *encounter*, not “community” or “communion.” Encounter certainly precedes conversion. Encounter affords a person an opportunity to assess his circumstances and to repent and convert. Encounter will present people with the possibility of authentic “accompaniment” as well—Jesus didn’t just aimlessly “walk with” people he encountered—he called them to *follow him*. Following him meant *not* staying on the path they had chosen but taking the path Jesus was already taking. Zaccheus the tax collector, for example, had an encounter with Jesus. It was a “follow me” moment for him. He responded as a penitent. Jesus then broke bread with him. In addition, for the Catholic the word “communion” denotes something deeply interior as well as external. The “Jesus way” wasn’t communion before conversion—at all—precisely because “communion” cannot be imposed upon a soul that is opposed to it. For example, catechumens are part of the Church’s “community” and yet at Mass are dismissed prior to Eucharistic Communion because they are on a path of continuing conversion *toward* full communion with the “community”—and with God himself. Thus, it would be contrary to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ to claim that being welcomed into the “community” is both possible before a person chooses to walk with Jesus and that when one *does* walk with Jesus and his community, unrepentance does not objectively contradict the concept of real “communion.”

“For Jesus there is no us and them. There is only us.”
The idea that Jesus sees everyone as “us” and never “them” is just fuzzy enough to be both true and false, depending on how

one frames it. The problem of course is that people too often frame it incorrectly and then draw false conclusions.

Naturally, Jesus sees only “us” from the standpoint of the human race, given that we are all sinners and are all included in his plan for salvation.

The implicit danger with this starting point is that we simply *remain* here, assuming that Jesus never makes category distinctions that would somehow create separation among members of the big wide world of human existence. We might falsely conclude that Jesus never ever referenced anyone as “other” and that “all are welcome” in the most literal way.

But is that what the Gospels really show us? Did Jesus preach an exclusively “us” gospel?

Well, we know that Jesus preached both “blessed are you” and “woe to you.” We know that Jesus “othered” a variety of groups that he deemed “hypocrites.” We know that he placed the demands of the gospel upon the rich young man, who went away sad and empty-handed, “othered” by his own inability to embrace those demands. We know that Jesus proclaimed his flesh was real food and his blood was real drink, and people fell away, “othered” by his words.

We also know, significantly, that Jesus viewed some as “sheep” and some as “goats” in the parable of the Last Judgment. And we know that the sheep and goats were received by Jesus not as one big “us” who would enjoy the same destiny.

Plus, we know the other New Testament writers made crucial distinctions regarding the effect of sin on communion and communal bonds. Sin is the real roadblock that gives rise to these distinctions, regardless of whether we wish to acknowledge them, or not. It’s beyond our control—it’s even beyond *Jesus’ control*. When of my own free will I choose to

sin, I make *myself* a “them” and not an “us,” so to speak. I place myself outside the communion of Christian community. I do so despite Jesus’ universal invitation to once again follow him as a sheep, not a goat.

In this light, it is dangerously incomplete to leave any impression that, just because Jesus accepts us always no matter what, we can merely remain steeped in our sinful choices. No. Jesus loves “us” enough that he straightforwardly helps us to know when our choices place us with the goats and not the sheep.

Such necessary distinctions are at the heart of the real Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now It’s *Your* Turn!

Well, readers, how did I do? Which gospel “according to Jim” better matches the true gospel?

I suppose, if I’m in the wrong, I can take comfort in a few things. It would mean that:

- You all have to love me first—everything else second. So, let me feel the love before y’all tell me how wrong I really am.
- I’m not ready to convert yet on this—so don’t rush me! Rather, you’re responsible for making me feel warm, fuzzy, and right at home as part of the community. So, don’t be mean by instructing the ignorant or admonishing the sinner.
- Jesus loves me just the way I am, so you should, too. I may not be in agreement with his Gospel, but so what? The only important thing is that we’re all “us,” so no sweat. I’m not worried. We sheep don’t have to believe in goats.

Then again—*what if I am right?*