

# Catholic comedian reaches diverse audiences of faith

Jeremy McLellan does not shy away from controversy. [As a standup comedian](#), McLellan admits that he likes to “cause trouble.”

“I like making people mad and getting them to argue with each other,” said McLellan, 34, of Charleston, South Carolina.

“At the same time, I want everybody to like me,” McLellan told Our Sunday Visitor. “Those two impulses conflict everyday. They go to war in my head. That’s my life.”

McLellan’s life has been a virtual whirlwind in recent years. He quit his job a few years ago to pursue comedy full time and has performed before large audiences across the United States, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Jordan and Dubai.

In 2018, McLellan, who was raised in a conservative Presbyterian family, entered the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. His interest in interfaith outreach has enabled him to create a large Muslim fanbase. He has sold out venues in Pakistan and is a frequent guest at interfaith events throughout the world.

In an interview with Our Sunday Visitor, McLellan – a married father with a young daughter and a baby on the way – discussed his conversion to Catholicism, his brand of “clean but edgy” comedy, how Catholicism differentiates his worldview from other comedians, his thoughts on interfaith relations and what Christians can learn from their Muslim neighbors.

**Our Sunday Visitor:** For people who haven’t seen your act, how would you describe your comedy?

**Jeremy McLellan:** It’s a lot of stories that wrap around

themselves and take you by surprise. It's really smart comedy, so it's good to be sober for it. You can have one drink, but after that you have to pay attention.

It's clean but edgy comedy, so I can do it in front of families. It's important for me to not have to rely on being vulgar as a crutch. At the same time, no one laughs because comedy is clean. You want it to be clean, but you don't want people to realize it during the show. You can do edgy comedy in a way that's accessible and clean. That's the hard challenge that I put myself in, but I enjoy trying to thread that needle.

**OSV:** What were you doing before you got into stand-up?

**McLellan:** I was working with adults with disabilities for a nonprofit in Charleston. I did that for most of my life before comedy. Then when I was 30, I quit my job to do comedy full time. And once I started doing it, it kind of took off.

**OSV:** How did you get into the stand-up scene?

**McLellan:** I had friends who were comedians. I would help them write material, and I would post stuff on social media. They encouraged me to try some open mics, and when I did, I was pretty hooked, and it went from there. Eventually I started getting requests to do shows outside of Charleston. The only way I could take those shows was to quit my job. It was a big risk at the beginning, but thankfully my wife supported me, and the risk paid off pretty quickly.

**OSV:** How did people outside of Charleston learn about your comedy?

**McLellan:** By word of mouth, from me doing well in competitions, from social media stuff and having clips of my stand-up go viral. I was also talking a lot about religion, so I got invited to a lot of interfaith events, so I went viral among the Muslim community and got booked for their shows. I

was also doing political commentary, so I got to do political events. Basically, all these requests came in, and I was like, "I gotta just do this."

**OSV:** Where does your interest in interfaith dialogue come from?

**McLellan:** When working with people with disabilities, you have people of all different faiths that you're responsible for caring for, so you have to organize and figure out how to accommodate them. I knew people who were Muslim, but I also was interested in the current larger debate about Christianity, Islam and the West. I also had had these experiences with people who were Muslim. I was talking about all that, and just used comedy as a creative outlet to talk about that, and it sort of went viral.

**OSV:** What have you learned about Islam and the Muslim community over the years?

**McLellan:** Well, for Pakistanis in particular, hospitality is a really big thing, and there is something really beautiful about that, that can transform how you view yourself. They're excited to see you and to have you in their homes, and you think, "Oh, maybe I'm someone who one would have reason to welcome."

Another thing that also constantly stands out is just how similar a lot of internal debates within the Muslim community are to the internal debates within the Catholic community, with the divisions between people who want to modernize and get with the times and people who think, "We need to go back."

Also, in Muslim communities, modesty, having lots of kids and going on pilgrimages are important, so I think there are a lot of similarities. I actually feel more at home among Muslims than I do, say, with Hollywood liberals.

**OSV:** What do you say to Christians who have a negative opinion

of Islam and Muslims?

**McLellan:** They can have a negative opinion if they want. You can't really change their mind by arguing with them. I think what you can do is you can model authentic engagement. Most interfaith stuff tends to be annoyingly liberal, where people tend to downplay what they believe. You don't have to do that, and they actually respect you more if you don't. So my contribution hopefully is just to model a nonliberal, interfaith engagement with Muslims.

**OSV:** Why did you convert to Catholicism?

**McLellan:** I was circling Catholicism for a very long time, starting in college, and I volunteered with a L'Arche community in Chicago after college. But each time [I came close to converting], there were reasons why I didn't. At one point my mom got really sad and cried that I was going to become Catholic, so I didn't. But finally, about two years ago, I just really absorbed the Faith, and it became personal for me. It wasn't just this set of beliefs, but really this world that I felt taken in by.

**OSV:** Does your Catholic faith inform your comedy?

**McLellan:** My comedy is not nihilistic. I think a lot of comedy is just "everything is meaningless," and the job of the comedian is to be either a political activist or a jester. But I think at the heart of my faith is the idea that the world is not just loveable but love, and I think there is something about comedy that can get at that.

The world is delightful. I wasn't raised to believe that. I was raised very Calvinist and to believe that the world is totally depraved. But I think my conversion to Catholicism had a big impact on my worldview, where I came to see the world as good, that there is this new creation and we can have a good time with it.

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*