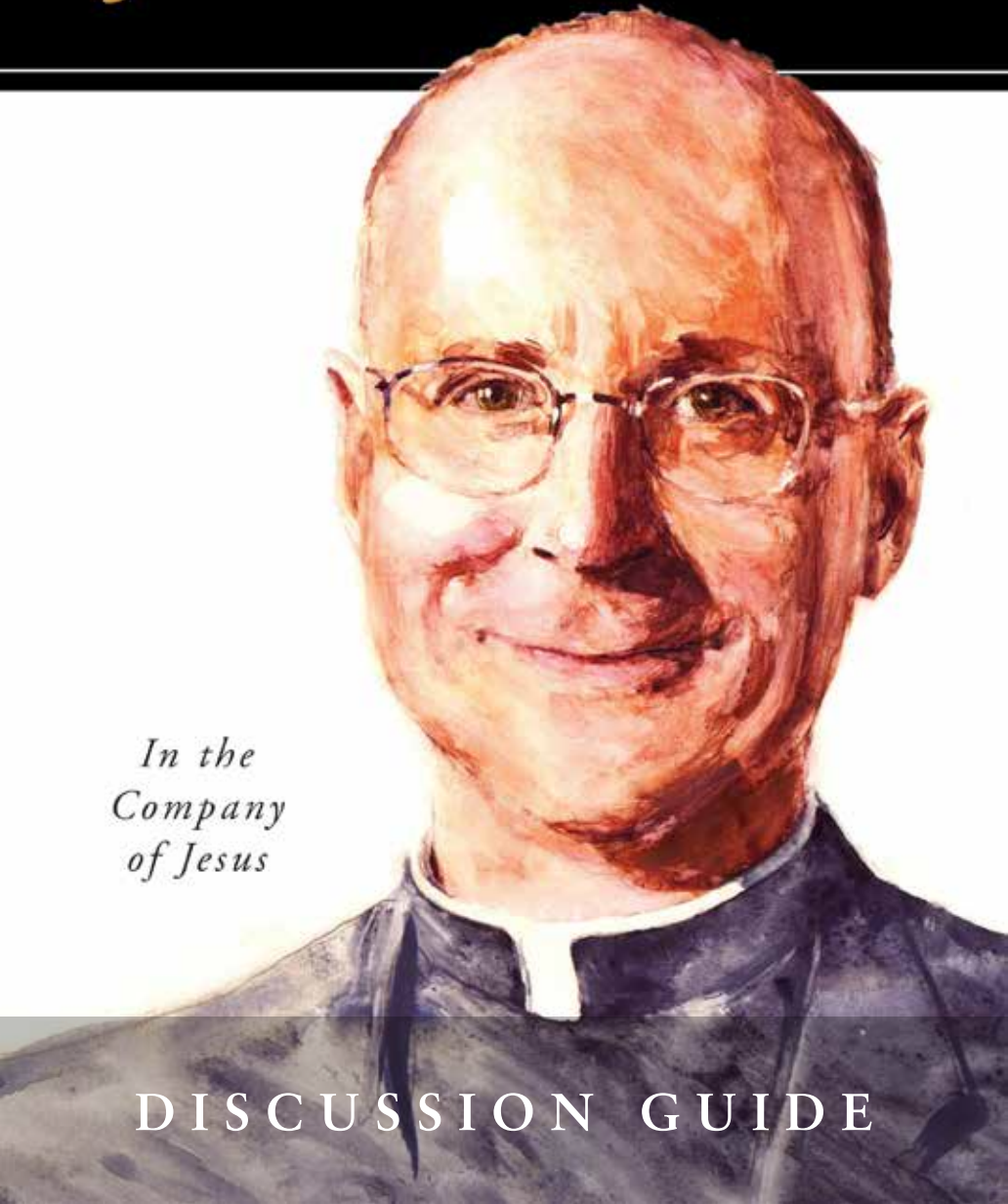


JON M. SWEENEY

# JAMES MARTIN

*In the  
Company  
of Jesus*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



## About the Book

Fr. James Martin, SJ, is one of the most recognized Catholic priests in the United States. His book *My Life with the Saints* introduced hundreds of thousands of readers to many saintly heroes. More recently, *Building a Bridge* called the Catholic Church to more respect and compassion for the LGBT community—and made Martin not only a friend to LGBT people but a lightning rod for some “traditionalist” Roman Catholics. His articulate and winsome personality has endeared him to millions inside and outside the church. Now it is time to tell the story of his own life, to explore the experiences that made him the person he is today.

And there’s no better narrator for the story than Jon M. Sweeney, an award-winning and highly accomplished writer in his own right. In *James Martin, SJ: In the Company of Jesus*, Sweeney probes Martin’s early life, his experiences as a corporate executive, his call to religious life, his ministry and spirituality, his feelings about both the adoration and the criticism he receives from so many, and much more. Readers will come away with a much better understanding of one of today’s most interesting and influential Catholics.

## About the Author

Jon M. Sweeney is an independent scholar and one of religion’s most respected writers. His books include *When Saint Francis Saved the Church*; *The Enthusiast: How the Best Friend of Francis of Assisi Almost Destroyed What He Started*; *The Complete Francis of Assisi*; and *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation*. He edited *A Course in Christian Mysticism* by Thomas Merton, published by Liturgical Press. Sweeney writes regu-

larly for *America* and *The Tablet* and is publisher and editor-in-chief at Paraclete Press. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

# Discussion Guide

## Chapter One

1. How was Fr. Jim Martin's upbringing like or unlike your own? How did his upbringing prepare him—and maybe fail to prepare him well—for the life that lay ahead of him?
2. Have you ever had an almost mystical sort of experience like the one had by ten- or eleven-year-old Jimmy Martin? What was your experience? What impact did this experience have on you?
3. Jim Martin made choices during his college years (ones that are fairly common among young men and women from Catholic families) that distanced him from the practice of his faith. Why did he do that, and what events played a role in bringing him back? Have you followed a similar journey? How or how not?
4. What events have made you most angry at God? How did you deal with that anger?
5. Are you familiar with the life of Thomas Merton, which had such a big impact on young Jim Martin? Merton wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*, among other notable works. If you are familiar with Merton, what impact has his life and work had on you? If you're unfamiliar with Thomas Merton, consider reading our People of God biography, *Thomas Merton, Faithful Visionary* by Michael W. Higgins.

## Chapter Two

1. Answering his therapist's question, "What would you do if you could do anything you wanted?" made a difference in James Martin's life. How might this reflection make a difference in your life, and why? What if the answer to the question is not something you realistically (or morally) can do?
2. Who taught you to pray? What was the experience (of a mature relationship with God through prayer for the first time) like for you?
3. How has your spiritual life been impacted by the most stressful or painful parts of your own life?
4. Jim's spirituality and ministry were shaped by many experiences of serving the poor and marginalized. Have you had a chance for experiences of this kind of ministry or work in your life? How has it shaped you? What are your strongest memories from engaging in these ministries?
5. Do you know anyone who is "crazy like St. Francis"?
6. This chapter offers some insights into not only Jim Martin's spirituality and ministry, but also his sins and weaknesses. How does this impact your understanding of him and his work? What lessons or conclusions do you draw?

## Chapter Three

1. At what point in Fr. Jim's career did you first become aware of his writing and ministry?
2. How is Martin's experience of September 11, 2001, similar or different from your own?
3. Martin says, "God called me through desire." How have you experienced God calling you through desire? Were you aware, in the midst of the experience, that this was God's call, or did you only recognize this afterwards?
4. It took a while for Jim Martin to understand business as a vocation. What does this idea mean to you? In what ways is it true? Have you lived business as a vocation, or do you know anyone who has? What difference might this awareness make in a person's professional life?
5. Have you seen Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*? How does your reaction to the film compare to Jim Martin's, and why?

## Chapter Four

1. In what ways have you encountered saints' stories told through "saccharine hagiography" and "goopy language"?
2. Where did you first encounter the saints? How? Which saints?
3. Have you read Fr. Martin's *My Life with the Saints*? If so, when? How did you encounter the book? What did you think of it?
4. What does it mean to be called "to be who you are"? How is this true for you?
5. Reflect for a moment on the words Fr. Jim preached at Mass on the day he professed final vows (on page 83). What are your thoughts? What people have encouraged you to "come on, just a little farther" in your Christian life? How might you offer that kind of encouragement to someone else?

## Chapter Five

1. Are you familiar with the play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*? If so, what was your reaction to it? If not, consider: What might one say to support the idea that Judas should not be so harshly judged “by the court of opinion”?
2. Have you seen the movie *Doubt*? What did you think of Philip Seymour Hoffman’s portrayal of a priest accused of abuse? Is there anything you’d have told him as an adviser?
3. What if it were your role to “explain the church to the world and the world to the church”? What does each need to understand better about the other?
4. What, in your mind, is the role of theologians or journalists in criticizing the church? Are you familiar with *America* magazine? If so, how would you characterize its approach to this question?



## Chapter Six

1. What is your reaction to the response that Jim Martin offered about the nature of celibacy and its role (or lack of one) in the clergy sex abuse crisis?
2. How have you seen celibacy lived as a way of love and service?
3. Are Jim Martin's words about your ability to meet God "where you are . . . now" helpful? Have you found yourself thinking that "now" (a particular period or moment in your own life) is not the time to "meet God" for particular reasons?
4. Did you ever catch an appearance of Fr. Jim on *The Colbert Report*? What were your impressions?
5. How can humor be a way to evangelize? Have you experienced this?

## Chapter Seven

1. Do you have experience with Ignatian spirituality? How were you exposed to it, and how has it contributed to your life with God?
2. Have you visited the Holy Land? If so, how do your experiences compare with Fr. Jim's? What memories or impressions did Sweeney's account of Martin's pilgrimage evoke for you?
3. Fr. Jim writes, "The Resurrection is at the center of my faith." What impact would that have on a person's life and faith, their relationship with God and others?
4. Do you see your own understanding of Jesus or your relationship with Jesus reflected in the comments of Jim Martin or Andrew Garfield?
5. What prayer, person, experience, or practice has contributed most to bringing you closer to Jesus?

## Chapter Eight

1. What were your impressions of the controversy over Fr. Jim's book, *Building a Bridge*, prior to reading this chapter, and what light does this chapter shed on it for you?
2. In what ways have you seen the truth of Fr. Jim's comment, "Extending mercy to those who are seen as 'other' makes people angry"?
3. What is your impression of the role and impact of friendship in Jim's life? What role does it play in your own, and how is it connected to your faith life?
4. What outreach to LGBT people has your own parish undertaken? Is there some gift of yours that you might share to strengthen or support it?
5. Have you seen examples of the homophobia in the church that Martin speaks of?

## Chapter Nine

1. Consider Jim Martin's quote that opens this chapter. Does it ring true to you, reflecting on your own experience?
2. Fr. Jim's activity in the media sometimes means involvement in contentious and politically charged issues. How is a priest to navigate these waters prudently?
3. What is your reaction to Jim Martin's tweet on the day the U.S. Senate passed its 2017 tax reform bill?
4. Keeping in mind Martin's important point that for each of us, holiness means being ourselves, not trying to be someone else, how might his ministry on behalf of "the least ones" inspire you to live your faith more fully?
5. Reflect on the text of Martin's message on "what happens" in prayer. Does it teach you anything you were not aware of? Or remind you of something you need to keep in mind?

## Chapter Ten

1. Have you had the experience that Jim has had, that suffering “makes one more Christian”? How has it been the case for you?
2. How do you suppose figures like Fr. Jim Martin, Fr. Gregory Grieten, and Sr. Jeannine Gramick will be viewed a generation or two from now? Why?
3. What are your thoughts on the statement of Fr. Grieten’s archbishop when he revealed to his parish that he is gay?
4. Fr. Jim’s newest book (his tenth!) on prayer includes a reason for not praying. Does this reason resonate with your own experience in any way?
5. What do you want to “leave behind in the tomb”?