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Chapter **1**

What It Means to Be Catholic

Being Catholic means more than attending parochial school or going to religion class once a week, owning some Rosary beads, and going to Mass every Saturday night or Sunday morning. It means more than getting ashes smeared on your forehead once a year, eating fish on Fridays, and giving up chocolate for Lent. Being Catholic means living a totally Christian life and having a Catholic perspective.

What is the Catholic perspective? In this chapter, you get a peek at what Catholicism is all about — the common buzzwords and beliefs — a big picture of the whole shebang. (The rest of this book gets into the nitty-gritty details.)

What Exactly Is Catholicism Anyway?

The cut-to-the-chase answer is that *Catholicism* is a Christian religion (just as Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy are). *Catholics* are members of the Roman Catholic Church (which means they follow the authority of the Bishop of Rome,

otherwise known as the pope), and they share various beliefs and ways of worship, as well as a distinct outlook on life. Catholics can be either Latin (Western) or Eastern (Oriental) Catholic; both are equally in union with the Bishop of Rome (the pope), but they retain their respective customs and traditions.

Catholics believe that all people are basically good, but sin is a spiritual disease that wounded humankind initially and can kill humankind spiritually if left unchecked. Divine grace is the only remedy for sin, and the best source of divine grace is from the *sacraments*, which are various rites that Catholics believe have been created by Jesus and entrusted by Him to His Church.

From the Catholic perspective, here are some of the bottom-line beliefs:

- » More than an intellectual assent to an idea, Catholicism involves a daily commitment to embrace the will of God — whatever it is and wherever it leads.
- » Catholicism means cooperation with God on the part of the believer. God offers His divine grace (His gift of unconditional love), and the Catholic must accept it and then cooperate with it.
- » Free will is sacred. God never forces you to do anything against your free will. Yet doing evil not only hurts you but also hurts others because a Catholic is never alone. Catholics are always part of a spiritual family called the *Church*.
- » More than a place to go on the weekend to worship, the Church is a mother who feeds spiritually, shares doctrine, heals and comforts, and disciplines when needed. Catholicism considers the Church as important to salvation as the sacraments because both were instituted by Christ.

The Catholic perspective sees everything as being intrinsically created good but with the potential of turning to darkness. It honors the individual intellect and well-formed conscience and encourages members to use their minds to think things through. In other words, instead of just giving a list of do's and don'ts, the Catholic Church educates its members to use their ability to reason and to apply laws of ethics and a natural moral law in many situations.

Catholicism doesn't see science or reason as enemies of faith but as cooperators in seeking the truth. Although Catholicism has an elaborate hierarchy to provide leadership in the Church (see Chapter 6), Catholicism also teaches individual responsibility and accountability. Education and the secular and sacred sciences are high priorities. Using logical and coherent arguments to explain and defend the Catholic faith is important.

Catholicism isn't a one-day-a-week enterprise. It doesn't segregate religious and moral dimensions of life from political, economic, personal, and familial dimensions. Catholicism tries to integrate faith into everything.



REMEMBER

The general Catholic perspective is that because God created everything, *nothing* is outside God's jurisdiction, including your every thought, word, and deed — morning, noon, and night, 24/7.

Knowing What the Catholic Church Teaches

The Catholic religion is built (by Christ) on four pillars of faith: the creed (teachings), the sacraments (liturgical worship), the Ten Commandments (moral code), and the Lord's Prayer or Our Father (prayer and spirituality). Church doctrine and dogma can be very sophisticated, which may intimidate some people. But the fundamentals are rooted in the Church's creed: the first pillar of faith. Either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed (which we introduce in Chapter 2) is said every Sunday and holy day to reaffirm what the Church actually teaches and expects her members to believe and profess. Catholics read the Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the definitive book explaining the official teachings of the Catholic Church on faith and morals.

In this section, we briefly overview the fundamental tenets of the Church, including what the Church is and who leads it.

Grasping the basic beliefs

Catholics are first and foremost *Christians*. Like Jews and Muslims, Catholics are *monotheistic*, which means that they believe in one God. But Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which is unique to Christianity. Catholics also believe the following:

- » **The Bible is the inspired, error-free, and revealed Word of God.** See Chapter 2 for an introduction to the Bible.
- » **Baptism, the rite of becoming a Christian, is necessary for salvation.** This is true whether the Baptism occurs by water, blood, or desire (see Chapter 8).

- » **God's Ten Commandments provide a moral compass — an ethical standard to live by.** We discuss the Ten Commandments in detail in Chapter 12.
- » **There is one God in three persons: the Holy Trinity.** In other words, Catholics embrace the belief that God, the one Supreme Being, is made up of three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (see Chapter 2).



TIP

Catholics recognize the unity of body and soul for each human being. So the whole religion centers on the truth that humankind stands between the two worlds of matter and spirit. The physical world is considered part of God's creation and is, therefore, inherently good until an individual misuses it.

The *seven sacraments* — Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick — are outward signs that Christ instituted to give grace. These Catholic rites marking the seven major stages of spiritual development are based on this same premise of the union of body and soul, matter and spirit, physical and spiritual. You find out more about the sacraments in this chapter's section "Worshipping as a Catholic: The Holy Mass," as well as in Chapters 8 and 9.



REMEMBER

Grace is a totally free, unmerited gift from God necessary for human salvation. Grace is a sharing in the divine; it's God's help — the inspiration that's needed to do His will. Grace inspired martyrs in the early days of Christianity to suffer death rather than deny Christ. Grace bolstered St. Bernadette Soubirous to sustain the derision of the locals who didn't believe she'd seen the Virgin Mary. You can't see, hear, feel, smell, or taste grace because it's invisible. Catholic belief, however, maintains that grace is the life force of the soul. Like a spiritual megavitamin, grace inspires a person to selflessly conform to God's will, and like the battery in the mechanical bunny, grace keeps the soul going, going, going, and going. Because grace is a gift, you can accept or reject it; if you reject it, you won't be saved, and if you accept it, you have to put it into action.

WHY IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S HOME IN ROME?

Saint Peter, the first pope, began his ministry in Jerusalem. Eventually, he ended up in Rome, where he was its first bishop and was then crucified and buried on Vatican Hill. That spot was imperial property, but in the fourth century, the Roman emperor donated the land and buildings to the pope in compensation for property and funds that were seized from Christians during years of Christian persecutions (a topic we discuss in Appendix A). It's important that the Church continues to have its home in the place where Saint Peter spent his final years and was bishop and pope.

Respecting the role of the Church and its leaders

Catholics firmly believe that Jesus Christ personally founded the Church, and He entrusted it to the authority and administration of Saint Peter (the first pope) and his successors. In this section, we explain what Catholics believe the Church really is, as well as how its leadership is structured.

What “the Church” really is

The word *church* has many meanings. Most obviously, it can signify a building where sacred worship takes place. The Catholic Church is not one particular building even though the head of the Church (the pope) lives next to Saint Peter’s Basilica (the largest church in the world) in Rome. People who use the church building — the body or assembly of believers — are also known as the *church*. When that body is united under one tradition of worship, it is called a *liturgical church*, such as the Eastern Catholic Church, the Melkite Church, the Ruthenian Church, or the Latin or Roman Rite Church.



REMEMBER

Catholic Churches may differ liturgically, but they’re still Catholic. The two main lungs of the Church are the Latin (Western) Church and the Eastern Catholic Church. The *Latin (Western) Church* follows the ancient traditions of the Christian community in Rome since the time of St. Peter and St. Paul; most parishes in the United States, Canada, Central America, and South America celebrate this type of Mass, said in either the location’s common tongue or Latin. The *Eastern Catholic Church*, which includes the Byzantine Rite, celebrates its Mass like Greek or Russian Eastern Orthodox Churches. Both Masses are cool by the pope, though.

At an even more profound level, the entire *universal* Church (meaning the Catholic Church around the world) is theologically considered the Mystical Body of Christ. In other words, the Church sees herself as the living, unifying, sanctifying, governing presence of Jesus Christ on earth today. Not just an organization with members or an institution with departments, the Church is an organic entity; it is alive. Its members, as Saint Paul says in his epistle (1 Corinthians 12:12–31), are like parts in a body. Just as your body has feet, hands, arms, legs, and so on, the Church has many members (parts) but is also one complete and whole *body*. (See Chapter 5 for a complete discussion of this topic.)

Unlike a club or association you belong to, the Church is more than an informal gathering of like-minded people with similar goals and interests. The Church was founded by Christ for a specific purpose: to save us. The Church is an extension of Jesus and continues the work begun by Him. He came to teach, sanctify, and govern God’s people as the Anointed One (called *Messiah* in Hebrew and *Christ* in Greek).



REMEMBER

The Church is necessary for salvation because she is the Mystical Body of Christ, and Christ (being the Savior and Redeemer of the World) is necessary for salvation because He is the One Mediator between God and man. People who do not formally belong to the Church are not *de facto* lost, however, because the Church believes in the universal salvific will of God. In other words, God offers salvation to all men and women, yet it is up to them to accept, believe in, and cooperate with that divine grace.

Anyone who has not consciously and deliberately rejected Christ and the Catholic Church can still be saved. In other words, besides the formal members (baptized, registered parishioners), there are many anonymous and unofficial members of the Church who act in good faith and follow their conscience, living virtuous lives. Someone may be innocently ignorant of the necessity of Christ and His Church and still achieve salvation from both.

One body with many members: That is how the Church sees herself. Her mission is to provide everything her members need — spiritually, that is. From the seven sacraments that give us grace to the Magisterium (see Chapter 6) that teaches essential truths to the hierarchy that brings order through laws and governance, the Church is there to give the soul what it needs on its journey to Heaven. More than a convenient option, the Church is a necessary and essential society (community) where members help each other, motivated by the same love.

The Catholic chain of command

Every group of human beings needs a chain of command (authority) and a set of rules (laws), which enable the group to maintain security, provide identity, and promote unity. Families depend on parental authority over the children. Nations have constitutions that delineate and define powers. The Church has authority that she believes comes directly from God. For example, the Lord gave Moses not only the Ten Commandments (see Chapter 12) but also many other laws and rules to help govern God's people to keep them safe.

Canon law is the set of rules and regulations the Church enacted to protect the rights of persons and the common good of all the members. The word *hierarchy* means “leveled tier.” Like the Roman army of old, the Church adopted a chain of command. The highest authority resides in the person of the pope, who is always simultaneously the Bishop of Rome. He is the Successor of Saint Peter, the man to whom Christ entrusted the keys of the kingdom.

The pope is the Church's supreme lawmaker, judge, and visible leader. He is also called the Vicar of Christ on Earth. As the Church's ambassador to the world, he possesses full, supreme, and universal power the moment he takes office. He is

elected pope by the *College of Cardinals*, which exists to elect a pope after the current one dies (or freely resigns) and also to advise, counsel, and assist the reigning pope (see Chapter 6).

The terms *Vatican* and *Holy See* refer to the various departments, commissions, dicasteries, and so on that help the pope govern the Church, evangelize and teach the faith, and maintain and promote justice.

Jesus not only entrusted the Church to Saint Peter and his successors (the popes), but He also had 12 apostles whose successors are called *bishops*. A bishop shepherds a local church called a *diocese*, whereas the pope shepherds the universal, global Church around the world. Bishops are helped in each parish church by a pastor who is a priest, and often they are helped by a deacon and/or a parochial vicar (assistant pastor). The bishops of a nation or geographical region form episcopal conferences, which provide the benefit of pooled resources. For the complete scoop on the Church hierarchy, be sure to check out Chapter 6.

Worshipping as a Catholic: The Holy Mass

The second pillar of faith in the Catholic religion is the seven sacraments — or in more general terms, divine worship of God as celebrated in the sacred liturgy (the topic of Part 2 of this book). The ceremonies, rituals, and rites performed for the past 2,000+ years were developed by the Church to render worship of the Almighty, to teach the faith to the believers, and to give moral guidance on how to live that faith. The seven sacraments are the most sacred and ancient Catholic rites. They mark the seven major stages of spiritual development:

- » **Baptism:** You are born.
- » **Holy Eucharist:** You are fed.
- » **Confirmation:** You grow.
- » **Penance:** You need healing.
- » **Anointing of the Sick:** You recover.
- » **Matrimony:** You need family.
- » **Holy Orders:** You need leaders.

Because humans have five senses and can't physically see what's happening in the spiritual realm, the seven sacraments involve physical, tangible *symbols* (such as the water used in Baptism, the oil for anointing, and unleavened bread and wine).

Symbols help connect us to the invisible spiritual reality, the *divine grace* (God’s gift of unconditional love) given in each sacrament. (For more on the seven sacraments, see Chapters 8 and 9.) Catholics belong to their own churches, called *parishes*, which are local places of worship. The *Holy Mass*, the Catholic daily and weekly church service, is a reenactment of *Holy Thursday* (when Jesus celebrated the Last Supper) and *Good Friday* (when He died to purchase the rewards of eternal life in Heaven for humankind). In Chapter 10, we explain the Mass in detail.



WARNING

Sunday attendance at a parish isn’t just expected; it’s a moral obligation. Not going to Sunday Mass without a worthy excuse, such as illness or bad weather, is considered a grave sin. (Note that many Christians attend church services on Sunday, but Catholics can also attend Mass on Saturday evening instead to fulfill the Sunday requirement, as we explain in Chapter 10.)

Bringing body and soul into the mix

As we detail in Chapter 7, human beings are created as an essential union of body and soul. Material and spiritual worlds are bridged in each and every human person. Because God made us this way, it only makes sense that both body and soul are incorporated in worship.

Attending Mass requires more than just being physically present in church. That’s why Catholics use different postures, such as standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing, and do plenty of listening, singing, and responding to phrases. For example, if the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” Catholics respond, “And with your spirit.”

During Mass, the inspired Word of God (see Chapter 2) is read, proclaimed, and heard through people’s eyes, lips, and ears. Holy Communion, food for the soul, is given to believers.

Sacred art (such as stained glass, statues, icons, paintings, mosaics, tapestries, and frescoes) adorns the worship space, sacred music is played and sung, bells are rung, incense is burned . . . the senses are stimulated as body and soul are united and nourished in the House of God.

Participating inside and out

Catholics are not spectators while at public worship. Yes, there is a distinction between the *clergy* (ordained ministers who perform the sacred rites and rituals in the name of the Church) and the congregants, but the people in the pews are crucial because they represent the entire human race.

Everyone in the church is asked to get involved in sacred liturgy. Divine worship is the adoration of God by man, and *interior* participation is the most important element. Every person at Mass should be open to God's grace to accept and cooperate with it. Interior participation means going to church not for what you get out of it but for what you can give to God.

Of all the sacraments and all the sacred liturgies, the Mass is par excellence, the source and summit of Christian worship. It is more than a mere reenactment of the Last Supper; it is the unbloody representation of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary (Good Friday).

Mass is first and foremost sacred worship, but it also teaches and supports what Catholics believe in terms of the doctrines and dogmas that form the creed of the religion. Mass communicates religious truths and encourages parishioners to respond morally and spiritually by living holy lives.

Behaving Like a Catholic

The third pillar of the Catholic faith is the Ten Commandments, which represent the moral life of the believer. Behaving as Jesus would want us to is the basic premise. The concept is not puritanical; fun and enjoyment aren't frowned upon. All legitimate pleasures are allowed in moderation — and only if they aren't an end in themselves. The individual's goal is to maintain a happy balance of work and leisure.

As we explain in this section, there are certain activities the Church recommends and encourages, and some she requires and demands. In all places and at all times, being docile to the will of God is paramount. For much more detail about how to behave like a Catholic, be sure to check out Part 3 of this book.

Following the general ground rules

The minimum requirements for being a Catholic are called the *precepts* of the Church:

- » Attending Mass every Sunday (or Saturday evening) and holy day of obligation.
- » Going to confession annually or more often (or when needed).
- » Receiving Holy Communion during Easter. (Receiving weekly or daily Holy Communion is encouraged, though.)

- » Observing laws on fasting and abstinence: one full meal on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; not eating meat on Fridays during Lent.
- » Supporting the Church financially and otherwise.

And, in the United States, the American bishops added two more precepts:

- » Obeying the marriage laws of the Church.
- » Supporting missionary activity of the Church.

You can find out more about the precepts of the Church in Chapter 11.

Catholics are also required to pray daily, participate in the sacraments, obey the moral law, and accept the teachings of Christ and His Church. If you haven't grown up knowing and accepting the faith, then you need to make sure you know and agree with all that the Catholic Church teaches before you can truly practice the faith.

Practicing the faith is the most difficult part of being Catholic. Obeying the rules isn't just mindless compliance. It involves appreciating the wisdom and value of the various Catholic rules and laws. Believers are asked to put that belief into action, to practice what they believe. Catholics are taught that all men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and that all men and women have been saved by Christ and are adopted children of God. That belief, if truly believed, requires that the person act as if they really mean it.



REMEMBER

Every organization, society, association, and group has rules. Even individual families and homes have their own rules, which exist for one purpose: the common good of all the members. Just like directions on a bottle of medicine tell you the proper use of something, Church laws are signs that warn you of danger and give you the proper directions to your destination. The laws of God — be they the Ten Commandments, the Natural Moral Law, or the moral teachings of the Church — exist to protect us and to ensure our spiritual safety.

Avoiding sin

Sinning is not only breaking the law of God but also much more. Sin is a disease, a germ, an infection of the soul. Just as tumors can be either benign or malignant, sins can be either *venial* or *mortal*, either slightly wounding or actually killing the life of grace in the soul.

The best prevention is to avoid sin just as doctors advise us to avoid disease. Good spiritual health requires more than being free of infection, however. Living a virtuous moral life and maintaining a healthy spirituality, when combined with an aggressive program to avoid sin at all costs, is the best plan to live a holy life worthy of a true follower of Christ. In Chapter 13, we discuss this subject in detail.

Heeding the Church's stance on tough issues

Certain topics get much more media attention than the substance of Catholic religion (like doctrine, worship, prayer, and spirituality). These topics include the Church's stance on abortion, euthanasia, contraception, homosexuality, and more.

Many of the tough issues that distinguish Catholicism from other faiths are based on the Church's foundational beliefs. Issues such as priestly celibacy are matters of discipline, whereas the ordination of women contradicts a doctrine of the faith. Abortion, euthanasia, contraception, and homosexuality are moral issues that require the application of biblical and doctrinal principles in order to see clearly the spiritual dangers often overlooked by well-meaning people. War and capital punishment are examples where legitimate differences of opinion still exist, yet basic fundamentals must always be respected and upheld. We devote Chapter 14 to a discussion of all these tough issues.

Praying as a Catholic: Showing Your Devotion

Part 4 of this book is devoted to a discussion of prayer and devotions. While public worship (such as the Holy Mass) is governed by the official Church, private prayer is more a matter of personal taste and preference. Each person needs to cultivate their own spirituality just as they need to develop a healthy lifestyle for their body.

When it comes to prayer, what works for one person may not work for another, but certain fundamentals almost always apply. Think of it this way: Your choices with regard to diet and exercise may differ from those of your friends and neighbors, but chances are, your choices have a lot in common with those made by people of similar physical health. Likewise, your devotional choices (such as how and when to pray) can be tailored to meet your needs, but many similarities exist among people who share a certain faith.

Praying and using devotions

As we discuss in detail in Chapter 15, Catholicism promotes both public and private prayer. In Chapter 16, we explain that *devotions* are prayers or actions devoted to God, which can be private or public as well. Devotions are minor ways that believers cultivate a love and familiarity with theological truths and revealed mysteries of faith and (most importantly) develop a personal relationship with the Lord. The devotions mentioned in Chapter 16, such as praying the Rosary, are some of the more popular and effective ones around.

Realizing the importance of Mary and the saints

The Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus, and she is also considered one of His most faithful disciples in her own way. While not an apostle and never holding any authority in the early Church, the Mother of Christ nonetheless has always been a model of humility, virtue, and obedience to the will of God.

As we explain in Chapters 17 and 18, Mary and the canonized saints of the Church are not objects of worship (which would be idolatry — something condemned by the First Commandment). Instead, they are living examples and models of holiness and sanctity. They are role models and heroes of faith who, in their own way, tried and succeeded in following Jesus as best they could.

Following traditions

The most visible aspects of Catholicism are not usually the most fundamental theological, doctrinal, or moral teachings. In other words, they aren't necessarily the meat-and-potatoes substance of what it means to be Catholic. But some traditions are so public or well known that people associate them with Catholicism much like people associate Judaism with a man wearing a yarmulke or Islam with the use of a prayer rug.

Some such Catholic traditions include meatless Fridays, ashes on the forehead to begin Lent, palms on Passion Sunday, and blessings (of throats, persons, homes, cars, and so on). Such pious practices are not the core of Catholicism, but they do connect and point in that direction, as we explain in Chapter 19.