



UNDERSTANDING

*Our*

CATHOLIC  
NEIGHBORS

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# 1

## Overview of Roman Catholic Beliefs and Doctrines

By Dr. Mathew N. Schmalz

### Beginnings of Roman Catholicism

Catholics trace their faith's origin to Jesus Christ identifying Simon Peter as the apostle who would lead His church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to using the word "church" (*ecclesia*), the original Greek plays on the word *Petros*, the word translated as "Peter," which is related to the word *petra*, which means "rock." Thus, for Catholics, Peter is the "rock" on which the Church would be built.

Catholics believe that Peter was the first pope,<sup>3</sup> the vicar or representative of Christ, and the other apostles were considered to be the first bishops.<sup>4</sup> After the death of the apostles, "bishop" was the title applied to leaders of geographical areas called dioceses. Dioceses were smaller communities at first, but over time they became large enough to have the same boundaries as local Roman municipalities or cities.

The historical record indicates that the bishop of Rome—understood as the successor to Peter—was speaking authoritatively as early as the reign of Clement (from about AD 91 onward). By this time, Christianity was recognized as a religion distinct from Judaism, and Christians were not allowed to attend synagogue services. In addition, a separate clergy,<sup>5</sup> as distinct from the laity,<sup>6</sup> was charged with performing rituals (called sacraments<sup>7</sup> in Catholicism) having a special spiritual power and impact.<sup>8</sup>

### Catholic Beliefs and Doctrines

Overall, the Catholic system of belief is complex, and it is relatively rare to find members of Catholic laity who know and understand all the various subtleties associated with Church doctrine. Like many Christian denominations, the Catholic Church accepts basic creedal statements such as the Apostles' Creed<sup>9</sup> and the Nicene Creed.<sup>10</sup> For the Catholic Church, the two fundamental sources of God's revelation—and so Catholic doctrine—are scripture and tradition. "Scripture" is understood as the Old Testament

(including what are called deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books<sup>11</sup>) and the New Testament. “Tradition” is how the Church has interpreted scripture through its theologians and its authoritative interpreters, the bishops and the pope.

## The Magisterium

In the Catholic Church, the authority to teach and define doctrine is called the magisterium. It is divided into two basic parts: extraordinary and ordinary. The extraordinary magisterium refers to special and specific pronouncements made by the pope or through a council convened and sanctioned by him. Teachings of the extraordinary magisterium are considered to be infallible and necessary for salvation.<sup>12</sup> The extraordinary magisterium builds on the ordinary magisterium. The ordinary magisterium is not necessarily infallible but can contain infallible truths of the Catholic faith if a particular doctrine is taught consistently over time by the bishops of the entire church in communion with the pope. In addition to indicating a lower level of clarity and authority, “ordinary” also refers to “ordinary” transmissions of teachings surrounding faith and morals such as papal letters, called encyclicals. The magisterium, both extraordinary and ordinary, also listens to, and evaluates, what is called the *sensus fidelium* or the sense of the faithful, which refers to the collective understanding of elements of the Catholic faith by members of the Church, from bishops to laity, over time.

In addition to beliefs contained in the extraordinary and/or ordinary magisterium, another category of beliefs is subject to prudential judgment, where individuals might in good faith and conscience weigh a particular issue differently and come to different conclusions. For example, questions concerning the appropriate level and means of supporting the poor would generally fall under the category of prudential judgment, even though helping the poor is an essential and consistent part of the Catholic Church’s magisterium.

## The Trinity

The Catholic understanding of God is expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which there is only one God but three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Traditionally, the Son and the Holy Spirit are described as “one-in-being” with the Father, who is equally divine. The distinction between the three Persons lies in their eternal interrelationship. The Father begets the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit are created by the Father at a single point in time, but each shares in the fulness of the divinity that constitutes the one eternal God who acts in the world.

Jesus Christ is understood to be the incarnate Son of God, fully human and fully divine. Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He was crucified under the rule of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, died, and rose again from the dead. Catholics believe that salvation comes through Jesus Christ and His loving self-sacrifice for the sins of human beings. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and Son together, is usually associated with the ongoing sanctification of the Church in its liturgy,<sup>13</sup> preaching, and teaching.

## Mary

Mary is called “the Mother of God” in the Catholic tradition. While Mary was fully human, she is understood to have been immaculately conceived, which means that she was born without the stain of original sin.<sup>14</sup> In Catholic doctrine, she conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and remained a virgin throughout her life. As was proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950, Mary was “assumed body and soul into heavenly glory” after her earthly life completed its course.<sup>15</sup> The twin dogmas<sup>16</sup> of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are thus special marks of Catholic understandings of Mary’s significance in God’s plan for human salvation.

## The Church

In the Catholic tradition, the Church has been presented or conceptualized in a variety of ways: broadly, it denotes the unity of all Christians; it also means “the body of Christ” or the “people of God.” Fundamentally, the Catholic Church is a living community and institution willed by God for proclaiming the gospel and enabling the salvation of human beings. As the body of Christ, the Church is, in a special way, the presence of Christ in the world today. The Church’s earthly leader is the pope, who is understood to be the successor to the apostle Peter, who, in turn, was specifically identified by Jesus Christ to head the Church. The pope is understood to teach infallibly concerning faith and morals under the very specific condition of speaking *ex cathedra*. Literally “from the throne,” this term refers to the pope consciously invoking his authority as vicar (or representative) of Christ. Under the pope are the bishops, who are understood to be successors of the apostles.

Priests and deacons are ordained by bishops. Some priests lead a parish, an established local community within a wider geographical jurisdiction called a diocese, which is headed by a bishop. Deacons can assist both priests and bishops in administrative and some liturgical responsibilities. Bishops may administer all of the seven sacraments (explained below); priests have the authority to administer most of them, depending on the circumstances.

The laity also have specific rights and responsibilities. Qualified laity may assist clergy in advisory roles in the parish, as lectors<sup>17</sup> during services, and in Church councils. As laypeople go about their lives in the world, they are required to conform their conduct—and their conscience—to the teaching authority of the Church. As their means allow, members of the laity are also required to materially support the Church.

## Sacraments

Catholics celebrate several kinds of rituals; as a group, these are called the liturgy of the Church. Over time, seven of these liturgical rites, called sacraments, have become the most significant. By the traditional definition, sacraments are outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace.<sup>18</sup>

While the specific sacraments are detailed in the section on Catholic religious practices, the sacraments themselves shed light on the structure of Catholicism. In the

Church, belief is often expressed through, and confirmed by, ritual. The sacraments are not a ritualized way to automatically receive grace. Rather, their efficacy relies in part upon the faith and belief of the individual receiving them. In addition, the ritual structure of Catholicism depends on a particular class of people, priests, who are specially authorized to perform the sacraments. Sacraments thus reflect the Catholic belief in the Church as a divinely established institution that enables sanctification and salvation, in part, through liturgical rites as well as through private prayer and ethical action.

## Saints

Contrary to a common misconception, Catholics do not worship saints or the Virgin Mary—they venerate them and may ask for their intercession. In Catholicism, the title “saint” is applied posthumously to certain people who have led a life of heroic virtue during their earthly lives. In this context, “heroic virtues” has the very specific meaning of exemplifying the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, as well as the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

The process for being named a saint in the Catholic Church is called canonization, the word “canon” meaning an authoritative list. A diocese brings a cause, or case, before the Vatican office in charge of considering candidates for sainthood. After their extensive investigation, with briefs that detail the examination of the candidate’s life and writings, the final decision lies with the pope. If he signs a Decree of Heroic Virtue, the person becomes venerable. Then two stages remain: beatification and sainthood. If it can be confirmed that one miracle has been performed through the intercession of the venerable individual, they advance in rank to beatification, or “blessed.”<sup>19</sup> If a second miracle is confirmed, the blessed becomes a saint. In such cases, intercession is understood to mean “the aid of” prayers given on our behalf by the venerable, blessed, or saint. However, a miracle is always understood to be fundamentally a gift of God, who alone is worshipped. Persons who are named saints are listed on the Catholic liturgical calendar and given a special day, called a feast.

## Social Teaching

There is a long tradition of Catholic social teaching on the proper organization and orientation of society. This social teaching has two overarching themes: the dignity of human life and the common good. The Catholic Church understands life as a precious gift from God. This belief informs Catholic opposition to abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia. Furthermore, artificial means of conception and contraception are prohibited under Catholic doctrine because they interrupt and even distort the natural—and divinely blessed—giving between husband and wife that brings forth new life.

The common good refers to ideals of general welfare that should determine the proper distribution of resources as well as human works and labor. In making such a determination, a primary obligation is reaching out in justice and charity to the poor and those who suffer. In specific regard to social organization, the Catholic Church affirms the importance of private property, but private property must be held to serve the greater good. The Catholic Church has supported taxation as a means to justly distribute wealth and the right of workers to organize.

In recent years, two aspects of serving the common good have assumed renewed significance in Catholicism: care for the environment and the concept of subsidiarity. Fundamental to serving the common good is protecting the environment, since natural creation is considered to be good and essential to human flourishing. The principle of subsidiarity holds that nothing should be done by a complex organization or means that can be accomplished by a simpler organization or means. Debate over the proper scope of governmental involvement in society and human affairs has become a crucial feature of contemporary Catholicism.

## Afterlife

The Catholic Church, along with many other Christian traditions, teaches that at the Second Coming of Christ, all will be raised from the dead for a final judgment. (By contrast, in Latter-day Saint theology the Second Coming is neither the time of a universal resurrection nor the day of final judgment.) Like many other Christian denominations, the Catholic Church affirms the reality of both heaven and hell. Within the Catholic tradition, hell has been conceptualized in many different ways. For example, it has often been seen as a place of eternal torment by fire, as depicted in scriptural imagery. The more contemporary understanding of hell is existence without God—an agonizing condition, to be sure, but one that lacks the specific punishments once associated with “hellfire.”

Heaven too has been conceptualized in a number of ways. Relying again on images from the scriptures, it is seen as a place of light, refreshment, and peace. The most enduring image of heaven is one of eternal contemplation of God’s love and beauty, which is called “the beatific vision.”<sup>20</sup>

Catholic tradition has also developed a belief in the existence of an intermediate state of purification, called purgatory, before the last judgment. After death, each person’s soul will be judged immediately in the particular judgment. Those who have died without making a final confession may first need to do penance for any residual offenses. Purgatory, then, is that state of purgation in which the last traces of sin are removed and the soul purified to enter heaven and the presence of God.

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- <sup>2.</sup> The translation here is from the King James Bible, which is more familiar to Latter-day Saints. Catholics usually use the New American Bible. In the New American Bible the lines read, “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” See The New American Bible, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/\\_\\_\\_PVP.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/___PVP.HTM).
  - <sup>3.</sup> The spiritual and administrative head of the Catholic Church on earth. The pope is considered to be the successor of the apostle Peter and the representative of Christ.
  - <sup>4.</sup> The leader of an administrative district called a diocese. Bishops are chosen by the pope.
  - <sup>5.</sup> Ordained ministers such as bishops, priests, and deacons, who have authority to administer the sacraments.
  - <sup>6.</sup> Non-ordained or non-consecrated members of the Catholic Church; often called “the faithful” or “the people of God.”
  - <sup>7.</sup> A ritual or sign instituted by Christ that provides grace.
  - <sup>8.</sup> For a brief overview of significant events in Catholic history, see “Important Dates and Events in Catholicism” in the appendices.
  - <sup>9.</sup> One of the earliest statements of Christian doctrine, traditionally believed to express the beliefs of the apostles. It affirms faith in God, the Father; Jesus, the Son; and the Holy Spirit.

10. The creed that summarizes the orthodox faith of Catholicism and is used in the liturgy of most Christian churches. It was adopted at the first Council of Nicaea in AD 325.
11. Literally “second canon,” these are parts of the Old Testament accepted as authentic by the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches but not by many other Christian denominations. These books are also called the Apocrypha and include the books of Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Sirach, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, and Wisdom of Solomon, as well as additions to Esther and Daniel.
12. A pronouncement incapable of being erroneous, as when a pope speaks ex cathedra or “from the throne” regarding a question of faith or morals. Infallibility is also understood to apply to proclamations made by councils of the entire Church.
13. The set of rituals including the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments; the formula for public worship of God and proclamation of the gospel.
14. The disposition to sin inherent in all human beings, inherited as a consequence of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.
15. Pope Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*: Defining the Dogma of the Assumption, Nov. 1, 1950, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html).
16. A binding, divinely revealed truth, associated with a decree made by a council of the whole Church or an ex cathedra statement of the pope in which infallibility is invoked.
17. A reader during worship, often a layperson.
18. The unmerited help that God provides human beings to draw close to Him.
19. One level below sainthood. A blessed is someone who led a life of heroic virtue and by whose intercession one miracle has taken place. Martyrs and confessors (those who were put to death or tortured for their faith) do not need a miracle associated with them to become blessed. The process for being named “blessed” is called “beatification.”
20. “Immediate knowledge” or vision of God experienced in heaven by those who are saved.

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