

Understanding What Others Believe

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church is the western world's oldest and largest institution, having more than a billion members. It maintains that it is the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" founded by Jesus Christ upon the Apostles, among whom Simon Peter was chief. It teaches that its bishops, through apostolic succession, are successors of these apostles, and that the Pope — the Bishop of Rome — as the successor of Peter — enjoys, by divine institution, "supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls".

Catholic beliefs have been defined through 21 ecumenical councils, following the example set by the first Apostles in the Council of Jerusalem, and are summarized in the Nicene Creed and detailed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

God

The Catholic Church holds that there is one eternal God, who exists in three persons: God the Father; God the Son; and the Holy Spirit, who make up the Trinity.

Catholics believe that Christ is the Messiah of the Old Testament's prophecies. The Church teaches that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God became united with human nature when Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He is believed, therefore, to be both fully divine and fully human.

Man's Problem

The Roman Catholic Church holds to the doctrine of original sin. Individual sins range from the less serious venial sins to more serious mortal sins which end a person's relationship with God.

The Solution to the Problem

The Church teaches that through the suffering of Christ and his crucifixion, all people have an opportunity for forgiveness and freedom from sin, and so can be reconciled to God. The Resurrection of Jesus gained for man the possibility of spiritual immortality previously denied to him because of original sin. By being reconciled with God through Christ and following Christ's words and deeds, the Church believes one can enter the Kingdom of God. All the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection have been delivered to the Catholic Church to be distributed to men.

It is through baptism that a person receives spiritual life. After baptism, Catholics may obtain forgiveness for subsequent sins through the sacrament of Reconciliation (Penance or Confession) in which an individual confesses his sins to a priest, who then offers advice and imposes a particular penance to be performed. The priest administers absolution, formally forgiving his sins. An indulgence may be granted by the church after the sinner has confessed and received absolution for his sins. An indulgence is believed to grant partial or full remission (a plenary indulgence) of the punishment still due to him in Purgatory.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation is complex and so we will return to consider it at greater length next week.

The Church

Catholic belief holds that the Church — the people of God, who abide in Christ — is the continuing presence of Jesus on earth. Just as in the days of His incarnation He taught, acted and worked miracles through His physical body, so He continues to speak and act through the Church.

The means of salvation is said to exist only in the Catholic Church. However, if a person has invincible ignorance of the Catholic Church and its teachings (as a result of parentage or culture, for example), yet follows the morals God has dictated in his heart and would join the Church if he understood its necessity, he may be saved. It teaches that Catholics are called by the Holy Spirit to work for unity among all Christians, but only under the authority of Rome.

The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus designated Simon Peter as the leader of the apostles by proclaiming "upon this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." It teaches that the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost signalled the beginning of the public ministry of the Church. All duly consecrated bishops since then are considered the successors to the apostles, and they hand on the Sacred Tradition received from them. The Pope as the successor of Peter is the most senior of the bishops and the Vicar — or representative — of Christ on Earth.

The College of Bishops, when speaking as a college, speaks with authority on matters of doctrine but only in so far as they speak under the authority of and in fellowship with the Pope. The Pope, when speaking "ex cathedra" is believed to speak with infallibility.

The Sacraments

According to the Council of Trent, Christ instituted seven sacraments and entrusted them to the Church. These are Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Reconciliation (Penance), Anointing of the Sick (formerly Extreme Unction or the "Last Rites"), Holy Orders and Holy Matrimony. Sacraments are visible rituals which are seen as signs of God's presence and, properly administered, are effective channels of God's grace to all those who receive them with the proper disposition. The sacraments are said to be effective "*ex opere operato*." That is to say it is the performance of the sacrament that brings about blessing.

The Holy Spirit

Catholics believe that they receive the Holy Spirit at Confirmation when the grace received at baptism is strengthened. To be confirmed, Catholics must be in a state of grace, which means they cannot be conscious of having committed an unconfessed mortal sin. They must also have prepared spiritually for the sacrament, chosen a sponsor for spiritual support, and selected a saint to be their special patron and intercessor.

Worship and the Mass

Differing liturgical traditions, or rites, exist throughout the Catholic Church, reflecting historical and cultural diversity rather than differences in beliefs. The most commonly used liturgy is the Roman Rite which exists in two authorized forms: the ordinary form (the 1969 Mass of Paul VI) and the extraordinary form (the 1962 edition of the Tridentine or Latin Mass).

The Eucharist is at the centre of the Catholic Mass. Catholics believe that at each Mass, the bread and wine become supernaturally transubstantiated into the true Body and Blood of Christ. Because the Church teaches that Christ is present in the Eucharist, there are strict rules about its celebration and reception. For example, Catholics must abstain from eating for one hour before receiving Communion and those who are conscious of being in a state of mortal sin are forbidden from the sacrament unless they have received absolution through Reconciliation.

Mary

Prayers and devotions to the Virgin Mary are part of Catholic piety but are distinct from the worship of God. The Church holds Mary, as Perpetual Virgin and Mother of God, in special regard. Catholic beliefs concerning Mary include her Immaculate Conception without the stain of original sin and bodily Assumption into heaven at the end of her life, both of which have been infallibly defined as dogma, by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and Pope Pius XII in 1950 respectively. Several liturgical Marian feasts are celebrated throughout the Church Year and she is honoured with many titles such as Queen of Heaven. Pope Paul VI called her Mother of the Church, because by giving birth to Christ, she is considered to be the spiritual mother to each member of the Body of Christ. Because of her influential role in the life of Jesus, prayers and devotions, such as the Rosary, the Hail Mary, the Salve Regina and the Memorare are commonly made to her.

The Final Outcome

The Church teaches that, immediately after death, the soul of each person will be judged by God according to his earthly life. There is also a final judgment when Christ will sit in a universal judgment of all mankind. This will bring an end to human history and mark the beginning of a new heaven and earth ruled by God in righteousness.

The basis upon which each person's soul will be judged is detailed in the Gospel of Matthew which lists works of mercy to be performed even to people considered "the least". Emphasis is put upon Christ's words that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" According to the Catechism, "The Last Judgement will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life."

A soul may enter one of three states after death. Heaven is a place of glorious union with God and of unspeakable joy that lasts forever. Purgatory is a temporary condition for the purification of souls who, although saved, are not free enough from sin to enter directly into heaven. Souls in purgatory may be aided in reaching heaven by the prayers of the faithful on earth and by the intercession of saints. Finally, those who chose to live a sinful life, did not repent, and fully intended to persist in their ways are sent to hell: an everlasting separation from God. The Church teaches that no one is condemned to hell without having freely decided to reject God. No one is predestined to hell and no one can determine whether anyone else has been condemned. Catholicism teaches that through God's mercy a person can repent at any point before death and be saved.

Some Catholic theologians have speculated that the souls of unbaptised infants who die in original sin are assigned to limbo although this is not an official doctrine of the Church.

How Do We Know These Things Are True?

Based on the promises of Christ in the Gospels, the Church believes that it is continually guided by the Holy Spirit and so infallibly protected from falling into doctrinal error. The Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit reveals God's truth through Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium.

Sacred Scripture consists of the 73 book Catholic Bible. This is made up of the 39 books found in the Old Testament, the 27 New Testament books and 7 additional books from the Apocrypha.

Sacred Tradition consists of those teachings believed by the Church to have been handed down since the time of the Apostles.

Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are collectively known as the "deposit of faith". These are in turn interpreted by the Magisterium, the Church's teaching authority, which is exercised by the Pope and the College of Bishops in union with the Pope.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think is the key difference between the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church and those of the Protestant churches?