

# Catholic *QUICK* View

beliefs ♦ definitions ♦ prayers ♦ practices

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# Being Catholic: A Quick View

There are an estimated one billion Catholics living in the world. That is about 17 percent of the world's population. There are more Catholics than there are people in any other Christian denomination. There are also more Catholics than there are Jews, Hindus, or Buddhists—only Muslims have more members. The great number of Catholics in the world testifies to Catholicism's universal appeal and to the power that the Catholic faith has in people's lives.

This book begins with a brief summary of key Catholic beliefs, practices, and attitudes. The book then introduces core Catholic spiritual beliefs, prayers, and liturgies. A glossary of Catholic terms offers specific definitions of key Catholic beliefs and practices.

This book provides only a quick view of Catholic beliefs, practices, and attitudes. It does not offer an in-depth explanation as to why Catholics believe or practice what they do. For an in-depth exploration of the Catholic faith, you may wish to purchase *The Catholic Faith Handbook for Youth*, by Brian Singer-Towns (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2004, from which the content of this book has been adapted).

## Core Catholic Beliefs

- God created human beings to be in perfect union with God and one another. However, the sin of our first parents—called original sin—deprived the human race of our original holiness and justice.
- Throughout human history God worked to restore the relationship of love and trust that was lost through original sin. He did this by entering into covenants—special relationships based on mutual promises—with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and the people of Israel. But the people often broke their covenant promises.
- Ultimately God sent his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, as savior for the human race. Christ was both fully God and fully man. He became the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the relationship of love and trust between God and humankind.
- Following his death Jesus was brought back to life in the Resurrection! Christ overcame death and opened heaven's gates for all the just.
- The Holy Spirit has been at work in the world from the beginning of creation to the present day. The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son, and is also called the Advocate (Paraclete) and the Spirit of Truth.
- God has revealed himself to be Trinity, that is, the mystery of one God in three divine persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This mystery cannot be arrived at by reason but was revealed by Jesus Christ.

- Christ established the Catholic Church on the foundation of the Apostles. Christ and the Holy Spirit revealed the fullness of religious truth to the Apostles. The fullness of God's revealed truth is called Sacred Tradition, and is entrusted to the Apostles' successors, the bishops of the Church.
- The Bible, or the Sacred Scriptures, is another source of God's revealed truth for Catholics. The Bible is closely connected to Sacred Tradition. The Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Bible to write what God wants us to know for our salvation.
- All people are destined for eternal life after death. The baptized who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as their savior will find their eternal reward in heaven. Those who have rejected Christ will find their eternal punishment in hell.

## Core Catholic Practices

- Catholics celebrate seven sacraments that form the basis of their worship, or communal prayer, together. The seven sacraments were instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church to make the love of God real and present in the world.
- The sacrament of the Eucharist is the heart of the Catholic Church's life. In the sacrament, Catholics literally receive the body and blood of Christ in the appearance of bread and wine.
- Sunday, or the "Lord's Day," is the principal day for the celebration of the Eucharist. Catholics keep the day holy by attending Mass and resting from work, in honor of Christ's Resurrection.
- Catholics follow a special calendar with all the feasts and holy days of the liturgical year. The special seasons of Advent and Lent prepare them to understand God's great love, which is celebrated at Christmas and Easter.
- Catholics place a strong emphasis on living morally because they believe they are called to new life in the Holy Spirit. The moral code for this new life is based on the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.
- Catholics defend the dignity of human life, and Catholic morality is often described as pro-life. Catholics are opposed to anything that threatens the sanctity of human life, including abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and human cloning.
- Serving people in need and working to transform society are essential elements of Catholic life. The Church is called to be a sign of God's perfect Kingdom yet to come, by working for justice and human rights in this life.
- Catholics honor the great people of faith who have preceded them, the saints, and in a dear and special way, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

## Core Catholic Attitudes

- Catholics recognize that God is present to, in, and through all creation—including the natural world, persons, communities, and historical events. For Catholics all creation is sacred and has the potential to be a source of God’s grace.
- Catholics place their trust in the essential goodness of the human person, who is made in the image of God, even though we are flawed by the effect of original sin.
- Catholics appreciate both faith and reason, both religion and science. Reason can lead to faith.
- Although the fullness of truth resides in the Catholic Church, Catholics seek to recognize and affirm the aspects of God’s revealed truth that is shared with other religions and all people of good will.
- Because the human person is saved by participating in the community of faith—that is, the Church—rather than as isolated individuals, Catholics emphasize community life and communal worship. Catholics distrust any spirituality that reflects a primary attitude of “me and God.”
- Catholicism respects the great diversity of cultures in the world, and is committed to proclaiming the message of Jesus to all people in all cultures at all times.
- Catholics respect and embrace a wide variety of spiritualities and prayer forms.

## Core Catholic Teachings on Reason and Revelation

The Catholic Church makes frequent appeal to human reason in teaching about the religious truths God has revealed. The Church teaches:

- Revelation is God making himself and his divine plan known to the human race through words and deeds in human history.
- The human person must trust that God has revealed to the Church what he wants it to know for its salvation.
- In listening to the message of creation and to the voice of conscience, every person can come to certainty about the existence of God.
- Through the natural light of human reason, the one true God can be known from his works, that is, from the world and from the human person. This is one reason why the Church teaches that salvation is possible for every person, even those who have never heard of Jesus Christ.
- God has revealed himself in order to restore the communion that human beings were created to have with him, before the relationship was broken by original sin.

- Revelation is communicated in the Bible's stories of how God made himself known to the chosen people by acting throughout their history. But when those attempts met with failure, God took a radical step. He sent his son, Jesus Christ, into the world as the savior. While remaining fully God, Jesus Christ took on a human nature, that is, he is both true God and true man. Thus Jesus Christ is the fullest and complete Revelation of who God is, and through Christ, God established his covenant with the human race forever. As the Bible tells us, "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).
- Everything needed to be known about God; everything needed to be known for eternal union with him has been revealed in Christ. Nothing more needs to be added or taken away.

## Core Catholic Teachings on the Scriptures and Tradition

The Catholic Church teaches:

- Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit to his closest followers, the Apostles, after he physically left them to ascend into heaven: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The Holy Spirit helped the Apostles remember and understand all that Jesus did and taught. These truths about Jesus and his teaching are therefore called the Apostolic Tradition, or sometimes just the Tradition.
- Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles handed on everything they knew about Jesus to the first Christians and to the generation of leaders who followed them.
- The Holy Spirit inspired people in the early Church to create written documents explaining what the Apostles had handed down about Jesus.
- The Scriptures and Tradition are two sources of Revelation. They are closely connected, and together form a single sacred deposit of truth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They can never be in conflict, and each one helps us to understand the other.
- The Church looks to God's Revelation in the Scriptures and Tradition as the only authentic and complete source for knowledge about God and God's will for the whole human race. It is the responsibility of the Church, through its teaching, its worship, and its ministries, to transmit to every new generation all that God has revealed.
- As the successors of the Apostles, it is the particular and exclusive responsibility of the bishops in union with the Pope—who are also called the Magisterium—to faithfully teach, interpret, and preserve the Scriptures and Tradition for all believers until Christ returns in glory.