

Q & A about the Catholic Faith

This pamphlet briefly answers some common questions about the Catholic faith. If you have any other questions or comments about the Catholic Church or how or why you might want to become Catholic, please talk with the person who gave it to you, call a local Catholic parish, or visit <http://prayer.comboard.com/>.

Detailed explanations of these and other Catholic teachings are available in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and from other sources. We invite you to consider becoming Catholic and hope that this information is helpful.

1. What is the Catholic Church?

The Catholic Church is an institution started by Jesus Christ over 2000 years ago, and is his continued active presence on earth. It has the mission of spreading Christ's teachings throughout the world. It does this through common worship, celebrating sacraments -- signs and actions that communicate God's love and grace -- helping and loving others, and being a good, responsible presence in the world.

2. What do Catholics believe?

The beliefs of the Catholic Church are summarized by the Apostles' Creed, below. (Catholics usually recite an expanded version of the Apostles' Creed, called the Nicene Creed.)

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

While many different churches repeat the same creeds, they often mean different things by some of the words and phrases.

3. What is the difference between Catholicism and Christianity?

There are in the world many people who identify themselves as Christian, but not Catholic; they view Catholicism as one of many possible expressions of Christianity (if even that).

From the Catholic Church's point of view, though, all Christians are Catholic to some extent. Consequently, the Catholic Church loves all Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ who, for various reasons, might not identify themselves with Catholicism and are separated from it to differing degrees.

4. What does "Catholic" mean?

"Catholic" means universal; "catholicity" was recognized in the first centuries of Christianity as a fundamental characteristic of the Church. That is, Christianity is open to all people of the world, without regard to race, sex, social status, age or ability.

For centuries, people would have understood any reference to Christianity or "Church" to mean what we today call the Catholic Church. Over time, other religious groups appeared that wished to distinguish themselves from the Church, so the prefixes "Catholic" and others began to be affixed to particular religious bodies.

5. What is the Trinity?

"Trinity" is a term used to describe the Christian concept of God. Christianity is not polytheistic -- it does not believe that there are multiple gods. It is monotheistic -- believing there is only one God -- but that God is three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God.

6. Why is the Catholic Church so controversial?

The Catholic Church is controversial because it claims to be the fullest manifestation of Christianity. Many Christians are offended by this claim because they either don't believe there is any single true church, or they just don't believe the Catholic Church is it.

Further, it claims to have the truth about man -- who he is, how he works, and how he can be fulfilled. Many people, including some world governments, have very different concepts about who man is and what it will take for man to fulfill his potential, and so they perceive Catholicism as a threat to their philosophies and plans. In particular, the teachings of Catholicism stand in sharp contrast to policies of socialism, communism, materialism, and other philosophies that devalue human life.

Catholicism is controversial because many of its own fail to understand or live according to Christ's teachings. This is a point of great sadness for the Church.

Catholicism is controversial as a consequence of misunderstandings and distortions regarding its teachings.

But ultimately, Catholicism is controversial because its founder, Jesus Christ, was controversial.

7. What is a Sacrament?

A sacrament is a sign or action instituted by Jesus that gives grace. While God's love and grace are not limited to these, the Church today recognizes seven basic sacraments; Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist (or Communion), Marriage, Holy Orders, Healing and Confession.

8. What does the Catholic Church teach about Communion?

In keeping with Scripture and Christian records dating back to the first century, the Catholic Church continues to believe that the bread and wine offered at the Catholic Mass become the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. It is for this reason that many Christians were criticized and accused of cannibalism in the early centuries.

The technical word given to this transformation is called "transubstantiation." The word is steeped in the history of natural philosophy, in which things are considered in terms of their outward appearances and inner reality (substance). "Transubstantiation" expresses the belief, in the case of the Eucharist (the word Catholics use to refer to communion), that the metaphysical

reality -- the substance -- of bread and wine change to become the reality of Jesus Christ. However, the outward appearances remain the same.

This mode of Jesus' presence is sometimes referred to as the "Real Presence," not to imply that other means of Jesus' presence are unreal or merely imaginary, but to point out the unique nature of the Eucharist.

9. What does Catholicism teach about other non-Catholic Christians?

The Catholic Church believes that all Christians have hope of salvation insofar as they truly seek God and make Jesus and his teachings an active part of their lives. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church believes that all people are called to the fullness of grace and unity of faith found in the one Church started by Jesus and the apostles.

10. Are Catholics "Saved"?

Different Christian groups mean different things when using the word "saved." Catholics believe that Jesus is God; they follow his teachings as they come to us through Scripture and the Church; they have received Jesus into their lives through the sacraments, and attempt to continue to strengthen that relationship through prayer and action.

Catholics believe that they are "saved by grace," that it is a gift from God that cannot be earned, and that insofar as we remain receptive to that gift, we have hope of heaven and joy on earth.

11. What does Catholicism teach about other religions?

The Catholic Church teaches that any person who believes in God and seeks to do what is right has hope of salvation. This includes in particular our spiritual ancestors of the Hebrew religion, and more remotely, Muslims. This notwithstanding, the Catholic Church continues to hold forth that Catholicism is the fullest and most complete truth available to mankind.

12. Why doesn't the Catholic Church have married or female priests?

All men and women, regardless of situation, age, status, or ability, are called to lives of holiness. Being a priest does not make one more holy (as most priests are willing to attest); rather, it is the context within which one's call to holiness is carried out.

A priest is someone whose very person has been changed by the Sacrament of Holy Orders so as to be a servant to the Church. It is his mission, acting on behalf of Jesus Christ, to help others become holy. It is virtually impossible, from a practical perspective, to carry out a priest's typical responsibilities and remain true to one's duties as a husband and father. Consequently, though there have been married priests in the Catholic Church (and there are today), it is very rare and discouraged except in exceptional circumstances.

In keeping with Jesus' example of calling only men as apostles, the Catholic Church ordains only men to the priesthood. Some argue that Jesus would have called women, as well, had he not been constrained by cultural customs of the time. However, the events recorded in the New Testament show that Jesus routinely

ignored man's customs when he thought them irrelevant, yet chose only men anyway. Some have further argued that the Church's refusal to ordain women is somehow an act of unfair discrimination against them. A survey of any Church services and staffs, however, readily indicates that women actually constitute a majority of service and staff participants. If anything, men are typically underrepresented on the average American parish staff.

13. Why do Catholics confess their sins to a priest?

The New Testament records events in which Jesus gives to the apostles the responsibility to forgive sins (John 20:23). Over time, the Sacrament of Penance developed as one of the standard ways through which this graced action is carried out. In this sacrament, the person briefly tells the priest about the sins in his life, his sorrow and wish for forgiveness. The priest, acting on behalf of Jesus and the Church, forgives the person's sins and blesses him. He also institutes a penance -- an action intended to strengthen the person against future temptations to sin, and to repair some of the damage that may have been caused by the sin. For example, if a person has lied about something important, the penance might include a combination of prayers and the requirement that the person correct the situation created by the dishonesty.

Catholics confess their sins to a priest because that is what they believe Christ intends for us to do.

14. What is the Pope?

The Church is both human and divine; as history demonstrates, no human organization lasts very long without a central, tangible leader (and some don't even last long with one). The New Testament records an event in which Jesus commissioned the apostle Peter with the responsibility of being a foundation, or rock, for the Church (Matthew 16).

This role has developed and played itself out in history as the responsibility of the Bishop of Rome, commonly known as the Pope. "Pope" is a derivative of papa and means father. Though Jesus is the ultimate leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope acts on his behalf to be the visible, unifying head of the Church on earth.

The Pope is also the monarch of Vatican City, a small country landlocked within Italy.

15. Why does the Catholic Church have so much wealth?

The Church's material wealth is a point of controversy for many. What financial and physical resources the Church has are there because people have chosen to donate them. The Church frequently liquidates property and goods to support charitable programs, staff costs, or other projects. However, many donated items represent an offering of human talent to God or are given with condition that they not be sold. Finally, it is true that some of the Church's possessions represent an unfortunate attachment to material goods on the part of those who cling to them; priests and employees are by no means immune to the human proclivity to acquire. During some periods of history, some in the Catholic Church have abused their positions (and the Church's teachings) in order to "encourage" monetary and material gifts.

Some argue that, to be consistent with its own teachings, the Church's unnecessary material assets should be liquidated to assist those in need. While sympathetic with the emotions behind the argument, most systematic poverty and famine are caused by political and natural events, not a lack of world resources. The benefit resulting from such a liquidation would have little or no effect on the overall world situation.

16. Do Catholics worship "saints," especially Mary?

If any of them are, they shouldn't be.

A "saint" is someone the Catholic Church presents to the world as a paramount example of Christian love -- a kind of spiritual role model. In addition, the Church teaches that these saints now exist in union with God and continue to watch over those on earth. As such, the Church believes that we can ask these saints to continue their intercession for us in heaven.

Many people perceive Catholics as worshipping saints because Catholics believe that you can pray to a saint -- that is, speak to him in heaven. Some Catholics have a "devotion" to particular saints who, for various reasons, are special to them. Christians who are not familiar with various forms of prayer often believe that such actions are acts of worship.

However, the Bible teaches that worship is the act of offering one's thoughts and actions as a living sacrifice. Any Catholic who places a human being equal or prior to God in this way is worshipping that saint, but such activity is rare, if not nonexistent.

Mary, Jesus' mother, has a special place in the Church. Historically, she is sometimes called the Mother of God, or the God-bearer. This is not to say that she is superior to or equal to God. However, she is, in a sense, the saints' saint and model for the Church in that it is the Church's (and every devout Christian's) desire to be one who bears God to the world.

17. What is the Catholic Church's teaching on birth control?

In accord with the beliefs of virtually all Christians up through the middle of the 20th century, the Catholic Church teaches that contraception is immoral (e.g., condoms, pills, etc.). The sexual act is among the most intimate and unifying events of a couple's life, implying a total openness, commitment and receptivity to each other. The Church recognizes that human marital relations serve many good purposes, two of which include mutual affection and procreation. Married couples are free to exercise their best judgment as to how many children to have and when to have them. However, birth control changes the nature of the sexual act into something that is no longer a complete giving and receiving of the other.

For those who wish to avoid having children, the Church recommends natural family planning, which is proven to be as effective as artificial methods of birth control, but maintains an openness between the spouses.

With the advent of chemical contraceptives and other means to make contraception more convenient, some have argued that this teaching should change. However, technology does not change the reality of man -- who he is and what he means. Consequently,

the fact that certain actions are made more easy now does not mean that those actions have also become moral.

18. What does it take to be a "good Catholic"?

At the heart of the Catholic life is a desire to draw closer to and open one's self up to God; a willingness to try to do the right thing, even when it isn't culturally popular or comfortable; a commitment to Jesus through prayer, obedience, truth and charity; and trust in Jesus to make up the difference.

Pragmatically, "practicing Catholics" attend Mass every Sunday and on holy days, and confess any serious sins of which they are aware. They take responsibility for their and their children's religious education. They pray and try to be good examples. They support the Church insofar as they are able. They pray and make honest efforts to be permeated by Jesus Christ.

19. Why should I be Catholic?

Catholics receive strength from God to live their lives in keeping with Christian teachings, particularly through the sacraments. They have the prayerful support of about one billion Catholic "brothers and sisters" around the globe. The Catholic Church has true and time-proven answers to the many deep and troubling questions of life. Finally, Catholics have hope of heaven and the assistance and examples of others to not only help point the way there, but also live a full and joyful life on earth.

Different people have different reasons for being (or not being) Catholic. Ultimately, there is only one valid reason to be Catholic: Because it is truly what it claims to be. If Catholicism is not true, then any other reasons one might give are insufficient. If it is true, then any other reasons are merely supplemental.

All men and women are called to the fullest possible relationship with God, found only through participation in the Catholic faith.

20. How does one become Catholic?

Adults who wish to become Catholic typically go through a period of inquiry and preparation called the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults. Practically every Catholic parish has such a program, and you are invited to contact your local Catholic parish (or Catholic friend) to learn more. In some circumstances, adults are also received privately into the Church.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Ephesians 4