



What Do Roman Catholics Believe?

SESSION 2

| Catholic Beliefs and Practices

Introduction

Catholics *believe*. Catholicism is, among other things, a body or system of belief. Consulting Catholic catechisms, histories, books of doctrine, and the teachings of popes, bishops, and theologians are ways to learn about these beliefs. Most Catholics who are not called to teach, preach, and administer sacraments may rarely consult the books, though preparation for their confirmation or the experience of adult education can provide them with outlines. How else do you find out what Catholics believe? Answer number one: ask them. In some cases you will get an almost exact match with formal teaching. Other responses reflect the ways Catholics adapt or improvise their beliefs, which may involve mixes of uncritical tradition, superstition, dreams and hopes, along with orthodox beliefs. Finally, you can learn something of what they believe by the ways they practice the faith and put it to work in moral life, habits and behavior, voting patterns, arts, and even jokes.

We will stick to the basics, outlining what a non-Catholic ought to know if he or she suddenly has a Catholic in-law, has been invited to convert, works to build an alliance in pursuit of shared social programs, or has a well-developed sense of curiosity, because Catholic beliefs are so fascinating.

Beliefs and Practices

Huge majorities of Christians share basic beliefs with Catholics, even if until the last half century many did not know this or think much about it. Without these fundamental beliefs, Catholicism cannot be understood.



Catholics believe Christ is “really” present in the gathering and in the bread and wine, and, through all the modern changes, Catholics show most respect to Eucharist and its meanings and effects.

Catholicism wants to be part of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church,” and it has never rejected all parts of other versions of the Christian faith. There will be exceptions from the following description, but in broad outline look for:

Holy Trinity. Catholics believe in God who created and creates, who in Jesus Christ provides access to the One he called Father and overcomes the broken links between God and human beings, and who in the Holy Spirit makes God present and humans holy. In short, Catholics believe in the Holy Trinity, so often defined in church councils, particularly in the third to fifth centuries.

The Bible. The ways of this God are known in the Bible—the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, shared with all Christians, but in the Catholic case also including seven books (the Apocrypha) that other Christians may respect but do not draw on for teachings. Catholics fuse belief in the authority of the sacred book with the understanding that the church is the main mediator and interpreter; this means that church tradition plays a part in revealing the ways and words of God.

In the Bible and through the teachings of the church, Catholics receive a message that includes both *God's commands*, which one is to follow, and *God's good news* (gospel) of mercy and grace, which demonstrates and effects the loving character of God.

Eternal life. Through God's generosity the Catholic is destined for and will realize eternal life with God. Often the biblical promise of heaven makes this hope vivid, but Catholicism regards the life to come as a mystery whose reality will be revealed in that new life. Some Catholic teachings about the life to come and about God's punishments and rewards are distinctive, which means not shared by most other Christians, notably the teaching of *purgatory*. Purgatory represents an intermediate stage between earth and heaven, where for indefinite but varying periods of time the sinner is purged of faults from earthly life and readied for perfection in the presence of God. While in some periods belief in purgatory was subject to exploitation, because shortening the time in purgatory was offered in connection with penance (see below) and even in effect marketed, the belief persists but is not pressed hard by most Catholic authorities.

Hell. Belief in hell is not remarkable, since 59 percent of the American people believe there is such a place or condition.¹ The existence of hell is again the kind of teaching most Catholics will not take off the books, but it does not play the vivid role in the drama of being saved that it did even decades ago, when fear of hell was a great motivator. Most Catholic pastors and teachers today put the accent on doing good out of love for God, not fear of hell.

Seven Sacraments. Not until the Council of Trent did the bishops specify the number of these sacred acts in which divine action is connected with visible means, palpable objects, specifiable events, and rites. We shall look at these briefly, beginning with the most obvious and widely practiced.

- *Baptism*, the pouring of water over a child. The Catholic Church baptizes infants and people of age who profess faith. The rite of baptism includes rejection of the powers of evil, classically "the devil," and the putting on, as if with a garment, the benefits given by God in Christ. They believe that even if the baptizer—normally a priest, but in an emergency situation, other believers—is sinful or unbelieving, the sacrament is effective.

- *Eucharist* or the *Mass*, the sacrament of Communion, when Catholics gather around an altar to receive bread and wine that, when blessed by a priest, is "transubstantiated" into the body and blood of Christ. That is, to Catholics the Mass is not a mere memorial, a ceremony full of symbolism. They believe Christ is "really" present in the gathering and in the bread and wine, and, through all the modern changes, Catholics show most respect to this rite and its meanings and effects.
- *Other sacraments.* What used to be called "extreme unction" is now referred to as *anointing* of the sick, usually a person who is believed to be near death. The anointing with oil is accompanied by words of prayer and consolation, readying the believer for a peaceful death and a blissful access to eternal life with God. *Marriage*, because it is a sacrament, is supposed to be indissoluble. That is why Catholicism is so opposed to divorce, though there are processes that allow divorced believers to continue communing at mass. *Ordination*, in which a person becomes a priest, deacon, or bishop, has to be done by a bishop, who is in succession in a line that goes back to Peter. *Penance*, a formal confessing of sins to a priest and receiving absolution, sometimes accompanied by assignment of duties to help compensate for sins, is a sacrament. So is *confirmation*, which is an affirmation of baptism and also a new commitment to the life of God in the church.

Belief in the Catholic Church. Catholics believe their denomination possesses the fullness of Christian truth and, according to the recent popes, regards the other Christian churches as "ecclesial communities," a term that does not make other Christians happy. This designation is connected with an affirmation that those who make up these communities are "separated brothers and sisters in Christ," with whom Catholics share common interests, dialogue, and works of justice and mercy.

Apostolic succession. What makes the Catholic Church unique is its understanding and claim that ordination in the church is effected because there is a clear line of succession from Peter to the present and that those ordained in that succession uniquely are equipped to administer sacraments effectively. The hierarchical or tiered order culminates in the *pope*, the bishop of Rome. Submission to his authority and what it implies is, in a way, what makes one a Catholic, since the belief in its

validity is one of the few Catholic beliefs not held by anyone but Catholics.

Saints. Catholics believe in the efficacy of praying to saints or through saints to the throne of God. By far the greatest devotion is to *Saint Mary*, the mother of Jesus and, in church council language, “the Mother of God.” It is impossible to overstate the degree to which Catholic devotion climaxes in devotion to Mary, who is admired by all Christians and regarded as the Virgin Mary in their creeds but who cannot represent humans before God as she does in Catholic piety and thought.

Immaculate Conception. Belief in the Immaculate Conception is connected with the belief that Mary did not pass sinfulness on to her son Jesus, so she had to have been born sinless, too. Belief in the *Bodily Assumption* of Mary is the belief that she did not die a regular death but was “assumed” into heaven. These two beliefs, Catholics acknowledge, do not have much biblical support but are deeply rooted in the faith and tradition of the church.

Papal infallibility. This teaching was made formal in 1870–71 at the First Vatican Council. It has been invoked only twice, when the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were proclaimed. Infallibility does not mean that the pope is always right and speaks only truth. Rather, it contends that when he speaks *ex cathedra*, from the papal throne and with claims of formal authority, he is kept from speaking or writing error.

Moral teaching. Certain moral teachings are nonnegotiable. Catholics have made many contributions to ethics, particularly with respect to medical decisions and care of the body. They have also shown considerable flexibility in applying the teachings in these fields to complicated situations. But they are well known for certain beliefs related to sexual ethics. Opposition to birth control, often called “artificial” birth control, was restated by Pope Paul VI in 1968. The church does endorse “natural” family planning, as through “the rhythm method.” Opposition to abortion is consistent and total, since in official Catholic teaching, the fetus is a human being from the moment of conception and is to be regarded as such, with rights and deserving respect. A third area of controversy in recent decades has been homosexuality. Catholics recognize that the “homosexual tendency” is present in millions of its adherents around the world but that homosexual acts are “objectively evil.”



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Justice. Catholics are to call for and work for justice in both personal and community life. Like members of many other churches, Catholics let their economic situation, political commitments, and even their locations play a big part in political choices. Encyclical (formal papal) letters from Rome often contradict favored American policies and are ignored. Among these have been opposition to the death penalty and opposition to the American invasion of Iraq. Most Catholics choose which church justice stances to follow.

Ecumenism. The Catholic Church encourages dialogue with the “separated brothers and sisters” and the opportunity to both teach and learn from others. Catholics have influenced and been influenced by non-Catholic devotion to the Bible, evangelical and Protestant accents on divine grace, and much more. Before the Second Vatican Council, American Catholics were forbidden to engage in theological discussions with non-Catholics, but since then they have become central players on that front. Some Catholics, following a schema called *Nostra Aetate* from the Vatican Council, have moved beyond the Christian ecumenical-interchurch sphere and are open to conversation with and the possibility of learning from other religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism. Such efforts are motivated not by interest in proselytizing or by being “soft” about doctrine, but by a belief that those who engage in open dialogues can represent orthodox and hospitable Catholicism in a time when violence among the religions threatens civil peace around the world.

The human situation. Catholics used to speak of the human situation as being colored by original sin, the contention that all humans do not always do good but are limited, their natures have been corrupted, and the propensity to do evil is in them. Yet they also believe that God uses the raw material of these imperfect humans

and that through faith in God, the freedom in Jesus Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, they can become instruments of God's working for good. They do not believe that humans are naturally good or that they can save themselves, but they see the image of God in humans and expect great things of all—beginning with themselves.

Role of the laity. While those who are not ordained or “professed” in religious orders or the clergy may not normally perform sacramental acts, the laity can serve God in countless ways, many of them representing very responsible expressions and vocations in the church. After Vatican II, laypeople began to hear that they represented the “*ministry of the baptized*,” and, as the council fathers said, the majority represented by them could move freely in the secular order. Great lay movements receive encouragement. Many Catholic action-movements, publications, forums, and certainly college campuses are led and guided by laypeople in ways undreamed of a half century ago.

Engagement in intellectual life. The university was born on Catholic soil under Catholic auspices in Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and elsewhere, and Catholic thought influenced many disciplines. In the modern world, most universities grew up independently of the church, and many church people turned defensive, warring against modernism and secularism. Today, while many issues of science are still seen as being posed *versus* religion, Catholic colleges and universities and Catholic groups in secular institutions foster open engagement with the sciences and humanities.

Earth stewardship. The physical environment is God's creation and humans are to be stewards of it, caring for the earth and its climate. If for a long time many Catholics paid little attention to pollution and the misuse of resources, today leaders make clear that Catholicism has many resources for dealing with these problems and wants to put them to work.

God of all. God has no favorite nation, race, or any other kind of human grouping. Faith in Jesus Christ, whether made visible in public action or remaining private, has been expressed in fresh ways during the past half

century. While Catholics have often engaged in forms of patriotism or civil religion that insist that their own nation is best, they share beliefs in the power of God, human creation, and the potential overcoming of self-centered group thought and action.

Action. Catholics should *witness*, making their faith commitments active so that others can see Catholicism's passion for justice and love of neighbor. Some offer a quotation attributed to Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel. Use words if necessary.” Catholics do believe in the mission of the church and in “missions.” If once that meant attempting to de-convert people from other faiths, today they still want to see the church grow, the faith spread, and the positive fruits of Catholic life be extended. The goal in Catholic witness and missions today is to engage in action that spreads justice, health, and hope and does not depend as it once did on spreading the fear of hell as the motor for conversions. They may have more positive views of some other faiths than before, but most of them believe that Catholicism is a unique community with a distinctive if not unique sense of receptivity to God's saving actions.

Conclusion

Once viewed as a threat and sometimes even an enemy to other forms of Christianity, Catholicism today remains the largest and most widely dispersed religious body in the world and serves as a partner in witness and service to God and humans. So it is ever more urgent for other Christians and nonreligious people to understand the dynamics and practices of this church that is, at the same time, ancient and modern.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-08-01-hell-damnation_N.htm.