



What Do Roman Catholics Believe?

SESSION 2

| *Catholic Beliefs and Practices*

Goal for the Session

This session is designed to introduce participants to the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Beliefs shared with other Christians and beliefs unique to Roman Catholicism will be discussed.

At the end of the session participants will be able to

- state at least one way to learn about Catholic beliefs,
- identify beliefs that Catholics share with most other Christians,
- discuss the beliefs and practices unique to Roman Catholicism.

Preparing for the Session

- Distribute the Participant Handout for this session to all participants and ask them to read the handout, underline the beliefs with which they are familiar and that they share, and circle beliefs and practices with which they are unfamiliar.
- Remind the participants to bring their handouts to the meeting. Have a few extra copies available.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers
- Slips of paper with the following beliefs listed. Place these slips of paper in a basket or bowl.
 - Belief in the Catholic Church

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Group introduction
- Discovering Catholic beliefs

EXPLORING

- Beliefs mostly shared
- Sacraments: Similar and different

RESPONDING

- Large-group discussion
- Different beliefs
- Large-group sharing
- What we learned

CLOSING

- Prayer

- Apostolic succession
- Saints
- Immaculate Conception
- Papal infallibility
- Moral teaching
- Justice

- Ecumenism
 - The human situation
 - Role of the laity
 - Engagement in intellectual life
 - Earth stewardship
 - God of all
 - Action
- Newsprint with the following items listed on it. Write the list on the left side of the newsprint and create two additional columns, one titled “Similar” and the other “Different.”

Beliefs shared with other Christians

- Holy Trinity
- The Bible
- Eternal life
- Hell

Sacraments

- Baptism
 - Eucharist/Mass/Communion
 - Anointing
 - Marriage
 - Ordination
 - Penance/confession
 - Confirmation
- Masking tape

Teaching Tips

- Thoroughly familiarize yourself with the Participant Handout.
- Create your list of beliefs you share with Roman Catholics and beliefs and practices you do not share.
- There is a great deal of material about Catholic beliefs in the Participant Handout, so it will be nec-

essary to keep a close watch on the time and encourage responders to be brief, or you can divide this into two sessions.

Opening (10 Minutes)

1. Prayer

Loving God, as we gather we praise you for people who throughout the ages have strived to be faithful to you and to the development of the Christian church. We are grateful that you have continued to reveal yourself through new understandings of the role of various parts of the Christian church. Open our minds and hearts as we study to discover ways the body of Christ, the church, can be a faithful witness in today’s world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

2. Group Introduction

Invite participants to introduce themselves briefly with their name and other denominations that have been significant for them.

If there are more than twelve people in the group, this could be done in groups of four, with the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church being briefly shared with the total group.

3. Discovering Catholic Beliefs

Call attention to the first paragraph of the Participant Handout and tell the three ways listed that a person can learn about Roman Catholic beliefs:

- Consult Catholic catechisms, histories, books of doctrine, or the teachings of popes, bishops, and theologians.
- Ask Roman Catholics what they believe.
- Observe how beliefs of Roman Catholic faith are put into practice in daily life.

Ask if anyone in the group has experienced one of the situations mentioned: acquired a Catholic in-law, been invited to convert, worked in shared social programs, or become curious about Catholic beliefs. Ask if this was a growth experience or one that was filled with anxious moments.

Tell the participants that this time is intended to create understanding about beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

Exploring (20 Minutes)

4. Beliefs Mostly Shared

The group will look first at four beliefs that are basically shared by all Christians.

Divide the participants into four groups and ask them to read their section and list what is similar and what is different in their assigned belief. Tell them they will have five minutes for this work, and then they will need to quickly share what they learned.

Divide participants into the following groups:

- Holy Trinity
 - Similar belief
- The Bible
 - Similar with the difference of the Apocrypha
- Eternal life
 - Similar with the difference of purgatory
- Hell
 - Similar including accent on doing good out of love for God, not fear of hell

Have each group quickly share with the total group the similarities and the differences in the belief they read.

5. Sacraments: Similar and Different

Have the group focus on the section titled “Seven Sacraments” and remind them that the Roman Catholic sacraments were set by the Council of Trent (1545–63).

Point out the sentence that defines sacraments as sacred acts in which “divine action is connected with visible means, palpable objects, specifiable events, and rites.”

Remind the group that for Roman Catholics there are seven sacraments and for most Protestant denominations there are two sacraments.

In pairs, participants should quickly read their assigned sacrament and be able to tell the group the key significance and differences with other Christians in celebrating this sacrament. They have five minutes to do their work and no more than two minutes to share what they learned. If there are fewer than fourteen people in the

group, you will need to have some pairs read two of the sacraments.

- Baptism
 - Similar: Sacrament for both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Includes pouring water over a child or an adult and rejecting “evil.”
 - Difference: Done by priests, but in an emergency situation, other believers can baptize.
- Eucharist/Mass/Communion
 - Similar: Sacrament for both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Uses bread and wine blessed by clergy to remember Christ’s death and resurrection.
 - Difference: Roman Catholics believe Communion elements of bread and wine are “transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ.”
- Anointing
 - Similar: Oil is used as a special sign along with prayer for the sick.
 - Difference: For Roman Catholics this is a sacrament, once called “extreme unction,” and is most often for persons who are dying.
- Marriage
 - Similar: Ceremony to celebrate and acknowledge the commitment of two people to each other.
 - Difference: For Roman Catholics this is a sacrament and therefore a marriage is supposed to be indissoluble. The church is opposed to divorce for this reason.
- Ordination
 - Similar: Recognition and setting aside of a person for a special function.
 - Differences: For Roman Catholics this is a sacrament, and ordination can be done only by a bishop, who is in succession in a line back to Peter. Ordination is reserved for men.
- Penance/confession
 - Similar: Sin is confessed, and pardon or absolution is given.

- Difference: For Roman Catholics this is a sacrament, and the sins are confessed individually to God through a priest. Protestants may confess sin in private prayer directly to God or as part of a community of faith in a prayer of confession.
- Confirmation
 - Similar: Part of a commitment to new life within the Christian community.
 - Difference: For Roman Catholics this is a sacrament.

Responding (20 Minutes)

6. Large-Group Discussion

Quickly have each group share what they learned. What was discovered will be similar to the list above but not identical word for word.

Ask someone to record key points of the groups' reports on the newsprint sheet. Periodically encourage the person writing on the newsprint to record just a few key words and not write word for word.

7. Different Beliefs

Pass the basket containing the slips of paper around the room. Have each person or pair select a slip of paper. There are fourteen beliefs that have a unique Roman Catholic interpretation.

Ask them to quickly read and be ready to report what the Roman Catholic Church believes about the topic they chose.

- *Belief in the Catholic Church.* The Roman Catholic Church possesses the "fullness of Christian truth" and other Christian churches are "ecclesial communities" of people who are "separated brothers and sisters in Christ."
- *Apostolic succession.* Ordination is effected because there is a clear line of succession from Peter to the present. The tiered order culminates in the pope, the bishop of Rome. Belief in the pope's authority is one belief held only by Roman Catholics.
- *Saints.* Roman Catholics believe in the efficacy of praying to or through saints to the throne of God. Catholic devotion climaxes in devotion to Mary, the

Mother of God, who they believe represents humans before God.

- *Immaculate Conception.* Belief that Mary did not pass sinfulness on to her son Jesus and thus must have been born sinless herself. Roman Catholics also believe in the Bodily Assumption of Mary. Neither belief has much biblical support, but they are rooted in the tradition and faith of the church.
- *Papal infallibility.* When the pope speaks from his throne with claims of formal authority, he is kept from speaking or writing in error.
- *Moral teaching.* Certain moral teachings are nonnegotiable. The church opposes birth control, abortion, and homosexual activity.
- *Justice.* Catholics are to call for and work for justice in both personal and community life.
- *Ecumenism.* The church encourages dialogue with "separated brothers and sisters." Catholics have influenced and been influenced by non-Catholic beliefs and practices, such as devotion to the Bible and accents on grace.
- *The human situation.* Catholics believe in original sin but believe that "God uses the raw material of these imperfect humans and . . . they can become instruments of God's working for good."
- *Role of the laity.* After Vatican II "ministry of the baptized" became popular.
- *Engagement in intellectual life.* The church encourages open engagement with sciences and humanities.
- *Earth stewardship.* The physical environment is God's creation, and humans are to take care of the earth.
- *God of all.* God has no favorite nation, race, or group.
- *Action.* Catholics should witness and make their faith commitment alive in ways that spread justice, health, and hope.

8. Large-Group Sharing

Have each group share one sentence of what they learned.

Continue to have this recorded on newsprint.

9. What We Learned

Invite participants to take a moment to reflect on the newsprint lists and then share one word or phrase with the group that reflects something they have learned or found significant about the Roman Catholic Church.

Closing (2 Minutes)

10. Prayer

Loving God, we thank you for the faithful people who have gone before us. We are grateful for all we have learned about the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church and how these beliefs have influenced our own faith. May we celebrate the many steps along the journey of the people of God. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- The material can be expanded to two sessions by allowing more in-depth conversation about the beliefs and practices. The material in the handout and in this Leader's Guide may be divided after the section on sacraments.
- An exploration of praying the rosary would enrich the learning of the group. The rosary is one of the best-known Catholic practices to help people focus and deepen their faith. Search the Internet for "praying the rosary" to find studies about its significance for Roman Catholics. One helpful site is <http://www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/english/p04200.htm>.

www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/english/p04200.htm. Protestant interpretations can be found at more than one site; a comparison can be found at <http://www.pathguy.com/rosary.htm>. The purpose of the rosary or prayer beads is to focus the worshiper on various mysteries about the life of Jesus Christ, using a selection of prayers as a guide.

- Using a pattern found on the Internet, participants can create simple prayer beads as they discuss the significance of the various parts of the life of Christ.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 16:13–20

Acts 2:1–28

Acts 2:38–47

For More Information

A more in-depth look at Catholic beliefs and practices can be found at <http://www.ancient-future.net/basics.html>.

About the Writer

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