



What Do Roman Catholics Believe?

SESSION 1

| *The Catholic Story*

Introduction

More than a billion people in the world, a sixth of the human race, consider themselves Roman Catholic Christians. They follow the leadership of one man, a pope, who lives in Rome. It is helpful for Catholics and non-Catholics to understand the history, beliefs, and practices of this large group of Christians. The practices of the church may seem puzzling to members and certainly to nonmembers, but the puzzlement is lessened when people learn the story of how and why they became prominent.

The word “catholic,” as in “the Roman Catholic Church,” appears in the creeds adopted by a variety of other church bodies. Both the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed affirm the holy catholic church. When these two creeds were written, there was only one church, and “catholic” was used to emphasize that the faith is global or universal. The word can also refer to the way the faith penetrates all dimensions of existence, the “whole” of life.

In this study we will drop the adjective, using “Catholic” to refer only to the Roman version. We may know “Greek Catholics,” “Anglo Catholics,” and Protestants whose creeds identify them with belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” and who happily call themselves catholic. We are here concentrating on the one communion—by far the largest and most widespread geographically—whose focus is Roman.

Beginnings

Stories usually start with the beginnings of their subject. It makes no sense to talk about Catholic *Christianity*



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before there was a *Christ* in history. He is Jesus the Jew who was “anointed”—which is what “Christ” means—to carry on a divine mission in the world. The story of Christ begins twenty centuries ago. Along with all other Christians, however, Catholics believe that the prehistory of the church is vital since their Jesus continues and climaxes the story of God’s dealing with the world through a people called Israel, whose hope and promise Jesus was.

The stories of Jesus in the Gospels and in letters written soon after his death and resurrection carry the Catholic story forward in a distinctive way. While Jesus preached that God’s kingdom was present, Catholics believe that when, in one Gospel story, Jesus spoke to his disciple Peter, he made a pun on his name, *Petros*, which means “rock”: “You are Peter, the Rock, and on this Rock, I will build my church.” Other Christians have other interpretations of that saying, but Catholics stake everything on their grasp of it.

From this word they derive the base of their faith that successors of Peter represent that “Rock,” around or under whom formed a community of twelve and then

a few hundred and now a billion people. And they see among Peter's successors the leaders, soon named "bishops" or "overseers," who inherit and exercise authority in God's name. At the summit of the ranks of bishops is the supreme authority, the pope, who has almost always resided in Rome.

The Geographical Spread

From a tiny base in Jerusalem, Catholic Christianity, not yet called Roman and sometimes spoken of as "the Way," spread throughout the world known as Roman, as far west as Spain, across Northern Africa (which is now largely Muslim), north into western Europe, and east through much of Asia. Most Catholics in India, for instance, believe that a colleague of Peter's, the disciple named Thomas, took the message of Jesus and the community of the church to India. Catholicism survived, against all odds, as Roman imperial rulers did all they could to stamp out this rival faith in Jesus Christ. The rulers saw Christianity as a challenge to the ruling Caesars who required absolute obedience, not to be shared with anyone else, even another god.

In the resulting conflicts between Christ and Caesar, persecution by the rulers killed many heroic believers in Christ. From their ranks Catholics named many of the saints whom they revere and on whom they call for prayer before the throne of God. Early Christians saw these martyrs as "the seed of the church," but the majority of believers, who stayed alive, won converts by their generous way of life and their message that a God who judges evil and loves sinners will save them in and through the community called the church.

The Turn toward Empire

In the fourth century, as Catholic Christian communities grew in number and influence, the emperor Constantine converted to the Christian faith. In the most dramatic about-face in Catholic history, he and his successors made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in a few decades Christian emperors began persecuting non-Christians, whom they called "pagan." For the next thirteen centuries, wherever Catholics were a thriving presence their church was established by law and had a monopoly in the spiritual realm.

Inevitably, the church also claimed and acquired earthly power. For centuries the stories of governance had to do

with the interactions between the pope and the civil rulers, the bishops and the princes: would they be seen as parallel or must one have authority over the other?

East and West

During the centuries of Christian monopoly, rivalries also developed within the Christian world. From the first centuries, the city of Rome became a focal center of imperial and churchly power. However, as imperial fortunes changed, authorities in a "new Rome," Constantinople (in today's Turkey), won a commanding place over other Christian authorities from Turkey east into today's Russian spheres and the Middle East. As imperial power grew in the East, so did contentions with Rome.

Numerous interpretations of the faith developed, but important among them was the fact that the East did not accept the final authority of the Western Roman pope. Further, while representatives from East and West together had developed and defined Christian doctrines, especially those about the way the divine and the human related in Christ, other definitions and practices differed so much that in 1054 a never-healed split occurred. Thereafter Western Catholicism became more definitively Roman and had to coexist with the Eastern church.

Defense and Aggression

After the seventh century another rival to Rome appeared in the form of another faith, the rapidly spreading Islam, whose followers are called Muslims. The fact that the sites of Jesus' birth, mission, death, and resurrection had fallen into the hands of Muslims fueled bitter reactions in both the church and state of the West. How could Catholics win back territories Muslim armies had seized? The efforts climaxed in a centuries-long conflict called the Crusades.

Many associate the beginning of the Crusades with a speech by Pope Urban II in 1095. He was joined by other leaders who found support among princes, kings, knights, monks, and peasants to mount military action on the path to Jerusalem and other goals near it. It is not necessary to detail here the mix of motives, means, and results: the story of the plunder, pillage, corruption, and greed that marred efforts which many considered to be noble and which offered heavenly rewards is familiar. As Eastern Christians often became victims of the Crusaders as well as Muslims, they distanced themselves from

Western or Roman Catholicism, and the two large Christian communions increasingly went their separate ways.

Mysticism, Piety, and Devotion in the Middle Ages

While the Crusades left a shadow over Roman Catholicism, there were bright spots in these centuries now called the Middle Ages. While the papacy developed and defined itself with ever-more power, some gentler forms of Christian expression flowered. This was the age of cathedral-building, when people of faith across western Europe erected magnificent houses of worship that still endure. Much of the visual arts represented the Christian story: biblical scenes and portraits of saints informed and inspired priests and laity alike. Men and women who wanted to find extraordinary ways to contemplate and please God and to serve others built and inhabited monasteries. From them many went out on missions of healing, mercy, preaching, and attempts to convert others. Local churches dotted the landscapes from the British Isles through all of western Europe, wherever Roman Catholicism was the dominant form of Christianity.

Scholars such as Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), building on intellectual traditions dating back to the time of classic figures like Augustine (d. 430), produced philosophically sophisticated approaches to faith. Universities were created to promote faith and learning. Some gifted souls, whether in monasteries or elsewhere, were mystics, who tried to attain union with God in extraordinary ways.

The Unlovely Side

Today Catholics readily admit that amid all the splendors in the period, self-defensive Catholic authorities overreacted when they felt threatened, whether by Muslims, improbably by Jews—a small but significant minority in what came to be called “Christendom,” or by people they called “heretics,” deviants from Catholic orthodoxy.

The best-known instrument for purging the Catholic world of the spiritual unacceptables was the Inquisition. Church officials, especially in Spain, beginning in the thirteenth century, became expert at flushing out suspected heretics, who were then turned over to secular authorities for torture and death. Thousands of people who were deemed to be witches suffered death. And, Catholic historians agree, corruption reached the high-



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est levels of church authority, compromising the positive record of Christians who were devoted to serving, feeding, healing, and teaching others.

Catholic and Other Reformations

In times past, history books often contained chapters on “the Protestant Reformation.” These referred to events in which some Catholics who rebelled against inherited practices and teachings were excommunicated, were forced out, or chose to be Christian in ways other than those demanded by the official church. In recent decades historians have tended to see that the larger picture of reform, which began in the fifteenth century and which included Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, and other challenges to Roman authority, also included the efforts of those who remained in and set out to purge and chasten the Catholic Church.

Many issues of faith, morals, and power had been festering, and in the fifteenth century gifted monks and preachers joined scholars at the new universities to reform their church. Some of these scholars who specialized in the Greek and Hebrew languages of the Bible produced translations which made available biblical resources and approaches to Christianity that were not endorsed by the official church. Others built on the piety of men and women in the monasteries, who were often authors of probing theological books. Not a few among them questioned Catholic teaching from within the church and came up with new understandings.

Like those who separated from Rome in the Protestant Reformation, many Catholic reformers also questioned teachings they considered wrong. They also attacked ways of life that appeared to them to be compromising to the Christian way and exploitative of Christian people. Reform began in the monasteries, where new regulations and practices made the church more attractive and, said the reformers, more congruent with the

original loving and saving intentions of Jesus and the early Christians.

Early Modern Catholicism

The Protestant reforms led to breaks in the church, which included a rejection of the institution of the papacy and thus struck at the heart of Catholic teaching and practice. Catholics after the Protestant Reformation also reacted to the challenges to church teaching, for example by calling church councils. The most important of these was the Council of Trent (1545–63), which over an eighteen-year period gave definitive shape to Catholic doctrine and durable form to Catholic practice.

New religious orders, communities of monks and nuns, developed as agents for recovering Catholic domain and extending it to new areas of the globe. While historic orders such as the Franciscans and Benedictines reformed and prepared themselves to extend the faith, the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, added another mobile arm. Such orders served Catholicism well when explorers and conquerors, notably from Spain and Portugal, led in establishing the church in the Americas. They did so combining teaching, the use of the sacraments, the development of communities, and the sword. At the side of the conquistadores, the conquerors, were Catholic teachers and priests who tried to deal with the spiritual lives of the victims while winning new converts.

In Central and South America in the next five centuries, Catholicism became the faith of the majority. Brazil today houses more Catholics than does any other nation. The missionaries also penetrated much of Asia, establishing beachheads in China, enlarging the scope of Catholicism in India, but generally failing in Japan. In North America, due to explorations and colonizing by northern European nations, Protestantism won out. The Catholic presence there did not grow until the nineteenth century, but in the twenty-first, Catholicism is by far the largest faith community.

The Challenges of Modernity

Catholicism, which dominated the West for fourteen centuries, has spent three centuries facing modernity, which is a code name, to Catholic leaders, for political democracy, scientific challenges, and the rise of individualism, which call into question inherited structures such as those of Catholicism. Not all of modernity is a

threat. Many Catholics have taken advantage of newly found freedoms, and the instruments of technology—in travel and communications—have helped spread the Catholic way.

Among the formal responses to modernity have been papal letters advocating cooperation with those who employ benign approaches to justice, peace, and the works of mercy. Laypeople, newly empowered, sometimes challenge the church but just as often bring their own insights to bear to serve in the world. Yet long gone almost everywhere are the opportunities for the church to assert dominance in statecraft, intellectual circles and culture at large.

The Second Vatican Council

Older Catholics tend to speak of the church pre- and post-Vatican II, referring to the council held in Rome from 1962 to 1965. The convoker, Pope John XXIII, told the bishops from around the world who participated that he wanted to effect *aggiornamento*, a shaking up. Perfectly orthodox, he wanted to present a positive face to non-Catholics and give courage and a sense of adventure to priests, nuns, and the laity.

The council brought considerable loosening of severely judgment-based churchly ways. Study of the Bible by the laity was now encouraged. Catholics could and did participate in ecumenism, an effort to bring the churches into dialogue and eventual communion. Now there were officially expressed positive views of religions beyond Christianity. The laity were given new voices.

Postconciliar Catholicism

Since Vatican II it has become clear that the weight of Catholic presence has moved from Europe and North America to the global south. Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia have become the centers of new vitality. There has been a drastic decline in the numbers of priests and members of religious orders, especially in the Northern Hemisphere. Revisions of the Eucharist, the Mass, have rendered it more informal and made it more accessible, but are disfavored in the eyes of many conservatives. Calls for the ordination of women, which displease the Vatican, are not heard so frequently in the southern and less-developed nations as in Europe and North America. Early in the twenty-first century a clerical sex abuse crisis rocked the church, but most of

the faithful faulted the higher clergy, who dealt inadequately with the abusers, more than the priests and members of orders who had caused the scandal.

Today Catholics continue to experience change in their church and world, but attempts to follow Jesus Christ in and through the church are as varied and often impassioned as ever. Catholics like to quote a saying of Jesus in the Gospels that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church, and they use that promise to inspire

their efforts to serve God and their neighbors through the Catholic Church.

About the Writer

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