



What Do Roman Catholics Believe?

SESSION 1

| *The Catholic Story*

Goals for the Session

This session is designed to introduce participants to the history of the Roman Catholic Church. The time line of the development of this branch of the Christian church will be discussed. At the end of the session participants will be able to

- define the word “catholic” and the understanding of “holy catholic church,”
- identify the major time blocks in that development,
- tell at least three facts in one time block of the history of the Roman Catholic Church.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray for the members of your group. In silence name each person you hope will attend and consider what is happening in their lives. Identify as many denominations that are part of the history of these participants as you can. Are there some members with a background in the Roman Catholic Church?
- Distribute the Participant Handout for this session to all participants and ask them to read the handout, underline the major time blocks in the history, and circle significant ideas or results of the various time spans. Remind the participants to bring their copy of the handout with them to the meeting. Have a few extra copies available.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Group introduction
- The definition of “catholic”

EXPLORING

- Small-group discussion

RESPONDING

- Large-group sharing
- What we learned

CLOSING

- Prayer
- Preparing for the next session

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers, chalkboard and chalk, or dry-erase board with markers
- Masking tape

Teaching Tips

- Thoroughly familiarize yourself with the Participant Handout.

- Read all the Scripture passages mentioned in the handout.
- Draw your own simple time line of the history of the Roman Catholic Church and identify some ways that each period of history moved the church along the journey with joyful or tearful steps.

Opening (15 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 for those historical voices who did what they believed to be the right things. 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, other denominations that have been significant for them, and one fact they know for sure about the Roman Catholic Church.

If there are more than twelve people in the group, this could be done in groups of four, with the facts about the church briefly shared with the total group.

3. The Definition of "Catholic"

Call attention to the second paragraph of the Participant Handout and the fact that both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed affirm the holy catholic church.

Remind the group that when these creeds were written there was only one organized and established church and the word "catholic" was used to emphasize that "faith is global or universal." That is what we say we believe when we say "holy catholic church."

Ask the group how reciting that phrase in those creeds has been helpful or difficult in their personal faith journey.

Exploring (15 Minutes)

4. Small-Group Discussion

Divide participants into small groups and assign one of the time periods below to each group. If you do not

have enough people to form eleven groups, have each group cover more than one time period or consider choosing a few of these to work on in small groups and summarizing the others in a short presentation. With enough notice, perhaps this presentation can be assigned to someone in the class. Distribute newsprint and a marker to each group.

Ask them to read their section and record important events, thoughts, and happenings during that time. Explain that this session looks at the history of the Roman Catholic Church. In the next session we will discuss beliefs and practices.

- First Century: Birth of Christ ("Beginnings")
 - Jesus the Jew was anointed (which is what "Christ" means) to carry on a divine mission.
 - Jesus continues and climaxes the story of God's dealing with the world.
 - The stories of Jesus written soon after his death and resurrection carried the Catholic story forward.
 - Jesus identifies Peter as the "Rock" on which the church would be built.
 - Successors of Peter through the ages represent that "Rock."
- First-Second Centuries: The Way ("The Geographical Spread")
 - Catholic (worldwide) Christianity, known as the Way, spread as far west as Spain.
 - People in India believe Thomas brought the message of Jesus to them.
 - Roman imperial rulers tried to stamp out this rival faith.
 - Conflicts between Christianity and Caesar resulted in persecution.
 - Early Christians saw these martyrs as the "seed of the church."
 - Converts were won because of the Christians' 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.

- Fourth Century: Empire Christianity ("The Turn toward Empire")
 - Constantine converted to Christianity.
 - Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire.
 - Where Catholics were a thriving presence, the church was established by law and had a monopoly in the spiritual realm.
 - The church claimed and acquired earthly power.
 - Governance depended on how the pope and bishops related to civil rules and princes: were these two powers parallel or did one have authority over the other?
- Sixth–Tenth Centuries: East/West Divide ("East and West")
 - Rivalries developed within the Christian world.
 - At first and later in the West, Rome was a focal center of church power.
 - Eventually, Constantinople (today's Istanbul, Turkey) won a commanding place over other Christian authorities from Turkey east to today's Russia and the Middle East.
 - As imperial powers grew in the East, so did conflict with Rome.
 - The East did not accept the final authority of the Roman pope.
 - There was conflict over the way the divine and human related in Christ.
 - In 1054, a never-healed split between East and West developed.
- Fifth–Fifteenth Centuries: Middle Ages ("Mysticism, Piety, and Devotion in the Middle Ages")
 - The papacy became more powerful.
 - This was the age of cathedral-building in western Europe.
 - Visual arts were given over to representations of the Christian story.
- Men and women who wanted to contemplate and please God and serve others built monasteries and convents.
- Local churches dotted the landscape.
- Scholars produced philosophically sophisticated approaches to faith.
- Universities were created to promote faith and learning.
- Mystics tried to attain union with God in extraordinary ways.
- Twelfth Century: The Crusades ("Defense and Aggression")
 - A rapidly spreading rival faith, Islam, appeared.
 - Important sites of Jesus' birth, mission, death, and resurrection fell into the hands of the Muslims.
 - The efforts to recapture that land climaxed in a centuries-long conflict called the Crusades.
 - Most believe the Crusades began with a speech by Pope Urban II in 1095.
 - Support for military action also came from kings, princes, knights, monks, and peasants.
 - As Eastern Christians became victims of the Crusades as well as Muslims, they distanced themselves from Western or Roman Catholicism.
- Thirteenth Century: The Inquisition ("The Unlovely Side")
 - Church officials, especially in Spain, became experts in flushing out suspected heretics, who were tortured and killed.
 - Suspected witches by the thousands suffered death.
 - Corruption reached the highest levels of church authority.
- Fifteenth Century: The Reformation ("Catholic and Other Reformations")
 - Some Catholics who rebelled against inherited practices and teaching were excommunicated.

- As they were forced or chose to be Christian in other ways than those demanded by the official church, new denominations were born.
- Some Roman Catholics remained in and set out to purge and chasten the Catholic Church.
- Monks and preachers joined scholars to reform the church.
- New regulations and practices made the church more attractive and more congruent with the original loving and saving intentions of Jesus and the early Christians.
- Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries (“Early Modern Catholicism”)
 - Protestant reforms led to breaks in the church.
 - The Catholic Church reacted to challenges to its teachings by calling church councils.
 - New religious orders, communities of monks and nuns, developed.
 - Catholic explorers and conquerors led in establishing the church in the Americas, often with the power of the sword. By the side of the conquistadores were Catholic teachers and priests.
 - Over the next five centuries the Catholic Church became the faith of the majority in Central and South America.
 - Protestantism became the faith of the majority of people in North America, which was explored and colonized primarily by northern Europeans.
- Nineteenth Century (“The Challenges of Modernity”)
 - In the last three centuries, modernity has called into question the authority of inherited structures such as the Catholic Church.
 - On the positive side, many Catholics have taken advantage of newfound freedoms and technologies.
 - Laypeople sometimes challenge the church but just as often bring new insights.
 - Long gone are the opportunities for the church to assert dominance in state business, intellectual circles, and culture at large.
- Twentieth–Twenty-first Centuries (“The Second Vatican Council” and “Postconciliar Catholicism”)
 - Vatican II was called by Pope John XXIII to shake up the church.
 - His desire was to present a positive face to non-Catholics and give courage to priests, nuns, and the laity.
 - Study of the Bible by the laity was now encouraged.
 - Catholics could and did participate in ecumenism.
 - The bulk of Catholic presence moved from Europe and North America to the global South. Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are new centers of vitality.
 - The numbers of priests and members of religious orders have declined.
 - Mass has been revised to be more informal and accessible.
 - Pleas for the ordination of women are not heard in the southern and less-developed nations.
 - The failure of church leaders to hold the abusers responsible has deepened the church’s sex-abuse scandal.
 - Attempts to follow Jesus in and through the church are as varied and impassioned as ever.

Responding (25 Minutes)

5. Large-Group Sharing

As a total group, have a representative of each smaller group share the significant ideas and facts learned in their section of the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Their answers will be similar to the list above but will not be identical word for word.

If space permits, hang the small groups’ newsprint on the walls to show a time progression.

6. What We Learned

Invite participants to share one word or phrase that reflects something they have learned or found significant about the Roman Catholic Church.

Closing (5 Minutes)

7. 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 history of the Roman Catholic Church and how that has influenced our own history and faith. May we celebrate the many steps along the journey of the people of God. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

8. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the next session's handout to the participants and commit as a group to read it before gathering again.

Teaching Alternatives

A time line of the history of the Roman Catholic Church can be created visually and actively by using a clothesline, clothespins, and index cards. Using index cards or card stock that is cut to five by eight inches, make headings for the major time blocks: First Century: Birth of Christ ("Beginnings"), First–Second Centuries: The Way ("The Geographical Spread"), Fourth Century: Empire Christianity ("The Turn toward Empire"), Sixth–Tenth Centuries: East/West Divide ("East and West"), Fifth–Fifteenth Centuries: Middle Ages ("Mysticism, Piety, and Devotion in the Middle Ages"), Twelfth Century: The Crusades ("Defense and Aggression"), Thirteenth

Century: The Inquisition ("The Unlovely Side"), Fifteenth Century: The Reformation ("Catholic and Other Reformations"), Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries ("Early Modern Catholicism"), Nineteenth Century (The "Challenges of Modernity"), Twentieth–Twenty-first Centuries ("The Second Vatican Council" and "Postconciliar Catholicism"). Ideas for each time block are found in the outline for the times above.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 16:13–20

Acts 2:1–28

Acts 2:38–47

For More Information

A comprehensive history of the Roman Catholic Church can be found at <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/catholichistory.htm>. Information on its connection to other denominations can be found at http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/denominations_3.htm.

About the Writer

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