

CATHOLICISM

at a glance

Catholics are Christians. And Christians are followers of Jesus Christ.

For the first thousand years of its existence, the Christian religion was essentially united despite spreading into diverse places, languages and cultures across the globe. In the year 1054, the Greek and Slavic speaking Christians of the east split off into their own churches (the Eastern Orthodox Churches). The Western, Latin speaking Christians became known as the Catholic Church.

A second major division of the Christian church began in 1517 with Martin Luther. The 'protesters' wanted to reform the Church and did so by setting up their own Protestant churches. Efforts have been made over the years to reconcile the Christian churches and to focus on what unites rather than divides.

All Christians share the belief that Jesus was a man, living in a specific time and place, who was also divine – the Son of God and therefore himself God. God chose to become human so that he might transform the nature and destiny of all human beings (a belief known as *redemption* or *salvation*). This belief about Jesus (that he was the Christ – the anointed one, the Messiah, the Son of God) is central and foundational to Christianity.

Christians believe that God has transformed all human beings by Jesus' life, death and resurrection; but also that we are not just passive receivers of God's action but called to be active participants by changing our attitudes and values and living by the gospel.

The Christian life consists of a way of living (summed up in Jesus's command to love one another, to forgive and be compassionate, to be generous and attentive to the needs of others) which includes prayer, reflection, and worship.

The celebration of the Eucharist (usually called the *Mass* by Catholics) is at the heart of the life of Catholics. The Eucharist consists of two parts: readings from scripture (always including the gospel) followed by a replication of the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died. On this occasion he took bread and wine and told his disciples these were his body and blood and that they were to take, share and eat, and do this in memory of him. Catholics hold that the bread and wine do, in reality but without changing their appearance, become the body and blood of Jesus. Sharing the eucharist unites us with Jesus, his Father, and with one another. It is why the consecrated bread and wine are treated with such respect and why, over the centuries, the celebration of this simple shared meal has been adorned with elaborate ritual.

Jesus Christ

Jesus was a Palestinian Jew born 2,000 years ago. And, for Christians, he is the Son of God.

Jesus's example and teaching, and above all his death and resurrection, drew followers who, despite persecution and martyrdom, persisted in their following of 'the Way' as they called it.

The first Christians passed on stories about Jesus by word of mouth until Matthew, Mark, Luke and John committed some of those stories to writing which became known as the gospels.

The four gospels record the last three years of Jesus's life – his public ministry when he travelled the region preaching and teaching about God. Jesus shows us what God the Father is like and how to relate to him; he speaks about the way should treat each other; and above all, he speaks about the way in which God's Kingdom will come about if human beings try to live according to God's purpose for us: "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done".

Jesus taught his followers to pray; to be generous with what they had; to treat the poorest, most despised, and marginalised members of society with dignity and love; to avoid hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy; and to build up spiritual richness rather than amassing material wealth.

St Paul of Tarsus, a radical Jew and persecutor of Christians, became one of the first converts to Christianity. He wrote letters to the Christian communities in Corinth, Philippi, Rome, Thessalonika, and elsewhere exploring the implications of Jesus's teachings. He was one of the first theologians of the Christian church. It was Paul who succinctly sums up Jesus' message as a call to faith, hope and love.

Beliefs

Catholics, like all Christians, believe that there is one God (they are *monotheists* like their Jewish predecessors and Muslim cousins).

But, unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians believe that God is best described also as being 'three'. This is the doctrine of the *Trinity* which holds that the one God is understood as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, indivisible and inseparable, but distinctly recognizable in the way God deals with human beings.

Christians also believe that God the Son became a human being at a distinct point in history and a specific place: the birth of Jesus at Nazareth two thousand years ago (this is the doctrine of the *Incarnation* celebrated by the Christian festival of *Christmas*). Jesus is the visible face of God, the one who knows what it is to be human and who teaches us about God the Father and calls us to live our lives in relationship with him.

Jesus's death on a cross (by which Christians believe he saves the world) and his *resurrection* (by which Christians believe God vindicates everything Jesus says and stands for and shows us the certainty of life after death) is central to the Christian faith.

Catholics recognize that humans are not perfect or always good – sometimes, often perhaps, we do bad things and act out of perverse and selfish motives. Christians call this *sin*. They also believe that God forgives sin and gives us the inner strength to make amends and do better (a gift known as *grace*).

Catholics believe that the *Church* is something inspired and protected by God. They believe that the Church teaches with authority (known as the *magisterium*).

The beliefs and teachings of Catholic Christians are summed up in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Catholic Life

For Christians, belief in God and in Jesus Christ creates a perspective on the world, on ourselves and on our relationships with others. Following Jesus implies not only a set of beliefs but also a set of values and attitudes which underpin everything. Being a Christian is a way of seeing the world.

What Christians see is a world filled with the presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit guides and protects, inspires and renews, challenges and forgives. Catholics remind themselves of this by listening to scripture, celebrating the Mass, praying, discussing and learning about their faith, and, most importantly, trying to live good lives of faith, hope and love.

Important milestones in human life are marked by the *Sacraments* which are important celebrations for Catholics: *Baptism* for new life, *Confirmation* for commitment to the Christian faith and way of life, *Matrimony* for the commitment of marriage, *Ordination* for those chosen to be priests, *Penance* for reconciling oneself to God and the community after wrongdoing, the *Eucharist* for regular sustenance from scripture and the body and blood of Christ across the years of our lives, and *Anointing* when we are sick and close to death.

Christians are called to proclaim Jesus Christ and the values of the gospel to others through their actions and words. This is known as *evangelization*. Some will do this explicitly while others will do it in a quieter way through the witness of their lives.

Prayer is important for Christians – it is a way of keeping in touch with God and making sure our inner lives (often referred to as our *souls*) grow and are healthy. Prayer can be informal, like a conversation with God, or it can follow the traditional form of well-known prayers such as the *Sign of the Cross*, the *Lord's Prayer*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Glory be to the Father*, the *Angelus*, the *Rosary*.

The Catholic Church

As the early Christian communities of the 1st century grew, the Church inevitably began to create structures, roles, and rules with the aim of making sure that the Christian message and way of life remained true and authentic.

The leaders of a Christian community in a town became known as *Bishops*. Priests were men ordained to preside at the Eucharist, celebrate the other sacraments, and provide pastoral care of their local community.

Among all the Catholic bishops of the world, the *Bishop of Rome* (the *Pope*, the successor of St Peter, whom Jesus chose as the first apostle) holds primacy. He has a particular role in uniting the Church through personal example, teaching, prayer and presiding at the Eucharist.

The Pope is assisted in his leadership and governance of the Church by around 100 *Cardinals* – senior bishops and occasionally priests who have particular expertise and experience.

The Catholic Church has its own law (known as *Canon Law*) which sets out the rights and responsibilities of Catholics (both priests and people), ways of resolving disagreements, and provides for punishments for those guilty of breaking its laws.

Christians believe that the Church is characterized as *One* (united in faith, hope and love), *Holy* (meaning it is set apart for God's own purposes, building up the Kingdom of God), *Catholic* (meaning it is universal and open to all, regardless of gender, race, age, culture), and *Apostolic* (meaning it can trace itself back through successive generations to Jesus's apostles themselves)

Today, some 1.2 billion people identify themselves as Catholics, around 17% of the world's population.

Catholic Schools

Learning and wisdom have always been prized by Christianity. From the earliest days, there have been Christian scholars and libraries. And not just of scripture and theology, but of all branches of learning. Christians believe that God has created the universe and has made humans in his own image and likeness (as spiritual as well as material beings) – this implies that everything in the universe is worth studying including, and especially, human beings, their lives and relationships, their social structures, and their political decisions. St Ignatius makes this a central feature of his own spiritual tradition.

It is not surprising then that the Church has its own schools – both as a way of passing on the Catholic tradition of faith, but also to contribute to the wider human enterprise of learning and wisdom. Christians believe that the resources of God’s earth and the intelligence he has given to human beings should be used, responsibly, for our benefit.

Currently, there are 139,029 Catholic schools worldwide educating 51.17 million children.

In England, there are 2,013 Catholic state schools and 136 Catholic independent schools educating 812,212 children. The average proportion of Catholic children in Catholic state schools is 70% and 36% in Catholic independent schools.

In Scotland, there are 366 Catholic state schools and 3 Catholic independent schools.

The saying of prayers, communal worship (especially the Mass and the celebration of feast days and seasons such as *Advent* and *Lent*), religious education in the Catholic faith, reflection and *retreat* experiences, formation of character in Christian virtues and attitudes, charitable work for others less fortunate, and a particular care for each individual, whether pupil or staff member, are ways in which a Catholic school will live out its Catholic/Christian identity and mission.

Spiritual Traditions

Over the 2,000 years of Christianity, different spiritual traditions have grown up within the Church. Perhaps the best known are the monastic tradition of St Benedict, the intellectual and preaching tradition of St Dominic, the tradition of simplicity of life of St Francis of Assisi, and the tradition of contemplation in action of St Ignatius Loyola.

Each of these, and many others beside, seek to interpret the gospel message with particular emphases. They have often given rise to Religious Orders – groups of men and women who take vows of *poverty, chastity* and *obedience* (and *stability* in the case of monks) and seek to live the Christian life according to a ‘*Rule*’ written by their founders.

The Jesuits are one such tradition, living according to the Rule of St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). The Jesuits have always been an active order, involved in schools and universities, hospitals and prisons, retreat houses and missions, anywhere people have needs. The institutions they founded have an Ignatian identity and a Jesuit mission.

Many other people, who are not Jesuits and who may not be Catholics, have been inspired by the spirit of St Ignatius and Jesuit education. They now make up the vast majority of teachers in Jesuit schools and have taken over responsibility for the Jesuit identity and mission of the schools, supported by Jesuit resources, governance and chaplaincy.

St Ignatius’s vision for Jesuit schools was that they should be places of excellent education and formation of character: ‘for improvement in living and learning for the greater glory of God and the common good.’



JESUIT
INSTITUTE

Shared Vision Induction
Catholicism at a Glance

2014 © Jesuit Institute London