

AN INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLICISM

The Vatican. The Inquisition. Contraception. Celibacy. Apparitions and miracles. Plots and scandals. The Catholic Church is seldom out of the news. But what do its one billion adherents really believe, and how do they put their beliefs into practice in worship, in the family, and in society?

This down-to-earth account goes back to the early Christian creeds to uncover the roots of modern Catholic thinking. It avoids getting bogged down in theological technicalities and throws light on aspects of the Church's institutional structure and liturgical practice that even Catholics can find baffling: Why go to confession? How are people made saints? What is "infallible" about the pope? Topics addressed include:

- scripture and tradition;
- sacraments and prayer;
- popular piety;
- personal and social morality;
- reform, mission, and interreligious dialogue.

Lawrence Cunningham, a theologian, prize-winning writer, and university teacher, provides an overview of Catholicism today which will be indispensable for undergraduates and lay study groups.

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Preface

When the editors of Cambridge University Press asked me to contribute a volume on Roman Catholicism for a series of books they were publishing on the religious traditions of Christianity I was both honored to have been asked and pleased to accept. Having worked on the book for some time, I now note ruefully that it was a task far more complicated than I had first imagined. To write about Catholicism encompassing its history, practice(s), and beliefs within the manageable framework of a single volume is not easy especially if the book is not to be a dreary litany of persons and ideas and a catalog of devotional practices, customs, and movements. Take a common term such as “Vatican” – a word that is often identified with Roman Catholicism. Vatican can refer to a specific place in Rome with a history that predates Christianity; it is the site of the purported burial place of the Apostle Peter; it is the location of a major basilica over the tomb of Saint Peter whose history goes back to the early fourth century; it has been the home of the popes since the late Middle Ages. Beyond those markers, it is also a shorthand term for the official administrative body assisting the pope (as in “The Vatican said yesterday . . .”), and those offices are often misidentified with the Vatican City State which is a sovereign state established in 1929 after the successful negotiations with the Italian government in a formal treaty known as the Lateran Treaty.

The polyvalent sense of the word “Vatican” is only one instance of a whole set of terms and images which have behind them a long history upon which meanings, nuances, and refinements have accrued. Were some fourth-century Catholics somehow allowed to come back to life and enter a contemporary Catholic Church or read a contemporary catechism, they would find much that would puzzle them and other things with which they would have some acquaintance. They would be amazed that their co-religionists honor seven sacraments, regard the pope as infallible, recite a rote set of prayers called the rosary, and allow only an unmarried

clergy, and they would have no sense at all of what the words “cardinal,” “transubstantiation,” “papal encyclical,” etc., mean. In fact, many Catholics today, only dimly aware of the history of their tradition, would be amazed that their fourth-century co-religionists would be amazed.

These religious ancestors of ours, however, would be quite comfortable with the idea of a bishop or priest presiding at the liturgy; they would recognize the readings from scripture; they would understand the offering and communion of bread and wine as signs of the real presence of Christ, and they would know that priests become priests by the laying on of hands; furthermore, they would know that one does not communicate without first having been baptized, and they would know the elements of the recited creed and recognize the general formulation of that creed.

One of the main burdens of this volume will be to explain how Catholic belief and practice evolved over the centuries. This is not primarily a history of Catholicism, but history will play a large part in my attempt to describe how the essential core of Catholic belief and practice encompasses both a fidelity to essentials – what we call the Apostolic Tradition – and a way of adding to and celebrating a deeper understanding of what that tradition is and how it is lived. This work, then, is neither a book of technical theology nor of pure history. It is a work that attempts to blend the two along with an account of worship, popular devotions, and, of course, how Catholics understand both personal and social morality.

I puzzled long and hard over how much technical theology should be included in this book and finally decided to treat theological issues, especially controversial ones, rather lightly. This neglect is not done from indifference since I earn my bread and butter by studying these matters. The reason behind that decision is easy to explain: Fundamental theological doctrines have behind them such a long and complicated history that it is not easy to describe them without endless qualifications, definitions, and caveats. That God grants us divine favor is easy enough to assert but how that favor, technically known as “grace,” has been understood is the subject of many weighty volumes and not a few contentious disputes. That it is God who saves us through Jesus Christ is a fundamental truth in Christianity, but the dynamics of being saved really merit a separate treatment of monograph length. My default mode was, where appropriate, to assert such beliefs without tracking out their justification or the history of their understanding.

In a similar fashion, it struck me as important to take note of popular piety and common usages in the Catholic tradition simply because they are part of the public perception of the Church: For example, Catholics

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say the rosary; Catholics make pilgrimages to shrines. Such practices are not of the essence, but, when properly understood, they do cast some light on the Catholic experience. They are traditions but not the Tradition.

In order to wrestle my account into some kind of order, this book will use thematic chapters. There are eleven of them. The number may seem a bit odd, but, as a long-time classroom teacher, it struck me that eleven might account for the number of weeks in a term (at least on this side of the Atlantic) with time enough for examinations and a week of vacation in term. My target audience is not my academic peers but for reasonably literate inquirers. For that reason, footnotes are sparse but suggested readings are appended to each chapter to aid the more inquisitive reader. The brief twelfth chapter is mainly bibliographical, and it also is modest – citing, for the most part, reference works in English. Each chapter also has a boxed figure to study in a bit more depth a specific topic only lightly touched on in the text. The chapters will also have shorter boxes on a tinted background so as to free the main text from too much factual clutter.

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Acknowledgments

This book benefited directly and indirectly from the wisdom of many people. Much of what is asserted in these pages was first delivered orally in the classroom over the past thirty years. For fear of neglecting to name all of them, let me, in the first instance, express my gratitude globally to my colleagues in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame both for being willing to help me with my many queries and for providing such a nurturing community within which to work. A special word of thanks goes to my next-door neighbor in the department, Cyril O'Regan, and my chairman, John Cavadini.

I have also been instructed by time spent in short-term teaching appointments at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama; Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota; and the College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, New Jersey. From those visits I have garnered much about the diversity of Catholic life. The Cistercian monastic communities of the Abbey of Gethsemani and Santa Rita Abbey have at times afforded me the leisure and quiet that make thinking possible, so, to their superiors, Dom Damien Thompson and Mother Miriam Pollard, I owe a debt of thanks. I wish to recognize my wife Cecilia and my two daughters, Sarah Mary and Julia Clare, for making my life so wonderful while urging me on with the gentle query about how the book is going. Finally, let me offer many thanks to Kate Brett of Cambridge University Press for taking me on as an author and for her understanding patience as I finished the book.

I would like to dedicate this work to the students of my university, past, present and future who study, work, and pray under the shadow of Notre Dame.