

THE ESSENTIAL CATHOLIC

SIX PRACTICES, FIVE BELIEFS,
AND FOUR QUESTIONS THAT
ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE
CATHOLIC WAY OF LIFE.



SIX ESSENTIAL CATHOLIC PRACTICES

1. ***BECOME FULLY INITIATED*** through the sacraments of **Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist.**

Full initiation in the Catholic Church includes three communal sacramental moments. ***Baptism*** connects a person's life publicly and permanently to Jesus' own life, death and resurrection as the pattern and way of greatest human fulfillment, healing, and reconciliation. ***Confirmation*** calls a person to live out that baptism as a public witness to God's gracious and saving love, and it offers the gift of God's own presence, the Holy Spirit, for that witness. ***Eucharist*** brings a person's entire life at that moment into the worship of the Christian community, making that community even more fully the Body of Christ. Only by marking his or her life by all three sacraments does one become a fully initiated Catholic.

2. Actively participate in *WEEKLY SUNDAY EUCHARIST* with a local Catholic faith community.

Catholics unite their weekly experience of life, bad and good, joyful and sorrowful, success and failure, to the Sunday Eucharist of their local faith community. This is a joining of our lives to the once-for-all eternal divine liturgy of Jesus' offering of his own life to the Father. We actively participate through singing, listening to God's Word, responding in faith, receiving communion, and then living out our lives so that they are signs of life and sources of nourishment for others.

3. Faithfully keep the spirit of and *CELEBRATE THE LITURGICAL YEAR*.

Catholics mark the year by the rhythm of the liturgical calendar, not simply the secular calendar. The liturgical year begins with the four week Advent season as we wait in hope and longing for the fullness of Christ's coming. This prepares us to celebrate with joy the Christmas-Epiphany season as we remember how Jesus unites Word and flesh to make God's saving love fully manifest within the world. The other special season of the year is the Lent-Easter-Pentecost season. Catholics keep the Lenten season in a spirit of penance through prayer, fasting and almsgiving (giving of ourselves, our time, energy, resources to those in need), preparing to receive new members and opening up to greater reconciliation. We celebrate the three great days (called the Triduum) of Holy Thursday Lord's Supper, Good Friday Liturgy of the Lord's Passion and Holy Saturday evening Easter Vigil, along with the Sundays of Easter and Pentecost Sunday, as we enter more deeply into the paschal mystery of Jesus. Throughout the year and especially during Lent, Catholics mark Fridays in some way in a spirit of penance and fasting. Various holy days such as the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception take us out of our normal secular rhythm and connect us to the Eucharistic celebration of the Christian community. Finally, there are memorials and feasts of special men and women, which are celebrated each year. These help us to realize that the whole communion of saints walks with us in our Christian journey and beckon us to join them by living a life of wholeness and holiness.

4. Nourish one's relationship to God through *DAILY PERSONAL PRAYER*.

Catholics pray daily in order to maintain and deepen a friendship with Jesus Christ who is the way to God. Where possible Catholics join others in such prayer, especially in the mornings and at evenings. Christian prayer is a relationship to God through Jesus, a spending of time and opening of the heart. The emphasis is not on the types of prayers prayed but on time spent in relationship. Where possible, prayer includes frequent reading from the Bible and meditation on the biblical stories and passages. Prayer invites us toward a contemplative “being with” God in deep personal communion, which in turn allows us to truly be with all others in our life.

5. *FORM ONE'S CONSCIENCE IN OPENNESS TO* the shared wisdom of *CHURCH TEACHING*.

Catholics approach moral decisions through a process of discernment. Through prayer and reflection Catholics trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeking the best wisdom possible, including the authentic teaching authority of the Church. We listen with openness and a willingness to put into practice the spirit of that teaching. Catholics try to live their personal, marriage, family, work and communal lives in conformity with that wisdom. At the same time, we are to respect and maintain the inviolable dignity of each person's well-formed conscience and take personal responsibility for our own decisions.

6. *BE A WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL* by sharing one's faith with others and acting with justice and charity.

To be fully Catholic includes a willingness to actively witness to the good news in many ways, most especially by how we live our lives. We raise our children in the Catholic faith and take seriously the responsibility to pass that faith on to them. We are to nurture relationships that respect human dignity, that foster justice, that exhibit solidarity with those most vulnerable, and that are marked by a generous charity. All these are hallmarks of sharing the good news, of living an evangelical Catholic life.

FIVE ESSENTIAL CATHOLIC BELIEFS



1. *About GOD:* There is one God who is a triune communion of overflowing personal love.

At the heart of the mystery of life is a God of overflowing personal love. God has revealed Godself as one God whose deepest unity comes from a communion of triune personal relationships. Although language about God is always partial and limited, the Church speaks most often of that triune relationship as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” God offering to share that life with us and our trusting in that loving relationship—rather than living out of fear—is the central mystery of our faith that illuminates all others.

2. *About JESUS CHRIST:* Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive revelation of God’s love in human form, whose life, death and resurrection reveal the deepest rhythm of all of life and the way of salvation.

How do we know the heart of God, the heart of the mystery of life? Through Jesus of Nazareth: his life, death and resurrection. In him the very heart of God, God’s Word, becomes one with humanity. We call that the Incarnation. Jesus, God’s Son, becomes one with humanity so that humanity might be one with God. Jesus of Nazareth stands as a constant reminder that our human lives have an intrinsic openness to God’s divine life, that the way to deepest and fullest humanity is to be fully open to God. However, since human life is marked by sin and a tendency to refuse God’s grace, Jesus the Christ is not only the revealer of God’s love, he is the way of salvation for all humanity, our redeemer and savior. His life, his confrontation of evil, his willingness and courage to trust in God as a God of life not death, his death on the cross that unites him with all who suffer injustice, and his vindication at the resurrection all open within human history the definitive way to God and to the fullness of life.

3. About *THE CHURCH*: Jesus gathers a community of disciples and empowers them to gather in his name and continue his mission.

Jesus intended for a community of faith to continue his mission and ministry. Through their experience of walking with him, witnessing his death on the cross, the wonder of the presence of the risen Christ beyond death, and the empowering reality of God's Holy Spirit guiding them, the disciples began to understand and proclaim Jesus as the way to God's kingdom. Gathering for prayer and sharing the Lord's Supper, they experienced the ongoing presence of the risen Lord and understood themselves to be the body of Christ. In sharing the good news to communities, nations, and cultures the Church understands itself as the pilgrim people of God, called to bring that good news to every time and place. By affirming that the Church of Jesus Christ "subsists in" the Catholic Church, Catholic teaching is not limiting the Church to membership in the Catholic Church nor is it saying that other Christians are outside the Church of Jesus Christ. Rather, it is affirming the Catholic belief that Jesus has endowed the Catholic Church with the fullest means of salvation.

4. About *CREATION*: God created the universe to participate freely in the fullness of God's life.

Creation and its unfolding, its evolution and development, its beautiful connectedness as well as its seeming intrinsic randomness, has its source in the creative power and goodness of God. Matter erupts into life and spirit. Humanity shares in that matter, life and spirit in such a way that we and ultimately all creation can consciously participate in the ongoing creative love of God. In the deepest sense, God alone creates and sustains creation even now (creation *ex nihilo*). In that sense creation is not God but neither is creation ever apart from God. That enables a sense of respect for both religious beliefs and insights into truth that come from science, history and other disciplines. Since all truth flows from and toward God, authentic truth cannot, in the end, contradict itself.

5. About *OUR HUMAN DESTINY*: We have only one life to live and how we live those lives, especially how we treat others, affects the destiny of all others and forms a judgment on our own life.

We are interconnected with all of life and we do not get to repeat our existence. Thus it matters to our ultimate destiny, to God, and to all others how we live this one life. That is why death can be at times a sign of blessing and at times a sign of sin and evil. For those who have lived a faithful and generous life, death allows that life to come to its natural completion as a true blessing. For those whose life is unjustly restricted or cut short, their death is a sign of the sin and evil, which we all have a responsibility to address.

**FOUR ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS
FOR A CATHOLIC WAY OF LIFE**



1. The *SACRAMENTAL QUESTION*: “How is God present in our life right now?”

The Catholic faith is creation-centered and looks at the world in a sacramental way. Catholics believe that all of life—anything we see and experience—can be an occasion of entering more deeply into the reality of God’s s life and love. Instead of being anxious about life, trying to control or limit it to serve our purposes, or approaching it in a childish, magical way, Catholics believe that life is an invitation to experience the mystery of God. Thus at the heart of the sacramental approach is a daily gratitude and thanksgiving for the goodness and mystery of God at work each day, no matter what we happen to face.

2. The *DISCIPLESHIP QUESTION*: “Where is the authentic cross in our life so that we connect our life to the pattern of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection?”

Catholic faith is Christ-centered, focused on being followers of Jesus. His life, death, and resurrection—which we name the paschal mys-

tery—is *the* pattern that marks our lives. Baptism inserts us publicly into this pattern of life and into a community that proclaims that pattern as the way of deepest human fulfillment and healing. Spirituality is the daily discernment of how God is asking us to share this pattern of Jesus in and through the concrete circumstances and created reality of our lives. Because life is filled with uncertainty, limitations, and even evil, the Christian life recognizes the reality of the cross in everyone’s life. Bearing that cross with courage and trust allows Jesus’ paschal mystery to be part of all we do, leading us and others to healing and life, rather than vengeance and death. At the heart of the discipleship question is a daily saying “Yes” to God no matter what life brings us, good and bad.

3. The *HUMAN QUESTION*: “How do our actions and the structures / institutions we are part of safeguard the dignity of every human person, especially those most vulnerable?”

Catholic faith highlights a commitment to social justice, centered on the intrinsic dignity of every human person and the common good of the entire human family. But that means that those who bear the brunt of today’s inequality and injustice or those who are most vulnerable have the greatest claim to our attention and resources. Thus at the heart of the human question is a moral question of preferential solidarity with those most vulnerable. Preferential solidarity is an ongoing willingness to consider how our actions and the structures we are part of affect the least of our brothers and sisters.

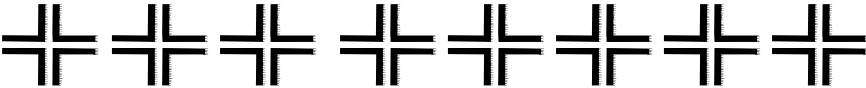
4. The *CHURCH QUESTION*: “How is God calling us to share our life within the community of disciples, the Church?”

Catholic faith takes seriously the fact that faith is intrinsically communal and most authentic only when joined to the community of disciples. Prayer, reading the Bible, charity and service are all commended no matter when done, but receive their direction from being connected to the whole faith community’s prayer, listening to God’s Word and service. Catholics acknowledge the priority of the intrinsically communal nature of faith, rather than putting in the first place an individualistic approach. To be Christian is to “belong to the Lord” (the meaning of the word “Church”; to

be part of God’s people; to be on our journey together as the Body of Christ, not alone.

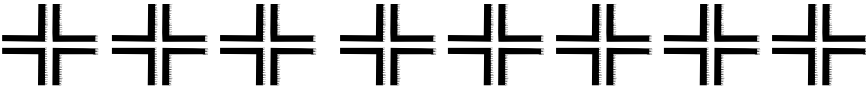
CONCLUSION:

The Catholic Church has a long and rich Tradition, uniting numerous teachings, practices, and insights into what might be called a “Catholic” approach to life. At times it is difficult, even for life-long Catholics, to focus on what is the heart of this Catholic understanding. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, runs to 2865 distinct articles taking up nearly 700 pages of text! These six practices, five beliefs, and four questions do not claim to be official or exhaustive. Rather, they are an attempt to carve out a more focused core to what it means to live a Catholic way of life. We hope they challenge and inspire you to delve into the Catholic faith even more deeply.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- 1. What do I do that I would say is essential to my practice of faith? Is it individually or communally centered?
- 2. If I had to sum up in a few sentences what I believe about God and Jesus what would I say?
- 3. What is the most challenging question for me as I look to live life with integrity and faith?



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