

# What It Means to Be Catholic

## *Satisfying 12 Human Needs*

by Msgr. Joseph M. Champlin

Being a member of the Catholic Church helps people satisfy their deepest personal needs and spiritual yearnings. Here are 12 good reasons for being Catholic.

### Being Catholic...[Fosters a healthy self-image](#)

People with a positive, healthy self-image generally engage in constructive behavior. Those with a negative, unhealthy self-image often slip into destructive behavior.

There are several signs or symptoms of an unhealthy self-image. Some of these might be, an awkwardness in accepting compliments, a tendency to remember one negative criticism and ignore nine positive comments, or any addictive habits.

Two basic Catholic teachings, though, can foster a healthy self-image. The first is to believe that God made each one of us. In the beginning the Lord Almighty examined the just-created world and “found it very good” (Genesis 1:31). That miracle of creation continues today with father, mother and God cooperating to produce a new being. This infant is unique, with the Lord calling the child by name and saying, “You are glorious and precious and I love you.” (Is 43:1-4). No other individual has the baby’s fingerprints or DNA.

The second “image booster” is to believe that Christ has saved us. By his suffering, dying and rising, Jesus has made it possible for us through Baptism to be washed clean and filled with the Divine Presence, then, later on, swiftly to be forgiven when having sinned, and coming to genuine repentance.

### [Satisfies our longing for happiness](#)

Priest-physicist-author Lorenzo Alabcete maintains that the human heart is always yearning for infinity, the eternal, a life forever. Moreover, he argues, we seek for the transcendent, for something beyond us; we search for infinite happiness and infinite satisfaction.

St. Augustine, 1,500 years earlier, spoke similarly: “O God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” The old *Baltimore Catechism* asked: “Why did God make you?” Its answer: “God made me to know, love and serve God in this world and to be happy with God forever in the next.”

The Church teaches that God mysteriously unites one divine nature and three divine persons—the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This distant and incomprehensible, yet close and caring God wishes us to be happy here and perfectly happy in the hereafter.

By using correctly and moderately the gifts of creation we experience a certain amount of contentment on this earth. But life here is not perfect; earthly joys are but a foretaste of the future.

In the hereafter of heaven or paradise, we will see God face-to-face, with all our yearnings satisfied and questions answered.

### Connects us with our past

The Roman Catholic Church is 2,000 years old. It is a faith with Jewish roots, Jesus as its founder, Peter as its first leader, Paul the worldwide preacher and the present pope as Peter's successor.

In the famous St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, inside and above the main altar, are words from Matthew 16 predicting Peter as the Church's rock foundation and promising Christ's protection until the end of time.

Along a side corridor is a list, carved on white marble, giving the succession of 267 popes, beginning with Peter and continuing through to Benedict XVI.

This Church possesses both a divine and human element. With Christ's divine guidance it speaks on matters of faith and morals, with the promise of the Holy Spirit, only the truth. God has promised that it will always survive struggles from without or within.

Nevertheless, the human weakness of the Church's leaders and members has caused great harm—most recently the mishandling of sexual-abuse cases, from which the Church is on the path to recovery.

Yet history has shown that the Church is resilient. An English historian, T. B. Macaulay, has observed that if any other human institution had known such great inner corruption or outer hostility, it would long ago have perished. For him, the Catholic Church's very survival is almost proof of its divine protection.

### Preserves and promotes the Bible

The Bible tells us the best of news: the blessing of God and how God offers us each salvation through Jesus. The Bible contains poetry, prayers, songs, genealogies, history, prophecies, stories, exhortations and teachings. The Church sees this treasure of God's Word not as one book, but a collection of books: 46 Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures and 27 New Testament or Christian Scriptures.

During the period from formal determination of the complete Bible at the end of the fourth century until the invention of the printing press, the Scriptures were preserved manually by the painstaking efforts of monks. They carefully copied by hand these sacred words.

The Church teaches that God is the Bible's principal author, influencing human authors as they wrote. That belief is the basis for the rich use of biblical texts in public worship, especially at Mass, and the strong encouragement given to Catholics to read personally the Scriptures on a regular basis.

The Church also recognizes that the Word proclaimed is one of the forms of Christ's real presence among us: "He is present in His word, since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in Church" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #7).

The Church admonishes all its members with words from St. Jerome, the fifth-century biblical scholar: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

### Provides models and heroes

Contemporary people admire and sometimes strive to imitate heroes and heroines. Bicyclist Lance Armstrong modeled courage and perseverance as he struggled with a severe cancer and sought to win the demanding Tour de France. Our models of faith guide us to true fulfillment and happiness. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta exemplified a deep love of God and dedicated service to the poorest of the poor.

But all human heroes and heroines have flaws. Only Jesus Christ is the perfect model, Son of God, yet Son of Mary, divine and still human, like us in all ways except sin. He walked on water, yet wept over a dead friend.

We learn the highlights of Jesus' life, hear his lessons and witness his model of heroic holiness during the Church year through the Scripture readings. We also hear about those who were closest to Jesus while he was among us on earth.

Jesus' mother, while merely human and not divine, nevertheless was uniquely blessed by God and without sin from the beginning until the end of her life. She, like other saints, is now for Catholics both human model and heavenly helper.

### Teaches us how to pray

Every human being has inner needs or anxieties. People who are believers tend to take such concerns to God. That communication or talking with our Creator we call prayer: a friend speaking with a friend in a conversation often about friends, family or other matters. Sometimes, however, the period of prayer is less a conversation and more like two lovers simply being present to each other. Prayer allows us to enrich our love relationship to God and to each other.

The Catholic Church issues minimal regulations concerning the prayer life of its members. Many opportunities and alternatives are offered; very little is obligatory.

The major responsibilities are participating at Mass on Sundays and six holy days of obligation as well as making one's "Easter duty" (the minimum requirement to receive Communion at least once annually, preferably during Easter season).

In public, liturgical prayer, Church members gather together and worship in a formal way according to official approved rites and texts. The Mass and the seven sacraments are prime examples of such liturgies.

The Church, however, also provides an enormously rich range of alternatives for personal, individualized prayer. Every Catholic is free to choose whatever style is comfortable. These include, for example, formal or informal prayer, the rosary, novenas (nine successive days of prayer for various reasons) and devotional candles (lit to show honor and call one to prayer).

### Deepens our faith

Faith and prayer are interconnected. People pray because we believe in a loving God who listens and responds. Faith is therefore the foundation for all prayers.

But people also pray to have their faith strengthened. The apostles once quite simply asked of Jesus, “Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). Prayer, therefore, presupposes faith but likewise deepens it.

The term “faith,” however, generally conveys two meanings: a body of truths that we accept or a power that enables us to accept those truths.

Throughout Christianity’s history, there has been a need for succinct formulas which clearly summarize the major beliefs of the Church. We call them “creeds” from the Latin word *credo*, meaning “I believe.” The two most familiar are the Apostles’ Creed, dating back to the first Christian years, and the Nicene Creed said or sung each Sunday at Mass.

Faith, however, can also be considered an inner power which enables us to look beyond and see something more.

In the natural world we look beyond beauty, for example, and discover a wise, powerful and caring God.

In the spiritual world, we look beyond and discover the Risen Christ in the Eucharist, the sacraments, the Scriptures and in people gathered for prayer.

### Gives us a sense of belonging

In the Acts of the Apostles we read an ideal description of the early Christian Church (Acts 2:42-47). That description seems to blend a horizontal (or community) and vertical (or sacred) dimension in their activities. Catholic parishes today seek to maintain a similar balance.

**Horizontal.** We see ourselves as a community of believers, linked together by a common bond of faith, grace and Baptism; a body of persons who share the same life and beliefs. It follows logically from our understanding of the Church’s nature that members ought to be one in heart and mind, living in unity and caring for each other.

A variety of activities reflect and foster that community dimension, like welcoming people before Mass, socializing with refreshments afterwards, visiting the sick or homebound and reaching out to those in need.

**Vertical.** But we also gather to offer God gratitude and adoration, to manifest our dependence upon the Creator and to express our needs. These encounters with an awesome and transcendent, yet

caring and compassionate Lord are wrapped in mystery. Silent periods, sacred symbols and reverent gestures reflect and deepen that vertical dimension of worship.

### Guides us to guidance-empowered freedom

We humans are quite curious by nature. We, on one level, resent any restrictions on our freedom, but, on a deeper plane, want definite rules or regulations for our lives. We jealously guard our choices, yet yearn for stronger guidance to keep us from making bad decisions and misusing our liberty.

An all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God allows us freely to use (or abuse) our world. Although many factors such as family background, cultural surroundings or current circumstances may diminish the degree of our freedom and consequently our responsibility for certain actions, we nevertheless remain free to decide for good or for evil.

Catholics have two guides to follow: our conscience and our Church. The Church offers the great commandments (love of God and neighbor) plus the Ten Commandments, teachings of Christ, centuries of tradition and nature's laws.

These moral standards may seem to be inhibiting and restrictive. But quite to the contrary, they actually release or liberate us. These norms both make us free and lead us to the deep happiness which comes from following God's plan.

Jesus said: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32).

### Conveys God's forgiveness

When we fail to follow our conscience and omit something that it commands, or do something that our conscience forbids, we sin. That sin, or our state of sinfulness, ruptures multiple relationships in our lives. It weakens or severs our connection with God, with one another and with the world around us. It also upsets our inner harmony and peace.

Our sins and the sinful world we live in can and do cause discontent at times, but Jesus' actions and words assure us that God's mercy more than matches human weakness. We know, for example, that Christ forgave the repentant thief, released a woman caught in adultery, absolved a prostitute and forgave the paralytic.

The Catholic Church has always taught that as soon as we sincerely repent and seek God's mercy, all our sins are forgiven. Yet normally there remains within those burdened by guilt a great need to express verbally their wrong and to experience actual forgiveness through some word or gesture. The Sacrament of Penance, Reconciliation or Confession does just that.

### Supplies strength in our weakness

Jesus predicted that because of human limitations we would struggle each day to walk faithfully in his footsteps.

However, Christ also instituted or established special means, called *sacraments*, which supply the sufficient grace God has promised, a power that makes us strong despite our weakness.

The center of these is the Eucharist, “the source and summit of Christian life” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, #11) or, as Pope Benedict terms it in his exhortation following the 2005 World Synod of Bishops, “the sacrament of love” (#75). The other sacraments lead to and flow from a faith-filled celebration of the Eucharist.

The Church divides these seven holy rites into three categories.

**Sacraments of Initiation.** This initiation process begins with Baptism, is complemented by Confirmation and reaches its fulfillment in the Holy Eucharist.

**Sacraments of Healing.** These two sacraments fundamentally deal with sin and sickness. Penance, also called Reconciliation or Confession, focuses on our sins. Anointing of the Sick centers upon physical, spiritual and emotional or mental illness.

**Sacraments at the Service of Communion.** The final two are essentially directed to the service of others. Holy Orders ordains persons to the “order” of bishops, priests or deacons. Matrimony unites a man and a woman in a marital covenant or partnership for the rest of their lives.

#### [Deals well with life's hard issues](#)

Those who possess an interest in people and openness to life swiftly learn of the diverse and crushing hard knocks which individuals often encounter.

The Church, in both its teachings and practices, provides effective help in several ways for such afflicted persons.

**By powerful prayer.** It prays formally and publicly for burdened people and urges members to speak with God in personal and private prayer about their needs.

**By supportive people.** Most of the Church's official charitable work over the centuries was done either by the local clergy or by religious men and women. However, after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's, there was a Church-approved explosion of laypersons performing those same functions for those in need.

**By hopeful truths.** The Church does not offer a simple, pat answer to life's perplexing hard knocks. But it does provide insights that shed some light and hope for those in darkness and near despair. For example, much suffering is caused by our own sinfulness and mistaken decisions, or by the sinfulness and bad choices of others.

However, the Church reminds us that the ultimate healing of such hard knocks will take place only in heaven or paradise during the next life.

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