

Catholicism 101

What is Catholicism?

With the proliferation of religions and Christian denominations throughout the world, one of the most important starting points for a discussion on Catholicism is what is Catholicism? This first lecture will focus on the characteristics that define and separate Catholicism from the rest of the world religions and Christian denominations. The brief overview below is intended to give a broad overview of some of the most important characteristics which will be discussed in greater detail later in the series.

What does “catholic” mean?

When someone asks the question, “what religion are you,” and the response is “Catholic,” the common response is, “so you’re not Christian?” This response is a misunderstanding of the history of Christianity as well as the word “catholic.” The Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches are the only churches in the world that can claim apostolic origins. After the death and Resurrection of Jesus, Jesus’ 12 disciples were given the gift of the Holy Spirit which empowered them to go and preach about the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. These, now Apostles, started the Christian church, the body of believers who believed and witnessed to the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

At first these early Christians were called the “People of the Way” since they followed a strict code of conduct and way of life. During the times of the Apostles, around 4-10 years later, these early believers received a new name, Christian, which would become their standard title. Christian means, the one who follows the Christ or the one who believes in the Christ. The title stuck because it best described their beliefs and message. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, was the primary focus of their preaching and teaching.

The word “catholic” came into use in the 2nd century. With lots of controversies and challenges facing the church, St. Ignatius of Antioch began using the term “catholic” to describe the oneness, the universality, and the separateness of the true Christian faith. St. Ignatius, and many like him, used the term “catholic” to separate the church from those who claimed to be Christian on their own and did not participate in the life of the Christian church. The Greek word, *katholikos*, means universal. Even from these origins the earliest Christians understood the church as a singular entity that could respond and reflect the entirety of the world and encompass the different tribes, peoples, and nations. Today this idea is best represented by the colonnade around St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The colonnade reaches out like arms embracing the world and bringing the nations home.

Through the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Apostles Creed, which was written in the 3rd century, the word catholic became one of the four principal words to describe the Christian Church. The Nicene Creed boldly proclaims that the church is “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic” harkening to the words of St. Ignatius who saw the universality and the universal mission of the Church.

Several events over the next millennium would solidify the qualifier “catholic” to the Christian church. The split between the eastern Christian churches and the Latin Christian church in 1054 required a way to distinguish the two churches. The eastern churches became the “orthodox” churches and the west became the “Latin” or “Catholic” church. Both of these names are historically comical. “Orthodox” means ‘the right way’ indicating that the eastern churches saw themselves as the “correct” way in contrast to the heretics or those of the “wrong way.” The term “catholic” became more common in the west to indicate the universality of the church and its “oneness” compared to the eastern churches who were heavily divided by the 11th century.

The Catholic Church from the 6th through 16th centuries showcased the belief in its universality as it ventured into the non-European lands and began to convert the nations. Throughout the world the Catholic Church encountered many different people with very different understandings of the world and attempted to adapt the “universal” church to these peoples and places. Some of the stories are quite fascinating. When the Jesuits entered China, they noticed that the Chinese had a great reverence for their ancestors. They quickly saw the connection between the saints, heaven, and the veneration of ancestors. In the Americas, the Native Americans had a practice called smudging as a removal of impurities. This ritual was adapted for the Mass and used during the Penitential Rite. Some places widely accepted the Christian church whereas others were more hostile. Regardless, the belief that the truths of the Catholic Church would appeal to all peoples dominated the missionary zeal of missionaries until the 1970’s.

The Protestant Revolution of the 17th-18th centuries popularized the term “Catholic” for the Christian church. The revolutionaries believed that the church was in error compared to the early church and wanted to reclaim the faith of the apostolic church. Thus they called themselves Christians in contrast to the followers of the Catholic Church who called themselves Catholic. The Catholic Church responded by emphasizing the qualifier “catholic” and the universality, oneness, and historicity of the Catholic Church. These names persist today to distinguish those who claim membership in the various Christian denominations.

One and Holy

The Catholic Church is an anomaly in the world. Whereas most religions have many different sects or groups, the Catholic Church, with the exception of the Orthodox Church, has remained as one church throughout the past 2000 years. In contrast Buddhism has five main groups with various smaller groups that all have widely different beliefs. Islam has four main sects and various other affiliated groups. Protestantism has over 19,000 different denominations. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Judaism split into several hundred different sects. Yet, somehow the Catholic Church has remained a single church with many groups residing within it.

The oneness of the Catholic Church extends beyond its historical unity. The hierarchical nature of the church and its drive for purity of teachings are two other aspects of its oneness. Only one other faith has a structure that maintains one leader as the head of its church: Latter Day Saints. Many today are leery if not adamant against a centralized leadership. Yet a centralized leadership is a huge part of the Catholic Church. Often the Catholic Church’s hierarchical structure is viewed with scorn as images of dictators and tyrants race through our minds. Although the

Church is hierarchical and obedience is a main component of our adherence to the structure, many other elements form boundaries against a tyrannical system. The Pope, the Bishop of Rome, is not sole ruler, God is the ruler of the Catholic Church. The Pope must act within the theology, tradition, and teachings of the Church. Acting outside those bounds has severe consequences. Although we have a strong structure, the structure is strong because of the tradition not the structure itself.

One part of the Catholic Church's oneness which is often misunderstood is the quality of the one church as holy. We often think of the term "holy" in the present sense: the church is currently holy. The holiness of the church and the oneness of the church are rooted not in this temporal world but the world to come. We believe that the one church extends into eternity and those who are in it already participate in the eternity to come. Therefore we emphasize theological points like "once baptized, always baptized" and "even an atheist can validly baptize a person" to emphasize that this is God's church, he is in charge, and we are not. The holiness of the church looks beyond the present day into the hope of a singular church, made holy by Jesus, that will persist for eternity.

The Apostles and Tradition:

Many world religions were founded by one man: Siddhartha – Buddhism, Muhammad – Islam, Joseph Smith – Latter Day Saints, John Calvin – Calvinism, Martin Luther – Lutheranism. Yet, no modern religion claims to be founded by a god or gods except the Christian church and Judaism. It gets weirder. Whereas most modern religion founders claimed to have divine revelation or receive special knowledge that instigated their efforts to found a religion, the Christian church claims that the "founders" of the Christian faith were witnesses. The disciples of Jesus never claim to have special revelation that encouraged them to leave their jobs, families, and homelands to spread this new faith. They never claimed to be founders of a religion or even desired to break from Judaism. The disciples of Jesus saw themselves as experiencing the fulfillment of the Jewish faith which they practiced and were taught. Only years after their discipleship with Jesus did they begin to break away from Judaism and begin a religion focused on the celebration of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. The entirety of this new religion was based on the disciples witnessing to the life, death, and Resurrection. As 1 John 1:1 proclaims "what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands, pertains the Word of Life."

This experience of God, the experience of Jesus, is the foundation of the Christian Church and the beginning of our discussion on tradition. Since the Apostles, who saw, heard, and touched Jesus, every Christian after them continues to pass down the messages and experiences from these witnesses, the Apostles. Every bishop in the church is ordained in the lineage of the Apostles with records showing which bishops laid hands on them reaching back to the time of the Apostles. This lineage of apostles and witness of Jesus give structure and authority to the church, which is only one aspect of tradition.

The other aspect of tradition encompasses the rest of the Christian church. Each member is a witness to the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus and experiences his power and teachings in

their own lives. As a body of believers we have come to experience the true and living God as active and alive in our lives. Through these experiences we have built up a tradition, a system of knowing God. This tradition includes everything from the knowledge of God, to advancing in prayer and the spiritual life, to human nature and how to live the laws of God. The tradition of the Catholic church is more than a collection of experiences and teachings. These teachings and experiences give boundaries and color to the theology of the Church. With so many different experiences and ways of encountering God, we have built up and incredible edifice of the multitude of ways a person can encounter God and they ways that are not authentically methods for coming to know God. Tradition in the Catholic Church gives us a history, a way of knowing our origins are in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, and gives the Church an incredible wealth of experiences through which we can come to authentically know God.

Truth

The final point that differentiates the Catholic Church from the rest of the religions of the world is its foundation in truth. The idea of truth brings together many of the topics already discussed. If God is truth and he is the head of the Catholic Church, then our goal is to know him which requires desiring the truth. If the Church is one, then the Church has one set of teachings and beliefs that give the Church its foundation. The quality of seeking and knowing the truth brings together the aspects of founded by God and seeking God as well as oneness and tradition.

The topic of truth is far more complicated for the Catholic Church than most people understand. The pope or a bishop cannot change the Church's teaching or deviate from what has been declared true by the tradition. Similarly, every action, every theological statement, every spiritual practice can be judged based on the tradition and the teachings of the Church. This structure and these sharp boundaries give the faithful a certainty about the truth of the faith and a comfort that they are taught the ways of God.

On a final note about truth, for most of the middle ages and into the modern era, theology was considered a science like Biology. Like the sciences which have a structure for knowing fundamental truths and evaluating ideas, theology had the same structure. Where as the sciences use data as the foundation, theology used the experiences of God. Whereas experimentation drove the quest for truth, philosophy, reason, and the quest for clarity and consistency amongst the experiences drove the theological studies. The quest for God, the quest for truth, was considered a scientific and intellectual endeavor.

In summary, these words from St. Cyril of Jerusalem emphasize my point. "[The Church] is called catholic, then, because it extends over the whole world, from end to end of the earth, and because it teaches universally and infallibly each and every doctrine which must come to the knowledge of men, concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly, and because it brings every race of men into subjection to godliness, governors and governed, learned and unlearned, and because it universally treats and heals every class of sins, those committed with the soul and those with the body, and it possesses within itself every conceivable form of virtue, in deeds and in words and in the spiritual gifts of every description" (*Catechetical Lectures* 18:23 [A.D. 350]).