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Rev. Fr. John Trigilio, Jr.,  
PhD, ThD

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PhD



# Catholicism

4th Edition

**by Rev. Fr. John Trigilio, Jr., PhD, ThD, and  
Rev. Fr. Kenneth Brighenti, PhD**

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Nihil Obstat: Reverend John G. Hillier, PhD, Censor Librorum  
November 22, 2021

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Published by: **John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**, 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774, [www.wiley.com](http://www.wiley.com)

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2022930209

ISBN 978-1-119-85571-2 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-85575-0 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-85576-7 (ebk)

# Catholicism For Dummies®

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# Introduction

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Three great religions trace their roots to the prophet Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And one of those religions, Christianity, is expressed in three different traditions: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy. You may already know that. You may also already know that currently, more than 1 billion Catholics occupy the earth. That's approximately one-fifth of the world's population.

Whether you're Catholic or not, you may be totally clueless about or just unaware of some aspects of Catholic tradition, history, doctrine, worship, devotion, or culture. No sweat. Regardless of whether you're engaged, married, or related to a Catholic; your neighbor or co-worker is a Catholic; or you're just curious about what Catholics really do believe, this book is for you.

*Catholicism For Dummies*, 4th Edition, realizes that you're smart and intelligent, but maybe you didn't attend Blessed Sacrament Grade School, St. Thomas Aquinas High School, or Catholic University of America. This book's goal is to give you a taste of Catholicism. It's not a Catechism or religion textbook but a casual, down-to-earth introduction for non-Catholics and a reintroduction for Catholics. It gives common-sense explanations about what Catholics believe and do in plain English, with just enough why and how thrown in to make solid sense.

Although *Catholicism For Dummies*, 4th Edition, is no substitute for the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, our hope is that it'll wet your whistle. We don't cover everything about Catholicism, but we do discuss the basic stuff so that the next time you're invited to a Catholic wedding, Baptism, funeral, Confirmation, or

First Communion, you won't be totally confused. And you may have an edge on other people in your life who are less informed about Catholicism than you.

## *About This Book*

This book covers plenty of material on Catholicism — from doctrine to morality and from worship and liturgy to devotions — but you don't need a degree in theology to comprehend it. Everything is presented in an informal, easy-to-understand way.

This book is also a reference, unlike the schoolbooks you had as a kid. You don't have to read the chapters in order, one after the other, from front cover to back cover. You can just pick the topic that interests you or find the page that addresses the specific question you have. Or you can indiscriminately open the book and pick a place to begin reading.

Throughout this book, if you see the word *orthodox* with a small letter *o*, it means correct or right believer.

However, if you see the capital letter *O*, then *Orthodox* refers to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, such as the Greek, Russian, and Serbian Orthodox Churches. Also, if you see the word *church* with a small letter *c*, it refers to a church building or parish, but *Church* with a capital *C* refers to the universal Catholic Church.

Bible references in this book use the traditional chapter and verse designation of a chapter number followed by a colon and the verse number(s). For example, Deuteronomy 6:4–6 refers to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy from verse 4 all the way to and including verse 6. Unless we tell you otherwise, our Scripture references are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

A quick note: Sidebars (shaded boxes of text) dig into the details of a given topic related to Catholicism, but they aren't crucial to understanding it. Feel free to read them or skip them. You can pass over the text accompanied by the Technical Stuff icon, too. The text marked with this icon gives some interesting but nonessential information about Catholicism.

One last thing: Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these webpages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an ebook, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the webpage.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

While writing this book, we made some assumptions about you:

- » You have Catholic friends, neighbors, or relatives, and you're curious about Catholicism and want to know a little more about it.
- » You've heard or read something about Catholics or Catholicism, and you have questions about Catholic beliefs or practices.
- » You may or may not be Catholic. Perhaps you were baptized Catholic but not raised Catholic. Maybe you're committed to a different faith, still searching, or have no faith to speak of. Regardless, you do want to know something about Catholics.

## ***Icons Used in This Book***



This book uses icons to point out various types of information.



**REMEMBER** Ummm, well, we can't remember what this icon's supposed to point out. Just kidding. This icon draws your attention to information that's worth remembering because it's basic to Catholicism.



**TECHNICAL STUFF** This icon alerts you to technical or historical background stuff that's not essential to know. Feel free to divert thine eyes whenever you see this icon.



**TIP** This icon points out useful tidbits to help you make more sense out of something Catholic.



**WARNING** This icon points out cautionary areas of Catholicism, such as the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday or Saturday evening. (Not doing so without a legitimate excuse, such as illness or severe weather, is a grave sin.)

## ***Beyond the Book***

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[www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for “Catholicism For Dummies Cheat Sheet” in the search box.

## ***Where to Go from Here***

*Catholicism For Dummies*, 4th Edition, is sort of like Sunday dinner at an Italian grandmother’s home. Nonna brings everything to the table: bread, antipasto, cheese, olives, prosciutto and melon, tomatoes and mozzarella; then comes the pasta or macaroni in marinara or meat sauce with sausage and peppers, meatballs, and veal; then comes the chicken, the pork, or the beef; followed by salad; and topped off with fruit and cheese, spumoni, gelato, ricotta pie, zabaglione, and an espresso with a splash of sambucca.

Likewise, in this book, we’ve brought out a little bit of everything on Catholicism: doctrine, morality, history, theology, canon law, spirituality, and liturgy. You can go to any section to discover Catholicism. You can pick and choose what interests you the most, get answers to specific questions on your mind, or just randomly open this book anywhere and begin reading. On the other hand, you may want to start at the beginning and work your way to the end, going through each chapter one by one. We don’t guarantee that you’ll be full when you’re finished, but we hope that you’ll get a good taste of what Catholicism is really about.

## **Part 1**

# **What Do Catholics Believe?**

## IN THIS PART ...

Find out what Catholics learn in religion class and what the Church teaches all its members. You'll look at the doctrines and beliefs every Catholic is expected to know and accept. The first pillar of faith of the Catechism is the creed, which is explained in this part.

Discover the revealed Word of God, including the Bible.

Explore Catholic beliefs about God as the Creator of everything.

Examine fundamental Christian teachings, such as the divinity of Christ and Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Understand the Church, its mission, and the means by which it fulfills that mission.

Get the rundown of the key figures in the Catholic hierarchy — the many, many people who make up the Church as an organization.

# Chapter 1

## What It Means to Be Catholic

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### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Getting a sense of the Catholic perspective
  - » Introducing Church teachings
  - » Participating in Catholic worship
  - » Behaving and praying like a Catholic
- 

Being Catholic means more than attending parochial school or going to religion class once a week, owning some Rosary beads, and going to Mass every Saturday night or Sunday morning. It means more than getting ashes smeared on your forehead once a year, eating fish on Fridays, and giving up chocolate for Lent. Being Catholic means living a totally Christian life and having a Catholic perspective.

What is the Catholic perspective? In this chapter, you get a peek at what Catholicism is all about — the common buzzwords and beliefs — a big picture of the whole shebang. (The rest of this book gets into the nitty-gritty details.)

## *What Exactly Is Catholicism Anyway?*

The cut-to-the-chase answer is that *Catholicism* is a Christian religion (just as are Protestantism and Eastern

Orthodoxy). *Catholics* are members of the Roman Catholic Church (which means they follow the authority of the bishop of Rome, otherwise known as the pope), and they share various beliefs and ways of worship, as well as a distinct outlook on life. Catholics can be either Latin (Western) or Eastern (Oriental) Catholic; both are equally in union with the bishop of Rome (the pope), but they retain their respective customs and traditions.

Catholics believe that all people are basically good, but sin is a spiritual disease that wounded humankind initially and can kill humankind spiritually if left unchecked. Divine grace is the only remedy for sin, and the best source of divine grace is from the *sacraments*, which are various rites that Catholics believe have been created by Jesus and entrusted by Him to His Church.

From the Catholic perspective, here are some of the bottom-line beliefs:

- » More than an intellectual assent to an idea, Catholicism involves a daily commitment to embrace the will of God — whatever it is and wherever it leads.
- » Catholicism means cooperation with God on the part of the believer. God offers His divine grace (His gift of unconditional love), and the Catholic must accept it and then cooperate with it.
- » Free will is sacred. God never forces you to do anything against your free will. Yet doing evil not only hurts you but also hurts others because a Catholic is never alone. Catholics are always part of a spiritual family called the *Church*.
- » More than a place to go on the weekend to worship, the Church is a mother who feeds spiritually, shares doctrine, heals and comforts, and disciplines when needed. Catholicism considers the Church as

important to salvation as the sacraments because both were instituted by Christ.

The Catholic perspective sees everything as being intrinsically created good but with the potential of turning to darkness. It honors the individual intellect and well-formed conscience and encourages members to use their minds to think things through. In other words, instead of just giving a list of do's and don'ts, the Catholic Church educates its members to use their ability to reason and to apply laws of ethics and a natural moral law in many situations.

Catholicism doesn't see science or reason as enemies of faith but as cooperators in seeking the truth. Although Catholicism has an elaborate hierarchy to provide leadership in the Church (see [Chapter 6](#)), Catholicism also teaches individual responsibility and accountability. Education and the secular and sacred sciences are high priorities. Using logical and coherent arguments to explain and defend the Catholic faith is important.

Catholicism isn't a one-day-a-week enterprise. It doesn't segregate religious and moral dimensions of life from political, economic, personal, and familial dimensions. Catholicism tries to integrate faith into everything.



REMEMBER

The general Catholic perspective is that because God created everything, *nothing* is outside God's jurisdiction, including your every thought, word, and deed — morning, noon, and night, 24/7.

# *Knowing What the Catholic Church Teaches*

The Catholic religion is built (by Christ) on four pillars of faith: the creed (teachings), the sacraments (liturgical worship), the Ten Commandments (moral code), and the Lord's Prayer or Our Father (prayer and spirituality). Church doctrine and dogma can be very sophisticated, which may intimidate some people. But the fundamentals are rooted in the Church's creed: the first pillar of faith. Either the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed (which we introduce in [Chapter 2](#)) is said every Sunday and holy day to reaffirm what the Church actually teaches and expects her members to believe and profess. Catholics read the Bible and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the definitive book explaining the official teachings of the Catholic Church on faith and morals.

In this section, we briefly overview the fundamental tenets of the Church, including what the Church is and who leads it.

## *Grasping the basic beliefs*

Catholics are first and foremost *Christians*. Like Jews and Muslims, Catholics are *monotheistic*, which means that they believe in one God. But Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which is unique to Christianity. Catholics also believe the following:

- » **The Bible is the inspired, error-free, and revealed word of God.** See [Chapter 2](#) for an introduction to the Bible.
- » **Baptism, the rite of becoming a Christian, is necessary for salvation.** This is true whether the



Baptism occurs by water, blood, or desire (see [Chapter 8](#)).

» **God's Ten Commandments provide a moral compass — an ethical standard to live by.** We discuss the Ten Commandments in detail in [Chapter 12](#).

» **There is one God in three persons: the Holy Trinity.** In other words, Catholics embrace the belief that God, the one Supreme Being, is made up of three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (see [Chapter 2](#)).



TIP

Catholics recognize the unity of body and soul for each human being. So the whole religion centers on the truth that humankind stands between the two worlds of matter and spirit. The physical world is considered part of God's creation and is, therefore, inherently good until an individual misuses it.

The *seven sacraments* — Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick — are outward signs that Christ instituted to give grace. These Catholic rites marking the seven major stages of spiritual development are based on this same premise of the union of body and soul, matter and spirit, physical and spiritual. You find out more about the sacraments in this chapter's section "[Worshipping as a Catholic: The Holy Mass](#)," as well as in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#).



REMEMBER

Grace is a totally free, unmerited gift from God necessary for our salvation. Grace is a sharing in the divine; it's God's help — the inspiration that's needed to do His will. Grace inspired martyrs in the early days of Christianity to suffer death rather than deny Christ. Grace bolstered St. Bernadette Soubirous to sustain the derision of the locals who didn't believe she'd seen the Virgin Mary. You can't see, hear, feel, smell, or taste grace because it's invisible. Catholic belief, however, maintains that grace is the life force of the soul. Like a spiritual megavitamin, grace inspires a person to selflessly conform to God's will, and like the battery in the mechanical bunny, grace keeps the soul going, going, going, and going. Because grace is a gift, you can accept or reject it; if you reject it, you won't be saved, and if you accept it, you have to put it into action.

## **WHY IS THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S HOME IN ROME?**

Saint Peter, the first pope, began his ministry in Jerusalem. Eventually, he ended up in Rome, where he was its first bishop and was then crucified and buried on Vatican Hill. That spot was imperial property, but in the fourth century, the Roman emperor donated the land and buildings to the pope in compensation for property and funds that were seized from Christians during years of Christian persecutions (a topic we discuss in [Appendix A](#)). It's important that the Church continues to have its home in the place where Saint Peter spent his final years and was bishop and pope.

***Respecting the role of the Church and its leaders***

Catholics firmly believe that Jesus Christ personally founded the Church and He entrusted it to the authority and administration of Saint Peter (the first pope) and his successors. In this section, we explain what Catholics believe the Church really is, as well as how its leadership is structured.

### ***What “the Church” really is***

The word *church* has many meanings. Most obviously, it can signify a building where sacred worship takes place. The Catholic Church is not one particular building even though the head of the Church (the pope) lives next to Saint Peter’s Basilica (the largest church in the world) in Rome. People who use the church building — the body or assembly of believers — are also known as the *church*. When that body is united under one tradition of worship, it is called a *liturgical church*, such as the Eastern Catholic Church, the Melkite Church, the Ruthenian Church, or the Latin or Roman Rite Church.



REMEMBER

Catholic Churches may differ liturgically, but they’re still Catholic. The two main lungs of the Church are the Latin (Western) Church and the Eastern Catholic Church. The *Latin (Western) Church* follows the ancient traditions of the Christian community in Rome since the time of St. Peter and St. Paul; most parishes in the United States, Canada, Central America, and South America celebrate this type of Mass, said in either the location’s common tongue or Latin. The *Eastern Catholic Church*, which includes the Byzantine Rite, celebrates its Mass like Greek or Russian Eastern Orthodox Churches. Both Masses are cool by the pope, though.

At an even more profound level, the entire *universal* Church (meaning the Catholic Church around the world) is theologically considered the Mystical Body of Christ. In other words, the Church sees herself as the living, unifying, sanctifying, governing presence of Jesus Christ on earth today. Not just an organization with members or an institution with departments, the Church is an organic entity; it is alive. Its members, as Saint Paul says in his epistle (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), are like parts in a body. Just as your body has feet, hands, arms, legs, and so on, the Church has many members (parts) but is also one complete and whole *body*. (See [Chapter 5](#) for a complete discussion of this topic.)

Unlike a club or association you belong to, the Church is more than an informal gathering of like-minded people with similar goals and interests. The Church was founded by Christ for a specific purpose: to save us. The Church is an extension of Jesus and continues the work begun by Him. He came to teach, sanctify, and govern God's people as the Anointed One (called *Messiah* in Hebrew and *Christ* in Greek).



REMEMBER

The Church is necessary for salvation because she is the Mystical Body of Christ, and Christ (being the Savior and Redeemer of the World) is necessary for salvation because He is the One Mediator between God and man. People who do not formally belong to the Church are not *de facto* lost, however, because the Church believes in the universal salvific will of God. In other words, God offers salvation to all men and women, yet it is up to them to accept, believe in, and cooperate with that divine grace.

Anyone who has not consciously and deliberately rejected Christ and the Catholic Church can still be saved. In other words, besides the formal members (baptized, registered parishioners), there are many anonymous and unofficial members of the Church who act in good faith and follow their conscience, living virtuous lives. Someone may be innocently ignorant of the necessity of Christ and His Church and still achieve salvation from both.

One body with many members: That is how the Church sees herself. Her mission is to provide everything her members need — spiritually, that is. From the seven sacraments that give us grace to the Magisterium that teaches essential truths to the hierarchy that brings order through laws and governance, the Church is there to give the soul what it needs on its journey to heaven. More than a convenient option, the Church is a necessary and essential society (community) where members help each other, motivated by the same love.

### ***The Catholic chain of command***

Every group of human beings needs a chain of command (authority) and a set of rules (laws), which enable the group to maintain security, provide identity, and promote unity. Families depend on parental authority over the children. Nations have constitutions that delineate and define powers. The Church has authority that she believes comes directly from God. For example, the Lord gave Moses not only the Ten Commandments (see [Chapter 12](#)) but also many other laws and rules to help govern God's people to keep them safe.

*Canon law* is the set of rules and regulations the Church enacted to protect the rights of persons and the common good of all the members. The word *hierarchy* means “leveled tier.” Like the Roman army of old, the Church

adopted a chain of command. The highest authority resides in the person of the pope, who is always simultaneously the Bishop of Rome. He is the Successor of Saint Peter, the man to whom Christ entrusted the keys of the kingdom.

The pope is the Church's supreme lawmaker, judge, and visible leader. He is also called the Vicar of Christ on earth. As the Church's ambassador to the world, he possesses full, supreme, and universal power the moment he takes office. He is elected pope by the *college of cardinals*, which exists to elect a pope after the current one dies (or freely resigns) and also to advise, counsel, and assist the reigning pope (see [Chapter 6](#)).

The terms *Vatican* and *Holy See* refer to the various departments, commissions, congregations, and so on that help the pope govern the Church, evangelize and teach the faith, and maintain and promote justice.

Jesus not only entrusted the Church to Saint Peter and his successors (the popes), but He also had Twelve Apostles whose successors are called *bishops*. A bishop shepherds a local church called a *diocese*, whereas the pope shepherds the universal, global Church around the world. Bishops are helped in each parish church by a pastor who is a priest, and often they are helped by a deacon and/or a parochial vicar (assistant pastor). The bishops of a nation or geographical region form Episcopal conferences, which provide the benefit of pooled resources. For the complete scoop on the Church hierarchy, be sure to check out [Chapter 6](#).

## ***Worshipping as a Catholic: The Holy Mass***