

CATHOLICISM

All Catholics are Christians, but not all Christians are Catholics. So the confusion begins. Christians accept that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ or Messiah of history, and is divine and rose from the dead; all Catholics believe this. Catholicism has been the decisive spiritual force in the history of Western civilization. Catholicism is not an island; rather, it is a continent, an entire world extending across 2,000 plus years and embracing more than 825 million people in every country on Earth. Catholicism is a way of being human, a way of being religious, and finally, a way of being Christian.

Catholicism touches every aspect of life and excludes none. But how does Catholicism differ from Christianity? First, Catholicism is about Catholic, which means universal. Catholicism is not about a national church, but rather a worldwide one. It is truly an international and multicultural institution. One of the first great councils of church leaders met in Nicea in 325 and came up with the Nicene Creed. This prayer is prayed in every Catholic Church throughout the world. In it are four “marks” of the Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. Prayers, worship, and ritual reflect the local church in language, music, and sacred art.

Catholicism today has a very optimistic view of creation and the human person. Creation and the human person are seen as fundamentally good. This has not always been the case. There have been points in history when the person and the world were seen as being evil or corrupt. Only the spiritual was to be encouraged, not the body, worldliness, or sensuality. Thankfully, a more optimistic outlook eventually prevailed, which allowed Catholicism to underwrite sculpture, painting, stained glass windows, music, drama, plays, and scientific inquiry.

Catholicism is about holiness and wholeness. All people are to be holy every day, not just on Sunday at worship. holiness recognizes that one needs a savior, and one cannot live in isolation. A community, the church, is needed. People are called to holiness as a group in holiness and wholeness, all people, every day. There is a fundamental dignity to all persons because they are all created in God’s image and likeness. Catholicism attempts to hold on to the “and”: faith and reason, grace and nature, spirit and soul. Yes, one is “saved” but one is not yet with God in heaven. There is a lifetime of trying to put one’s faith into action.

There is a strong commitment in Catholicism to social transformation. One’s relationship with God is in direct proportion to one’s caring for those on the fringes of society. The early Church cared for widows, orphans, and the dying. Throughout the history of the Church, leaders and common folk were always speaking up for those who were forgotten or neglected. In the United States, there was strong support for the early labor unions and workers’ rights. A Roman Catholic priest, Reverend John Augustan Ryan, came up with the economic principles for a “just wage”, which later became the reality of the minimum wage.

Catholicism has a profound sense of history, good and bad. Yes, there have been many sad and tragic times in the history of the Catholic Church. These should never be overlooked or whitewashed. But at these times men and women called by and inspired by God called leadership and the entire Church back to foundational concepts (see Matthew 25:31-46)

Catholicism today has a profound respect for human knowledge. One needs to remember that after philosophy, theology is the oldest intellectual discipline. Theology is faith seeking understanding. There is a need to accept and study sacred texts and sacred tradition. There is a need to allow for the insights of reason and experience to show who and what the human person is. Science is not the enemy. Blind faith is not part of Catholicism.

There are 26 different branches of Catholicism, known as “rites”. In the West, most are familiar with Roman Catholicism. But there are also the Armenian, Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian, Chaldean, Syrian, and Maronite Catholics, as well as the very large Eastern rite Catholics who separated from Rome in 1054. Some Catholics accept the leadership of the Holy Father or Pope in Rome; others would just see him as another bishop, or perhaps the first among equals.

Catholicism completely permeates the roots of European culture, art, and literature, from the beginnings of modern science in the 13th century to the foundations of nursing and mass education in the 19th century. Catholics have contributed to the arts, sciences, and humanities. In certain cases, they have brought with them a greater depth and vision precisely because of their Catholic faith; in the music of Palestrina, Elgar, or Messiaen, the poetry of Dante, the paintings of Giotto, Fra Angelico or Michelangelo, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Evelyn Waugh or Flannery O’Connor (the list could be extended indefinitely), one can clearly trace a Catholic spirit. One can see this also in other fields, in the contributions of E. F. Schumacher to environmental economics, of Mary Douglas and Rene Girard to anthropology, and of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor to contemporary philosophy. The Catholic spirit exists not just in Europe, but also on every continent. In fact, every country has its own expression of the faith, from the martyrs of Nagasaki to the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

In the end, Catholicism is characterized by three main ideas; sacramentality, mediation, and communion. The special configuration of these ideas within Catholicism makes it unique. Catholicism is a tradition that sees God in all things (sacramentality), using the human and the material and the finite, (mediation) to bring about the unity of the human family (communion).