

## P R E F A C E

Catholicism is contagious. We catch it from other Catholics who are living their faith with enthusiasm. Most often we catch it from Catholics banded together in some kind of community—a parish, a prayer group, a Bible study, or some other communal group whose committed relationships and obvious love for one another attract others like magnets.

I am a cradle Catholic, raised by a faithful, single-parent mother, and educated in Catholic schools from the earliest grades through graduate school. But I did not discover what it meant to live a fully Catholic life until I became a university student in my late teens.

Shortly after I enrolled at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the fall of 1959, I bumped into an informal community of professors and students who were living what I sometimes call “the normal Catholic life.” They invited me to join them for early-morning prayer. With them I learned to pray a layperson’s version of the Liturgy of the Hours. That exposure to praying the psalms and reflecting on scripture shaped the way I pray to this day.

We organized ourselves into a kind of Catholic fraternity or sorority called Chi Rho, the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek. The group pursued what I regard as essential everyday habits of the spiritual life of Catholics. We worshipped together at Mass. We studied the liturgy and the sacraments, sponsored a Bible study, and worked for social justice and racial equality. Many others from the group and I marched on Washington in 1963 and were thrilled to have heard Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

My Chi Rho brothers and sisters brought me to experience a personal relationship with Jesus, the relationship that defines each of us as Catholics. At one of our Bible studies I was awestruck and transformed by a verse in John 14 that said the Father and the Son had come to make their home in me (see Jn 14:23). I was stunned that the God of the universe dwelt in me even though I did not feel it. This verse has become a theme for my life.

Then one night during Lent of my junior year, Professor William Storey, the faculty advisor to Chi Rho, asked me if I experienced the Lord when I prayed. Later I realized that this was his Catholic way of asking if I had a personal relationship with Jesus. I told him that, no, I had no experience of God when I prayed. But later that night I prayed and asked the Lord to let me experience him. No sooner were the words out of my mouth than the Lord enfolded me in his presence. This encounter with Christ has oriented my life. At that moment the Lord elicited from me a decision to follow him.

So my earliest involvement with committed Catholics introduced me to the following identity-shaping practices or habits of Catholic spiritual life:

- forming and sustaining community;
- praying daily;
- regularly participating in the Mass, sacraments, and other liturgical prayer;
- regular scripture study;
- working for social justice; and
- maintaining a personal relationship with the Lord, which of course is the foundation of all our spiritual practices.

Then, in 1963 I was admitted to the University of Notre Dame to pursue a graduate degree in history. In December I made a Cursillo retreat and soon found myself participating in a community of Catholics whose faith was contagious. A Cursillo retreat is a dynamic, short course in Christian living given over the period of a long weekend. Its teachings, prayer, and fellowship broadened my Catholic experience and drew from me a deeper sense of commitment to Christ.

One teaching in particular, titled “Environments,” permanently affected my approach to evangelization. The presenter explained that we should pray for members of all our social environments and be prepared to speak to individuals about the Lord and the Church. He urged that we hold ourselves to a decision to be open about our faith and recommended that we each prepare a short testimony that we could instantly use when an opportunity arose. For the past five decades, I have found these principles effective for bringing others to Christ. And I suggest that those committed to spreading the Good News of Jesus adopt these “old” tried-and-true practices.

For me, the Cursillo highlighted two essential elements of the spiritual life of Catholics: commitment and evangelization.

At Notre Dame in 1967 my wife Mary Lou and I were among the earliest responders to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that came to be called the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Shortly after I experienced this intense conversion of heart—what we came to call being “baptized in the Spirit”—I found myself thrust into leadership. I served on the service committee that fostered the movement, led prayer groups in two Michigan cities, wrote a handbook for building prayer groups, and for eleven years edited *New Covenant*, the magazine that guided the Charismatic Renewal.

Receiving a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit touched every area of my life. His renewed presence energized my prayer, scripture study, worship, and every other element of my spirituality. The Spirit taught me how to receive spiritual gifts and use them to build up the Body of Christ. Most of all, the Holy Spirit heightened my experience of and love for the Lord Jesus.

My Charismatic Renewal experience added these practices to my understanding of the spiritual life of Catholics:

- receiving the Holy Spirit and his gifts;
- growing in holiness through the Spirit's gifts; and
- using spiritual gifts to build up the Church.

Over the past forty years I have had many opportunities to teach people about the practices or habits of Catholic spirituality. For example, I have spoken at conferences in the United States and Canada, served in Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) programs, led Bible studies, and chaired my parish's faith-formation commission. My books about faith, prayer, and the saints explain and illustrate the foundational principles and spiritual habits that shape our identity as Catholics. This book brings together my experiences and the profound blessing of introducing people to "the normal Catholic life."

*The Heart of Catholicism* is a book about what Catholics do and why they do it. It describes the practices and spiritual disciplines that shape a Catholic's daily life. You will notice that the book covers the elements of Catholic spirituality bulleted in this preface. My personal experience of the Lord and the Church flows into every chapter.

This is a book for every Catholic or for anyone who would like to become Catholic. It will serve everyone in

your pew at church, no matter how different: the lovely elderly lady in the funky straw hat praying her rosary; the middle-aged, balding man who sings too loud; or the young professional woman helping her four-year-old follow his colorful missal.

A cradle Catholic can read *The Heart of Catholicism* as a refresher course. A novice can use it as a handbook for getting up to speed. Participants in RCIA programs will find it especially useful. A Catholic who is confused about what he must do can consult it as a way of filling up his Catholic-knowledge gaps. Even people who disagree vigorously over critical issues should find the content of this book satisfying and agreeable, because it sticks to the very core of Catholic practices that we all share.

I designed the book for either individual or group use. Each chapter concludes with questions for personal reflection or discussion with others. You will find “Choose an Action” sections designed to prompt you to put your faith into practice. Scattered throughout are quotations from Church documents and good books which are intended to whet your appetite for more reading. You will find short lists of recommended books and online resources at the end of each chapter under the rubric “For Further Study.”

*The Heart of Catholicism* is a primer. It is only a first word—by no means the last word—on putting the Catholic faith into practice. It’s like your first arithmetic book, which did not pretend to cover all of mathematics. But it was a good start and got you on your way to algebra, geometry, and beyond. That’s the hope I have for this book. May it be a jumpstart for new Catholics, and a fresh start for the rest of us.

I.

# BEING CATHOLIC

*When we declare ourselves Catholic, we are not merely expressing a “religious preference,” as we are sometimes asked to do on a hospital form. Nor are we just saying that we attend a Catholic parish on Sunday mornings, although that is certainly part of it. So what does it really mean to say, “I’m a Catholic”?*

# 1.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CATHOLIC?

“What does being Catholic mean to you?” I asked this question of Catholics of different ages and backgrounds. Here are some of the answers I received:

- “It means belonging to a church, a community that places high emphasis on a sacramental system and responsibility to the poor, sick, and hurting.”
- “Being Catholic means being a part of the bride of Christ! Christ loved his bride so much that he gave everything for her.”
- “To me being Catholic means doing the right thing, standing for principles like being against abortions.”
- “It’s about being part of the Catholic Church, with all of its tradition and history.”

- “Being Catholic is to be a privileged guest at the greatest banquet, where I am fed with both God’s Word and his Body and Blood.”
- “It’s about embracing the beliefs of the Church, which do not change with its leaders. Regardless of who is the pastor, the basic beliefs stay the same.”
- “Believing what the Bible and the Church say about God, and doing one’s best to serve him.”

These are all interesting answers. None are wrong because the question is subjective: “What does being Catholic mean to *you*?” My interviewees gave good responses, each articulating important elements of being Catholic. But none of them hit the nail on the head about what it truly means to be a Catholic.

What do you think? What does it mean to be Catholic? What does it mean to call the Church Catholic? If we want to live as good and happy Catholics, we must at least understand what it means. Let’s explore these questions together.

The Bible reports that it was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” (see Acts 11:26). But nowhere does scripture refer to Christ’s disciples as “Catholics.” So where does that name come from?

At its root, *catholic* with a small *c* means “universal.” So the word denotes something that is present everywhere or in all things. Coincidentally, the city of Antioch was also connected with the first recorded use of *catholic* to designate the Church. In AD 110, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was martyred by wild animals in the arena at Rome. On his way to the arena, he wrote to the Christians at Smyrna, saying, “Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church.”<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean, then, that the Church is catholic or universal? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (830) says that



the Church is universal in two senses. St. Ignatius summed up the first sense: Christ's presence causes the Church to be universal because Jesus, the Lord of the universe, founded it and lives in it. Thus, we are not speaking here of a geographical reality. The One who is present everywhere, who keeps everything in existence, and in whom the fullness of God dwells—Christ himself—makes the Church catholic, universal, present everywhere (see Col 1:17–19).

Second, the *Catechism* (831) says the Church is universal because Christ gave it an unlimited mission. It is the Catholic Church because Jesus assigned it the responsibility to proclaim the Good News to all people and make disciples of all nations (see Mk 16:15 and Mt 28:19). “When Our Lord established the Church,” wrote apologist Frank Sheed, “it consisted of one hundred and twenty Jews; it had no age at all; its teaching had not begun. And in that instant it was the Catholic Church. For it had been made by the universal Teacher and Lifegiver for all human beings. That is the inner reality.”<sup>2</sup> No mere human institution is anywhere near so inclusive as this divinely established one.

These truths about the universality of the Church have very practical implications for you and me. They help us get past superficial understandings of what it means to be a Catholic. When we declare ourselves Catholic, we are not merely expressing a “religious preference,” as we are sometimes asked to do on a hospital form. Nor are we just saying that we attend a Catholic parish on Sunday mornings, although that is certainly part of it. So what does it really mean to say, “I’m a Catholic”?

Just as the Church is catholic because Christ lives in it and unites it, we are Catholics because of our relationship to him. Jesus made us members of the Church by linking us to himself, something similar to grafting branches onto

## The Church Christ Founded

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic; which our Savior, after His resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and him and the other Apostles to extend and direct with authority; [and] which he erected for all ages as “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tm 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of its visible structure.

—Second Vatican Council  
*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*  
(*Lumen gentium*), 8

a vine. Jesus himself used that image to depict our union with him. When he said, “I am the vine; you are the branches,” he was painting a word picture of our membership in the Church (see Jn 15:5). Just as a branch belongs to the vine, so we belong to Jesus. Branches get their life from the vine, and we get our Christian life from Christ. Like branches that wither when cut from a vine, we have no Christian life apart from him.

Thus, by saying we are Catholics we acknowledge that we are one with Christ. We affirm that the Lord of the universe has made us his own. Simply put, at the most foundational level, a Catholic is a

Christian—a follower of Jesus Christ.

We share many beliefs and practices with other Christians—with mainline Protestants, with Orthodox, Evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians. But we diverge in many other ways. Among the differences that separate us from other Christians, perhaps the most significant is the Catholic teaching about the Church itself. We believe that the Catholic Church is the direct descendant of that visible society that Jesus founded and handed over to Peter and the apostles to care for, propagate, and govern. The Second Vatican Council declared authoritatively that “this Church, constituted

and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter [the bishop of Rome, the pope] and by the bishops in communion with him." Above we discussed how Christ's presence and the Gospel mission cause the Church to be catholic. That was the "grace" side of the story. Now with the mention of Church government, we have turned to look at the "law" side, which will round out our understanding of what it means to be Catholic. A Cath-

*Who* Is a Catholic?

They are fully incorporated into the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion.

—Second Vatican Council  
*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*

olic is a Christian who meets certain requirements. St. Robert Bellarmine summed up these conditions in his classic definition of the Catholic Church. He said it is "the community of men and women linked together by the profession of the same Christian faith, united in the communion of the same sacraments, under the government of the legitimate pastors and especially the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff."<sup>3</sup>

Catholics are joined to Christ and to each other in the Church by these bonds: profession of faith, participation in the sacraments, and submission to authority. First, we must profess the Christian faith, which is set forth in the Creed, and we must believe Catholic doctrine. Second, we must receive the sacraments, which are the source of Christian life. We must also continue to participate in them—especially the Eucharist—in order to maintain our communion with the

Church. Finally, we must submit to the authority of the pope and bishops, which they normally exercise in teaching and providing pastoral direction.

Sometimes requirements annoy us. We find them restrictive or oppressive. However, our view of these three conditions for being Catholic must be quite the opposite, for they are avenues that lead to Christ. Our profession of faith marks and affirms our adherence to Christ, the Eucharist and all

### *T*he Apostles' Creed

I believe in God,  
 the Father almighty,  
 Creator of heaven and earth,  
 and in Jesus Christ, his only Son,  
     our Lord,  
 who was conceived by the Holy  
     Spirit,  
 born of the Virgin Mary,  
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
 was crucified, died, and was buried;  
 he descended into hell;  
 on the third day he rose again from  
     the dead;  
 he ascended into heaven,  
 and is seated at the right hand of  
     God the Father almighty;  
 from thence he will come to judge  
     the living and the dead.  
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
 the holy catholic Church,  
 the communion of saints,  
 the forgiveness of sins,  
 the resurrection of the body,  
 and life everlasting. Amen.

the sacraments bring us into his presence and secure our relationship with him, and the pope and bishops are empowered to ensure that Catholic teaching does not stray from the deposit of faith that we received from Jesus.<sup>4</sup> This divinely appointed assurance that the Church will remain faithful to the mind of Christ is a great protection and blessing for all Catholics.

Let me tell you about my friend Mike's experience, which illustrates what it means to be a Catholic. This true story shows how the presence of Christ in the Church (the grace side) draws a person to profess faith in and submit to the community or human society he founded (the law side).

Mike had been raised in a Christian home, but his

rebellious adolescence had diluted his commitment to his faith. However, friends in college had evangelized him, and he then gave his life to Christ and entered a personal relationship with him. Mike lived with our family for several years. He involved himself fully—sharing meals, prayer times, and family events. At one point he began worshipping at Mass with us.

After several months of attending Sunday liturgies, Mike announced that he wanted to join the Catholic Church. I suggested that he might want to consider returning to the denomination he grew up in. But Mike was sure that he wanted to become a Catholic because somehow he felt irresistibly drawn to Jesus in the Eucharist. This was the grace side of Catholicism at work.

So Mike went through the process of joining the Church. He enrolled in an adult-initiation program at the parish, where he participated in classes about life in Christ; the sacraments; the Church's government, laws, and spiritual practices; and so on. Because he had been baptized as a baby and so was already a Christian, when he had completed his catechetical course and process of spiritual formation, he made a simple profession of faith and was received into the Catholic Church. This was the law side of Catholicism at work.

I won't forget the look on Mike's face when he received his First Communion. This young man, who a few years prior had been a rambunctious youth, glowed with the innocence of a seven-year-old! These events occurred more than forty years ago, but Mike, now with a family of his own, is living as a faithful Catholic and enjoying life more. And, he is now serving his parish as a permanent deacon.

What attracted Mike to the Catholic Church was the reality that makes it universal—the dynamic love of God generously expressed in a frail, human community. In a fairly

ordinary parish, he encountered the Real Presence of Jesus, which worked on him like a spiritual magnet. Then Mike came to profess faith in the community that Jesus founded and entrusted to the apostles and their successors to lead.

Maybe up until now your experience as a Catholic does not match Mike's. You may have set your sights too low. Perhaps considering what it really means to be Catholic will help you elevate your view and enlarge your experience of God. "Look beyond the bread you eat," declares a popular liturgical song, "and see your Savior and your Lord."<sup>5</sup>

### COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION *Questions*

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1. What does it mean to you to be Catholic?
2. What is the root meaning of the word *catholic*?
3. What is the inner reality that causes the Church to be catholic?
4. How does the mission to spread the Gospel make the Church catholic?
5. What three requirements bind Catholics to Christ and the Church? In what sense are they life giving?

### CHOOSE AN *Action*

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1. For the next month, pray the Apostles' Creed once each day. Pray it reflectively, affirming your belief in each of its phrases. At the end of the month, write down what praying the Creed taught you. Then pray it daily for another month.