

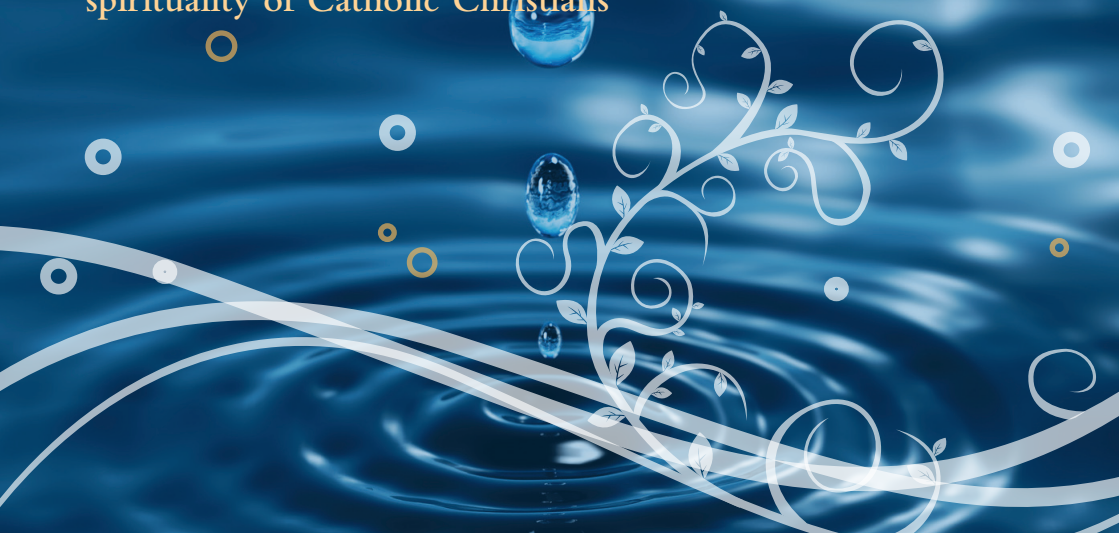


Australian Catholic  
Bishops Conference



# The Catholic Church

An introduction to the life, beliefs, practices and  
spirituality of Catholic Christians





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that Jesus is Lord,  
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# Introduction

This brochure introduces the life, beliefs, practices and spirituality of Catholic Christians. It is written especially to introduce the Catholic Church to believers from other religions, but it can also be used for Christians from other churches, as well as for anyone who wants to find out what the Catholic Church believes and teaches. Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the brochure presents the key elements of Catholic identity and teaching in very summary form. It also gives references to official Catholic sources where enquirers can find more detailed information on the Catholic Church.

Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

May 2011

# The Catholic Church

Catholics are first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ, who proclaimed the Kingdom of God in word and deed. Through him, with him and in him, Catholics are called to be Church, the body of Christ, the community of disciples who continue his mission on earth until he comes again.

Catholics believe that Jesus is Lord, the Christ, the Saviour, the Son of God incarnate, who by his life, death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit inaugurated the Kingdom of God. This central belief leads to acknowledgement of the Trinity, that the one and only God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Catholics are gathered from all races and nations, called to be the one people of God, members of Christ's body, temples of the Holy Spirit and witnesses to the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

The Catholic Church is a community of communities. The community of the family form the domestic church; the Catholic families and individuals in a neighbourhood together form the local parish; the Catholic parishes gathered around a bishop form a diocese or local church; the local churches, whether they be Eastern or Western together form the one Catholic Church. For all Catholics, communion with the local Church of Rome and its bishop, the pope, is central to their identity and faith - hence the popular name "Roman Catholic", most often used to distinguish Western Catholics from other Christians who also profess to be 'catholic'.

Catholics hold many beliefs and values in common with Orthodox and Protestant Christians—including scripture, the apostolic heritage, a common patrimony of teaching, some sacred rituals, and a commitment to serve society—but are often at variance over particular forms of ministry and governance. All Christians are called to work and pray for the complete visible unity that Christ desires for his Church.



Catholics are fellow pilgrims with the members of other religions, with whom they share many religious and moral convictions, including a commitment to the transcendent dimension of human living, some spiritual disciplines and the obligation to work for peace and justice. All believers are called to cooperate together in service of the common good and the care of creation.

Catholics share the common humanity of all peoples. They cooperate with civil society by witnessing to Gospel values and promoting the common good. A particular Catholic contribution is concern for the poor and for all who are marginalised.

**All Christians are called to work and pray for the complete visible unity that Christ desires for his Church.**

# Part One:

## The Profession of Faith

### Revelation

Catholics acknowledge that God created all to enjoy eternal life. Although sin entered human history and marred God's original design, God promised salvation. God revealed himself through creation, through prophets and inspired preachers and writers, and finally in a complete, definitive and unsurpassable way in the incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ. This revelation of God in Christ through the Spirit was attested by the apostles, written in the Scriptures, and has been handed down in the Church through the ages.

### Sacred Scripture

Sacred Scripture is the inspired sacred writings which the Magisterium (the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, the bishops in communion with the pope) has confirmed to be the revealed word of God and which witness to the incarnate Word of God in Jesus Christ.

Catholics acknowledge 46 books of the Old Testament (including the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Psalms, the Prophets and the Wisdom Literature, all of which are a common heritage from the Jews). They also acknowledge 27 books of the New Testament (including the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline and Apostolic Writings).

The Creed celebrates the creation, redemption and sanctification carried out by the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.





## Tradition

Tradition is the lived practice of Catholics down through the ages. It includes prayer, liturgy, preaching, teaching and the love of God and neighbour as expressed in dedicated service to others. It is the living witness of countless millions of Catholics, responding to Christ's invitation, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, making the Gospel come alive in the different times and places of unfolding human history. This is supremely true of Mary and the saints. A special moment in this living tradition is the Catholic Church's teaching of faith and morals as confirmed by the Magisterium.

## The Creed

The faith of the Church is summed up in the Creed, the testimony of faith of the ancient Councils. This has been handed down over generations, taught in the Catechism and is professed at significant moments in the life of Catholics. For example, when someone enters the Church through baptism they profess the Creed (parents, godparents and the community do it on behalf of infants). It is also solemnly recited at Sunday Mass, major feast days and formal appointments to sacred office.

The Creed celebrates the creation, redemption and sanctification carried out by the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

# The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ  
the only Begotten Son of God,  
born of the Father before all ages.  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
through Him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,  
he suffered death and was buried,  
and rose again on the third day  
in accordance with the Scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead  
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.  
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins  
And I look forward to the resurrection of the dead  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## The Mission of the Church

The mission of the Church is to proclaim and serve the Kingdom of God inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is the lived witness of faithful Catholics in all walks of life; there is the official teaching authority of the bishops in service of the Word; there is the charismatic witness of individuals and religious communities following the prophetic impulse in responding to the signs of the time and the contemporary needs of society and the world.

Catholics carry out their mission through a variety of activities including:

- liturgy and prayer
- celebration of the sacraments
- proclamation of the Gospel
- promotion of the Church's teaching
- pastoral care of the faithful
- service of the common good
- solidarity with the poor
- working for justice
- promoting peace and reconciliation
- care for the earth
- ecumenism
- interreligious dialogue
- teaching and education
- health services
- care for the sick and the elderly
- ....

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# Part Two: The Celebration of the Christian Mystery

## Sacramental Economy

God uses ordinary human beings and natural objects like water, oil, bread and wine to communicate the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ. This mediation of the extraordinary through the ordinary, of the supernatural through the natural, is what Catholics mean by the word “sacrament”.

When Catholics speak of the sacramental economy and say that the church is “a sacrament” they affirm that the church is the earthly mediation of the divine plan, the body of Christ in human history, and the sign and instrument of God’s Kingdom revealed in Jesus and of the unity of the human race.

The Catholic Church has seven sacraments. These are at the heart of the liturgical and spiritual life of Catholics and shape their lives.

## The Seven Sacraments of the Church

The three sacraments of initiation:

1. **Baptism** – is immersion in water or pouring water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It signifies being born again through being incorporated into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and becoming a member of the Church.
2. **Confirmation** – is anointing with the blessed oil of chrism, prayer and laying of hands. It signifies being sealed by the Holy Spirit and strengthened to witness to the Christian faith.
3. **Eucharist** – fulfils Jesus’ command at the Last Supper to celebrate that Supper in his memory until he comes

again. In accord with his word, Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. Participating in the Eucharistic liturgy—especially partaking in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ—unites Catholics with his sacrificial death on the cross and resurrection, fosters community, and provides nourishment for Christian living.

The two sacraments of healing:

4. **Penance (Reconciliation)**— celebrates forgiveness through the confession of sins and the words of absolution by a priest. It effects reconciliation with God and with each other.
5. **Anointing** – uses blessed oil, prayer and the laying of hands on the sick and the frail. It unites them with Christ's suffering and death and so gives them strength, comfort and peace in their time of trial.

The two sacraments of service to others:

6. **Holy Orders** – is the laying on of hands by a bishop and the prayer of ordination. It consecrates chosen men for sacred ministry in the Church as deacons, priests and bishops to act in the name of Christ, the Head of the Church, in service of the community. Priests and bishops are anointed with the blessed oil of chrism.
7. **Matrimony** – is the freely-given consent between a man and a woman to an exclusive, life-long commitment of mutual love and for the raising of children. The exchange takes place in the presence of the Church's minister and two witnesses. The faithful living out of this spousal love between husband and wife over a lifetime is a sign of Christ's faithful love for the Church.

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# Part Three: Life in Christ

## Human Dignity

Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God and destined to share forever in the intimate life of the Trinity. All must respond to this invitation freely, but all are inhibited by the effects of sin. God freely bestows all the help needed to overcome sin and live life to the full and inherit the Kingdom.

Every human being is made in the  
image and likeness of God



# Christian Life

Catholics are called to witness to this new life in Christ through the power of the Spirit by their love for each other and by their service of the common good of society and the world.

## The Ten Commandments

Catholics are called to follow the *Ten Commandments* given to the Jews. Although many of these ethical-moral precepts are common to other religions and philosophies, their revelation in Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21 gives them divine authority. Their commonality means that Catholics join with all people of good will in working for respect for human life and the family, justice, peace, human rights and the integrity of creation. Their divine authorship means that Catholics bring a Christian faith commitment and a Gospel-inspired perspective to these ethical-moral issues.

The first three commandments concern love of God and the last seven commandments concern love of neighbour.

- I. I am the Lord your God:  
you shall not have strange Gods before me.
- II. You shall not take the name of the Lord your  
God in vain.
- III. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
- IV. Honour your father and your mother.
- V. You shall not kill.
- VI. You shall not commit adultery.
- VII. You shall not steal.
- VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
- IX. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.
- X. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.

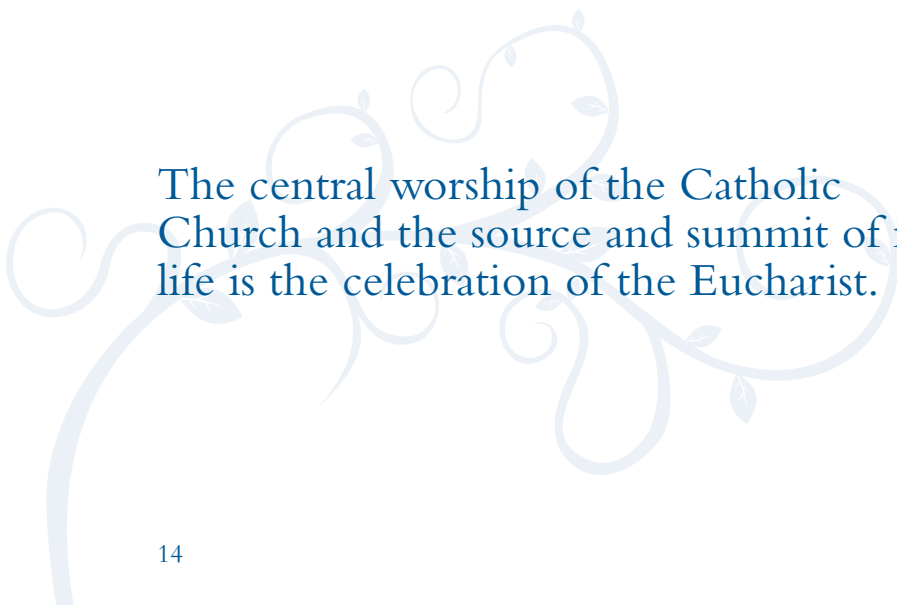
## The Greatest Commandment

When Jesus was asked which commandment in the law was the greatest he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:34, joining them together:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40, cf. also Mark 12:29-31)

## The New Commandment

On the night before his death, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: “that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12, cf also John 13:34). This new commandment challenges Christians to a personal intensity and limitlessness in carrying out the Ten Commandments which goes far beyond the letter of the law. Living out the demands of this new commandment is made possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit.



The central worship of the Catholic Church and the source and summit of its life is the celebration of the Eucharist.





## Part Four: Christian Prayer

Living up to the challenges of the Christian vocation is only made possible by prayer. It is the gift of God who first comes to encounter us through the Spirit. Christian prayer is the personal relationship of the children of God with their Father, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit who dwells in their hearts. It is modelled first on Christ Himself and then on the saints who imitated him.

The formal prayer of the Catholic Church is the liturgy. This worship uses prescribed scripture and prayer texts, is presided over by ordained ministers of the Church and is communal and public. The central worship of the Catholic Church and the source and summit of its life is the celebration of the Eucharist. Another form of worship is the Divine Office, the prayerful recitation of Psalms and other texts at prescribed times of the day, usually by priests and religious.

There is also informal prayer, the personal devotions of individual members of the Catholic Church, offered in private or communally. These take various forms, including prayerful reading of scripture, meditation, petition, adoration, contemplation, retreats and other spiritual exercises such as the Rosary. Many devotions are associated with particular saints, modelling their attitudes, making their prayers one's own, seeking to follow their example and asking their intercession for particular needs.

The writings of the saints form a treasure house of spiritual wisdom—for example, Franciscan, Carmelite, Ignatian and other spiritualities—which are meditated upon, practised and followed for growth in the spiritual life.



The Christian prayer par excellence is that of Christ himself, who taught his disciples to pray in these words:

## Our Father or The Lord's Prayer

(cf Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4)

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us,  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

Catholics traditionally show a particular reverence for Mary, the Mother of God, and the model of Christian living. The following is a popular Catholic prayer.

## Hail Mary

(cf Luke 1:28, 42)

Hail, Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou among women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death.  
Amen.

## Glory be to the Father

Glory be to the Father  
and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning  
is now, and ever shall be  
world without end. Amen.



## Prayer of St Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where is sadness, joy.  
O Divine master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console.  
To be understood as to understand,  
To be loved as to love,  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

## Beatitudes

(Matthew 5: 3-11)

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom  
of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called  
children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

## The fruits of the Holy Spirit

(Galatians 5:22)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,  
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

# Resources

For further information see:

## **The Holy See**

<http://www.vatican.va/>

- Catechism of the Catholic Church
- Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church

## **The Catholic Church in Australia**

(website of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference)

<http://www.catholic.org.au>

## **The Catholic Enquiry Centre**

(the website of the national faith promotion outreach of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference)

<http://www.catholicenquiry.com>





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