

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND CATHOLICISM: WHAT I LIKE ABOUT CATHOLICISM

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Perhaps a better title would be "How I Understand Catholicism." As it stands, the title is simply one I use in the filing system for my articles that I post. The subtitle is actually the original heading of a set of handwritten notes that I have made over the decades during which I have sat, stood, and kneeled in many churches—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and other Christian ecclesial bodies.

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- ✓ I like being part of a Church whose members include 1.2 billion Christians worldwide.
- ✓ I like being part of a Church whose members include 51 million U.S. Americans.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church is racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse (Pew Research Center, 2015).

- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church was among the world's first institutions to provide free health care to the poor.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church established the first hospital (Charity Hospital, New Orleans, 1727) in the colonies (Niebuhr, 1994).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church is the largest non-government provider of healthcare in the world (Agnew, 2010).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church is the largest private provider of healthcare in the U.S. (Niebuhr, 1994).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church serves the poorest of the poor. Ascension Health, the nation's largest Catholic health system and largest nonprofit provider in the U.S., operates 66 general hospitals, along with clinics, cancer centers, home health services, and nursing homes. In 2019, Ascension's bad debt from treating uninsured and under-insured people grew by \$167 million, or 23 percent (Keiser Health News, 2020).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church respects the sanctity of life from the moment of conception to natural death.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church opposes the culture of death, including abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, murder, and war.

- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church teaches that science and the Christian faith are complementary and not contradictory (Catholic Church, 2012).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church started missions, monasteries, and convents all around the world.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church has clergy from all over the world.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches in the U.S. have clergy from Africa, India, Ireland, Mexico, and from all over the USA.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches are named after Saints rather than secular ranks (e.g., there is no "First Catholic Church of Atlanta").
- ✓ I like how the doors of Catholic churches are open every day from before 7:00 in the morning until after 8:00 at night.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches have art, paintings, and statues of spiritual role models who are known as the Saints.
- ✓ I like how Catholics venerate Saints rather than megachurch pastors, politicians, media celebrities, or professional athletes.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches always have votive candles, whose lighting signifies prayers, offered in faith, entering the light of God.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches have candles that show our reverence and desire to remain present in prayer as we continue on our day.
- ✓ When I walk into a Catholic church, I like being greeted by a reverent silence rather than the loud noise of social conversations.
- ✓ I like how the Sanctuary of a Catholic church is used only for prayer and Mass, and never for lectures or secular events.
- ✓ I like how we enter the church by reminding ourselves of our Baptism and then by making a sign of the cross.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church recognizes the Sacrament of Baptism performed in any Christian church.
- ✓ I like how the architecture of Catholic churches is designed in the shape of a cross, so that I can always kneel at the foot of the cross.
- ✓ I like how the architecture of Catholic churches is designed so that the altar is located at the heart of the church.
- ✓ I like how we bow or genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament, whether it is publicly exposed or enclosed in the Tabernacle, as a sign of adoration.
- ✓ I like how the Tabernacle reminds us of the Ark of the Covenant, complete with two cherubim of gold—"make them of hammered work"—at each end of the cover.
- ✓ I like how God explicitly instructed Moses to make two gold cherubim and put them on top of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-21). If God gave instructions to make images of golden angels, then God must not be against people making religious statues.

- ✓ I like how Catholics kneel, because Jesus kneeled during prayer (e.g., Luke 22:41).
- ✓ I like the uniformity of posture in worship as together we make the sign of the cross, bow, kneel, sit, stand, wait, and walk together as a congregation.
- ✓ I like how the Lectionary for Mass (2001) forms the basis of Protestant lectionaries, most notably the Revised Common Lectionary (1992) and its derivatives.
- ✓ I like how all Catholic churches in my time zone read and hear the same Lectionary readings during the same hour.
- ✓ I like how all Catholic churches in the world read and hear the same Lectionary readings on the same day.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Bible (e.g., New American Bible) includes seven books that are missing from Protestant Bibles: 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, and Wisdom, as well as sections of Esther and Daniel.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic and Orthodox Church use the same seven *Deuterocanonical* books, which Jews and Protestants term *Apocryphal* books.

### The Liturgical Year

- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church established the calendar in use throughout the world today (i.e., Pope Gregory XIII in 1582).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church marks time throughout the entire liturgical year.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church has at least five Mass times on Christmas Eve, culminating with the midnight Mass that is celebrated all around the world.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church celebrates all 12 days of Christmas, beginning December 25 (Christmas) and running through January 6 (the Epiphany, sometimes also called Three Kings' Day).
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church, for more than 1,500 years, remembers Ash Wednesday with the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church recognizes 40 days of Lent—a time of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving—beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending at the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.
- ✓ I like how Catholics observe the Washing of the Feet during the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday.
- ✓ I like how the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday evening ushers in the Holy Triduum.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church celebrates Eastertide, the period of 50 days beginning on Easter Sunday and extending to Pentecost Sunday.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church orders the weeks of Ordinary time (Latin, *ordo*; English, order), representing the ordered life of the faithful.
- ✓ I like the Catholic liturgical calendar, in which Ordinary time turns into the season of Advent, which awaits the season of Christmas, which leads to the season of Epiphany, which leads to the season of Lent, which culminates in the season of Easter, which leads back to Ordinary time.
- ✓ I like how the homilist at the last public Mass on Sunday before the temporary suspension of in-person Masses during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized three points: We should strive to discern the will of God each day, we should have a vocation and live into it each day, we should always be prepared to meet our Maker.

### Celebration of the Mass

- ✓ I like knowing that, on any day of the week, there will be a minimum of 3 daily Masses from which I can choose to attend.
- ✓ I like knowing that, on any Sunday, there will be a minimum of 5 Masses from which I can choose to attend.
- ✓ I like how we kneel in silent prayer before the Celebration of the Mass begins.
- ✓ I like how the chiming of the bell signals the beginning of Mass.
- ✓ I like the presence, scent, and symbolism of the incense throughout the Mass.
- ✓ I like how the Penitential Act at every Mass reminds me to take a daily personal inventory and to confess my sins of commission and my sins of omission.
- ✓ I like the rhythm and reciprocity of the Liturgy, between the lector and the congregation during the Responsorial Reading.
- ✓ I like the way that the Psalms are chanted or sung much as they have been for hundreds of years.
- ✓ I like how everyone in the entire congregation stands for the reading of the Gospel.
- ✓ I like how a Homily integrates themes of the four readings from the lectionary (i.e., First reading, Responsorial Psalm, Second Reading, Gospel Reading).
- ✓ I like the idea of the Communion of Saints, which fits with my experience of relationships with the Faithful Departed continuing after life on earth has ended.
- ✓ I like how congregants respond to each of the General Intercessions (Prayers of the Faithful) with a short invocation (i.e., "Lord, hear our prayer").
- ✓ I like how the General Intercessions (Prayers of the Faithful) include prayers for public officials, no matter to which political party they belong.
- ✓ I like how we recite the Lord's Prayer, which Catholics call the Our Father, while we hold hands together.
- ✓ I like the actions and the symbolism involved in the Sign of Peace, which is always done before receiving Holy Communion.
- ✓ I like watching old people and young children walk down to the front of the church to receive Holy Communion.
- ✓ I like the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the mystery of which I don't have to fully understand in order to experience.
- ✓ I like how the profound mystery of the Real Presence of Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—is experienced in the Eucharist.
- ✓ I like how the Catholic Church acknowledges that we can experience a spiritual event without fully understanding it (mystery).

- ✓ I like how the Mass allows participation of all our senses: sight, sound, tactile, taste, olfaction, and kinesthetic.
- ✓ I like how the Latin Mass is ended with the dismissal: "*Ite, missa est*" ("Go, you are dismissed" (from which the Latin "*missa*" became the name of the celebration).
- ✓ I like how the Mass is ended: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," to which we respond, "Thanks be to God."
- ✓ I like how, as we leave the Mass to go to our homes, offices, and schools, we are reminded to live as one of Jesus' disciples, asking ourselves, "What would Jesus do?"

### Silence

- ✓ I like the dozen or more different times during the Mass when there is complete silence.
  1. Before Mass begins
  2. Before Penitential Act
  3. Before 1st reading
  4. After Homily
  5. During General Intercessions (i.e., after "For those private intentions we hold in the silence of our hearts.")
  6. After Consecration of Element of Bread, the Body of Christ.
  7. During Elevation of Consecrated Element of Bread (i.e., the Body)
  8. After Consecration of Wine, the Precious Blood of Christ.
  9. During Elevation of Consecrated Element of Wine (i.e., the Blood)
  10. After the Sign of Peace
  11. After the Agnus Dei (i.e., when Priest receives Communion)
  12. After Holy Communion
- ✓ I like the silence within which we respond to the "altar call" of Holy Communion. It is in part through how we experience the Eucharist that we renew our participation in Christ's covenant, deepen our relationship with the Lord in prayer, and receive nourishment to serve in practical ways such as giving comfort to the poor, the sick, and those who suffer.

### What I Do Not Like About Catholicism

- X Impatience:** I do not like the practice of Priests and Deacons whose invocation "We pray to the Lord" follows "For those needs and intentions we hold in the silence of our hearts" by less than a half-second so that no one in the congregation has time for even a moment of silence.
- X Judgmentalism:** I do not like how I mentally judge a few of the attendees of daily Mass who make audible signs and look at their watches whenever the morning celebrant happens to arrive three minutes later than their watches are set. What's the rush?
- X Automatism:** I do not like the liturgical practice of Priests who seem to act more like mindless automatons than celebrants when they are seemingly going through the motions of performing their daily duties as fast as they can.
- X Monotonism:** I do not like the practice of Priests whose monotonous voices sound like their homiletics classes focused more on eliminating any trace of affect or intonation than reflecting any spirit of enthusiasm.
- X Funeralism:** I do not like the practice of Priests who seem like they are conducting a funeral than they seem to be celebrating the Liturgy of the Eucharist.
- X Sarcasm:** I do not like the practice of Priests whose homiletic criticisms of their congregations seem antithetical to the *ministerium* (e.g., building disciples) and the *magisterium* (e.g., promoting evangelization) of the Church.
- Pseudo-celibacism:** I do not like the practice of Priests who take public vows of celibacy while secretly practicing otherwise. The term—not the practice—is an oxymoron.
- X Clericalism:** I do not like the practice of Bishops and Cardinals who seem more devoted to the idolatry of *ecclesiolatry* than in worshipping God and serving others. *Ecclesiolatry* refers to the excessive dedication to the church as an institution, rather than to the religion it serves.
- X Elitism:** I do not like the practice of parish Pastors who seem more interested in acquiring power, privilege, and prestige than in practicing poverty and humility.
- X Cronyism:** I do not like the practice of Bishops and Archbishops who appoint their friends and associates to positions of authority, without proper regard to their qualifications.
- X Authoritarianism:** I do not like the autocratic practice of Church officials whose authoritarianism promotes power in the upper echelon of the hierarchy while enabling passivity among parishioners, all of which contradicts the egalitarianism and inclusiveness of Jesus.
- X Imperialism:** I do not like the real division of the Church, in which the power interests of the Roman Curia seem to be so out of touch with the human needs of local parishes.

- X Schism:** I do not like the "growing alienation of the 'church from below' from the 'church from above,' which goes as far as indifference" (Küng, 2001, p. 197).
- X Protectionism:** I do not like the practice of the Church in opposing state legislation that would toll the statute of limitations for civil suits of victims of child abuse perpetuated by Catholic Priests.
- X Exclusivism:** I do not like the practice of the Church in excluding from Holy Communion remarried Catholics, who believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, while at the same time including Priests who have broken their Sacramental vows by engaging in child abuse or secret love affairs.
- X Paternalism:** I do not like the practice of Pastors who restrict the freedom and responsibilities of their subordinates (Deacons, Lay ministers) in the subordinates' supposed best interests.
- X Absolutism:** I do not like the historically militarized, typically repressive, and always centralized enforcement of acceptance and belief in absolute principles in theological matters that stand in contrast to the diversity of beliefs and practices of the majority of parishioners.
- X Pseudo-Ecumenism:** I do not like the practice of Church officials who give obligatory lip service to ecumenical dialogue while at the same time voicing absolutism when engaged in inter-faith dialogue.
- X Anti-Ecumenism:** I do not like the practice of Church officials whose ecumenical dialogue refers to little more than a return of Orthodox and Protestants to the Catholic Church, with no need of reform for itself.
- X Capitalism:** I do not like the practice of Pastors who seem more concerned with raising bigger buildings rather than building better parishes.
- X Institutionalism:** I do not like the practice of Catholics who seem more interested in maintaining an institution than in practicing Christianity.
- X Fundamentalism:** I do not like the attitude of a some Catholics who think God is Catholic.
- X Catholicentrism:** I do not like the beliefs of some Catholic faithful, seminarians, and even priests who seem to ascribe to a Venn diagram model of Christianity as a subset of Catholicism rather than viewing Catholicism as a subset of Christianity. See also Particularism.
- X Particularism:** I do not like the attitude of some Catholics who seem to view Christianity as a part of Catholicism rather than viewing Catholicism as a part of Christianity.
- X Parochialism:** I do not like the practice of some Catholic schools whose religious educators leave their graduates with "a remarkably superficial understanding of Catholicism and a profound ignorance of scripture" (White & Corcoran, 2013, p. 79).

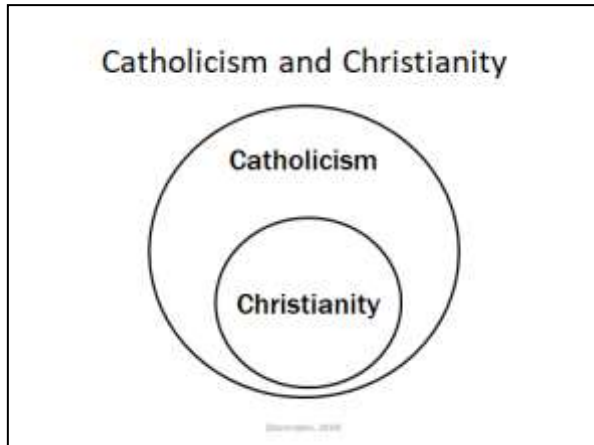


- X Legalism:** I do not like the practice of Priests who seem more focused on rules, regulations, and restrictions than on love, compassion, and understanding.
- X Literalism:** I do not like how a Catholic Diocese invalidated thousands of Baptisms because of one priest's use of the word "we" instead of "I" in the phrase "I baptise [sic] you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (One-word gaffe invalidates thousands of U.S. baptisms, 2022). Would baptisms have been invalidated if the alternative pronunciation or spelling (baptize) had been used?
- X Sexism:** I do not like the practice of a hierarchical power structure comprised solely of a closed group of old, unmarried men who engage in the systematic, institutionalized subjugation of women.
- X Marianism:** I do not like the practice of Mariacentric parishioners, whose worship of Mary is more adoration than veneration—more *hyperdulia* than *dulia*—elevating her to the status of a Deity or goddess rather than simply a Saint.
- X Anti-Transubstantiationism:** I do not like the fact that one-third (37%) of the most observant Catholics (i.e., those who attend Mass at least once a week) do not accept the church's teaching about transubstantiation (see Pew Research Center, 2019; Smith, 2019).
- X Traditionalism:** I do not like the attractive and progressive term that refers to the unattractive and regressive post-pandemic return of some pre-Vatican II practices in Mass.
- X Absenteeism:** I do not like how in many parishes the two Bs have continued to be withheld from congregants since the end of the COVID pandemic: (1) pew Bibles; (2) the Precious Blood, which, as a regression back to pre-Vatican II years, the clergy receive only for themselves but they withhold from the faithful. Everyone knows that it has nothing to do with any airborne virus (see O'Donoghue, 2022).
- Catholicentrism:** I do not like the attitude and beliefs of many Catholic faithful, seminarians, and even priests who describe Christianity as a subset of Catholicism (see Figure 1) rather than Catholicism as a subset of Christianity (see Figure 2).
- X Superstitions:** I don't like the practice of those whose magical beliefs and practices are a blend of Catholicism and superstition (see Figure 1). For example, a blurring of boundaries might occur when an otherwise devout Catholic buries a statue of St. Joseph (inside a hole, upside-down, and facing the house near the "For Sale" sign or near the road) in order to make St. Joseph work harder to get out of the ground and on his way to a safe home (so that the house will sell). It may be accompanied by a *novena* (a prayer said on nine consecutive days) such as the "St. Joseph Prayer," known colloquially as the "Prayer to St. Joseph to Sell House Fast").

- X Anti-Biblist:** I do not like how, by the Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (June 09, 2024), all of the Bibles were removed from a church in one parish with the explanation that "they were being torn up." Many Catholic churches have fewer editions of the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) than are in my personal library.
- X Transactionalism:** I do not like the perception that tuition discounts for Catholic schools are given in exchange for documentation of weekly attendance at Mass. An anonymous Catholic observes: "The transactional nature of the Mass attendance record feels misaligned with the intent of Mass" (Cooper, 2024, p. 7).

**Notes**

Figure 1  
Christianity as a Subset of Catholicism



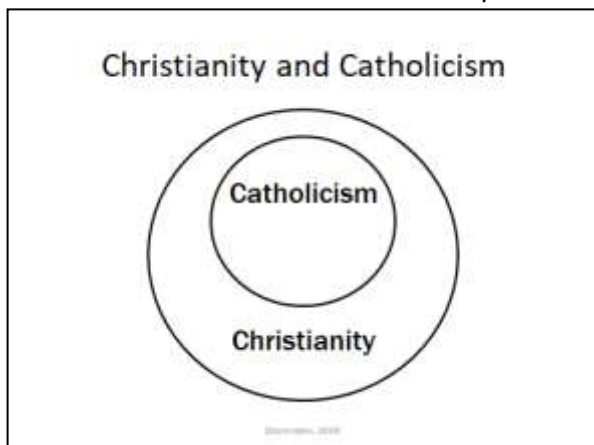
Adapted from Doverspike (2019)

Figure 3  
Overlap Between Catholicism and Superstition



Adapted from Doverspike (2019)

Figure 2  
Catholicism as a Subset of Christianity



Adapted from Doverspike (2019)

### Resources

**Going up in smoke:** There is no scent more Catholic than incense. Fr. Michael Silloway (2023, p. 3), Pastor of All Saints Catholic Church, explains it this way:

"Incense has been used in liturgical and personal prayer since the beginning because it accomplishes three things.

First, burning incense is an act of worship. Long before Catholics burned incense at Mass, our elder siblings in the faith, the Jewish faithful, burned offerings to God as an act of worship. By burning up a sacrificed animal or grains on the altar of the Temple, a "pleasant aroma" would waft up to the heavens for God's enjoyment, to be received as a sacrifice acceptable to the Father. Sweet resins and hardened tree saps would also be put on hot coals to produce delightful smells in the sanctuary. Recall that along with gold and costly oils, the Magi also brought expensive frankincense...gold for the King of Kings, myrrh to anoint Him at His burial, and frankincense to burn before Him as the Son of God.

Secondly, the incense represents our prayers. In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, St. John describes how he saw angels swinging golden thuribles (that's the official name of the incense burners on a chain we use today) with clouds of incense billowing up to the throne of God. When he asks an angel what's going on, he gets the response that the clouds of smoke are the prayers of the faithful rising up to God's presence.

Third and finally, the incense conveys a sense of mystery in our prayer. The Mass is not a cooking show, but an act of worship of the Infinite and Almighty God. The cloud of incense that lingers around the sanctuary is intended to blur our vision just a bit, to make us realize that even though the Lord comes so close to us in Word

and in Sacrament, He is ever-greater, He is ever-more. The Eucharistic celebration is a foretaste of heaven, the cloud incense reminding us that "no eye has seen, no ear heard, what God has ready for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9)." (Silloway, 2023, p. 3, para. 2-5)

Fr. Silloway (2023) provides this summary:

"At Mass and Eucharistic exposition, we use incense for all the above reasons. It is a burnt offering rising up before the Father; it is also an image of our prayers rising up to God's throne; and it should awaken within us a sense of awe before the sacred and divine mysteries into which we enter.

So next time you see the process lead [sic] by an altar server carrying the thurible, you'll know it's not just an old tradition, but an expression of our living faith and our desire to have everything lifted up to the father's glory and delight.

Praise be Jesus Christ, *now and forever.*  
All your holy saints of God, *pray for us!*"  
Fr. Michael  
(Silloway, 2023, p. 3, para. 6-9).

Silloway, M. (2023, August 27). *Going up in smoke*. All Saints Catholic Church [Bulletin]. Dunwoody, GA: Author.

Note: A *thurible* is a metal censer suspended from chains, in which incense is burned during worship services. Rooted in the earlier traditions of Judaism dating from the time of the Second Jewish Temple, the thurible (carried by the altar server known as the *thurifer*), the practice is used in the Roman Catholic Mass. It is also used in services of Eastern Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East and Oriental Orthodox, as well as in some Protestant denominations including Lutheran, United Methodist, Reformed, Presbyterian Church USA, and Anglican churches (with its use almost universal amongst Anglo Catholic Anglican churches).

### **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

On October 11th, 1992, Pope John Paul II presented the Catechism of the Catholic Church to the world. On March 2, 2000, the Second Edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church was promulgated. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.) is arranged into four parts, often informally described as the Four Pillars of the Catechism: the Creed, the Sacred Liturgy, with pride of place given to the sacraments; the Christian way of life, explained beginning with the Ten Commandments; and finally, Christian prayer. Pope Saint John Paul II writes, "The four parts are related one to the other: the Christian mystery is the object of faith (first part); it is celebrated and communicated in liturgical actions (second part); it is present to enlighten and sustain the children of God in their actions (third part); it is the basis for our prayer, the privileged expression of which is the Our Father, and it represents the object of our supplication, our praise and our intercession (fourth part)" (FD III).

**159 Faith and science:** "Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth."<sup>37</sup> "Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God in spite of himself, for it is God, the conserver of all things, who made them what they are."<sup>38</sup>

Catholic Church. (2012). Faith and science. In 2nd ed., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Section 159, 37-38). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

**3. Knowing Stuff:** "...By the way, in our community we've found that the graduates of our Catholic schools and religious education programs often walk away with a remarkably superficial understanding of Catholicism and a profound ignorance of scripture. Not to mention that many of them don't know the Lord in a personal way. Disciples are students, and they're life-long learners, going deeper than just mastering content."

White, M. & Corcoran, T. (2013, February 25). *Rebuilt: Awakening the faithful, reaching the lost, and making church matter*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Marie Press. Page 79.

**Monotonism:** A *monotonist* is one who talks in the same strain or lack of intonation until weariness is produced. The causes of monotony have been attributed to a variety of factors including "unmusical home environments, lack of interest in singing, physical disabilities of the vocal apparatus, and failure to develop the proper mental concept of pitch and melody" (Franklin, 1981, p. 56).

Franklin, E. (1981). Monotonism. *Music Educators Journal*, 67(7), 56-58. doi:10.2307/3400657

**The Real Presence (CCC, 2000)**

**1374** The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as "the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend."<sup>201</sup> In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*"<sup>202</sup> "This presence is called 'real' - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present."<sup>203</sup>

201 St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* III,73,3c.

202 Council of Trent (1551): DS 1651.

203 Paul VI, *MF* 39.

**1390** Since Christ is sacramentally present under each of the species, communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace. For pastoral reasons this manner of receiving communion has been legitimately established as the most common form in the Latin rite. But "the sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly."<sup>225</sup> This is the usual form of receiving communion in the Eastern rites.

225 *GIRM* 240.

225 General Instruction of the Roman Missal

240

Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.). Our Sunday Visitor.

Catholic Church. (2000, March 2). *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.). Continuum International. ISBN13: 978-0879739768

**Transubstantiation:** Gregory Smith, an Associate Director of Research at Pew Research Center, summarizes a Pew Research Center (2019) survey that finds that most self-described Catholics don't believe the core teaching of transubstantiation. In fact, nearly seven-in-ten Catholics (69%) say they personally believe that during the Catholic Mass, the bread and wine used in Communion "are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ." Just one-third of U.S. Catholics (31%) say they believe that "during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus."

Transubstantiation, referring to the idea that during Mass, the bread and wine used for Communion become the body and blood of Jesus Christ, is central to the Catholic faith. In fact, the Catholic Church teaches that "the Eucharist is 'the source and summit of the Christian life.'" According to Smith, about six-in-ten (63%) of the most observant Catholics (i.e., those who attend Mass at least once a week) accept the Church's teaching about transubstantiation. However, even among this most observant group of Catholics, roughly one-third (37%) don't believe that the Communion bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ (including 23% who don't know the church's teaching and 14% who know the church's teaching but don't believe it). Among Catholics who do not attend Mass weekly, large majorities say they believe the bread and wine are symbolic and do not actually become the body and blood of Jesus. See also Pew Research Center (2019).

Smith, G. A. (2019, August 5). Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>

Pew Research Center. (2019, July 23). *What Americans know about religion*. Pew Research. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/07/23/what-americans-know-about-religion/>

**The Real Presence:** Just for me, no explanation of transubstantiation will ever be as simple, deep, and wide as the spiritual direction I received from Father Mary John "Joachim" Tierney, OCSO (1912-1999) on August 10, 1991, during my first silent retreat at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia. My Catholic friends know the place by its official name of the Monastery of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit, and my Protestant friends know the place as simply "the Monastery."

My Cistercian friends know that Fr. Jo was one of the 20 original founding fathers who had travelled down from the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani (Bardstown, Kentucky) to Georgia to begin a monastery in Conyers on March 21, 1944. Three years earlier, he had been the guest master of Thomas Merton (1915-1968) at Gethsemani when Merton first entered for three days beginning on a cold Wednesday evening of December 10, 1941 (Merton, 1951, p. 373). My Protestant know that Gethsemane (ending with the letter "e" rather than the letter "i") is a garden at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem where, according to the four Gospels of the New Testament, Jesus underwent the agony and was arrested before his torture and execution.

On a Saturday afternoon during my first silent retreat at the monastery in Conyers, the silence was broken by a loud knock on my door, to which I quickly replied, "Come in." An 80-year-old monk unexpectedly burst into the room with an apparent sense of urgency. Calling me by name (which only later I discovered he had learned from my father, whose relationship to the old monk had always intrigued me), the old priest asked, "Aren't you the preacher's son?" I confessed that I was guilty. Almost bursting with excitement, the old priest boldly exclaimed, "You need to experience the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist!" Taken back (and hearing him as saying I needed to "understand"

the Real Presence), I replied somewhat defensively, "I don't even believe in transubstantiation." "Oh, no," said the priest, while waving his hand dismissively, "I'm not talking about that book stuff." His words echoed within me every weekend that I returned to the monastery.

Ten years later (2001), while having dinner with Dom Bernard Johnson, OCSO (1925-2017), who a year earlier had retired as the Abbot of the monastery, I shared the story with him. In retrospect, it was interesting to me that Fr. Jo had provided the direction and Fr. Bernard had provided the explanation: "Oh, no, Billy," said Dom Bernard, "Father Jo wasn't talking about transubstantiation. He was inviting you to share communion with us. He wasn't telling you to understand the Real Presence; he was inviting you to experience it." As Fr. Bernard knew—and as I came to know—there are some spiritual truths that are better experienced than understood.

Merton, T. (1951). *The seven story mountain*. Garden City: NY: Garden City Books, by special arrangement with Harcourt, Brace & Company.

**The Cistercians:** The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO) is a Roman Catholic contemplative religious order, consisting of monasteries of monks and monasteries of nuns. The term *Cistercian* derives from *Cistercium*, which is the Latin name for the locale of Cîteaux, near Dijon in eastern France. It was there that a group of Benedictine monks from the monastery of Molesme founded Cîteaux Abbey in Saint-Nicolas-lès-Cîteaux (France) 1098, with the goal of following more closely the Rule of Saint Benedict. Cistercians are dedicated to seeking union with God, through Jesus Christ, in a community of brothers or sisters.

A reform movement seeking a simpler lifestyle began in 17th-century France at La Trappe Abbey, and became known as the Trappists. The Trappists were eventually consolidated in 1892 into a new

order known as the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Latin: *Ordo Cisterciensis Stricteris Observantiae*), abbreviated simply as OCSO. In contrast, the Cistercians who remained within the Order of Cistercians are called the Cistercians of the Common Observance (OCist), distinguishing them from the Trappists.



**Catholic Clergy sexual misconduct:** *The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States*, commonly known as the John Jay Report, is a 2004 report by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, based on surveys completed by the Roman Catholic dioceses in the United States. The initial version of this report was posted on the Internet on February 27, 2004, with corrections and revisions posted on April 16. The report determined that during the period from 1950 to 2002, a total of 10,667 individuals had made allegations of child sexual abuse. Of these allegations, the dioceses had been able to identify 6,700 unique accusations against 4,392 clergy over that period in the USA, which is about 4% of all 109,694 ordained clergy (i.e., priests, deacons, or members of religious orders) active in the U.S. during the time period covered by the study. The report classified more than 20 types of sexual abuse ranging from verbal harassment to penile penetration.

One reason for so much focus on the Catholic Church is its sheer size in comparison to other denominations and religions in the U.S. Furthermore, only the Catholic Church has released detailed data about its internal problems, whereas there appears to be no comparative information reported for Protestant, Evangelical, or non-denominational churches. A *Newsweek* article (see Wingert, 2010, para. 9) indicated that the Catholic Church may not have a higher incidence of abuse than is seen in other religions. Similarly, Smith (2017) points out that the Catholic clergy sexual misconduct "seems no different statistically than the rest of the population, perhaps lower than in some organizations" (p. 221).

**Non-Catholic Clergy sexual misconduct:** To place the prevalence of Catholic Clergy sexual misconduct in perspective, it may be helpful to consider prevalence rates of sexual misconduct among non-Catholic clergy. With 13 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is often described as the largest protestant Christian denomination in the U.S. As a point of clarification, Baptists are not generally classified as a liturgical mainline Protestant denomination, and many Baptist clergy and members do not even consider themselves to be a denomination. In any event, at its June 12-15, 2022 Annual Meeting, the SBC publically acknowledged sexual abuse by some of its ministers. Although the SBC denies having any hierarchical control over its ministers or its churches in the hiring of ministers, a third-party investigation uncovered an institutional cover-up that has spanned almost two decades. The independent investigation by Guidepost Solutions (2022) revealed that, for many years, a few senior Executive Committee (EC) leaders, along with outside legal counsel, largely controlled the EC's response to reports of abuse that included minor children. Further, the investigation revealed that the EC closely guarded information about abuse allegations and lawsuits. According to the 288-page report, abuse survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant rebuttal that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy - even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation (Guidepost Solutions, 2022, p. 1, para 2).

**Non-Religious and Secular sexual misconduct:** To place the prevalence of Clergy sexual misconduct in its proper perspective, prevalence rates among non-religious and secular personnel should be considered. Garland and Argueta (2011) emphasize that child sexual abuse issue is present in secular

organizations as well as in religious organizations-- at approximately the same prevalence levels. The Boy Scouts reported dismissing more than 5,000 scoutmasters for alleged sexual abuse--more than 3 percent of all Scout volunteers. An educational activist group reported that up to 5 percent of teachers sexually abuse their students, with more than a third of them keeping their jobs. The authors note estimates of 5 percent or more of health workers who are sexually attracted to children, even higher among those working in children's hospitals.

Garland, D. R., & Argueta, C. A. (2011). *Unholy touch: When church leaders commit acts of sexual misconduct with adults*. In *The church leader's resource book for mental health and social problems*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Guidepost Solutions. (2022, May 15). *Report of the Independent Investigation: The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee*. Washington, DC: Author. [https://www.sataskforce.net/s/Guidepost-Solutions-Independent-Investigation-Report\\_.pdf](https://www.sataskforce.net/s/Guidepost-Solutions-Independent-Investigation-Report_.pdf)

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Fr. Neil Xavier O'Donoghue sounds the alarm that "the Emperor has no clothes—the Eucharistic Cup is not being distributed to the Christian faithful! Other than seeing that clergy seem to occasionally receive from the same cup (as opposed to intinction or one cup each), I have not seen the Eucharistic Cup being distributed to the assembly since before March 2020" (O'Donoghue, 2022, para. 2). Note: On June 18, 2023, it was decided that the Catholic faithful could receive the cup again; however, most parishes continue withholding the cup.

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