

HOW TO UNDERSTAND CATHOLICISM: WHAT I LIKE ABOUT CATHOLICISM

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

- ✓ I like being a member of a Church whose members include 1.2 billion Christians worldwide.
- ✓ I like being a member 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 cancer centers, home health services, clinics, 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 United States.

- ✓ 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, media celebrities, or professional athletes.
- ✓ I like how Catholic churches always have votive candles, whose lighting signifies prayers offered for someone.
- ✓ When I walk into a Catholic church, I like being greeted by a reverent silence rather than loud noise more appropriate for social conversations.
- ✓ I like how the Sanctuary of a Catholic church is used only for prayer and Mass, and never for lectures, musicals, concerts, or fund raisers.
- ✓ 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 the Tabernacle in the sanctuary reminds us of the Hebrew Ark of the Covenant.
- ✓ I like how we bow or genuflect before the Blessed Sacrament, whether publicly exposed or enclosed in the Tabernacle, as a sign of adoration.
- ✓ 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 for 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 (i.e., 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.

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 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 in the Liturgy, such as 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 own experience of relationships with the Faithful Departed continuing after life on earth has ended.
- ✓ I like how the congregation responds 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 having to fully understand it.
- ✓ 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 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 public Masses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized these 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.

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

What I Don't Like About Catholicism

- 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 or phones whenever the morning celebrant happens to arrive three minutes later than their watches are set. What's the rush?
- 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 **Automatism:** I do not like the practice of Priests whose voices sound more like mindless automatons conducting a funeral when they are supposed 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.
- 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.
- X **Elitism:** I do not like the practice of 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 passivity among parishioners while contradicting the egalitarianism 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 **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 **Exclusivism:** I do not like the practice of the Church in excluding from Holy Communion divorced and remarried Catholics, who believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, while at the same time including Priests who break their Sacramental vows by engaging in child abuse.
- 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 Pseudo-Ecumenism:** I do not like the practice of Church officials who give 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 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 Sexism:** I do not like the practice of a hierarchical power structure comprised solely of a closed group of old, unmarried men who freely engage in the institutionalized subjugation of women.
- X Superstitions:** I don't like the practice of parishioners whose magical beliefs and practices seem to be a blend of Catholicism and superstition, such as burying 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 its way to a safe home (so that the house will sell)).
- X Marianism:** I do not like the practice of parishioners, whose worship of Mary is more adoration than veneration, elevating her to the status of a goddess or Deity rather than a Saint.
- X Fundamentalism:** I do not like the attitude of a few Catholics who think God is Catholic.

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Notes

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."³⁷ "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."³⁸

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 Lords in a personal way. Disciples are students, and they're life-long learners, going deeper than just mastering content."

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