

## **An Introduction To The Roman Catholic Church**

### **What Roman Catholics Hold In Common With Other Faiths:**

- Roman Catholics (= RCs) believe in one Creator God (understood as a Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – because of the experience of Jesus Christ as Risen from the Dead)
- RCs believe, with other Christians, that Jesus founded a new community of faith to live the Gospel message and did this through his life, death and Resurrection, led by the apostles, who appointed successors to ensure continuity of the community and its work of ‘evangelisation’
- RCs believe that baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit brings people into membership of the church and recognise the baptism of other Christians
- RCs believe in the ‘universal call to holiness’ – that all men and women are addressed by God, blessed through Jesus Christ and called by the Holy Spirit to reflect God’s love
- RCs share the Hebrew Scriptures with the Jewish people and other Christians - while also accepting as fully Canonical some books which have survived only in Greek (and one – The Book of Wisdom – originally written in Greek)
- RCs share with other Christians the same Canon of New Testament writings
- RCs share a strong moral code, derived from the Ten Commandments of Mosaic Law

### **What Makes RCs Distinctive:**

- The shape of Roman Catholicism is heavily influenced by its history. One temptation for RCs is to forget this and to assume that things were ever thus ...
- RCs regard the Bishop of Rome (as ‘Pope’) as successor of St. Peter and leader of the ‘college of Bishops’, as the focus of unity (‘communion’) – with a strong emphasis on the visible links between local churches and on agreement in doctrine and worship
- RC theology has a distinctive approach to understanding the Revelation once given and recorded in the Scriptures – as illuminated by the action of the Spirit in the life of the Church (‘Tradition’) and as interpreted authoritatively by Pope and Bishops (‘Magisterium’)
- RCs believe the Holy Spirit protects the Church from errors that would fatally damage the Revelation given (‘Infallibility’) and that the Pope and Bishops may solemnly pronounce (very rarely!) on issues of faith and morals

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- RCs have a strong sense of the Communion of Saints, with a central focus on the Virgin Mary as the Mother of Jesus Christ, and may ask the prayers of the saints, especially the martyrs (never violent figures)
- RCs have a strong emphasis on the celebration of the Eucharist ('Mass') as the highest form of worship and believe that the bread and wine are transformed (metaphysically (i.e. spiritually), not chemically!) into the body and blood of Jesus Christ ('Transubstantiation')
- RCs believe that the Church can mediate the forgiveness by God of our sins, which traditionally led to a focus on going to confess our sins (now much diminished)
- RCs recognise 7 sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, reconciliation, marriage, ordination, anointing of the sick)
- RCs use many symbols and images in worship out of a conviction that the material world is God's world and contains signs of God's goodness and purposes
- In the medieval period, Latin became the universal language of the Western Church and, when Protestants rejected this in order to encourage lay participation and the reading of Scripture, Catholics emphasised Latin the more so. Only after the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) did worship in the vernacular become normal
- Vatican II also involved a major change in theology – from the view of the ordained priest 'saying mass' for the people in Latin (with his back to them) to the priest presiding and celebrating with the people in their language (facing them). Our Lady of Lourdes church, built in 1964 reflects the renewed theology of that period
- RC moral theology (ethics) is distinctive in its attempt to dialogue with other believers by talking in philosophical categories of 'Natural Law' (e.g. 'Just War theory') and emphasising the role of (informed) conscience, with the dignity of the Human Person the measure of all things
- RC theology potentially has a higher estimate of other faiths than many other Christian theologies, since it acknowledges the action of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all and recognises all as being held together by Christ. It's understanding of the natural world as 'sacramental' (pointing beyond itself to God) potentially offers grounds for ecological action