

The Catholic Church In Britain

The Catholic Church is the oldest institution in the western world. It can trace its history back almost 2000 years.

Today there are well over a billion Catholics in the world, spread across all five continents with particular concentrations in southern Europe, the United States, the Philippines and the countries of Central and South America. What binds this diverse group of people together is their faith in Jesus Christ and their obedience to the papacy.

Catholics believe that the Pope, based in Rome, is the successor to Saint Peter whom Christ appointed as the first head of His church. He therefore stands in what Catholicism calls the *apostolic succession*, an unbroken line back to Peter and has supreme authority. Popes can speak **infallibly** on matters of faith and morals but in practice do so rarely.

In Britain, Catholics suffered a long period of persecution following Henry VIII's break with the papacy in the 1530s and were sometimes regarded as servants of a foreign power - particularly in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, orchestrated by Catholic figures in the hope of restoring a co-believer to the throne.

By the start of the nineteenth century, however such 'anti-popery' prejudices started to die away and full civic rights were restored in 1829.

Today there are as many as five million Catholics - or about one in 12 people - but of these only about one million attend church regularly. Catholics are obliged to attend weekly mass and during the Easter season to attend the sacraments of reconciliation (also known as confession) and Holy Communion.

Distinguishing features and doctrine

How does the Catholic Church differ from other denominations? For almost a thousand years, Catholicism and Christianity were as one. The break, or *schism* between the Church of Rome and other Christian faiths began with the split with Orthodox Christians in 1054 over questions of

doctrine and the absolute authority and behaviour of the popes. For similar reasons in the sixteenth century, the Protestant churches also went their own way.

The modernising Second Vatican Council (1962-65) saw Catholicism (which post-Reformation was often labelled Roman Catholicism, though this is not a description much favoured by Catholics themselves) addressing itself in earnest to its relationships with other Christian bodies.

It has produced an atmosphere of good will and much talk of reunion, but key questions on authority, the sacraments and ministry continue to present seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Catholics share with other Christians a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man who came to earth to redeem humanity's sins through His death and resurrection. They follow His teachings as set out in the New Testament and place their trust in God's promise of eternal life with Him. Catholicism, however, is distinct from other Christian churches in both its organisation and its teaching.

Structure

The Catholic Church ordains only celibate men to the priesthood since Jesus was, it teaches, male and celibate. In the Protestant churches married and female clergy are the norm. Orthodoxy allows married men to become priests but

not bishops. However they have to be married before ordination.

Traditionally clerics were seen as having a higher calling than the laity but, since the landmark Second Vatican Council, both laity and clergy have been regarded as jointly 'the people of God'. That same reforming council stressed the need for popes and bishops to consult widely before pronouncing on matters of faith, but in practice they retain the unfettered power to teach on such questions. All major decisions rest with the Pope and his advisors.

Doctrines

Catholic doctrine is based the scriptures and on the church's own traditions. It believes that its doctrines were revealed to the apostles and have been preserved in the continuous tradition ever since. There are several doctrinal issues where the Catholic Church has a distinct position:

- in its devotion to Christ's mother, the Virgin Mary, who Catholics believe gave birth to Jesus without having sex first and who was raised body and soul into heaven where she occupies a special place interceding between God and His people
- in its belief in transubstantiation, that during the celebration of the mass when the priest repeats Christ's words from the Last Supper the bread and wine become Christ's body and

blood, though no change takes place in their outward appearance

- in its opposition, as stated in the 1968 papal encyclical *Humanae vitae*, and reiterated on numerous occasions by Pope John Paul II, to artificial methods of contraception which, it says, interfere with the transmission of human life and the sacred purpose of sex
- in its unflinching condemnation of abortion as the destruction of human life, which, it believes, begins at the moment of conception

Social teaching

Catholicism's stance on abortion is part of its wider and keystone teaching on the dignity of the human person which informs its understanding on all issues. So while much has been written of Catholicism's outspoken stance of sexual less has been written of its social gospel, often called its 'best kept secret'.

Yet contemporary Catholicism embraces a distinctive set of social principles - supporting the rights of workers, opposing unfettered capitalism, defending the rights of oppressed people, campaigning for a more equal global trading and political balance between the countries of the industrial north to the developing south - that stretch back through landmark

papal encyclicals like *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.

The Sacraments

Catholicism is a faith that revolves around the seven sacraments - baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, confirmation, marriage, holy orders (joining the priesthood) and the sacrament of the sick (once called extreme unction or the last rites). The importance of receiving Christ's body and blood at communion as the bread of life is central.

Saints

The Catholic Church places great emphasis on moral law and is strong in its devotion to saints. It embraces a mystical dimension - most clearly visible in its liturgy - which sits uneasily with the modern secular and scientific world.

At various Marian shrines around the world, for instance, the Catholic Church believes that a small number of miracle cures of illness have been effected.

Great emphasis is placed on the ascetic tradition of religious life as either separation from worldly concerns or, in the words of Pope John Paul II (1978 - 2005) as 'a sign of contradiction'

in contemporary culture. Catholicism retains from earliest times a strong sense of sin and correspondingly of God's redeeming love.

Recent History

The recent history of Catholicism has been one of successes and failures. Its previous Pope, the charismatic Polish-born Pope John Paul II, was widely hailed as the 'spark from heaven' who ignited the revolutions that swept away the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s.

In the developing world, its congregations grow apace and its seminaries and convents have no shortage of vocations to the religious life. In Europe and North and South America, however because of the secularization of the prevailing culture, numbers of churchgoers have decreased and papal authority has been questioned. There has been a marked exodus from the priesthood and female religious orders since the 1970s. Traditional ministries in running schools and hospitals have had to be abandoned for lack of clergy, religious brothers and nuns. The recent Popes have called for a new evangelization to help combat the spread of atheism which dulls our spiritual sense making us less integrated as human beings.