

Overview of the Catholic Church

When the Catholic Church is looked upon as an organization, the Catholic Catechism breaks it down into four parts, or four perspectives. These are

1. It is a set of beliefs
2. It is a system of community celebrations
3. It is a way of life
4. It is an experience of divine intimacy

It is a set of beliefs.

Almost 40% of the entire Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCR) is devoted to a listing and explanation of what Catholics believe. If we want a quick synopsis of these beliefs we look to the Creed that Catholics recite. The creed tells us what we believe about God the Father, what we believe about God the Son, and what we believe about the Holy Spirit.

What is unique about these statements of belief is that they were not manufactured by human reasoning or through human experience. What Catholics believe has been revealed by God himself to human beings and through the Church. What does God have to say about himself and what does he say about human beings and their relationship with Him?

There are three sources that the Catholic Church relies upon for truth: The Bible, the Teachings of the Church, and the Tradition of the Church. These are not separate entities but are woven together in a complementary way. If one reads a portion of the Catechism or one of the teaching documents of the Church, that person will see almost every part supported by texts from Scripture. Practices of the Church, such as the way we celebrate Mass, were not formed by an ad hoc committee, but were created in the early Church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in its leaders and members.

It is a system of celebrations.

No group, to my knowledge, celebrates more than the Catholic Church does. Its primary way of celebrating is in its seven sacraments, the most central of which is the Holy Eucharist. While there is a steady format for these celebrations, there is

great variety among them. No two masses, for example, are ever the same. There are different Scripture readings, different prayers, and different focuses for each Mass. There are the primary seasons and days of celebration: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. Beyond these there are over thirty different aspects of Mary's life that are celebrated, at least two days for St. Joseph, at least one day for each of the apostles, then there are days to celebrate the martyrs, hundreds of saints, doctors of the Church, and so forth.

Besides gathering together to celebrate the sacraments, Catholics come together to celebrate using other various forms of group prayer, such as holy hours to adore Jesus in the Eucharist, the rosary and other Marian devotions, novenas in preparation for important feast days, and a variety of prayer meetings and other devotional experiences.

Following the example of the early Church, Catholics celebrate the Eucharist every day and, in a special way on Sunday. Celebrations are a way of bringing glory, praise, and thanksgiving to God, forgiving of sins, healing of hurts, special help in growing as a Christian, praying for others including the dead, and drawing us together in vibrant unity as the living Body of Christ on earth.

It is a way of life.

Like all religions the Catholic Church presents its people with guidelines and principles for living a fruitful and happy life. These are not just a set of disciplines, but secrets on how to become fully happy. A happy way of life involves knowing how to relate to God in a way that pleases him, how to grow in personal holiness, and how to live a life of love with one another.

If we want a quick summary of these secrets on how to be happy, the Church presents us with the eight beatitudes that Jesus taught his disciples. Those who look for a set of rules on how to live, are frustrated because the beatitudes are not rules but attitudes that are formed by the Holy Spirit dwelling within a believer. They represent Jesus' own secrets for living and show us how to model our lives after him.

The Catholic Church also proposes the Ten Commandments as foundational to a leading a happy life and ordered life. It elaborates on the commandments just as Jesus did, and extends, for example, "Thou shalt not kill," to the sins of calling

other people names, gossiping about others, and having judgmental attitudes toward others. Jesus told us he did not come to destroy the Old Law but to build upon it. In this sense Catholics share these common principles with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Beyond the fundamentals, the Catholic Church explores the virtues presented in the Bible and presents them as a way of living a life more like that of Jesus. It presents us with models of these virtues in the lives of the saints who have gone before us.

It is an experience of divine intimacy.

The Catechism concludes its presentation of the Catholic Church with a series of articles on “prayer.”

While all religions propose systems that help a person make contact with the Supreme Being, the Catholic Church believes that this contact has already been established by a personal visitation from God at Baptism. This, however, is only the beginning. Catholics are taught to develop this intimate relationship with God through personal prayer. Prayer, ideally, is the daily breathing the life of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Catholic Church offers an almost infinite treasury of “prayers” that have been selected from Scripture as well as formed through Catholic devotion over the ages. Foremost, of course, is the prayer Jesus taught us, the Our Father. Most frequently recited, however, is probably the Hail Mary—a prayer that starts with the greeting the Angel Gabriel gave Mary to begin God’s becoming flesh in her womb. The Psalms are packed carefully into a set of prayers called the “Liturgy of the Hours” which are presented not just for priests and religious, but for lay people as well.

While there are “prayers,” the Catholic Church reminds us that it is “prayer” that really counts. Prayers are tools to open us to the presence of God, but heart-to-heart communication with the Holy Trinity is true prayer. Many “styles” of prayer exist within the Church—meditation on Scripture, spontaneous prayers from the heart, praying in tongues, silent adoration, prayers of intercession for the needs of others, contemplative prayer, and so on. The Catholic Church is unique in the variety of prayer styles that it offers to its members.

Fundamental to the Catholic Life is personal intimacy with God.

In Summary

Is there any organization more relevant in our age than the Catholic Church? People are confused, misguided by popular opinion, and desperately in search of the truth. The Church offers a set of clear and solid beliefs that cover every aspect of life. People are bored and don't know how to celebrate in a way that meets their deepest needs. The Church offers a system of celebrations that really work, they are free, and take place every day at almost every hour. People don't know how to be happy, to make life-enhancing decisions, and to find peace in their lives. The Church presents a way of life that fulfills all these needs. Finally, people are lonely, empty inside, suffocating in a web of superficial relationships. The Church offers a solution to our needs for closeness and inner fulfillment—an intimate relationship with our loving God himself.