

From the Heart

A series of essays on basic Catholic doctrines and beliefs

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Is Catholicism Unique?

This is the first in a series of articles called “From the Heart,” published by the Liturgy Committee of Immaculate Heart of Mary parish in Harwinton, Conn. The goal of these essays is to offer some insight about the basic doctrines of the Catholic faith. It is hoped that if we, the people in the pews, better understand exactly what the Church believes and practices, then our spiritual lives will be enriched and we will participate more actively and joyfully in the Mass and other parish activities.

Recent surveys indicate that the average Catholic adult in the United States does not know very much about the teachings of the Church. The old-fashioned mindset of the laity still seems to hold true: “Let the clergy do the thinking—our job is to pray, pay, and obey.” (Although if we’re honest, most of us don’t do any of those three items very well.)

The majority of American Catholics are not sure of the correct answers to the follow basic questions:

- Is Jesus really present in the Eucharist?
- How do you get to Heaven?
- Isn’t the Bible a Protestant book?
- Do Catholics worship the Virgin Mary?
- Does the Church still believe in Purgatory?
- Does “infallibility” mean the pope is sinless?
- Only Catholics can go to Heaven, right?

We hope to answer these and other important questions in future essays. The first question we would like to address today is very simple: Is Catholicism unique?

Quite a few people are convinced that all religions are basically the same. “It doesn’t matter where and how you worship,” it is often said, “as long as you believe in God.”

Is that true? Are there really no differences between, say, Baptists and Catholics and Methodists, other than the style of worship, the musical selections, and the dress codes? (Or in the case of many Catholic parishes, or so it seems, the complete lack of dress code.)

Well, the fact of the matter is this: on many different topics, the doctrines of the Catholic Church are quite unique. But before we discuss these items, it is important to emphasize that whenever Catholics explain and defend the beliefs of our Church, it does not mean we are automatically putting down other denominations.

The Catholic Church does NOT teach that only Catholics can go to Heaven. The *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church clearly states that Protestant churches have valid baptism; have the right to be called “Christian”; have the written Word of God; and most important of all, possess the “means of salvation.”

The Catholic Church has great affection for our “separated brethren” in Protestant churches. When explaining and teaching Catholic beliefs, we are in no way criticizing or attacking other faith traditions.

So, how is the Catholic Church unique? First and foremost, we are by far the oldest Christian church, having been founded by Jesus Christ himself. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus gave Simon a new name, saying, “You are Peter (which means ‘Rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church....I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 16:18-19).

Jesus established his church in the early first century A.D., and appointed St. Peter as its first earthly leader. From that time until now, a span of almost 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has existed in an unbroken chain, and we can list each of Peter’s 264 successors right up to the present-day pope, Benedict XVI. (Although if you don’t mind, we’re not going to list them all here!)

For the first ten centuries of Christian history, there was only one church, the Roman Catholic Church. (The word “catholic,” by the way, means “universal.”) In the 11th century the Eastern Orthodox churches separated from Rome, and in the 16th century Martin Luther, an ordained Catholic priest, broke away from Catholicism and began the Protestant Reformation. All present-day Christian churches are offshoots of the original Christian church, the Roman Catholic Church.

Although many Protestant churches call themselves “Bible churches,” the Bible itself was given to the world by none other than the Roman Catholic Church. We believe that God is the ultimate author of Scripture, of course, but it was the Catholic Church, at two church councils in the late 4th century, that determined exactly which ancient writings belonged in the canon of Scripture. So in other words, the Bible is a Catholic book.

As Catholics, we believe that the Roman Catholic Church possesses and proclaims the fullness of the deposit of faith. We have been entrusted with both the written Word of God, the Bible, and the sacred Traditions handed down by the apostles. This is truly unique. This is something that should make us at the same time both proud and humble to call ourselves “Catholic.”

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