



Gerald O'Collins

CATHOLICISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction

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Preface

On 8 April 2005, up to three billion people around the globe watched the televised funeral of John Paul II (pope 1978–2005). They saw many of the distinctive features of the Catholic Church on display as the service for the dead pope was celebrated in front of Saint Peter's Basilica, the largest Christian church in the world.

Lifted high above the crowd like a Viking king, the body of John Paul II had been carried in an open coffin from the Vatican palace, through Saint Peter's Square, and into the basilica. For four days he lay there in state right above the ancient cemetery where Saint Peter was buried after his martyrdom under Emperor Nero. Nearly two million people of different ages, classes in society, and faith convictions filed past to pay their last respects to the dead pope.

After being solemnly closed, the coffin was slowly carried out into the square as the choir chanted the litany of the saints, a prayer that invokes numerous Christian men and women officially recognized for their holiness after their death and that remains very dear to Catholic and Orthodox Christians alike. At the service, rows of cardinals and bishops were gathered near the altar; their red vestments fluttered in the breeze. They were flanked by representatives of Christian churches, ambassadors, prime ministers, presidents, and other heads of state. The crowd



1. Pope John Paul II lies in state in St Peter's Basilica before his funeral on 8 April 2005

of nearly three-quarters of a million stretched beyond the square into the broad Via della Conciliazione and other neighbouring streets. Around the city of Rome several million people followed the funeral on mega-screens.

The funeral service featured many traditional Catholic symbols: the candles guttering in the wind; the smoke of incense rising from thuribles; the book of the Four Gospels opened on his coffin to symbolize the good news by which the dead pope had tried to live; and the holy water sprinkled on his coffin before it was carried away for burial in the crypt of Saint Peter's.

On that spring day in 2005, the television audience around the earth watched the largest and oldest institution in the world burying its dead leader. The global communion of Catholicism was praying for and with the late pope and sharing his passage into eternal life. People everywhere could see for themselves how the Catholic Church 'breathes with two lungs', when first a Western rite deacon and then an Eastern rite deacon sang the Gospel and

when, at the end of the ceremony, Eastern rite leaders gathered around the coffin to chant their ancient prayers.

Through television a vast public followed a dramatic moment in the life and practice of Catholics around the world. They could watch and see how the Catholic Church remains vigorous and indisputably important today to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

'Catholicity' belongs, of course, among the characteristics of the Church confessed by all Christians in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, a concise version of the chief points of Christian faith that is derived in its full form from the First Council of Constantinople (AD 381). Used at least sometimes every year by all Christians when they celebrate the Eucharist (the sacred rite that commemorates the 'Last Supper' celebrated by Jesus on the night before his death), this Creed declares a common faith in the 'one, holy, *catholic*, and apostolic Church'. This is the confession of many Protestants when they profess the Creed on Sundays, whether or not they meet for the Eucharist. Some people would prefer to give this book the title of *Roman Catholicism*. After all, Catholics are those Christians who are in communion with the bishop of Rome; they accept the universal authority of the pope who lives in the Vatican and presides over the diocese of Rome. Nevertheless, when one speaks or writes of 'Catholics' or 'Catholicism,' people almost invariably understand a reference to Roman Catholics. That surely was the presumption behind the invitation to write a Very Short Introduction to *Catholicism*, and not one on *Roman Catholicism*. At the same time, I appreciate the motives of some readers who will mentally add 'Roman' whenever I write of 'the Catholic Church' and 'Catholicism.'

In any case, many elements of Catholic Christianity are found beyond the Catholic Church: for example, the practice of baptism, acceptance of the Four Gospels as normative, and government by bishops. What we may think of as distinctive about Catholicism need not always be uniquely Catholic. Greek, Russian, and other

Orthodox Christians share with Catholics the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance or reconciliation after sin, anointing of the sick, ordination, and matrimony. (Sacraments are outward and visible ceremonies, such as using water in baptism, that signify inward, spiritual gifts from God.) This book aims at a wide readership among all those who for various reasons want to learn more about the Catholic Church. I write this book 'from the inside', as one who has been born into a Catholic family and has tried to serve the Catholic and wider community as an ordained priest and teacher of theology. Knowing the institution intimately and identifying with the common faith and deep values of other Catholics, I hope to be able to describe and explain Catholicism competently, but without becoming biased and defensive. Some 'insiders' show an unacceptable bias, but certainly not all. To offer an analogy, when it comes to music or drama, insiders who have years of study, experience, and commitment behind them help us to be more accurately informed about and skilfully guided through musical or dramatic compositions. In such areas, detached outsiders may be able to communicate a wealth of facts, but at times their judgements can remain superficial.

Catholic worship, belief, and practice are not timeless. They have been subject to enormous growth and to changes that embodied either healthy and faithful development or real corruption. How should one construe the ups and downs, the decay and renewal, the happy advances and the tragic disappointments of Catholics through the centuries? The first two chapters of this book will offer an extended tour of that history. Then follow chapters that describe the central beliefs of the Catholic Church about God and the human condition (Chapter 3); the Church and her sacramental life (Chapter 4); and her moral life and teaching (Chapter 5). The book will close by summarizing certain basic characteristics of Catholicism (Chapter 6), and expounding some urgent issues confronting Catholicism and its future (Chapter 7).

In telling the story of Catholicism, every attempt to generalize is constantly beset with enough exceptions to break the rule. But some generalizations will find much support: the coexistence from the beginning of holiness and sinfulness; the recurrent tensions between local communities and a centralized institution; the Catholic Church's challenges to prevailing cultures along with widespread assimilation of them; and shifting relations between governments and the Church.

With deep gratitude I record my warm thanks to those whose questions, criticisms, suggestions, and support have helped me in writing this book: above all, Stephanie Bennett, Vivian Boland, Louis Caruana, Samantha Chant, Dushan Croos, Kerstin Demata, Michael Elligate, Mary Grey, Emmanuel Gurumombe, Michael Hayes, Jane Jeffes, David Jones, Andrea Keagan, Patrick Madigan, Paul Murray, Anthony Nye, Adrian Porter, Glenn Richardson, Trevor Stammers, Anthony Towey, Peter Tyler, Samantha Walcot, and several anonymous advisers for the Oxford University Press.

I dedicate this work to Michael Hayes and other treasured colleagues at St Mary's University College.

Gerald O'Collins, S.J.
St Mary's University College, Twickenham, London
Easter 2008

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Abbreviations

Dei Verbum (the Word of God) Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 1965

Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope) Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965

Lumen Gentium (the Light of the Nations) Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964

Nostra Aetate (In Our Age) Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1965

Sacrosanctum Concilium (the Sacred Council) Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 1963

Unitatis Redintegratio (the Restoration of Unity) Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, 1964

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Chapter 1

From Pentecost to Christopher Columbus (AD 30–1492)

During his life and at his death, Pope John Paul II showed the face of Catholicism to the world. But was there, from the origins of Christianity, a recognizable entity that had some shape and structure and that we might call the nascent Catholic Church? Can we identify, right from the first Pentecost (the Jewish feast when the Holy Spirit descended upon 120 disciples of Jesus (Acts 2: 1–4)), some kind of institution whose history could be written? By answering yes to these questions, this chapter opens the story of Catholic Christianity in Jerusalem after the resurrection of the crucified Jesus (most likely in April AD 30) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

After Pentecost

During his public ministry, Jesus led a revival movement that remained largely within Judaism itself but had some surprising features: above all, his scandalous claim to a personal authority that put him on a par with the God whom he called 'Abba' (Father dear). From a wider group of disciples (who included some non-Jews), he chose a core group of twelve men (all Jews) – a gesture that indicated his intention to re-found the twelve tribes of Israel, or the Jewish nation descended from Abraham and Sarah.

The first Christians expected the risen Christ to return shortly in glory to judge the world. Totally focused on Jesus, they fashioned their interpretation and proclamation of him by putting together two elements: on the one hand, their experience of the events in which he had been the central protagonist and, on the other, the concepts, expectations, and practices that they found to be relevant and illuminating within Judaism. To articulate their convictions about Jesus and his role in fulfilling the divine purposes, they depended in part upon their Jewish heritage. Thus their initiation rite of baptism took over some values from purificatory rites of Judaism, not least from the baptism for the forgiveness of sins practised by John the Baptist. All the followers of Jesus continued to find in the Jewish psalms their main prayerbook. Some or even many of them continued to worship as Jews and in the Jerusalem Temple until excommunicated from Palestinian and other synagogues in the course of the 1st century. At least initially, Jesus' followers were unsure about the need to continue observing the Torah or Jewish law (especially about circumcision and dietary requirements) and the conditions they should impose on Gentiles who accepted faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. Yet the first Christians differed from other devout Jews by administering baptism 'in the name of Jesus' (e.g. Acts 2: 38) and celebrating together the Eucharist, the service in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed (e.g. Acts 2: 42, 45).

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells the story of the origin and early spread of Christian faith. In the early chapters, Peter functions prominently as the head of the twelve apostles, the core group of public witnesses to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. With his dramatic calling on the road to Damascus around AD 36, Paul enters the Acts of the Apostles in ch. 9 and takes over the narrative from ch. 15. When Paul returns to Jerusalem in ch. 21, he meets James and 'all the elders'. But there is no mention of Peter still being in Jerusalem. Acts ends with Paul arriving in Rome several years before he and Peter died there as martyrs

(between AD 64 and 67). James, a relative of Jesus and the leader of the Mother Church, had already been martyred in Jerusalem.

These first decades of Christian history featured the tension between two 'constituencies', the original Jerusalem Church with its vision of a Torah-observant community and the non-Torah-focused vision of Paul and others. The latter vision lifted the early Church beyond being merely a reform group within Judaism. Paul loved the Jerusalem community and showed that love by collecting money for them from other (local) churches (e.g. 2 Cor. 8: 1-9: 15). Nevertheless, a worldwide identity of Christians in Antioch, Rome, and further centres was formed in a tensional relationship with the Jerusalem community.

Paul spearheaded missionary activity around the Mediterranean world, and spread faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Luke understands this original Christian expansion as opening up an indefinitely long period which will close when Jesus appears again in his glory. In the meantime, as Acts repeatedly indicates, the risen Jesus and his Holy Spirit constantly guide and empower Christian life and mission.

By the 60s, the followers of Jesus had come to be called 'Christians' (Acts 11: 26). Through baptism in the name of Jesus, they knew their sins to be forgiven, received the Holy Spirit, entered the community of the Church, and celebrated the Eucharist. When praying, they called on God as 'Abba' (Rom. 8: 15; Gal. 4: 6), and used not only the psalms but also the Lord's Prayer and other such prayers as the *Benedictus* and the *Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46-55, 68-79), which were originally in Greek like the rest of Luke's Gospel but were subsequently known by their Latin titles. They learned the teaching of Jesus that reached them through their apostolic leaders and their associates. They confessed the risen and exalted Jesus to be Messiah (anointed Deliverer), Lord, and Son of God, and to have sent them, together with God the Father, the gift of the Holy Spirit. They believed that

the Spirit was offered to all peoples and that salvation no longer required circumcision and the practice of the Mosaic law in all its details (Acts 15: 1–35).

Paul's letters defend God's gift of salvation to all alike; justification is not gained through human efforts at fulfilling the Jewish law. Faith and baptism incorporate people into the Church, the Body of Christ, and put an end to distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3: 26–9). Faith in God the Father, in Jesus as Son of God and divine Lord, and in the Holy Spirit brings all believers together in the unity of baptism, the Eucharist, and a common life. The apostle insists that sharing in the one Eucharistic bread and in the one cup means belonging to the one Body of Christ (1 Cor. 10: 16–17).

While emphasizing the holy unity of the baptized, the apostle's letters let us glimpse the moral failures of early Christians. The First Letter to the Corinthians reveals how some suffered from factionalism, indulged doubts over the central truth of the resurrection, committed fornication, incest, and drunkenness, and showed a selfish unconcern for poorer Christians. The reproaches coming from Paul challenge illusions about a hypothetical golden age of Catholic Christianity that practised heroic ideals on all sides. From the outset, the Church suffered from scandals and divisions. The Book of Revelation, with its opening letters to the seven churches, joins the apostle in testifying to the mixture of holiness and sinfulness that characterized Christianity from the beginning (Rev. 2: 2–3: 22).

Along with holiness and sinfulness, a missionary outreach characterized early Christianity. The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters name with respect missionaries who spread the good news about Jesus as Saviour of the world: Barnabas, Epaphroditus, Timothy, Titus, and, not least, Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila. This married couple, when they lived in Ephesus and Rome, gathered believers in their home, and were also known to

the Christians of Corinth (1 Cor. 16: 19; Acts 18: 2-3, 26). Paul calls this couple his 'fellow workers' (Rom. 16: 3). When listing other collaborators on his mission for Christ, he names Andronicus and Junia (another married couple?) as 'distinguished in the eyes of the apostles' (Rom. 16: 7).

Early leadership

In concluding his Letter to the Romans, Paul begins with 'our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church', writes of those who 'work' to spread the good news, and greets 26 people, 24 of them by name. The final chapter of Romans raises the question: was the Church meant to be a completely egalitarian community, free of any kind of subordination to office-holders and sacred authorities? Did the vision of Jesus and the spontaneous direction of the Holy Spirit exclude such institutionalized leadership as occurred in the subsequent transmission of a threefold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons? Did that historical development betray Jesus' original dream of male and female disciples as co-partners variously empowered by the Holy Spirit to minister to the whole community? Or was there always some kind of leadership that rightly developed and was handed on to successive generations for the good of all?

From Pentecost to Christopher Columbus

We find multiple evidence for the fact that during his ministry Jesus chose twelve disciples from among the wider ranks of his followers and gave them some kind of authoritative office and leadership role. Mark attests the original call and subsequent mission of the Twelve (Mark 3: 13-19; 6: 7-13). Q (*Quelle*, or 'source'), a collection of sayings of Jesus that both Matthew and Luke draw from, implies the existence of his core group (Matt. 19: 28 = Luke 22: 30). They are 'in place' to receive together an appearance of the risen Christ, a fact first attested by a traditional formula cited by Paul (1 Cor. 15: 5) and subsequently narrated in various ways by the Easter chapters of the Gospels. The Twelve are given authority by Christ to lead and teach in his name, a role for

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