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## Preface

# We Are One Family

In the tapestry of human experience, few threads are as enduring and profound as our fundamental interconnectedness. The Catholic Church recognizes this not as an abstract idea but as a lived reality. She teaches that all of humanity is a single family, bound together by our shared dignity as children of God. Though diverse in culture, language, and belief, we are united by our common origin and purpose.

At the same time, within this universal human family, the Catholic Church forms a distinct spiritual family. Through faith, Baptism, and the sacraments, Catholics are drawn into a deeper communion—not just with one another, but with God. This spiritual family is not separate from the broader human family; rather, it exists to serve it, guiding people toward truth, love, and salvation.

This handbook is a guide to the Catholic Church as a spiritual family. It provides an overview of the core truths revealed by God and safeguarded by the Pope and bishops. You may be reading this as a baptized Catholic, using it as a reference or textbook in a religion class, or using it as part of sacramental preparation. Perhaps you are using it to prepare to become a member of the Catholic Church family. Or maybe you are simply curious about what Catholics believe and do.



Pope Leo XIV became the leader of the Catholic Church on May 8, 2025.

Whatever your reason for reading, this book invites you to discover the Church’s teachings and its role in the world. The Catholic faith calls us to recognize both our place in the human family and the unique role of the Church as a family of faith—one that welcomes, teaches, and leads all people closer to God.

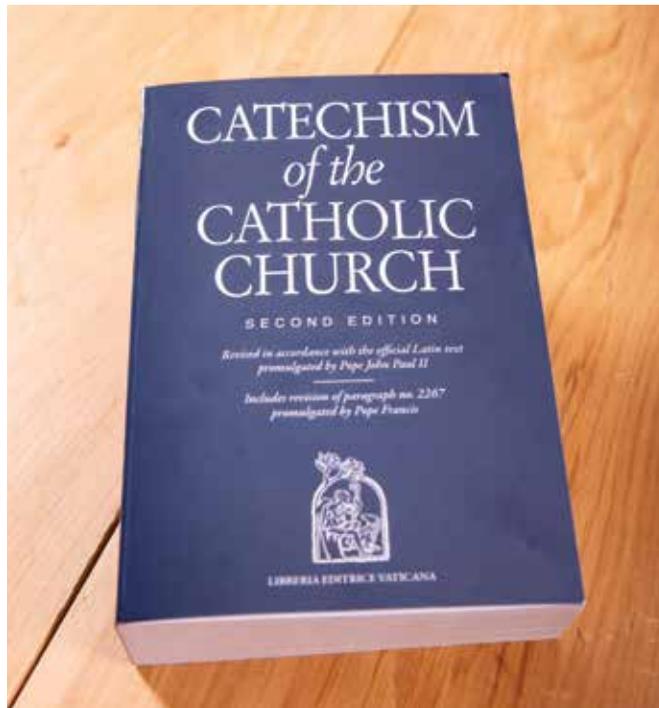
This handbook has been created to respect your curiosity and provide you with honest, to-the-point answers. Every word and image has been carefully chosen to show you something about Catholic beliefs, art, culture, and history.

We who created this handbook care deeply about you and about the Catholic Church. We hope and pray that you enjoy using this handbook as much as we enjoyed creating it.

## Overview

You may have heard of a book called the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (referred to from here on as the *Catechism* or *CCC*). It is a book of the most important teachings of the Catholic Church. Bishops, priests, youth ministers, teachers, and other adult Catholics use it as a reference book for authentic Catholic teaching. In its content and similar structure, this handbook reflects the *Catechism*.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an authoritative source for Catholic beliefs. *The Catholic Faith Handbook* reflects its content and follows a similar structure.



For example, the *Catechism* is divided into four major sections. Each section reflects an important aspect of Catholic teaching. This book follows a similar structure. After the three introductory chapters of unit 1, the remaining units reflect the four sections of the *Catechism*. However, the chapters on the creed have been divided into two units to keep them fairly equal in length. The units are as follows:

- **Unit 1:** This unit contains three introductory chapters exploring core Catholic beliefs, core Catholic practices, and Catholic attitudes. Before you begin a deep dive into the creed, liturgy, and sacraments, learn about how we come to know God through reason and Revelation. Finally, we look at the role sacred Scripture has in our formation as Catholics and our continuing faith journey.
- **Unit 2:** This unit is an overview of what Catholics believe about God and Jesus Christ. Both unit 2 and unit 3 are based on the Apostles' Creed.
- **Unit 3:** This unit is an overview of what Catholics believe about the Holy Spirit and the Church.
- **Unit 4:** This unit is an overview of how Catholics worship God and encounter Jesus Christ through the Seven Sacraments of the Church.
- **Unit 5:** This unit is about moral decision-making, sin, and conscience. The Ten Commandments are used as the basis for exploring and understanding specific moral issues and how we are called to respond.
- **Unit 6:** This unit is about prayer. It explores types of prayer, ways of praying, and what we pray for when we pray the Lord's Prayer.

In a way, this book is like a study guide or *Catechism* for anyone seeking to know more about their faith. It contains the essential teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* but is presented using language and examples that are easy to understand.

Each chapter focuses on one topic. The chapters contain additional short articles to help you further study and live the teachings. Here are short explanations of the six types of additional articles you will find.



The chapters do not explain everything there is to know about the Catholic faith. They cover the essentials, the basics. **The Good to Know** articles give additional information that a well-informed Catholic should be aware of. They provide answers to questions like “Why are the priest’s vestments different colors at different times of the year?” or “How many Catholics are there in the world?” If you familiarize yourself with the Good to Know articles, you can amaze your family and friends with your knowledge of Catholic facts!



The **Faith in Action** articles contain ideas and advice for putting your faith into action. A faith that isn’t lived out isn’t true faith. The Letter of James says:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what is the good of it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (2:14–17)

In the Faith in Action articles, you will find advice on setting up prayer time, suggestions for keeping control of your tongue, ideas on how to respond when someone questions your faith, and a description of how to go to confession. You will find that the Faith in Action articles contain lots of solid, practical advice.



The Catholic Church has a long and rich history, and most of us are familiar with only a little piece of it. The **Catholic Wisdom** articles present the teachings of saints and Church leaders, describe historical events, and explain why certain Church councils were called. Through the Catholic Wisdom articles, you will gain a better appreciation of the wisdom of two thousand years of Church history.



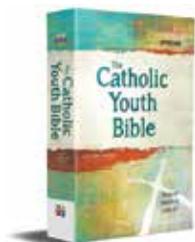
The Catholic Church has an important tradition of honoring women and men whose holy lives are an inspiration to others. These are the official saints of the Catholic Church, and there are hundreds of them. The **Models of Faith** articles provide short biographies of thirty-nine of these saints. These saints were chosen to represent the wide variety of people who have become official saints in the Catholic Church. Most of them are famous names you will hear if you spend time with involved Catholics for very long. We hope these saints' stories will inspire you to learn more about these great people and to explore your own call to holiness. The date of each saint's feast day is also given, which is the day the Church designates for remembering and celebrating the saint's life.



Prayer is a rich part of the Catholic Tradition, but you may not yet have experienced all the ways that Catholics pray. The **Connecting with God** articles will expose you to many different ways to expand your prayer life. They will teach you the Jesus prayer, how to create your own blessing prayer, and how to say traditional prayers like the Rosary. Many of the articles explain different aspects of the liturgy, the public worship of the Church. They include quotes from the prayers used in the Mass and the sacraments so that you can reflect on the meaning of these prayers more deeply.



God reveals himself and his divine plan for our salvation fully and completely through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. These two ways of communicating Divine Revelation are closely related. Even though this book is primarily devoted to helping you understand Sacred Tradition, you will see frequent Scripture quotations and Scripture references in the chapters. The **Scripture Spotlight** articles suggest a particular Scripture passage for you to read that is closely related to the topic of the chapter. The articles also offer questions and commentary to help you understand and reflect on these Scripture passages.



Keep in mind that this book is not intended to be a Bible study resource. For that, we suggest you find a study Bible like *The Catholic Youth Bible*®, also published by Saint Mary’s Press. That Bible and this handbook are, in a sense, a matched set—*The Catholic Youth Bible* helping you understand Scripture, and this book helping you understand Tradition.

## Catholic Essentials

In addition to the material in the chapters, you will find a treasury of easy-to-access information at the end of the book. We call this section Catholic Essentials, and there you will find the following sections:

- lists of Catholic beliefs and practices
- a collection of traditional Catholic prayers and devotions
- an illustrated guide to Catholic signs and symbols
- a list of various patron saints and their causes
- a glossary of Catholic terms and their definitions
- a timeline with important dates and events from the history of the Catholic Church

Turn to **Catholic Essentials** when you are looking for a prayer for a special need, a list of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, or the meaning of a word you are not familiar with. You may find it interesting to just browse through these sections from time to time.

## How to Use This Handbook

You can make use of this handbook in many ways. You may be using it as a textbook for your parish religious education program, Confirmation preparation program, or involvement with the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. But this handbook isn’t meant to be used just as a textbook. It is a guide you can use in many different ways.

Maybe you want to use this book just for private reading, to go through in your own time. The chapters are short, so it won’t take long to read one. If you do read the handbook this way, we suggest that you keep a Bible close at hand. The handbook contains many references to Bible stories and passages that you will want to look up.

Maybe you just want to keep this book handy as a reference when you have a question about the Catholic faith. The index in the back will help you quickly find a specific teaching or topic. The handbook was designed to make it quick and easy to find the information you need.

The people at Saint Mary’s Press believe in you. We want you to experience the deep peace, joy, and love that come through faith in Jesus Christ and membership in his Church. We hope this handbook will help you better understand what faith in Jesus and membership in the Church truly mean. With Saint Paul, we pray “that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). God bless you!

# Unit 1

## Introduction

Peace be with you all. God loves us, God loves you all, and evil will not prevail! All of us are in God's hands. So, let us move forward, without fear, together, hand in hand with God and with one another! We are followers of Christ. Christ goes before us. The world needs his light. Humanity needs him as the bridge that can lead us to God and his love. Help us, one and all, to build bridges through dialogue and encounter, joining together as one people, always at peace.

—Pope Leo XIV

# Chapter 1

## The Big Picture of Being Catholic

### *For Reflection*

Do you know a faithful and committed Catholic? Consider asking them what they find motivating about the Catholic faith.

Believers from all over the world come to Saint Peter's Square in Rome to hear the Pope's weekly address.

Being Catholic means many different things to people. For some, it means a whole culture or way of being in the world. It means Friday fish fries, Advent wreaths and crucifixes, having priests and religious sisters as friends, and saying the Rosary, among many other things. For these folks, being Catholic is a wonderful way of experiencing God in the world and following Jesus Christ. Hopefully, you know some Catholics like this.

On the other hand, some people's only understanding of Catholicism comes from what they see and hear in the popular media, which might be focused on the sinful actions of some members of the Church or a general misunderstanding of the Church and its teachings. The popular image of Catholicism formed by the media can be filled with stereotypes and misinformation and doesn't provide a true understanding of what Catholicism is all about.

By exploring the core teachings of the faith, this book will help you gain a deeper understanding of what motivates devoted Catholics. Through this journey, you may come to appreciate the richness of the Catholic Tradition and the profound beauty of its teachings. More than just an intellectual exploration, this book has the potential to



be transformational—opening your mind and heart to new insights, deeper reflection, and perhaps even a renewed sense of faith and purpose.

## Why Are All These People Catholic?

It is estimated that there are almost 1.4 billion Catholics living in the world. That is about 17.5 percent of the world's population. There are more Catholics than there are people in any other Christian denomination. There are also more Catholics than there are Jews, Hindus, or Buddhists—only Muslims have more members. Catholics and Catholic churches can be found almost anywhere in the world.

What do these numbers mean? Let's be honest. On the one hand, they do not necessarily mean anything at all. A religion isn't necessarily good or true simply because lots of people belong. The truth of Catholicism cannot be determined by how many people are Catholic.

On the other hand, the great number of Catholics in the world testifies to Catholicism's universal appeal and to the power that the Catholic faith has in people's lives. Since the Catholic Church's humble beginnings following the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it has truly become a worldwide religion. People of almost every nationality and cultural background embrace it. Surely such a religious tradition must have something compelling to offer.



### How Many Catholics Are There?

There are almost 1.4 billion Catholics worldwide. In recent trends, the Church is growing most rapidly in Asia and Africa. What direction do you think the population of the Catholic Church is headed in the United States?

- **Africa:** 272 million (19.7% of the population)
- **North and South America:** 666 million (64.1% of the population)
- **Asia:** 154 million (3.3% of the population)
- **Europe:** 286 million (39.5% of the population)
- **Oceania:** 11 million (17.7% of the population)

**Ecumenical Council** A gathering of all Catholic bishops, convened by the Pope and under his authority and guidance.

### For Reflection

What has been your experience with the Catholic faith up to this point? What are you most curious about as you explore Catholicism more deeply?



## The Mystery of the Church

On special occasions, the Pope calls all of the bishops of the world together to address important issues in the Church. These gatherings are called **Ecumenical Councils**, and the last one, held from 1962 to 1965, was called Second Vatican Council. Here is part of a statement on the Church from that council:

[God] planned to assemble in the holy Church all those who would believe in Christ. Already from the beginning of the world, the foreshadowing of the Church took place. She was prepared for in a remarkable way throughout

If you ask a dozen Catholics what is compelling about their faith, you will probably get a dozen different answers. This is one of the wonderful things about the Catholic faith! Its rich tradition provides something for all people, no matter what their particular personality or spiritual need may be. The Catholic Church includes people who desire quiet, meditative prayer as well as those who enjoy communal prayer filled with sound and action. The Catholic Church embraces people who desire a clear and unchanging set of beliefs as well as those who want to explore how those beliefs are applied to different cultures and a changing world. The Catholic Church is made up of people who provide direct service to those in need as well as those who want to change structures in society to create a more just world.

But if you listen carefully, you will hear some common threads when Catholics talk about what is important to them about the Catholic faith. They often speak about truths God has revealed and transmitted through Scripture and Tradition. They also talk about the practices of the Catholic faith, the ways in which Catholics pray and make moral decisions. And they talk about the worldview of Catholicism—that is, the attitudes that Catholics display as they live out their faith in the world. Let’s look briefly at these three areas: beliefs, practices, and attitudes.

the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant. Established in the present era of time, the church was made manifest by the outpouring of the Spirit. At the end of time she will achieve her glorious fulfillment. Then, as may be read in the holy Fathers, all just men from the time of Adam, “from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect” will be gathered together with the Father in the universal Church. (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium, 1964], 2*)

## Scripture Spotlight

### A Catholic Worldview

Read Philippians 4:4–9. In this passage, Saint Paul expresses a Catholic attitude toward the world. Especially reflect on verse 8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

The Bible teaches us that the goodness and love of God are not limited to the Christian faith only. Saint Paul instructs us to discern God’s presence in the world by looking for truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, and grace in all people, all relationships, and all social institutions. The presence of these qualities—wherever they are found—should cause us to praise God and rejoice in the many ways he cares for us.

### Some Core Catholic Beliefs

The following list is meant to give you a quick glimpse of the core beliefs of Catholics. These statements may leave you with many questions, which is why you will find them explained in greater depth in later chapters.

- God created human beings to be in perfect union with himself and one another. However, the sin of our first parents—called Original Sin—deprived the human race of our original holiness and justice.
- Throughout human history, God worked to restore the relationship of love and trust that was lost through Original Sin. He did this by entering into covenants—special relationships based on mutual promises—with Noah, Abraham, and the people of Israel. But the people often broke their covenant promises.
- Ultimately, God sent his only begotten son, **Jesus Christ**, as savior for humanity. Christ is both true God and true man. He became the perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the relationship of love and trust between God and humankind.
- Following his death, Jesus was brought back to life in the Resurrection! Christ overcame death and opened Heaven’s gates for all the just.
- The Holy Spirit has been at work in the world from the beginning of Creation to the present day. The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son and is also called the Advocate (Paraclete) and the Spirit of Truth.
- God has revealed himself to be Trinity, the mystery of one God in three Divine Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This was revealed by Jesus Christ.

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**Jesus Christ** The Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, who took on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

**Bible** Also called Sacred Scripture, the collection of Christian sacred writings accepted by the Church as inspired by God. Composed of the Old and New Testaments.

### For Reflection

Which beliefs from the list of “Some Core Catholic Beliefs” do you best understand? Which of those beliefs would you like to better understand?

- Christ established the Catholic Church on the foundation of the Apostles. Christ and the Holy Spirit revealed the fullness of religious truth to the Apostles. The fullness of God’s revealed truth is called Sacred Tradition, and it is entrusted to the Apostles’ successors, the Pope and all the bishops of the Church.
- The **Bible**, or Sacred Scripture, is another source of God’s revealed truth for Catholics. The Bible is closely connected to Sacred Tradition. The Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Bible to write what God wants us to know for our salvation.
- All people are destined for eternal life after death. The baptized who have put their faith in Jesus Christ as their savior will find their eternal reward in Heaven. Salvation through Christ is also possible for those who seek God with a sincere heart and try to do his will but who do not know Christ, the Gospel, or the Church, through no fault of their own. Those who willfully and persistently reject God in this life will suffer eternal separation from God in Hell.

## Some Core Catholic Practices

The weekly celebration of the Eucharist is considered the heart of the Church’s life and worship. Participation is expected of all Catholics of the age and ability to do so.

Catholic practices are closely related to Catholic beliefs. Some important Catholic practices in worship and morality could also have been listed as beliefs in the previous section. As in the belief section, the practices listed here are not complete and should raise some questions that will be answered in later chapters.





## How Can You Actively Live Your Faith?

The Catholic Church offers countless opportunities for people to deepen their relationship with Christ and become active participants in their faith community. Here are five meaningful ways you can engage with your Church community:

- **Participate in the sacramental life** by attending Mass regularly, receiving the Eucharist, and making Reconciliation part of your spiritual practice.
- **Join a ministry group** where you can connect with others who share your values, discuss faith questions in a supportive environment, and build lasting friendships centered on Christ.
- **Discover the rich tradition of Catholic prayer** through practices like Eucharistic Adoration, the Rosary, *lectio divina*, or the Liturgy of the Hours.
- **Serve others** through parish outreach programs or Catholic charitable organizations.
- **Seek ongoing faith formation** through Bible studies, catechesis programs, or Catholic podcasts and literature.

Spiritual growth is a journey. Start with what appeals to you most and allow your involvement to deepen naturally.

- Catholics celebrate Seven Sacraments that form the basis of their **worship**, or communal prayer, together. The Seven Sacraments were instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church to make the love of God real and present in the world.
- The Sacrament of the Eucharist is the heart of the Church's life. In this sacrament, we literally receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the appearance of bread and wine.
- Sunday, or the "Lord's Day," is the principal day for the celebration of the Eucharist. Catholics keep the day holy by attending Mass and resting from work, in remembrance of Christ's Resurrection.
- Catholics follow a special calendar with all the feasts and holy days of the Liturgical Year. The special seasons of Advent and Lent prepare us to understand God's great love, which we celebrate at Christmas and Easter.
- Catholics place a strong emphasis on living morally because we are called to new life in the Holy Spirit. The moral code for this new life is based on the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.
- Catholics defend the dignity of human life, and Catholic morality is often described as pro-life. Catholics are opposed to anything that threatens the sanctity of human life, including abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and human cloning.

**worship** Adoration of God, usually expressed publicly in the Church's official liturgy, as well as through other prayers and devotions.

## Models of Faith

### Mary (First Century)

Catholics have a special devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ. We do not worship her or pray to her as God, like some people mistakenly believe. We do honor her as the Mother of God, and at times we ask her to approach Jesus with a special need or concern. She is the only person besides Jesus who was born without Original Sin, and at her death we believe she was taken up directly to Heaven.

We recognize that she was the first follower, the first disciple, of Jesus. Her yes to the angel Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke (see 1:26–38) made it possible for Jesus to come into the world. In the Gospel of John, Mary is the first person to believe that Jesus can work miracles, at the wedding feast at Cana (see 2:1–11). At the cross, Jesus tells the beloved disciple, “Here is your mother” (John 19:27), which has the symbolic meaning

that Mary is the Mother of all believers. And Mary was present at Pentecost (see Acts of the Apostles 1:14), receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Mary is a model for all who wish to follow Jesus more closely. She is our loving and patient Mother, and we do well to honor her and ask for her prayers on our behalf—she will never turn a deaf ear to our requests.



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### For Reflection

Which of the practices from the list of “Some Core Catholic Practices” do you witness in the lives of Catholics you know? How does their example inspire you?

- Serving people in need and working to transform society are essential elements of Catholic life. The Church is called to be a sign of God’s perfect Kingdom yet to come, by working for justice and human rights in this life.
- Catholics honor the great people of faith who have preceded them, the **saints**, and in a dear and special way, **Mary**, the Mother of Jesus.

**saint** Someone who has been transformed by the grace of Christ and who resides in full union with God in Heaven.

**Mary** The Mother of Jesus, sometimes called the Blessed Virgin Mary. Because Jesus is the Son of God and the Second Person of the Trinity, Mary is also given the title Mother of God.

## Catholic Attitudes

Because of what we believe and how we live, Catholics see the world in a unique way. Many Catholics don't even realize that they have this unique perspective until they spend time with people from other religious or nonreligious backgrounds. See how many of the following attitudes describe your perspectives:

- Catholics recognize that God is present to, in, and through all creation—including the natural world, persons, communities, and historical events. All creation is sacred and has the potential to be a source of God's grace.
- Catholics place their trust in the essential goodness of the human person, who is made in the image of God, even though we are flawed by the effect of Original Sin.
- Catholics appreciate both faith and reason, both religion and science. Reason can lead us to faith. When we experience conflict between religion and science, it is because we have an inadequate understanding of one or the other.
- Although the fullness of truth resides in the Catholic Church, Catholics seek to recognize and affirm the aspects of God's revealed truth that we share with other religions and all people of goodwill.
- Because we are saved by participating in the community of faith—that is, the Church—rather than as isolated individuals, Catholics emphasize community life and communal worship. Though we value and nurture our personal relationship with God, we distrust any spirituality that reflects a primary attitude of “it's just God and me—I don't need a Church.”
- Catholicism respects the great diversity of cultures in the world and is committed to proclaiming the message of Jesus to all people in all cultures at all times.
- Catholics respect and embrace a wide variety of spiritualities and prayer forms.

CONNECTING  
with God

### Act of Faith

The Act of Faith is an old and traditional prayer of the Catholic Church. People pray it as a sign of commitment to the core truths of the faith. Try praying it as a sign of your desire to believe.

O my God, I firmly believe you are one God in three Divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins and that he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches because you have revealed them who are eternal truth and wisdom, can neither deceive nor be deceived. In this faith I intend to live and die.

## For Review

1. Approximately how many Catholics are there in the world today?
2. Through what two sources is God's Revelation transmitted to us?
3. How did Original Sin affect the relationship between God and human beings?
4. What did God establish with his people to try to restore the relationship of love and trust that was lost through Original Sin?
5. Describe the importance of Jesus Christ in two or three sentences.
6. What does it mean to say that God is Trinity? Name the three Divine Persons in the Blessed Trinity.
7. How does a person attain salvation?
8. Describe three practices and three attitudes that Catholics follow and value.

## Chapter 2

# How Can We Know God?

Do you remember pestering your parents to let you do something you really wanted to do but they didn't want you to? Even after they said no and explained their reasons, you kept asking: "Why? Why not? Come on, why?" If your parents are like most parents, at some point their patience wore out and they simply answered, "Because I said so, that's why!"

Would you believe that there is a parallel to this common relationship between parent and child in the truths held by the Catholic Church? The Church makes frequent appeal to human reason in teaching us about the religious truths God has revealed. But reason can take us only so far in explaining the great mysteries of life and religious truth. Ultimately, we must trust that God has revealed to the Church what he wants us to know for our salvation. Let's explore our need for God and how we can come to know the truth about God.

## Our Need for God

When you take a moment to look at what you really want from life, what do you think about? Most people name things like a happy family, success in work, a comfortable life, good health, and so on. Now look a little deeper and ask, "What do these things symbolize?" Don't they symbolize our need to be loved and accepted for who we really are—and our need to return love, to make a difference in the world and in people's lives?

Consider one more thing. Literature and movies are full of stories about people who have everything that one could desire—and yet these people are still unsatisfied, they still seek something more. Could it be that our need to be loved and to return love, and the emptiness we feel even when we have everything the world tells us we need, are signs of our need for God? The simple truth is that we are by nature religious beings, and each of us has an empty place—a God-shaped hole—that can never



## The Canon of the Bible

In the first centuries of the Church, quite a few letters and gospels existed that Christians used for information and inspiration. It was the responsibility of the early popes and bishops, guided by the Holy Spirit, to determine which of these books were truly inspired. At the Council of Rome in AD 382, Pope Damasus determined the official list of books, sometimes called the **canon**, that make up the Catholic Bible. That list is complete, so books can never be added or taken away.

Catholic Bibles have seven more books in the Old Testament than do most Protestant Bibles. This goes back to a

disagreement over whether to use the original Greek or the Hebrew version of the Old Testament. The Greek version has been accepted by the Church since the time of the Apostles and contains the Books of Tobit, Judith, First and Second Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch. These seven books are sometimes called the Apocrypha (Greek for “hidden”) or the deuterocanonical (Greek for “second canon”) books. Many Protestant churches later decided to use the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, which does not contain these books.

be filled by anything less than God. We are made to live in spiritual union with him, in whom we can find true happiness. Perhaps Saint Augustine said it best when he said, “For you have made us for yourself, [God], and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

## Reason and Revelation

Well, if we all have God-shaped holes, how do we discover God, who alone can fill them? One way people have been doing it for all human history is to use our natural gifts of observation and **reason**. When confronted by an awesome dis-

play of a star-filled night or the overpowering experience of being truly loved by another person, we know that we are in touch with something far greater than just what we can see and touch. Reason tells us that something had to create such order and possibility. Or when we experience the voice directing us to act lovingly and generously instead of selfishly—reason tells us that something greater than us is responsible for placing that voice within us.

The Bible speaks about this experience of God through the created world. For example, many of the Psalms proclaim God’s presence in works of nature:

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**canon** This word has a variety of meanings. The canon of Scripture refers to the Church’s list of books of the Bible. The canon of the Mass is another name for the Eucharistic Prayer. Canon Law is the official body of laws for Catholics.

**reason** The natural ability human beings have to know and understand truth.

“The heavens declare the glory of God; / the firmament proclaims the works of his hands” (Psalm 19:2). In his Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul writes this about God: “Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made” (1:20).

When we listen to the message of Creation and to the voice of conscience, we can come to certainty about the existence of God. We call this process **natural revelation**. Through natural revelation, we can know the one true God from his works—that is, from the world and from the human person. This is one reason why salvation is possible for every person, even those who have never heard of Jesus Christ.

Yet human reason rarely seems like it is enough by itself to come to know God. Pope Pius XII put it like this:

**natural revelation** The process by which God makes himself known to human reason through the created world.

CONNECTING  
with God

## Story of the Man and the Birds

Now the man to whom I’m going to introduce you was not a scrooge, he was a kind, decent, mostly good man. But he just didn’t believe that Jesus was God who had been born into the world as a man. “I’m truly sorry to distress you,” he told his wife, “but I’m not going with you to church this Christmas Eve.” He said he’d feel like a hypocrite.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. Minutes later, the man was startled by a thudding sound. When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds that had been caught in the storm and, in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window. Well, he couldn’t let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he hoped to direct the birds to his barn for shelter.

He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms. Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn. And then he realized that they were afraid of him. He wished he could think of some way to let them know they could trust him.

“If only I could be a bird,” he thought to himself, “and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see and hear and understand.” At that moment, the church bells began to ring, pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. And he sank to his knees in the snow. (Adapted from a story shared by Paul Harvey)

**Divine Revelation** God's self-communication through which he makes known the mystery of his divine plan. Divine Revelation is a gift accomplished by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through the words and deeds of salvation history. It is most fully realized in the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ.

### For Reflection

Take a moment to meditate on the idea that God was willing to take the radical step of becoming fully human to communicate with us. What a tremendous sign of his love! What are some signs of God's love in your life?



### Reading the Bible: The PRIMA Process

Having an effective strategy for reading the Bible can make the difference between giving up and staying on course. We call one such method the PRIMA process. *Prima* is the Latin word for "first." In the PRIMA process, each letter of the word stands for a step in studying the Bible, either individually or with a group:

- **Pray.** Begin by praying that your time with the Bible will draw you closer to God.
- **Read** attentively, trying to hear the words as if for the first time. Reading the passage aloud, even if you are alone, can help with this.
- **Imagine** being part of the story you just read. What would you feel? How would you react? Do you know anything about the background of the story that can help you understand what the author is trying to get across?
- **Meditate** on what you have read. How does the message of the story fit with the rest of the Bible's teaching? with the Church's teaching? What do you think God is teaching you?
- **Apply** what you have read to your life. God may be calling you to make a change in your life. Or you may find encouragement that you need during a difficult time. Carry God's Word into the rest of your day!

The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful! (CCC, 37)

So how do we overcome this gap created by the limits of human reason? Well, we cannot overcome it, but God can! In his great love, he has revealed himself to us to restore the communion that human beings were created to have with him, before the relationship was broken by Original Sin.

In **Divine Revelation**, God makes himself and his divine plan known to humanity through words and deeds in human history. This Divine Revelation is communicated to us in the Bible's accounts of how God made himself known to the Chosen People by acting throughout their history. But when those attempts met with failure, God took a radical step. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be our savior. While remaining fully God, Jesus Christ took on a human nature: He is both true God and true man. Thus, Jesus Christ is the fullest and complete

## Chapter 3

# The Bible's Big Picture

**salvation history** The pattern of events in human history that exemplify God's presence and saving actions.

### For Reflection

How familiar are you with the Bible? Find an approved Catholic translation of the Bible, such as the *New American Bible, Revised Edition*, and open it to the table of contents. Scan the list of books for any that look familiar. Use the Bible to look up some of the Bible passages referred to in *The Catholic Faith Handbook*.

God has a plan, and we are all part of it. If this is true—and it is—then it follows that we should know his plan and its ultimate goal. God makes this possible for us by revealing himself and his plan for our salvation in a privileged way through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. In particular, the events of God's Revelation in history are recorded in Sacred Scripture, God's inspired Word. Most of this book is devoted to helping you understand the Tradition of the Catholic Church. However, you will better appreciate Sacred Tradition if you understand the big picture of God's relationship with humanity, as told in the Bible. This big picture is called **salvation history**, because it shows how God has worked within the people and events of human history to achieve his ultimate goal: restoring our lost union with him. This chapter provides a basic understanding of salvation history.

As you read this overview, you will probably notice how human disobedience to God's Covenant and God's Law keep getting in the way of the fulfillment of God's plan. Despite these setbacks, God reveals in Scripture that his goal will ultimately be fulfilled. Further, each one of us is an active participant in God's plan; we cannot choose otherwise. The question is whether we will work in support of God's plan or against it.

The original books of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew on scrolls, usually one book per scroll. In Jewish worship services, Scripture is still read from scrolls like the one pictured here.



## The Big Picture of Sacred Scripture

The books in the Bible are a mix of religious history, poetry, wise sayings, symbolic stories, songs, and other kinds of literature. Although some books provide an orderly sequence of events, presented in chronological order, others do not. All the books of Sacred Scripture, however, are the inspired Word of God and are a source of prayer for us. When studied as a whole, the books of the Bible reveal for us a picture of God's gift of himself through his saving love and his plan for our salvation. What follows is a brief overview of that plan. This overview follows the most common way that salvation history is divided into different periods.

### Primeval History

Salvation history begins with Creation. The first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis contain what the *Catechism* calls figurative language—that is, symbolic images and accounts used to express great truths. These chapters are also sometimes called primeval history, meaning that these events happened long before there



Noah, his family, and all the animals after the Great Flood.

**covenant** In general, a solemn agreement between human beings or between God and a human being in which mutual commitments are recognized; also called a testament.

was any recorded history. In these chapters, we learn that God created the world and all that is in it, and that all God's creatures are good and live in harmony with one another and with him. Further, the first three chapters of Genesis reveal that God's Creation was good, ordered, and harmonious, without sin or human death. In these chapters, we learn that the sin of our first human parents, Adam and Eve, injured their perfect relationship with God and with each other. This Original Sin is passed on to all human beings and makes it more difficult for us to choose good and choose God.

In chapters 4–11 of Genesis, the accounts of Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the tower of Babel teach us that sin spreads and that without God's help, sin leads to death and destruction. But despite our sin and disobedience, God begins a process of intervention to save us. To the serpent, who represents Satan, he says:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
They will strike your head,  
while you strike at their heel.

(Genesis 3:15)

This is the first promise of a coming savior who will triumph over the power of evil. Then, after the Great Flood, God makes a special promise called a **covenant** with Noah and the whole human race—a promise to never destroy the world by flood again.

## The Patriarchs

In the period of the patriarchs, God begins to form a special relationship with a chosen race of people. At this time, most of humanity does not recognize the one, true God. So, God makes a Covenant with a man named Abraham. He promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars, and that through them all future generations will experience God's blessings (see Genesis 12:3). Abraham and his wife, Sarah, experience several crises in which it appears that the Abrahamic Covenant will go unfulfilled: famine, war, Sarah's barrenness, even a test that involves the near sacrifice of their only son, Isaac. But each time, God steps in to ensure that the people he has chosen survive.

The accounts of Abraham and Sarah's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren show us the same pattern of crisis and God's faithfulness. Their son, Isaac, has difficulty finding a suitable wife. There is the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau, Isaac's sons that nearly leads to violence. Jacob's older sons sell their youngest brother, Joseph, into slavery. Yet in an amazing story of reconciliation and forgiveness, Joseph—whom God had led to become the pharaoh's chief adviser—welcomes his father and brothers, providing them food and a place to live during another famine. Jacob's sons go on to become the patriarchs (founding fathers) of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

In the ancient world of the Bible, a patriarch was the male leader of a tribal group and was responsible for the group's survival. Ideally, he was a benevolent and strong father figure, who was obeyed without question by the members of the tribe. In the biblical use of the term, the patriarchs are the original ancestors of God's Chosen People, the Israelites. Namely, they are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons.



## Make a Plan for Reading the Bible

There is more than one way to read the Bible. Some people try reading it from the beginning to the end. Often, though, people who try reading the Bible this way don't make it very far. They get confused and quit because some of the books in the beginning of the Old Testament are difficult to understand. Here are two suggestions for other ways you can make a plan for reading the Bible:

- 1.** Because understanding Jesus' life is key, start by reading one of the Gospels, perhaps the Gospel of Mark, as it is the shortest. Then read Genesis to get the beginning of salvation history. Then jump back to Acts of the Apostles to understand the start of the early Church. Then jump back to Exodus to see how

God's saving power saved the Israelites from slavery. By jumping back and forth between New Testament and Old Testament books, you can start to see how the two Testaments are connected.

- 2.** Read the Sunday readings every week. You can find the readings listed in a missal or church bulletin or on the United States bishops' website. Sure, you hear these read at Mass on Sunday, but by reading them on your own, you can study them more deeply and meditate on their meaning. The Sunday readings are on a three-year cycle. After three years, you will have read most of the four Gospels and a good section of the Old Testament and the letters of the New Testament.