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What is the Catholic Church?

For the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul on 29 June, here are answers to some common questions about the Catholic Church. What is the Church? Why can eternal salvation be found only in the Church?

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Summary

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1. What is the Church?

The word "Church" (Latin ecclesia, from the Greek ek-ka-lein, to "call out of") means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people, usually for

a religious purpose. *Ekklesia* is used frequently in the Greek Old Testament for the assembly of the Chosen People before God, above all for their assembly on Mount Sinai where Israel received the Law and was established by God as his holy people. By calling itself "Church," the first community of Christian believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly. In the Church, God is "calling together" his people from all the ends of the earth. the equivalent Greek term *Kyriake*, from which the English word Church and the German Kirche are derived, means "what belongs to the Lord."

In Christian usage, the word "church" designates the liturgical assembly, but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable.

"The Church" is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ's Body. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 751-752)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- What is most important in the Church is not how we humans react but how God acts. This is what the Church is: Christ present in our midst, God coming toward men in order to save them, calling us with his revelation, sanctifying us with his grace, maintaining us with his constant help, in the great and small battles of our daily life. (*Christ is Passing By*, 131)
- People from different countries, different races, and very

different backgrounds and professions... When you speak to them about God, you become aware of the human and supernatural value of your vocation as an apostle. It is as if you are re-living, in its total reality, the miracle of the first preaching of Our Lord's disciples. Phrases spoken in a strange tongue, which open up new ways, have been heard by each one, in the depth of his heart in his own language. And in your mind you can see that scene taking on a new life, in which "Parthians, Medes and Elamites" have come joyfully to God. (*Furrow*, 186)

2. Why did the Church begin?

"The eternal Father, in accordance with the utterly gratuitous and mysterious design of his wisdom and goodness, created the whole universe and chose to raise up men to share in his own divine life," to which he calls all men in his Son. "The Father [...] determined to call together in a holy Church those who should believe in Christ."

This "family of God" is gradually formed and takes shape during the stages of human history, in keeping with the Father's plan. In fact, already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvelous fashion in the history of the people of Israel and the Old Alliance. Established in this last age of the world and made manifest in the outpouring of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time.

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 759, quoting *Lumen Gentium*, 2)*

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Let us love the Lord our God; let us love his Church, Saint Augustine writes. Let us love Him as our Father, and her as our Mother. Let no one say: 'It is true that I still go to the idols and consult the possessed and the sorcerers, but I have not abandoned the Church, I am a Catholic.' You may still be united to your Mother, but you offend your Father. Someone else might say: 'God forbid. I do not consult sorcerers or the possessed. I do not practise sacrilegious prophecies nor go to adore demons nor serve gods of stone. But I belong to the Donatist party. ' What use will it be to him not to offend his Father if his Father will avenge his Mother whom he offends? And Saint Cyprian puts it more briefly: No one can have God as

his Father who does not have the Church as his Mother. (*In Love with the Church*, 29)

- The same thing applies to the lives of institutions, and in a very special way to the life of the Church which does not follow a precarious human plan but a God-given design. The world's redemption and salvation are the fruits of Jesus Christ's loving filial faithfulness to the will of the heavenly Father Who sent Him, and of our faithfulness to Him.

(*Conversations*, 1)

- The Church belongs to God and has only one aim, the salvation of souls. Let us draw near to Our Lord and speak to him face to face in our prayer. Let us ask him forgiveness for our personal weaknesses and let us make reparation for our sins and for those of other men who may not realize in this climate

of confusion, how gravely they are offending God. (*In Love with the Church*, 33)

3. Who founded the Church?

It was the Son's task to accomplish the Father's plan of salvation in the fullness of time. Its accomplishment was the reason for his being sent. "The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God, promised over the ages in the scriptures." To fulfill the Father's will, Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church "is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery."

To welcome Jesus' word is to welcome "the Kingdom itself." By all his actions, Christ prepares and builds his Church. The Church is

born primarily of Christ's total self-giving for our salvation, anticipated in the institution of the Eucharist and fulfilled on the cross. The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 763-766)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- Christ has given his Church sureness in doctrine and a flow of grace in the sacraments. He has arranged things so that there will always be people to guide and lead us, to remind us constantly of our way. There is an infinite treasure of knowledge available to us: the word of God kept safe by the Church, the grace of Christ administered in the sacraments and also the witness and example of those who live by

our side and have known how to build with their good lives a road of faithfulness to God.

(Christ is Passing By, 34)

- Become more Roman day by day. Love that blessed quality which is the ornament of the children of the one true Church, for Jesus wanted it to be so. *(The Forge, 586)*
- Christ is alive in his Church. "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." That was what God planned: Jesus, dying on the cross, gave us the Spirit of truth and life. Christ stays in his Church, its sacraments, its liturgy, its preaching — in all that it does. *(Christ is Passing By, 102)*

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4. How does Christ's mission continue in history?

The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else there is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head. Representing the twelve tribes of Israel, they are the foundation stones of the new Jerusalem. The Twelve and the other disciples share in Christ's mission and his power, but also in his lot. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 765)

As narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, the twelve apostles are the most evident sign of Jesus' will for the existence and mission of his Church, the guarantee that there is no contradiction between Christ and the Church: they are inseparable, despite the sins of the men who make up the Church.

The apostles were aware, because they had received this from Jesus, that their mission would be perpetuated. That is why they were concerned to find successors so that the mission entrusted to them would continue after his death, as the book of the Acts of the Apostles testifies. They left a community structured through the apostolic ministry, under the guidance of legitimate pastors, who build it up and sustain it in communion with Christ and the Holy Spirit in which all men are called to experience the salvation offered by the Father.

Meditate with the saints

- But what is the Church? Where is the Church? Bewildered and disoriented, many Christians do not find sure answers to these questions. And they come to believe that perhaps the answers which the Magisterium

has formulated for centuries — and which good catechisms have proposed with the necessary precision and simplicity — have now been superseded and must be replaced by new ones. (...) The Church today is the same one Christ founded. It cannot be any other. The Apostles and their successors are the vicars of God with regard to the rule of the Church as instituted through faith and with regard to the sacraments of the faith. Hence, just as it is not lawful for them to constitute any other Church, so too it is not lawful for them either to hand down any other faith or to institute any other sacraments. Rather, the Church is said to have been built up with the 'sacraments which flowed from the side of Christ hanging on the Cross'. (Saint

Thomas, S. Th. III, q.64, a.2 ad 3).

- The Church must be recognised by the four marks in the profession of faith of one of the first Councils, as we pray in the Creed of the Mass: One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. These are the essential properties of the Church, which are derived from its nature as Christ intended it. And, being essential, they are also marks, signs, which distinguish it from any other human gathering, even though in the others the name of Christ may be pronounced. (*In Love with the Church*, 2)
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5. Who forms part of the Church?

In the letters of St. Paul, the members of the Church are conceived as "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20).

"The Christian faithful are those who, inasmuch as they have been incorporated in Christ through Baptism, have been constituted as the people of God; and they are called to exercise the mission which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one."

"In virtue of their rebirth in Christ there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one's own condition and

function." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 871-872, quoting the *Code of Canon Law*, can. 204 & 208)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- God's call, the character conferred by Baptism, and grace mean that every single Christian can and should be a living expression of the faith. Every Christian should be 'another Christ, Christ himself', present among men. (...) It is necessary to restore to Holy Baptism its full significance. By means of this sacrament we are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church... To be a Christian, to have received Baptism, should not be looked upon as something indifferent or of little importance. It should be imprinted deeply and joyously on the conscience of every

baptised person.

(Conversations, 58)

- Seeing how so many Christians express their affection for the Virgin Mary, surely you also feel more a part of the Church, closer to those brothers and sisters of yours. It is like a family reunion. Grown-up children, whom life has separated, come back to their mother for some family anniversary. And even if they have not always got on well together, today things are different; they feel united, sharing the same affection.
(Christ is Passing By, 139)
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6. Why can we find eternal salvation only in the Church?

Christ himself is the mystery of salvation: "For there is no other mystery of God, except Christ." The saving work of his holy and sanctifying humanity is the sacrament of salvation, which is revealed and active in the Church's sacraments (which the Eastern Churches also call "the holy mysteries"). The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body. The Church, then, both contains and communicates the invisible grace she signifies. It is in this analogical sense, that the Church is called a "sacrament."

"The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament -- a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men." The Church's first purpose is to be the sacrament of the inner union of men

with God. Because men's communion with one another is rooted in that union with God, the Church is also the sacrament of the unity of the human race. In her, this unity is already begun, since she gathers men "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues"; at the same time, the Church is the "sign and instrument" of the full realization of the unity yet to come.

As sacrament, the Church is Christ's instrument. "She is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all," "the universal sacrament of salvation," by which Christ is "at once manifesting and actualizing the mystery of God's love for men." The Church "is the visible plan of God's love for humanity." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 774-776)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- In the Church there is a diversity of ministries, but there is only one aim: the sanctification of men. And in this task all Christians participate in some way, through the character imprinted by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. We must all feel responsible for the mission of the Church, which is the mission of Christ. He who does not have zeal for the salvation of souls, he who does not strive with all his strength to make the name and doctrine of Christ known and loved, will not understand the apostolicity of the Church. (*In Love with the Church*, 15)
- The Church does not have to strive to please men, since men -- neither alone nor in community -- will never give

eternal salvation: the one who saves is God. (*In Love with the Church*, 12)

- Our Lord Jesus Christ, who founded the holy Church, expects the members of this people to strive continually to acquire sanctity. Not all respond loyally to his call. And in the spouse of Christ, at one and the same time, both the marvel of the way of salvation and the miseries of those who take up that way are visible. (*In Love with the Church*, 6)

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7. What does it mean to be Christian, part of the People of God?

The People of God is marked by characteristics that clearly distinguish it from all other religions,

ethnic, political, or cultural groups found in history:

- It is the People of God: God is not the property of any one people. But he acquired a people for himself from those who previously were not a people: "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation."
- One becomes a member of this people not by a physical birth, but by being "born anew," a birth "of water and the Spirit," that is, by faith in Christ, and Baptism.
- This People has for its Head Jesus the Christ (the anointed, the Messiah). Because the same anointing, the Holy Spirit, flows from the head into the body, this is "the messianic people."
- "The status of this people is that of the dignity and freedom of the sons of God, in whose hearts

the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple."

- "Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us." This is the "new" law of the Holy Spirit.
- Its mission is to be salt of the earth and light of the world. This people is "a most sure seed of unity, hope, and salvation for the whole human race."
- Its destiny, finally, "is the Kingdom of God which has been begun by God himself on earth and which must be further extended until it has been brought to perfection by him at the end of time." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 782)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- When the Lord brought you into the Church he put an indelible mark upon your soul

through Baptism: you are a son of God. — Don't forget it. (*The Forge*, 264)

- God is right there in the centre of your soul, and mine, and in the soul of everyone who is in a state of grace. He is there for a purpose: so that our salt may increase, that we may acquire more light and that each one of us from his place may know how to distribute those gifts of God.
- And how can we share out these gifts from God? With humility and piety, and by being very united to our Mother the Church. —Do you not recall the vine and the branches? How fruitful is each branch when united to the vine! What large bunches of grapes! And how sterile the broken—off branch that dries up and becomes lifeless! (*The Forge*, 932)

- Pray to God that in the Holy Church, our Mother, the hearts of all may be one heart, as they were in the earliest times of Christianity; so that the words of Scripture may be truly fulfilled until the end of the ages: *Multitudinis autem credentium erat cor unum et anima una* — the company of the faithful were of one heart and one soul. —I am saying this to you in all seriousness: may this holy unity not come to any harm through you. Take it to your prayer. (*The Forge*, 632)
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8. What is the Church's mission?

The Church is, by her very nature, a missionary sent by Christ to all nations to make disciples of them.

To carry out her mission, the Holy Spirit "builds her up and directs her with various hierarchical and charismatic gifts." Enriched by the gifts of her Founder and faithfully observing his commandments of love, humility, and renunciation, the Church receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing in all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God.

The Church "will reach her perfection only in the glory of heaven", when Christ returns in glory. Until that day, "the Church advances in her pilgrimage through the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God". (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 767-769, quoting *Lumen Gentium*)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- How good Christ was to leave the Sacraments to his Church!
They are the remedy for all our

needs. Venerate them and be very grateful both to God and to his Church. (*The Way*, 521)

- Our Holy Mother the Church, in a magnificent extension of love, is scattering the seed of the Gospel throughout the world; from Rome to the outposts of the earth. —As you help in this work of expansion throughout the whole world, bring those in the outposts to the Pope, so that the earth may be one flock and one Shepherd: one apostolate! (*The Forge*, 638)
- A Christian can't be caught up in personal problems; he must be concerned about the universal Church and the salvation of all souls. (*Christ is Passing By*, 145)
- Charity with everyone means, therefore, apostolate with everyone. It means we, on our part, must translate into deeds and truth the great desire of

God 'who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth'. (*Friends of God*, 230)

9. What are the characteristics of the Church?

The Church is *one*: she has only one Lord; she confesses only one faith, is born of only one Baptism, forms only one Body, vivified by only one Spirit, oriented towards only one hope at the end of which all divisions will be overcome.

The Church is *holy*: God the most holy is her author; Christ, her Spouse, gave himself up for her in order to sanctify her; the Spirit of holiness gives her life. Although she understands sinners, she is "immaculate, though composed of sinners. In the saints her holiness

shines forth; in Mary the Church is already entirely holy.

The Church is *Catholic*: it announces the totality of the faith; it bears in itself and administers the fullness of the means of salvation; it is sent to all peoples; it addresses all men; it embraces all times; "it is, by its very nature, missionary."

The Church is *apostolic*: she is built on solid foundations: the twelve Apostles of the Lamb; she is indestructible; she stands unerringly in the truth: Christ governs her through Peter and the other Apostles, present in their successors, the Pope and the college of bishops.

"The one Church of Christ, of which we confess in the Creed that she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic [...] subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, even if, without doubt,

outside her visible structure, many elements of sanctification and truth can be found." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 866-870, quoting *Ad Gentes* and *Lumen Gentium*)

Meditate with St. Josemaria

- We are contemplating the mystery of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. It is time to ask ourselves: Do I share with Christ his zeal for souls? Do I pray for the Church of which I form part, in which I must carry out a specific mission which no one else can do for me? To be in the Church is already much, but it is not enough. We must be the Church, because our Mother must never be a stranger to us, something external, foreign to our deepest thoughts. (*In Love with the Church*, 16)

- To defend the unity of the Church is to live very united to Jesus Christ who is our vine. How? By growing in fidelity to the perennial Magisterium of the Church: For the Holy Spirit was promised to the successors of Peter not that they should manifest a new doctrine by his revelation, but rather that with his assistance, they should religiously safeguard and faithfully teach the revelation that was handed down through the Apostles — the deposit of faith. By venerating this Mother of ours without stain, and loving the Roman Pontiff, we will preserve unity. (*In Love with the Church*, 3)
- By seeing ourselves as part of the Church and united to our brothers in the faith, we understand more deeply that we are brothers of all mankind, for the Church has been sent to

all the peoples of the earth.
(*Christ is Passing By*, 139)

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