

Being Catholic: What Does It Mean?

by Brett C. Hoover, C.S.P.

As the man told his personal story, we were all a little awed. A difficult childhood, drug addiction, theft, deceit, life on the streets – he spoke at our Returning Catholics meeting, a group for people coming back to the Catholic faith after being away for a while.

The group was captivated by his story, especially by his hope-filled return from the brink of self-destruction. He said Narcotics Anonymous had saved his life, and also awakened him to the presence of God in his everyday life. He paused. Then he said, “And when everyone in N.A. started talking about God, all I could think of was “Hey, I’m *Catholic!*”

I’ve never been able to forget those words and the look of happy surprise on his face when he said it. To him being Catholic meant belonging, an important kind of belonging, being a part of something bigger than just one person, and something connected with God.

His story reminded me that being Catholic does mean belonging to a community of faith. That ought to mean something in our lives, ought to make a difference. Being Catholic shouldn’t just be taken for granted, though it’s easy for those raised in the faith to do just that.

The word catholic comes from the Greek meaning “universal,” “across the whole thing.” But if you asked a hundred Catholics what it means to be Catholic, you probably wouldn’t get a universal answer! If you picked apart their answers, though, I bet that you’d find a few things in common. These things do make a difference in our lives.

God in Person

The first pattern that would likely emerge is that being a Catholic means following Jesus Christ. We are Christians. We’re not hooked on a particular ambition (like trying to get ahead) or a feeling (like being happy all the time) but on a person – Jesus of Nazareth.

Like other Christians, we put our trust in him as the “Christ,” the Messiah, the one chosen by God to save us. We also believe that Jesus was God come down from heaven who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). It is because of our belief and trust in Jesus that we do the things we do as Catholics. We take what he said and did in his lifetime seriously. We depend on his promise that the Holy Spirit will be with us always. Every Sunday, we listen to the Scriptures and share the consecrated bread and wine at Mass in order to remember him and how he faced and overcame death out of love for us.

Sacramental Sense

We Catholics follow Jesus, but so do our Protestant brothers and sisters. So what makes us different? What makes us unique? For one, we have what a friend of mine, a former Protestant, calls a “supersensitive sacramental sense.”

My friend was kidding around, but we Catholics do have a fairly sensitive sacramental outlook. We can see just about anything in this world as pointing to God. We see an awe-inspiring sunset as well as the tiny beads of a rosary as pointing us toward the mysterious God who is beyond and behind them both. This sacramental sense comes from our belief that God became a real human being, with all the

weaknesses and limitations that entails. So every limited and imperfect thing is a potential sign of God's presence ("grace"). Thus we hang on to our signs and symbols, our crosses and paintings, our gestures and music.

For us, creation itself really is blessed by God as "very good" (Genesis 1:31) from the Big Bang onward, a sign of God's generous love for us. So there is no problem finding God in nature or art or science or even the smallest parts of everyday life.

God Pointers

Because we see things and actions as symbols pointing to God, we tend to have a lot of things and actions in our worship. We've got our water for baptizing, candles to light, prayer books to fumble through, the stand/sit/kneel pattern at Mass that so confuses people of other faiths, and the bread and wine that we say and believe become the very presence of our Lord among us.

Among the many thousands of objects and gestures we make us of in Catholic worship, seven combinations of "things and actions" are termed Sacraments, with a capital "S" – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation (Confession), Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. They mark big moments in the life of a Catholic.

God People

Sacramental sensitivity also alerts us to people who point to God. In other words, human beings can help us in our life journey of faith. Some of them are the "hall of famers" in heaven, like the Virgin Mary and the saints. Others are ordinary people who help show us the way here on earth. These include your parents and godparents, nuns and priests, teachers, bishops, and the pope.

Some people say that Catholics worship these saints and the Virgin Mary or even the pope, but worship is for God alone! We just honor them as guides and helpers on the road of faith.

God's Family

Her question was blunt: "What good is the Church to us?" I flinched but another teen answered without skipping a beat. "It's community. Like when you're in trouble, it's where you can be and be safe." This seemed to me a very Catholic response.

Life is better when it is shared. As the Bible puts it, "It is not good for the man [or the woman] to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). What goes for life in general also goes for our life of faith. You need someone to stand by you in the difficult moments when you doubt. You need people to support you but also to challenge you to be better and brighter and more faithful. Somebody has to be there to teach and guide when you have questions and are seeking. Somebody has to hand on the faith.

Most people have not seen God. Just about the closest you can get is seeing God in other people. When a friend puts her hand on your shoulder, when a teacher challenges you to be more than you thought you could be, this is God at work through them. When a priest in confession tells you that awful thing you did is forgiven, when someone in your youth group tells you that you are loved, that is God's word being spoken by members of the Church.

Christian community is Jesus' own school of divine experience. You find God there in relationship with other people. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The best experience of God still around is loving and being loved by others.

God's Wisdom

From the very beginning of our religion, Christian community has been the place where people learn how to find and love God. After Jesus was gone, his disciples had the tough job of going on without him. They discovered that they could depend on the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would always be with them.. This "divine navigator" led them as they retold stories from the Jewish Scriptures, shared tales of what Jesus had said and done, and sent letters to other Christian communities far away.

Eventually everything was written down and collected together and the result was the Bible. Through the centuries, Christians held on to the Bible, finding in its stories, dialogues, and poems wisdom for all times and places.

But, Catholics don't believe that the Holy Spirit stopped working when the Bible was complete. The Spirit has always been with the Church, inspiring men and women of faith to speak further about God's plan for human beings.

The result is what we call the tradition of the Church. It includes essential teachings over the centuries (like the Immaculate Conception – Mary being conceived innocent of original sin), as well as those things the whole people of God have agreed upon.

Beyond the essentials, our trust in the Holy Spirit means that we honor the wealth of traditions that come down to us from over the centuries. We listen to stories about the lives of saints and continue practices of worship that came from the lives of real people (like the rosary and the Christmas crib).

Not everything that happened in the history of the Church was good. Church leaders also burned witches and headed up the inquisition. What we honor amidst our Catholic traditions is only the good things which have survived the test of time, what Catholic Christians have found still helps them in their search for God.

God's Training

These days, you walk into one of those gigantic mega-bookstores and you are bound to see at least a major section devoted to spirituality. People go looking for information about Eastern religions, Native American traditions, and the New Age, all looking for clues to develop a spirituality. It almost feels like a secret that so much wisdom about spirituality is found in Catholic tradition.

Meditation, finding God in nature, uncovering your own potential, learning not to be afraid of death. All these are found in Catholic tradition. One thing the great teachers of Catholic tradition agree upon (as well as those of all the great religions) is that it starts with discipline. The word may activate bad memories of the principal's office, but it doesn't have to be a bad word.

Basically, spirituality is like sports. You can't get good unless you practice. Practicing the spiritual life means discipline in "exercises" like prayer, spiritual reading, talking about faith with peers, talking about it with someone older you trust (a kind of "spiritual coach"). Also remember that the spiritual life is not something different from your regular life. It's finding the hand of God in your everyday life.

Some people think prayer always has to be something highly emotional and dramatic. It's more important that it be sincere, honest, and coming from your real life. Whatever you pray, God can handle it. The Bible is full of stories of people bargaining and fighting with God!

In God's Image

Life is a complicated journey. I know a 17-year-old woman who is already addicted to alcohol and is desperately trying to stay sober. Every day brings her the choice to drink or not, a choice that for her is between life and death.

Most of your choices as your people are not so dramatic, but they are in their own way between what gives life and what takes it away. Is it right to put down my friends? Should I get a job for fun money or concentrate more on schoolwork? Is it right to have sex with my girlfriend or boyfriend? Do I spend time volunteering to help people or just focus on myself? What kind of career is helpful to society? What might hurt people? These are all, whether they seem like it or not, moral choices. Over time, they make you who you are and affect the others in your lives.

The teaching of the Catholic Church can help you navigate through these decisions. The Church teaches that each person is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). So one of the first moral principle is self-respect. Putting yourself down, starving yourself to look thin, refusing to exercise: All these things lead down the path of less life.

But it doesn't stop with just you. Church teaching calls you to rest and do good to others, both those close to you and strangers. Oddly, doing that tends to make people feel good about themselves too! The idea is that over time you become the love-filled people God wants you to be.

God of Second Chances

You won't always get it right. But that shouldn't discourage you. Jesus always forgave mistakes and sins and encouraged his followers to do the same. The most important thing is to learn from your mistakes! Catholicism recognizes that failure is an inescapable part of being human, yet Catholics still believe that being human is such a very good thing.

The Church knows, through experience, that God is extraordinarily merciful. Look through history at the costly mistakes the saints and mystics made, and still God was with them. The Church has always been a hospital for sinners and not a house of perfect saint. Whatever happens, faith says that God will be with you.

Your job is to try to grow in love day by day. That seems so simple, and yet it is difficult in practice. It takes a lifetime to get it right. But eventually, hopefully at the end of a long lie, people will ask you what made a difference in your life, what helped you to keep loving all the way through.

You'll respond that it was faith in a loving God. When they ask you where you found that faith, you'll add, maybe in happy surprise, "I'm a Catholic."

What is Your Place in the Church?

The Church has many different ways for people to participate, and all of them are important. You will see Catholics feeding the homeless, caring for their children, protesting injustice, and praying the rosary daily for the sick. There is a spot for everyone. What are your talents?

- Do you read well? Be a lector
- Are you good with the sick or elderly? Visit a nursing home
- Do you know how to work with your hands? Volunteer to build or repair homes for those who can't do it themselves.
- Do you love children? Teach them.

You may even want to try something you've never done before! Speak to your youth minister or pastor about what you can do.

*The Rev. Brett Hoover is a Paulist priest living and working in New York City. He is the author of *Losing your Religion, Finding your Faith: Spirituality for Young Adults* (Paulist Press).*