

Introducing Catholics

This is who we are



Catholics are a community. A body made up of many different people, united by a common bond of love. Because of the enduring strength of this bond, and the life-long commitment it implies, one of the best ways of describing the Catholic Church is that it is like a family. This may come as a surprise to many people who associate different images with the Catholic Church: organisation, government, moral watchdog.

Yet, really, at its heart, the Church is a community of people travelling together through life. Like every human family, we have our ups and downs, our good times and bad. We have a heritage from which our values and behaviour codes have come. Our men co-operate through a variety of roles and functions. We have our special times of celebration, as well as the mundane activities of day to day life.

How we began

What is different about this family like bond, however, is that it is not based on race or blood but on a spiritual bond of faith. Catholics believe in a God who is love, a God who has created us out of love, and who envelops each moment of our existence. Catholics believe this loving presence of God has been communicated to the world in an extraordinarily tangible way through the person of Jesus Christ, a man who walked the earth 2,000 years ago in Palestine—and whose whole life was animated by the Spirit of God.

During his short life (for he only lived to about 33 years of age) Jesus preached a bold message of love, of freedom from fear, of the promise of life. People experienced him as a person of extraordinary love, bringing healing, hope and forgiveness of sins to those who knew him. So great was his impact among the people of his day, that the religious and political authorities felt threatened. So much so, that Jesus was put to death by crucifixion.

Approaching the Topic

Welcome! Thanks for knocking... The door is open ... come inside ... Have a seat ...Can we offer you a drink?... Make yourself comfortable ...Come and meet the family...? If you walked into a hospitable home this is probably the sort of welcome you would receive. This, too is the spirit in which we would like to involve you in this programme. Starting with this leaflet, and over next five, we will introduce our Catholic community to you. Introductions are always somewhat limited. We connect with a name, a face, we get a feel for a personality and the sort of things they do. Over time we come to know the person in greater depth, but an introduction, is always the first step.



Jesus' followers were devastated by his death. But then something happened beyond their wildest dreams. Jesus was raised from the dead! They experienced his living presence in a whole new way. Their lives were transformed. Their faith in God took a quantum leap. Yes, love is stronger than death! Yes, the promise of eternal life is true! Yes, our God is always with us. The Spirit of God alive in Jesus had taken hold of their lives too. They came to recognise Jesus as the Son of God, the 'Christ, God with-us. They had felt themselves 'die with Christ, and now they experienced themselves 'resurrected'. Alive! Free! Hope-filled and open to the promise of life - in this life and in the next.

In their excitement, Jesus followers gathered in a little community. Together they lived a new vision for their lives. Their joy of knowing Christ and living in his Spirit was all consuming. They felt his presence in the depths of their humanity. In fact, so much so, that they came to understand themselves as 'the body of Christ', the people in whom the Spirit of God dwelt. Their bond of love attracted others. Their stories of

how God had touched their lives raised hope, questions, curiosity amongst those who would listen. Their community grew and spread to all parts of the world. Despite times of great persecution and difficulty, this experience of faith continued to be transmitted through the ages; passed down through word of mouth, through sacred writings, through the traditions and practices of the community, enlivening the hearts of each new generation of Christians.

And the story continues...

Does this sound too good to be true? In a media-saturated society which bombards us with so much 'bad news', there is an almost puzzling significance in the 'good news' element of the Christian message. In fact, the story of Jesus is referred to as the 'Gospel', which means 'good news'.

Today, the Catholic Church continues the life of the early Christians, although the community has grown a bit since then! The invitation to faith is offered through local Catholic communities known as parishes. As we as, and within, parishes there are many other smaller groupings of Catholics, through which the Church continues to speak the Gospel message and to stand as a living witness that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, brings us the fullness of life.

The risen Christ is the one who motivates all Christians, not just Catholics. So Catholics are part of a much wider family of Christians.

God: for us, with us, in us.

The Gospel story of Jesus is the great story of God's self-revelation to us—caring for us, involving in our poverty and suffering, promising us life eternal. Through the risen Jesus, the daily drama of human living has received new meaning, for we experience the Mystery of God as extraordinarily near—a Spirit-filled love enveloping us, permeating our entire existence, offering us 'life to the full'. We realise that our God is closer to us than we could ever imagine.

PUTTING IT SIMPLY

We Catholics are

- a body of people
- a community
- a family

With

- a story
- a history
- a purpose

Who

- believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God
- share a common vision for life
- seek to live in a spirit of love

Not Just

- a social club
- a group of like-minded people
- a welfare agency
- a spiritual fill-up station

But

- a life long love relationship
- alive in the Spirit of Christ
- a people with a mission

To

- proclaim Jesus to the world
- share our life with others

So that

- the world may believe
- and share our joy.

JESUS SAID...

'This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, to give ones life for his friends.' (John 15:12-13)

Faces and Places

In a community called Catholic

Catholics come in many shapes and sizes and colours. Their personalities may be as varied as the faces which present them. Some faces are familiar to you already, like those you see in the newspapers from time to time: Pope John Paul II, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Then again, there are Catholic faces closer to home which you will readily recognise. Friends, work colleagues, perhaps even your local parish priest.

But there are many others. If you went along to a youth Mass, you might find the Church full of teenagers. It is our love inspired by

It is our love inspired by our faith in Jesus Christ that makes us who we are.

our faith in Jesus Christ that makes us who we are. expressing their faith in a raucous and lively manner. In another parish you ought find elderly parishioners praying in a hushed silence. Or young families juggling babies and toddlers as they participate in worship.

But Catholics are not only found in churches. Most of all they are found in ordinary homes everywhere. In cities, in suburbia, and in the country. The Catholic Church exists wherever Catholics dwell. If you visited a Catholic home, you would more than likely find a range of levels of enthusiasm for the faith. Committed parents, questioning teenagers. Sometimes committed youth and skeptical parents. Like all families, the Catholic Church has members 'going through stages' and wrestling with life's questions. They are all part of our faith family.

Catholics can be found in all cultures. If you were to seek out



One Journey with many roads

In a family, different members contribute in different ways to a common way of life. Similarly, in the Catholic Church, members contribute differently through their chosen vocations. A vocation, in the Catholic sense, is more than a job or function, it is a calling from God, a way of living, with specific relationships and responsibilities.

Couples

For many Catholics, the vocation of married life is the way they give expression to their life of faith. Through their commitment to their spouse and children, the couple show what it means to love one another with the unconditional love that Jesus Christ offers us. Their life of union is so profound that the Church holds up marriage as a sign to all its members of the unity to which they are called.

Religious

Religious orders are communities of celibate men or women who undertake a common life and mission. They are inspired by the charism and example of their founder. Many Catholic schools and hospitals have been established and staffed by religious orders.

Singles

Apart from the religious, the Church has many other single people. For some this is by choice. For others, it may be due to circumstances. Sometimes tragic circumstances, such as death of a spouse or divorce, Single Catholics live out their faith through their home life, their work and their various other activities. Single people, including single parents, are a great gift to the Church.

Priests and bishops

The bishops of the Church provide a unique gift of leadership. Together with the priests of their local Church community they undertake a role of empowering the people of God, teaching and leading the community at worship. Ordained to the sacrament of Holy Orders, they embody the presence of Christ, being a focal point of unity for the Church.

Youth

Nor must we overlook our children and youth who, although not having made a life choice, are considered to be equal members of the body of Christ and who bring irreplaceable qualities and gifts characteristic of their unique stage of life.

Within all these vocations, there are included countless roles and functions through which a life of service to the Church can be expressed. But the overriding concern is our unity in the Lord, our love for one another as the body of Christ. That is what makes us different from caring groups based on humanitarian values. For Christians, it is our love, inspired by our faith in Jesus Christ, that makes us who we are.

Catholics in South America, you would be part of an oppressed Church fighting boldly for justice. Faces of pain and determination In Eastern Europe you would be part of an awakening, turbulent Church, facing a myriad of problems and possibilities arising from political and social transitions.

In Asia and Africa you would encounter a fresh range of faces and Catholic expressions. Vietnamese Catholics have brought to our shores an energetic religious zeal borne from hardship and persecution. Catholics like these are helping to shape the face of the Church in Australia. There are also Catholics with a particular eastern flavour (like the Maronites, the Ukrainians and the Melkites) as well as those of the 'Roman Catholic' variety.

Yes, there are many different faces to the Catholic community. This is because the message of Jesus is for all people, everywhere. In fact, the word 'catholic' means universal, all embracing. While there is one Gospel, it can find expression wherever people and their cultures are open to the spirit of Jesus Christ.

The Scripture Story

'The whole community of believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed any of their possessions as his own; but rather they shared all things in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and they were living in a time of grace.' (Acts 4.32-33)



Dominic's Story

Wise Advice

Persistence in prayer is a gateway to a growing relationship with God.

'At 18, I was on the verge of rejecting my religious upbringing. It just didn't make sense. I remember a friend saying to me: "Pray for the gift of faith". I stared at him, disbelieving that anyone could be so stupid! "How can I pray if I don't believe in God?!" My friend was unruffled. "How can you believe in God if you don't pray?"

'So I did. I can't believe I did, but I prayed each night. Simple stuff. Nothing to qualify me as a candidate for the Benedictine monks. Just a few words like: "God, if you're really there, give me faith ... and by the way what is it?" I felt silly, but I kept at it, and the extraordinary thing is - it worked! I came to experience the presence of God in my life. In fact we're on intimate

speaking terms now!

'Looking back, my friend's advice makes sense. I mean, I began talking to my wife long before I married her. I can even remember our first conversation. We were waiting in the cafeteria line discussing the pros and cons of eating breakfast (I do, she doesn't...eat breakfast). I guess you've got to start somewhere. Neither of us dreamt that a year later we would be preparing for marriage!

'My relationship with God started a bit like that.' (Dominic)

Your Story

Think About It

What yearnings do you experience

- for life?
- for relationships?
- for purpose, fulfillment?
- for self-esteem?
- for 'more'...?

Try It

The word 'Gospel' means 'good news'. The Christian outlook is definitely an optimistic one! What about yours? How hope-filled are you? How do you respond to good news and bad news? As you go through this week, be aware of the messages—hope-filled or pessimistic—that come your way through people and events.



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