

Catholics Believe

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction," wrote Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*.¹ And, as if a follow-up to that, he soon after published *Jesus of Nazareth*,² an in-depth examination of the man who defines Christian life. Following the Pope's lead, then, it would be enough to say simply, "Catholics believe in Jesus." At the center of all Catholic doctrine, liturgy, morality, and prayer is the Person of Jesus.

With all Christians, Catholics believe that Jesus is the Savior and the Son of God. As Savior, he rescues us from eternal death. We were cut off and dead through sin. He has reconciled us with the Father, establishing peace through "the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20). By His death He paid the price for us and won for us every grace necessary for forgiveness, sanctification, and salvation.

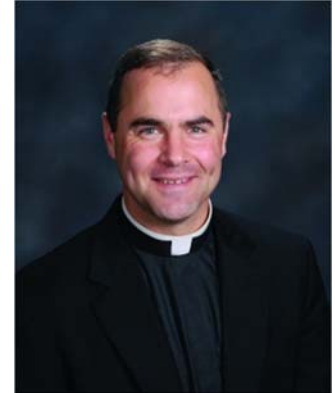


But His redemption is more than merely a restoration. It is also an elevation. As the Son of God, Jesus brings us into the intimate life of the Trinity. Through the Holy Spirit He gives us a participation in His own Sonship. We become "sons in the Son", or as the traditional phrase has it, "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). To be Catholic, then, means to live a Trinitarian life—to live according to the Spirit, in the likeness of

the Son, for the glory of the Father.

Salvation and sonship—these are what Jesus won for us. Yet these gifts must still be extended throughout the world and throughout history. He desires that every soul encounter Him, that He be formed in every soul (cf. Gal 4:19). To accomplish this, Jesus established His Church. (And it is on this point that Catholics differ from most other Christian denominations.) When Jesus ascended into heaven, He did not leave behind a book, or even instructions to write a book. Rather, He left behind a hierarchical community of believers, "His Church. And He established this not as a merely human organization but as His abiding presence in the world—as His Body animated by His Spirit. Thus we believe that one's personal relationship with Jesus is inseparable from the Church.

Rev. Paul Scalia



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We believe this union of Christ and the Church on the authority of Jesus Himself. "He who hears you hears me," He said to His disciples. "[A]nd he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16). Similarly, when the risen Lord confronted Saul of Tarsus, He identified Himself with His Church: "[W]hy do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4; italics added). And again, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5; cf. Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-11; 26:2-18). The lesson was not wasted. Years later Saul, by then the Apostle Paul, described the union between Christ and the Church: they are two in one flesh, head and members, bridegroom and bride (see 1 Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 5:31-32; Col 1:18).

It stands to reason that to accomplish her mission of forming Christ in souls, the Church must possess the means to do so. And so she does, most notably the authority to teach Christ's truth and communicate His grace. The Church teaches authoritatively what to believe (doctrine) and how to live (morals). This authority, so often seen as a threat to human freedom, in fact answers the longings of the human heart. We all want to know what is true and to do what is right. Uncertainty, not a teaching authority, is the enemy of human freedom. As long as we are uncertain, we will not give ourselves generously. We remain enslaved in doubt. Confidence in the truth about Jesus and His narrow path frees us to run that path joyfully. The Church teaches authoritatively the truth that sets us free (see Jn 8:32)."

But to know the truth is not enough. Since we remain weak and ignorant, we need Christ's grace to strengthen and enlighten us. Thus the Church administers the sacraments to her members, to bring them divine life, to nourish them, and to heal them when necessary. Or, better, we should say that Jesus Himself administers the sacraments, using the Church's ministers as His instruments. These means of grace, entrusted to the Church for the salvation of souls, have as their ultimate purpose the formation of Christ within us.



"Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15; Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20). Jesus put this question to His Apostles, and it echoes throughout history. It is, in the end, the only question that matters. The Catholic Church exists, ultimately, as a living response to that question and to form the response in every soul: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16; cf. Mk 8:29; Lk 9:20).

Paul Scalia. "Catholic Believe" That Nothing May Be Lost: Reflections on Catholic Doctrine and Devotion. Ignatius Press. 2017. pp