

**Catholic**  
IS  
**Wonderful!**



*How to Make the Most of It*

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## *Introduction*

# **Why Stay Catholic?**

THOMAS MERTON, who died in 1968, is probably the 20th century's most influential American Catholic writer. In his 1966 book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the famous Trappist monk quoted the French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus. "An oriental wise man," Camus wrote, "always used to ask the Divinity in his prayers to be so kind as to spare him from living in an interesting era. As we are not wise, the Divinity has not spared us, and we are living in an interesting era."

You can say that again, Al. One of the more interesting characteristics of our era is that many Catholics today wonder if they should remain Catholic. Some Catholics get frustrated with this or that about the church, and the next thing you know they join some other church or religious group, or they opt for religious indifference. Most Catholics remain Catholic, of course, but some join everything from the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's "Moonies" to a local New Age church; everything from fundamentalist Bible churches to the Mormons.

Time was, Catholics gave no thought to staying Catholic. Most Catholics who were born Catholic stayed Catholic. Sure, many families had the family “lapsed Catholic.” But even a lapsed Catholic still thought of himself or herself as a Catholic, and so did everyone else. Someone asked the great Irish writer, James Joyce, a “fallen-away” Catholic, if he had become a Protestant. “Good God!” Joyce replied. “I’ve lost my faith, not my mind!”

Today, it’s not unusual for many Catholics to ponder the question, Why stay Catholic? A rhetorical question bandied about a good deal asks, “Isn’t one church as good as the next?”

To which I would reply: No and yes. As a Catholic who loves being Catholic, I’m biased. I think being Catholic is wonderful. Like many Catholics, I disagree with a few official, non-essential, church teachings. Like most Catholics, I do not believe that every papal or Vatican pronouncement is virtually, if not literally, infallible. But Catholicism is in my blood, it’s almost genetic. I wouldn’t be anything else.

That’s my subjective response. My objective response is historical, and the historical facts are clear. The Roman Catholic Church has direct historical ties to the apostles of Jesus and the first Christian communities. (The Eastern Orthodox churches can make a similar claim, but I don’t have the space to discuss that here.) At one time or another, all other churches broke away from Catholicism, from a group that broke away from Catholicism, or from a group that broke away from a group that broke away, and so on.

In addition, the Roman Catholic Church is linked historically to the first Christian communities whose faith experience and Sacred Tradition gave birth to the New Testament. To be in communion with the Roman Catholic Church is to be as close as you can get to the spiritual source of the New Testament itself.

This does not mean that Martin Luther, or any of the other 16th-century Protestant reformers, didn't have some legitimate gripes. They certainly did, and it's a shame the Catholic Church of that era couldn't hear what Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and the others said and avoid the tragic divisions that took place. At the same time, the Protestant Reformers made some mistakes, too, and it's a shame they couldn't be more patient instead of stomping off to start their own churches.

Because I cherish the Catholic faith, and because historically it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church is the original Christian Church, I would say that one church is not as good as the next. Still, a lot of water has gone under the bridge in the more than 500 years since the Protestant Reformation. Many generations of Christians have lived and died as Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, and as members of groups like the Assemblies of God and the Nazarene Church. Roman Catholics believe the gift of salvation—spiritual healing and liberation—is *most fully* present in the Catholic Church. Still, salvation can come to people through whatever religious tradition they find themselves a part of or, indeed, outside of any religion. For

someone whose family has been Episcopalian for generations, to remain Episcopalian may be the best thing for him or her. Someone who is Baptist may be better off staying Baptist. In this sense, it's just as good for someone else to be a Lutheran as it is for me to be a Catholic. In this subjective sense, "one church is as good as another."

If you are a Catholic, I find it difficult to imagine circumstances that would make it a good idea for you to become something else. The only exception I can think of would be if you are Catholic and your spouse belongs to another tradition. If the future health and unity of your marriage and family would be endangered if you insist on remaining a Catholic, then you may want to think about joining your spouse in his or her faith tradition. Ideally, this is an issue you work out prior to your marriage. Ecumenical or two-tradition families can be healthy, strong, and a blessing to the world, but I believe that the ideal is for husband and wife to share the same faith tradition and community.

People think of leaving the Catholic Church for various reasons. They don't like something about the church. They disagree with certain church teachings. They find their parish to be cold and impersonal, too conservative, or too liberal. They were offended or treated unkindly by a priest. They are divorced and think, mistakenly, that they can't remain Catholic and remarry. All of these reasons to "leave the church" are understandable, but they all carry the implication that the church should measure up to my stan-

dards before I will accept it. Ultimately, they all imply that the Catholic Church must be nearly perfect, *as I understand perfection*, before I will remain a Catholic.

Father Andrew M. Greeley, probably the most widely recognized American Catholic writer of the late 20th century, gave the perfect response to this point of view. If you can find a perfect church, Greeley said, go ahead and join it. But as soon as you do, it won't be perfect anymore.

Why stay Catholic? Because you're not likely to do better anyplace else. "Catholic" means "universal" or "all-encompassing." Anything good, true, and beautiful that you find outside the Catholic Church is present in the church as well, even if you must look for it for a while. Either that, or it's compatible with Catholicism and you should incorporate it yourself. You will find in Catholicism the greatest potential to experience God's self-gift, or grace. You will find in the Catholic Church the most reliable opportunity to discover the truth about yourself, about other people, about life, and about the world we live in. That's it in a nutshell.

When push comes to shove, of course, each person makes his or her own free choice to be, or not be, a Catholic. This book is for those who, like myself, decide to stay and want to make the most of a living Catholic faith, tradition, and identity.

Sometimes we can be so eager to praise what's good in other traditions that we can overlook what's special and unique about our own. This book is about appreciating and

cultivating what's special about belonging to the oldest institution in the western world, the Roman Catholic Church. It's about treasuring Catholicism in ways that will benefit us, and our children and grandchildren, the most.



## *Chapter 1*

# **What Kind of Catholic Are You?**

IN NORTH AMERICA, more people identify themselves as Catholic than claim membership in any other single religious tradition. More than fifty-nine million citizens of the United States alone claim membership in the Roman Catholic Church. But numbers can be deceiving.

As a writer for Catholic magazines and newspapers, when I interview someone I try to discover what kind of Catholic he or she is. Practicing? Non-practicing? Liberal, conservative, moderate? Well informed about what's happening in the church today, or out of touch? Is this person a "Sunday Catholic," or does he or she try to practice the faith seven days a week?

There have always been different kinds of Catholics, socially, culturally, in terms of educational level, and in terms of their theological inclinations. But today the theological differences, in particular, are more different, if you will. Clear contrasts characterize the various groups in the church that claim to be authentically Catholic. Consequent-

ly, when someone tells me that he or she is a Catholic, I'm inclined to ask, "What do you mean by that?" The lines between the various ways of being a Catholic are difficult to draw straight, and they blur easily. For illustration purposes, however, I will hazard descriptions of the various kinds of Catholics one can find in the church today.

Some people define Catholic as being rooted in and guided by the living Catholic tradition. They are active in a parish and participate in the Eucharist, or Mass, regularly. They place a high value on the Sacraments and the Scriptures, and they make regular time for a form of prayer that suits them best including, perhaps, a traditional prayer form such as the rosary. They may subscribe to two or three national-level Catholic periodicals. They respect the pope and Vatican officials, but they don't pay much attention to what they say. Still, they are grateful for the leadership of the pope and their local bishop. These people generally agree that abortion is unacceptable. Consistent with bottom-line church teachings, they do not attribute infallibility to every official church pronouncement, and they believe they should follow the dictates of an informed adult conscience. They do not believe they are free before God to shut off their intellect and critical faculties and simply obey all official church teachings. I call such people "progressive Catholics."

Another kind of Catholic picks and chooses from the tradition even more than progressive Catholics do. Such Catholics listen when the pope says what they already