

# Our Neighbor's Faith –Roman Catholic Church

## History and Description<sup>1</sup>

We've talked about a lot of denominations that trace their roots back to the Reformation in the 1500s. The Reformers were trying to reform, or change, or fix, the denomination they originally belonged to: the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church of the Reformation is very different from the Roman Catholic Church of today, especially since the mid-twentieth century when a worldwide Church Council called Vatican II made lots of changes and reforms of its own.

First off, let's point out the difference between Catholic and catholic: *Catholic* refers specifically to this denomination, while *catholic* means universal, like the church everywhere. We say *catholic* in the creeds to mean the holy church everywhere.

The Catholic church believes that it has been in existence since Jesus' formation of the apostles into a community, giving them the job to continue to teach and minister to people. The apostle Peter was chosen by Jesus as the "rock" (Peter's name means "rock") on which to build the church (check out Matthew 16:16-20 and John 21:15-18). Peter was considered the first leader of the church after Jesus, and he eventually went to the city of Rome as the first bishop (overseer) there. His job was to be the chief teacher and shepherd of the church. The leader of the Catholic church is called the Pope; Catholics consider Peter to be the first Pope.

Catholics believe in the Trinity, and talk about its mystery. Catholic faith has a lot to say about mystery and mysticism, ritual and ceremony. Another teaching is that Jesus is the only savior of humankind, and that this gift of salvation is completely free. For Catholics, simple membership does not equal being saved; each person is responsible for his or her own life and the manner in which you respond to Christ. It's true that Catholics follow many rules and laws and perform many religious rites and practices, and do other things that might be familiar to non-Catholics (like going to Confession, "doing a certain number of Hail Marys," or not eating meat during Lent). This might give the impression that Catholics are expected to work out their own salvation, but the foundational teaching is still that it is only Christ who saves, not all these other things.

The Church is not just an organization: it is the mystery of the People of God who bear witness to Christ, who are Christ in the world. In the life of the church there are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Orders. Sacraments are seen as "effective signs": in other words, things that accomplish what they signify. For example, Baptism accomplishes cleansing; Eucharist accomplishes nourishment. Sacraments are sacred signs of spiritual strength, healing, food, etc.: Jesus personally entering into the lives of Christians. "Just as the humanity of Christ is the sacrament – the effective sign, the manifestation – of the Father, so the church is the sacrament of Christ. And the sacraments in turn are the manifestation of the church."

The regular worship service is called a Mass, and it has two parts: first, the Liturgy of the Word (prayers, Bible readings, sermon) which prepares you for the second part, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. There is a lot of structure and tradition in both the Mass and in the body of the church and how it's governed. At the top of the church structure is the Pope, who holds special

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<sup>1</sup> Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 109-113.

privileges and duties; however, the pope is not considered to be infallible; only the office of the Pope is considered infallible with regards to matters of doctrine.

Other Catholic teachings involve Mary, Jesus' mother, who was thought to be a virgin before, during, and after Jesus' birth; who was also thought to be conceived in her mother's womb without sin and therefore redeemed from the start (immaculate conception); and, very important for daily life: Catholic social teachings that give clear structure on how to live out one's faith.

Statistics: As of 2010, the Roman Catholic Church had 58,963,835 members and 20,589 congregations. You might know people who attend Church of the Redeemer, just across our parking lot: <https://www.churchredeemer.org/>. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

### Experience

Check out the U.S. Catholic website, <https://www.usccb.org/>.

Did you grow up being taught misinformation or suspicion with regards to Catholic beliefs and practices?

The Roman Catholic Church is the "mother church" for most Western denominations. How much overlap and similarity remains between ELCA Lutherans and Roman Catholics? You can also check out <https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/documents-produced-lutheran-catholic-dialogue-united> for the ongoing conversation the ELCA and RCC are in.

### Comparison with the ELCA<sup>2</sup>:

<u>Roman Catholic Church</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Believe in the triune God	1. Same
2. Believe in the full divinity and humanity of Christ.	2. Same
3. Accept the Bible as the source of truth interpreted in the light of tradition.	3. Accept the Bible as the source of truth expressed in creeds and confessions of tradition.
4. Celebrate seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, penance, eucharist, marriage, orders, and anointing of the sick.	4. Celebrate two sacraments: baptism and the eucharist.
5. Believe in the real presence of Jesus in the consecrated bread and wine – that bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ.	5. Believe in the real presence of Jesus in the eucharist. Each communicant receives not only the bread and wine but also the body and blood of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

6. Mass celebrated in the language of the people. Two main sections: word and sacrament. Order of Mass is the Western church pattern.	6. Liturgically is basically the same shape as Roman Catholic, congregations have freedom to enrich the pattern.
7. Government: the College of Bishops shares authority with the pope as head of the college.	7. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.

What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. The sense of faith at work in daily life through prayer, social teachings, and more is often much stronger for those in the Catholic faith; how can we Lutherans integrate the teachings of our faith into all aspects of our lives?
2. Catholics are often more comfortable (generally speaking) talking about mystery and mystical things of the faith; Lutherans are sometime more “head” Christians than “heart” or “soul” Christians, and it would be good for our vocabulary and our life of faith to explore those realms more often, too.

Let’s pray:

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.