Contents

Sacred Writings of Christianity
• The Catholic Canon
• The New Testament
• Scripture in Catholic Liturgy
• Scripture and Tradition

Christian Exegesis and Issues of Jewish-Christian Relations
• Who Killed Jesus?
• Covenant: Supersession and Typology

Christian Prayer and Practice
• The Prayer of Jesus and the Paschal Mystery
• Six Forms of Catholic Christian Prayer
• Devotional and Liturgical Prayer
• The Sacraments
• Liturgical Time

Catholic Christianity
• Origins of Christianity
• Distinctiveness of Christianity
• Distinctiveness of Catholic Christianity
Sacred Writings of Christianity

The Catholic Canon

The sacred books of the Catholic Church, referred to as the Canon of Scripture, include forty-six books from the Hebrew Bible and twenty-seven Christian writings. Traditionally, Catholics refer to these writings as the Old Testament and New Testament, respectively.

The New Testament

The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—present the life and teaching of Jesus as it was orally transmitted in the decades immediately following his death. They hold a unique and important place in the life of the Church.

The Letters of Paul are the earliest known Christian writings of the first century CE. They were written to churches throughout Asia Minor and in Rome made up largely of gentile converts to Christianity. From these letters, as well as from the Acts of the Apostles, details about Paul’s life and work can be learned.

The dramatic turning point in Paul’s life was the vision of the resurrected Jesus that Paul had on his way to Damascus. This encounter had profound consequences for Paul’s theological orientation and his career. However, in his letters he insists that his newly accepted Christian faith and allegiance are not incompatible with his identity as a Jew. “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I” (2 Cor. 11:22). Paul believed that God gave him an assignment to serve as missionary to the gentiles.

The Acts of the Apostles, along with the Gospel of Luke, tells of Jesus’ ministry and recounts the growth of the early Church. A major portion of Acts records the spread of the Church outside ancient Judea through Paul’s missionary travels and tells of his captivity in Rome. Luke emphasizes in Acts, as he does in his Gospel, that the time has come for salvation to be extended to all people, to the entire world (Acts 1:8).

Scripture in Catholic Liturgy

Scripture is central in Catholic liturgical celebrations. The Book of Psalms is the inspiration of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Breviary, and the Prayer of the Church. The lectionary is the book that contains readings for each day of the liturgical year. It is held aloft when it is brought into the sanctuary at the beginning of Mass.
Scripture and Tradition

Catholic tradition interprets Scripture through historical, textual, and source criticism. Vatican Council II expresses this in the document *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), No. 12:

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through men in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred Scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words . . . .

But since the sacred scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind, no less attention must be devoted to the content and unity of the whole of scripture, taking into account the Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith, if we are to derive their true meaning from the sacred texts.

All Christian churches accept the Christian Bible (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament, and non-Catholic Christians include the Apocrypha) as the word of God that can be read in church. However, they differ in how they understand and implement this.

This difference in biblical interpretation was a major point of division during the Protestant Reformation because it called into question the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. Protestants believe Scripture takes preeminence over tradition, while the Catholics derive their doctrines from both the Bible and tradition. Both require the assent of faith. Vatican Council II speaks of tradition and Scripture that “[flow] out from the same divine well-spring” (*Dei Verbum*, Nos. 8, 9).

Christian Exegesis and Issues in Jewish-Christian Relations

Who Killed Jesus?

Throughout history, the Christian charge of deicide, the killing of God, has been used against the Jewish people. That is, the Jews killed Jesus and must be eternally punished for their crime. This canard has been responsible for untold suffering and violent persecution of Jews for many centuries. The ugly cry of “Christ-killer” has been used as a rallying cry to inflict harm on the Jewish people.

In 1965 the deicide charge of collective guilt was explicitly repudiated in the historic *Nosra Aetate* declaration:
what happened in his [Jesus'] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. ..
the Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from Holy Scripture. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work, and in the preaching of the Word of God they teach nothing save what conforms to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Even though the Catholic Church and most other Christian church bodies have now officially eliminated the deicide charge from their teachings, this traditional belief still continues to influence some popular piety and culture. Because Christian understandings and attitudes have been deeply influenced by many centuries of this teaching, it will take time and purposeful effort to completely eliminate its influence from Christian liturgy and preaching.

In some countries and cultures it is proving especially difficult to remove overtones of the deicide charge from traditional passion plays and religious processions as well as from familiar Holy Week prayers and hymns.

Scripture scholars agree that the death of Jesus was a political execution carried out by the Roman imperial government. William Nicholls describes the progressive development of the basis for the deicide charge in the Gospel writing process:

Each of the Gospel writers in his own way distorts earlier traditions about the way Jesus met his death in order to place the Jews in a more unfavorable light and make the Romans by contrast look better. [This at a time when the fledgling Christian community was seeking approval and acceptance by the authorities in Rome.] The tendency increases as time goes on. It is already present in Mark, but Matthew, Luke, and . . . John each considerably accentuate it . . . An action in fact undertaken by the Romans for their own political reasons, in which the Jewish role at most consisted in identifying and handing over the leader of a supposed resistance movement in order to save the lives of his followers and of other Jews, is progressively transformed into a Jewish plot to get rid of Jesus for religious, not political reasons.

Covenant: Supersession and Typology

Since the patristic era most Christians have perceived their covenant as displaced God's original covenant with Israel, or at least describe the initial covenant as an incomplete expression of the full divine-human relationship that is available only after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But the words of Vatican Council II's Nostra Aetate, the Vatican 1985 Notes, and the words of Pope John Paul II clearly indicate that Catholic Christianity today understands God's covenant with the Jewish people as a
permanent and irrevocable reality.

Christian theologians and Church leaders in the process of articulating a renewed covenant theology have spoken of two major trends:

(1) The single covenant theory maintains that Jews and Christians belong to the one covenental tradition begun at Sinai. This perspective sees Jesus' life and death as the decisive moment for gentiles. It is the point in the covenant relationship when gentiles are able to enter fully into the relationship with God which Jews already enjoyed and in which they continued.

(2) The double covenant theory begins by affirming the continuing bonds between Christians and Jews, but then emphasizes the distinctiveness of the two traditions and communities. Through Jesus, a distinctively new vision of God and of relationship with God emerged, but the events at Sinai, the Jewish covenant, and at Calvary, the Christian covenant, are coequal.

**Christian Prayer and Practice**

**The Prayer of Jesus**

One Catholic scholar, Fr. Robert Schwartz, writes that while Catholic prayer is distinct and unique, it grows out of its Jewish past:

Catholic Christian prayer traces its origins to Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Jew, lived as a Jew and prayed as a Jew. Even though the Catholic approach to prayer was deeply influenced by the Gentile world into which it passed, its roots lie firmly within the Hebrew Scriptures.

**The Paschal Mystery**

The passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus represent the heart of Catholic Christian prayer and worship. Holy Week and Easter, the high point of the Christian liturgical year, are celebrated at the same time as the Jewish Passover. Christians continue to use Israel's Exodus from Egypt as the primary image to help them understand the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. This is because Jesus died during Passover week.

The Mass, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, must be seen against the background of the Seder, the Passover meal. The Mass is the most important Catholic prayer, and is often referred to as the Eucharist—a word derived from the Greek for thanksgiving. Thankfulness to God for mighty saving works is expressed in a litany of blessings.

The most sacred moment in Catholic prayer begins with the words “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” The congregation responds, “It is right to give God thanks and praise.” It is in remembering what God has done, and in praising God for what God has already accomplished, that Catholics believe
that God acts here and now to save them.

Catholics believe that in receiving what begins as ordinary bread and wine, but through the Mass becomes the actual body and blood of Christ, they participate in his passage from death to life. According to Fr. Schwartz, “We believe this, not because of some magic words or ritual, but in response to the Hebrew Scriptures, which portray God as present when his saving deeds are recalled with faith.”

Six Forms of Catholic Christian Prayer

Catholic Christians recognize six forms of prayer:

1. Praise and Thanksgiving. This prayer form is at the heart of Christian prayer (cf. Paul’s exhortations in 1 Thess. 5:17f, 2 Cor. 1:11, Rom. 12:12, Col. 4:2, Phil. 4:6, Eph. 5:4, 20)

2. Petition. This prayer brings personal concerns before God.

3. Intercession. This prayer is on behalf of the needs of others or the requirements of the community.

4. Confession. This type of prayer acknowledges one’s limitations and wrongdoings and asks forgiveness.

5. Meditation. This prayer focuses attention on a single line of text or on a single narrative in order to hear its message.

6. Contemplation. This form is also referred to as the Prayer of Quiet. By transcending the distractions of the above five forms, this prayer form requires an awareness of God’s presence.

Devotional and Liturgical Prayer

In addition to formal liturgical prayer, Catholics are also encouraged to pray at home, alone, or in other gatherings. These prayers often take the form of Scriptural reflections, Marian prayer and devotions to the saints, and praying for the dead.

The norm for Christian prayer is to pray to God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Catholics also (especially in their personal devotions) approach Mary and the saints as mediators and intercessors. It is important to note that Catholics do not worship or pray to Mary and the saints but, rather, they venerate them.

Among the saints, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has a unique place for Catholic Christians. She is seen as a daughter of Israel, par excellence, and the first among the disciples of Jesus. Through her “yes” at the Annunciation (cf., Luke 1:26-38) she has become the exemplar for Catholic Christians of what it means to be responsive to the will of God. Catholic devotion to Mary is expressed through numerous feasts throughout the liturgical year (e.g., the Annunciation, March 25; the Assumption, August 15) and through the Rosary.
The Rosary is one of the oldest and most popular forms of prayer in the Catholic Church. It is recited with a set of ten prayer beads that represent five mysteries. A complete Rosary (from the Latin *rosarium*, rose garden; the rose is a symbol for Mary) is divided into three sets of five mysteries, each set marking significant events in the life of Jesus and Mary. Ten Hail Mary prayers are recited while reflecting on each event of a mystery.

The mysteries are: *(Joyful)* the Annunciation; the Visitation; the Nativity; the Presentation; the Finding of Jesus in the Temple; *(Sorrowful)* the Agony in the Garden; the Scourging; the Crowning with Thorns; the Carrying of the Cross; the Crucifixion; *(Glorious)* the Resurrection; the Ascension; the Descent of the Holy Spirit; the Assumption of Mary; the Crowning of Mary.

Catholics also see the presence and activity of God being mediated by the human through the saints. Heroic men and women in every age who have made the reign of God concrete in their daily lives have been singled out for special honor. The saints are addressed as friends in a community of faith in the belief that they pray for believing Catholics as much as living friends do.

In the context of their belief in saints, Catholics also pray for those who have died. Along with devotions to the saints, prayer for the dead is an illustration of the Catholic belief in life after death.

Heaven expresses Christian belief in an afterlife with respect to the individual. Traditionally, many Christians described death as the separation of body and soul, and believed that the soul went to heaven after death. Today, the Christian belief is more accurately described by saying that after death the whole person enters into a new life characterized by love and self-transcendence.

Christians do not know how this occurs. The New Testament itself simply tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is the guarantee that the God who is faithful brings people to new life after death.

Hell expresses the opposite of heaven. It does not refer to divine punishment. Rather, it expresses the conclusion of a life of selfishness and alienation from God and others.

Purgatory is an intermediate state. This teaching expresses the realization that even good people end their lives with some selfishness unresolved. Purgatory is thus a state for the resolution of all ambiguity so that one can enter heaven. Catholics pray for souls in purgatory so that they might go to heaven.

**The Sacraments**

Catholic Christianity sanctifies life most profoundly through the celebration of the sacraments. Catholicism marks important life transitions of its members by rites of passage, liturgical rituals called sacraments. The sacraments are an essential and central part of Catholic Christianity. Its understanding of the
sacraments is based on the theological principle of mediation, which means that it is through the mystery of the Incarnation that God's saving action is realized for Christians.

Three sacraments of initiation—baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist—mark a person's passage into the Catholic Christian community. Baptism is the first sacrament received by a Catholic Christian. The baptism administered by John the Baptist to Jesus is an immersion in water connected with the repentance of sin. To be immersed in water and to emerge from it symbolizes that the Christian is buried with Christ and rises with him to a new life.

This new life is reflected in the Christian's daily living through the power of the Spirit (cf. Rom. 6:1-11). It is also understood as plunging the believer into the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, and into the community of the Church. Following ancient tradition Catholics generally baptize their children as infants, no longer by immersion but by sprinkling, so their lives in the Christian community will nurture their faith from infancy on.

Confirmation is considered the sacrament of Christian maturity in which the gift of the Holy Spirit strengthens and confirms the initiate's existence in Christ. Confirmation is generally received by an adolescent to mark the young believer's transition from child to mature Christian.

The Eucharist is understood as the bread of life which nourishes this new life of the Christian. From earliest times the Eucharist has been the public act of assembled Christians to give thanks and to praise God. Catholic Christians see it as the sign of the unity of the people of God.

Catholics are required to participate in celebrating the Eucharist at least once a week on Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. As part of the Eucharist, Catholics receive and consume consecrated bread and wine (communion) in the belief that these elements are now the body and blood of Christ.

Other important Catholic Christian sacraments include the sacrament of reconciliation, which includes conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation; the sacrament of anointing the sick; and the sacraments of holy orders and matrimony.

**Liturgical Time**

The Liturgy of the Hours is the public prayer by the Catholic community for the purpose of sanctifying the day and the whole range of human activity. Its prayer of praise and petition are rooted in Christian Scripture.

Christians engage the weekly cycle of time by hallowing Sunday—the first day of the new week—as the memorial for the resurrection of Jesus. Thus for Christians Sunday is the first day of the new creation.

The Catholic Christian liturgical year begins with and celebrates the mystery of the incarnation in the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle during
winter. The cycle begins with the period of Advent, a four-week period of intensive preparation and reflection, a time of penitence when Christians recall that they are to live by the values of the kingdom which Jesus taught. The feast of Christmas and this entire cycle, when rightly understood and observed, is essentially a celebration of the Paschal Mystery, for it is an adult Christ in his life, death, and resurrection who is celebrated even during this nativity cycle.

The tone of this season emphasizes waiting, hope, and the Second Coming. In the Lent-Easter-Pentecost spring cycle a special unity exists between the Lenten preparatory time and the fifty-day Great Sunday Easter-Pentecost period.

Catholic Christianity

Origins of Christianity

Born around the year 3 BCE and dying around 30 CE, Jesus of Nazareth, the young preacher from Galilee in ancient Judea, lived under harsh Roman military occupation and experienced with his fellow Jews the apocalyptic hopes, fears, and anticipations to which this gave rise. The Jewish community at that time lived in hope and expectation that the time of pain and persecution would soon end. Hence, talk about and hope for a messiah were common among Jesus’ contemporaries.

During his lifetime Jesus attracted a group of followers (disciples) who believed that their dynamic rabbi (teacher) and healer had a special relationship with God. Alarmed by his influence on his followers, and by the hope of some that he was a political messiah, the Roman occupiers crucified Jesus around 30 CE.

Two days later his closest followers experienced his presence and proclaimed that he had been resurrected, a basic tenet of Jewish belief. This helped confirm for his followers that he was the promised Messiah and that he would soon return to earth in a “Second Coming” to usher in the reign of God.

Jesus’ teachings and the events of his life, initially passed on by word of mouth, were gradually put into written form beginning at the end of the first century CE. Paul from Tarsus in Asia Minor, the great progenitor of Christianity, became a strong believer in Jesus after a powerful vision in which the voice of Jesus addressed him personally.

Though he never knew Jesus during Jesus’ life, Paul became the apostle to the gentiles, helping to carry Jesus’ message to communities along the Mediterranean coast and eventually to Rome.

Though Jesus himself was minimally affected by the Greek culture prevailing in his time, Greek concepts and philosophy became very influential
in formulating and spreading the Christian message. Most gentile Christians, unlike Jesus' earliest Jewish followers, were unfamiliar with Jewish traditions and Jewish religious thought. Therefore, very early in its development the Christian community used Greek philosophy and theology to express its belief and self-understanding. Examples include such concepts as "divine son" and "miraculous birth," which were integrated from various Hellenistic mystery cults of the time.

**Distinctiveness of Christianity**

There are four ways in which Christianity, when compared with other religions, is most distinctive. Its claim to universality indicates that Christianity regards itself as a religion for the whole world. Reaching into the gentile world, Christianity offers belief in one God to people of all lands, races, ethnicities, and cultures. Christianity understands that the belief it proclaims is rooted in historical revelation, the revelation by God through Jesus in history, taking place in particular points in space and time. Handed down from one generation to the next, the message of this revelation is summarized in dogmatic formulations called creeds. Professing the Christian faith implies accepting these creeds and living one's life of faith accordingly. As an eschatological religion, Christianity looks to the future full revelation of God. Many Christians express this eschatological yearning in terms of the "already" and the "not yet."

The "already" implies that this fulfillment has already begun in Jesus, while the "not yet" implies that it will be completed at the end of time with Jesus' Second Coming. The task of the Christian until that time is to be fully involved in the here and now, helping to build a world of justice, peace, and love.

**Distinctiveness of Catholic Christianity**

Roman Catholic Christianity has further distinguishing features, the main characteristics of which are its approach to sacred Scripture and tradition. As indicated above, Catholics accept the Bible as the word of God to be read in church. This has meant that the interpretation of the word of God in the Church ultimately rests with the Church's teaching authority. The Catholic Church claims its teaching authority is derived from the commission received from Jesus Christ which has been passed on through apostolic succession.

Catholic Christianity is further distinguished by its emphasis on trinitarian monotheism (refer to "Christian Beliefs About God" above). Unlike the general Protestant belief in "justification by faith alone," Catholic Christianity's specific expression of faith is that of justification by both faith and works, believing that people are saved by what they believe and by what they
do.

Finally, Roman Catholic worship and rituals are different from other expressions of Christianity. Catholic worship is primarily its major ritual actions called sacraments, symbolic actions that communicate Catholic belief in the saving act of Jesus the Christ.