

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

An account of Christian faith offered by the Roman Catholic Committee for Other Faiths as a contribution to inter-faith understanding and the dialogue of faiths.

All Christians share a common belief in God and an allegiance to Jesus Christ. Jesus was a Jew who lived in what was then called 'Palestine' in the First Century of the Common Era. He taught that the purpose of life was to seek and work for the spreading of the 'Kingdom of God', above all by the love of God and of our neighbour. Jesus was eventually crucified, but Christians believe, as the very heart of their faith, that the Father raised him from the dead into a new human life fulfilled and perfected by God - what the Christian scriptures call a 'new creation'. In this form, unseen by us but as Lord of all creation, he is present and active in the world, continuing his work of establishing the Kingdom of God. Christians hope in the promise of Jesus that all who believe in him, or are open to his Spirit in some other way, and who follow his way of life spent in the service of God and neighbour, will likewise be brought through death to the 'new creation'. This 'new creation' has its first beginnings, even in this life, in those individuals and groups who imitate Jesus and live a life that is truly open to his Spirit.

The total number of Christians in the world is just under two billion. About half of these belong to the **Roman Catholic Church**. There are also the members of the **Eastern Orthodox Church**, the various **Protestant** traditions, the **Anglican Communion**, and other smaller groupings. These families of Christians divided from each other at various times, and there are still important differences between them; but nowadays great efforts are being made to bring them closer

together, because Christians believe that Jesus died to make it possible for all human beings to be united, eventually, in peace and harmony - this is fundamental to the idea of 'the Kingdom of God'. In other words, Jesus wants his Christian followers to show the way by being convincingly united among themselves.

Main Points of Christian Belief and Practice

(As understood in the Roman Catholic tradition)

(a) Jesus Christ: *(N.B. The name 'Christ' - 'Messiah' means the same - is not a surname, but a title given to Jesus in the Christian scriptures. The word means 'Anointed as kings were anointed. During his lifetime he was known as 'Jesus of Nazareth..)* Jesus (meaning 'One who saves') revealed himself to be in a unique relationship to God which he spoke of in terms of 'Father and Son'. Christians do not understand these words in a bodily sense, but neither are they mere metaphor. We believe that Jesus was, and is, both truly human and truly divine.

At the beginning of Jesus' life of preaching the Kingdom, he was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. The scriptures tell how God's Holy Spirit then entered mightily into him, giving him the power to preach, to heal, to forgive sins, and to live his life more consciously as the Son and Servant of God his Father. He brought this dedicated life to a climax by the manner of his death, in which

he abandoned himself in trustful obedience to the Father. The Father's response was to raise him out of death to the 'new creation' - in other words, his human life was now utterly transformed by the Holy Spirit of God.

Christians believe that all human beings have been created by God for this new life. This is our destiny, and it is only by the death and resurrection of Christ that it becomes possible. That is what we mean by claiming that Jesus Christ is the only 'Saviour'. But Christ has many ways of working in people's lives, and not only through Christianity. People may well not be Christians at all, yet Christ can meet and bless them where they are, and give them the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit can transform their lives so that the Kingdom of God can take root in them. By the power of the Spirit they can work for that Kingdom, and the Spirit can lead them through death to the fulfilment of the Kingdom beyond death.

(b) God: The Christian experience of receiving the Spirit of God and living in deep relation to Christ as brother and friend, as well as addressing God in prayer as *Our Father* as Christ commanded, gradually led Christians to their characteristic understanding of the nature of God. There is indeed only one God - yet that inexpressible unity is a *living* unity of love. The 'Father-Son' language that Jesus used, and his whole life of loving abandonment to the One he called 'Father', together with the Christians' own knowledge of the Spirit who lived in Christ and was received by them, led them to worship God as **Father, Son and Spirit** - Three in their relationship to each other, yet utterly One in the living Unity which is the one God.

(c) The Bible: The Bible is not a book, but a collection of writings spanning nearly a thousand years. We share many of these sacred writings with the Jewish people, and regard them as the inspired word of God. The

older part of the Christian Bible - the part we share with the Jews - we Christians call *The Old Testament*, the more recent part contains purely Christian writings, and is called *The New Testament*. The New Testament was written at various times around the First Century of the Common Era: it consists of four accounts of the words and deeds of Jesus (called *Gospels*), together with other writings. We regard these too as God's inspired word, and would regard Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of what was taught and recounted in the Old Testament.

(d) The Church: The New Testament bears witness to Christ's desire to create a new people, his followers. This new people are called by various names, such as his 'little flock', his 'church' (a word meaning an assembly called out by God), and even his 'body'. We believe that the risen Christ associates himself very closely with this community, and lives and works within it. We believe that the Church is both a *Sign* and an *Instrument* of Christ's activity in the world. Although the Church is a very human institution, with all the limitations that belong to human institutions (including individual and institutional sin, sadly exemplified in past and present), we believe that, in spite of this, Christ so identifies himself with the Church that it has a divine aspect and power that nothing can destroy. This is the power of God's love, drawing people closer to God and God's Kingdom.

The following are three examples of how that God-given power works:

[1] Sacraments: A 'Sacrament' is a sacred Sign which, by the power of Christ, actually brings about what it signifies. The basic sacrament is Christ himself: as a human being he was the visible *Sign* of God's love: but by being this he actually brought the power of that love into play. Through the visible Church he still continues to do this:

the Church is a *Sign* of God's love, and in various ways makes that love effective in our lives.

Conspicuous among these ways are what we call the 'Seven Sacraments', which are sacred rites which, for those who take part in faith and sincerity, both *signify* and *bring about* in their lives the forgiveness, the renewing love and the transforming Spirit of God. For example, **Baptism** is the sacrament which begins the process of initiation into Christ's Church. Water is used, both as a sign of cleansing from past sin and as a sign of death, burial and rising to new life. But it also, by Christ's power, effects what it signifies: the person's sins are truly forgiven and he/she receives the Spirit who can gradually develop in that person the new life of Christ. This process of initiation is continued in the sacrament of **Confirmation**, and is completed in the sacrament called **The Eucharist**, or **Holy Communion**. (We will deal more fully with this under [4] **Prayer and Worship**.)

Other sacraments are to do with healing in sickness (**Anointing of the Sick**), forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism (**Sacrament of Reconciliation**) or to mark life-commitment such as Marriage and Holy Orders. We believe that in all these Signs Christ is at work, touching with his compassion and love the believer who comes with faith and humble sincerity.

[2] **Teaching Authority:** It is our conviction that there is a basic faithfulness in the Church to the truth of Christ's message, which means that in spite of muddle, sin and stupidity the essentials of that message will never be lost or falsified. In Roman Catholic belief a key part in all this was given by Christ to a special group of men chosen by him (known as *Apostles*, meaning 'those who are sent'), and led by the Apostle Peter. These, we believe, were succeeded by others who continued

their work of leadership in pastoral care, teaching and worship. In the course of time these successors came to be known as *overseers* or *bishops*, under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome, whom Catholics regard as the successor of the Apostle Peter. These bishops had representatives, sharing some of their authority, called *presbyters* ('elders'), nowadays usually known as 'priests'. The bishops also had assistants called *deacons* ('servants'). These offices still exist today, and are conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

[3] **Saints: Mary, the Mother of Jesus:** Over the centuries, there have been Christian men and women in whom the Spirit of God has been at work in an outstanding way, making them exemplary followers of Christ. These are called *saints* (from the Latin *sanctus*, 'holy'). Some of these have been publicly recognised as such by the Church, but most of them are known only to God. The Catholic Church gives very special honour to **Mary, the Mother of Jesus**. Because Jesus is believed to be both human and divine in the one Person, Mary is known as **Mother of God**. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that she was without sin, and that the Spirit gave her a perfect faith and openness to God. She was so closely united to Jesus that by the power of his death and resurrection she has already been taken by God, body and soul, into the Kingdom of eternal life. This is known as the 'Assumption' of Mary.

[4] **Prayer and Worship:** The Catholic tradition gives primary, though not exclusive, importance to the *Prayer of the whole Church* when it is gathered together to pray as the Body of Christ. Above all this is the case when a local parish community gathers for the Sunday *Eucharist*, or *Mass*. The Eucharist is the chief sacrament. We take bread and wine, and remember the last supper Jesus took with his friends before he was arrested and crucified. We believe that in this solemn

Remembering the death and resurrection of Jesus are made present for us here and now, though in a different way, and we are united with him in his supreme act of self-giving to the Father, offering ourselves and our lives with him. We believe that by his power the bread and the wine that we eat and drink have become, in a real but utterly mysterious way, his body and blood. So our union with Christ, if we take part with genuine faith, is very deep.

As well as *collective* prayer, such as the Eucharist, the Church also insists on the vital importance of *personal* prayer, when the individual Christian relates personally to the Father (e.g. in the prayer given by Christ in the Gospels, the *Our Father* or *The Lord's Prayer*), or to Christ, or to the Spirit. The Christian may pray in a set form of words, or in words personally chosen, or in a wordless silence of love and worship. Prayer may be one of intercession in situations of need, or of repentance, or thanksgiving, or simple wonder and adoration.

[5] **Morality and Disciplinary Customs:**

The fundamental moral principles are Christ's double commandment to love God as Christ himself loved him (i.e. as our Father), and to love one another as Christ loved us, with total unselfishness. The traditional **Ten Commandments**, which are found in the Old Testament, are some of the ways in which that double commandment must be put into practice. Over the last hundred years the Catholic Church has developed a thorough teaching on social justice and human rights, on the notion of 'The Common Good' in society and the need for every citizen to respect it, on respect for God's creation and the environment, on wealth and poverty, on 'structural sin' as well as personal sin, and on the dignity of the individual human being as created in God's image and likeness. In parts of South America, for example, where the rights of the poor are often grossly neglected,

Catholic groups are trying to put this Catholic social teaching into practice. One basic human right, of course, is the right to life, and the Catholic Church vigorously upholds this against such practices as euthanasia and abortion. Church authority also condemns artificial contraception, and tends to take a negative view on the morality of some modern genetic techniques, often because they offend the dignity of the human person.

The disciplinary rules of the Church (e.g. fasting) have been considerably relaxed in recent years, but there is still a strong insistence on the need for self-denial. We are expected to practise this especially on Fridays and during the season of 'Lent' (the six weeks leading up to Easter). This self-denial is partly in order to imitate Christ's own fasting, partly a way of expressing our own 'emptiness' before God and our radical need of God, and partly a way of expressing concern for the poor. In some countries, such as England and Wales, there is a 'Family Fast Day' several times a year, when the money saved by fasting is given to those in need.

History of the Catholic Church

The story of Catholic Christianity spans two millennia, and opinions would differ on what the most significant developments were. In matters of doctrine there were the *Councils of the Church* that settled major disputes and clarified certain vital areas of belief - such as those about God and Jesus Christ in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., or after the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Among other developments, the *Edict of Milan*, 313 C.E. should be mentioned, when Christianity became a tolerated religion in the Roman Empire, and many of the structural developments of Christianity began. From that time eastern and western Christianity began to

diverge, and the Bishops of Rome (the *Popes*) became far more significant figures in the West than the church leaders did in the East. The growing estrangement between East and West came to a head in the eleventh century, and this division has characterised and weakened Christianity ever since, though the Catholic Church regards itself as still very close to the Eastern Church in doctrine and worship. In the West, the great upheaval of the sixteenth century *Reformation* was another defining moment, when western Christianity divided into Catholicism and Protestantism, with mutual bitterness and persecution.

In the early twentieth century, the Protestant, Anglican and Eastern Orthodox traditions began to make great efforts towards reunion. The Roman Catholic Church began to take part in this much later in the century, after the *Second Vatican Council* in the 1960's. As the twentieth century reaches its end many would say that enthusiasm for reunion has somewhat cooled in some parts of Christianity, but there is no doubting the official commitment to it on the part of Roman Catholic church leadership - notably the recent Popes, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. There have been notable breakthroughs, for example the Joint Lutheran-Catholic Declaration in October 1999, which reached far-reaching consensus on one of the principal issues dividing Catholicism and Protestantism at the Reformation, the Doctrine of 'Justification', or

how God reconciles sinners and restores them to his friendship.

Openness to Other Faiths

Particularly since the Second Vatican Council there has been, in the Roman Catholic Church, a much greater readiness to see truth, value and the work of God outside the bounds of Christianity altogether. Christianity is of its nature a *missionary* faith, convinced that Christ commanded the Church to 'Go and teach all nations'. At the same time there is a greater readiness to acknowledge that God's Spirit, present in the world from the dawn of creation, but poured out upon the world in greater abundance after Christ's Resurrection, is at work in other world Faiths, and in every aspect of human life. Far from denying all this, the Christian needs to rejoice in it, and learn what the Spirit teaches in these other sources. It is not always easy to see how these two principles - the *missionary* principle to proclaim Christ and the *openness* principle to recognise Christ in other places - can be held together. Nevertheless, they must be. As the Roman Catholic poet, G.M.Hopkins wrote:

*For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father, through the features of
men's faces.*

This leaflet has been prepared by the Catholic Committee for Other Faiths, and is offered to members of other World Religions who may wish to learn more about Christianity from the Catholic viewpoint. It is also offered to Catholics themselves who wish to explain their faith to friends from the other Faiths.

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**+ Charles Henderson
Chairman**

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