



## What's So Great about Catholicism?

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**With its divine foundation, sanction, and mission**, nothing could be more glorious than the Catholic Church. But, of course, many people -- even many baptized Catholics -- don't see it that way.

Yet when the sins of men -- or secular material progress, or our own self-centeredness -- blind us to this, they blind us to everything. The Renaissance, a great Catholic moment, enlightened the world by seeing it afresh with both the light of faith and the light of classical civilization, which was Catholicism's seedbed. So, too, today, if we look on the world through truly Catholic eyes, we will find that the fog lifts, our perspectives grow deeper, and beauty and truth beckon above the puerility of mass popular culture.

What's so great about Catholicism? Here are ten things -- in countdown order -- to which one could easily add hundreds of others.

### 10. Hope

Classical paganism, as we know, always ended in despair -- a noble despair sometimes, but despair nevertheless. Eastern religions don't offer much in the way of hope, as they are tied to doctrines of fate, cycles of history, and a nirvana of extinction. Reformation Protestantism is pretty despairing, too, with Calvin's belief that it would have been better for most people if they had never been born, predestined as they are for damnation. Secularism and materialism are no better, as wealthy secular societies tend to have the highest rates of suicide.

But in the Catholic Church, there is hope. Salvation is open to every man willing to take it. And though Jesus warned His apostles that following His way meant enduring inevitable persecution and hatred, He also gave them this promise: The gates of hell would not prevail against the Church. Even outsiders recognize this. Who ever heard of a deathbed conversion to Methodism? Hope comes from the Real Thing.

### 9. The Inquisition

*The Inquisition?* Yes, let's not be shy. The Inquisition is every Catholic-basher's favorite tool of abuse -- though it is one that is very much *not* in the basher's favor. There were several Inquisitions. The first in order of importance in Catholic history was the Inquisition against the Albigensians -- a heresy that encouraged suicide, euthanasia, abortion, sodomy, fornication, and other modern ideas that were distasteful to the medieval mind. The struggle against the Albigensians erupted into war -- and a war that could not be carefully trammled within crusading boundaries. So Pope Gregory IX entrusted the final excision of the Albigensian heresy to the scalpel of the Inquisition rather than the sword of the Crusader.

Did the Inquisition of the 13th century strike fear into the people of western Europe? No. Its scope was limited; its trials and punishments more lenient to the accused than were those of its secular counterparts. Inquisitional punishment was often no more than the sort of penance -- charity, pilgrimage, mortification -- that one might be given by a priest in a confessional. If one were fortunate enough to live in England, northern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, or, with the exception of Aragon, even, at this time, Spain, the risk that one might be called before an inquisition trial was virtually zero. The focus of the Inquisition was in the Albigensian districts of southern France; in Germany, where some of the worst abuses occurred; and in those parts of chaotic Italy rife with anticlerical heresy. In all cases, parts of chaotic Italy rife with anticlerical heresy. In all cases, inquisitional courts sat only where Church and state agreed that peace and security were threatened. Nevertheless, the courts were abused. The Church could not modify an ironclad rule of life as true in the 13th century as it is today: Every recourse to law and the courts is a calamity. But the Church then, and people today, seemed to assume it is better than vigilantes and war. There's no accounting for some tastes.

More famous, certainly, is the Spanish Inquisition. The Spanish Inquisition was a state-run affair, where the Church's role was to act as a brake of responsibility, fairness, and justice on the royal court's ferreting out of quislings (who were defined, after centuries of war against the Muslims, as those who were not sincere and orthodox Catholics). Recent scholarship, which has actually examined the meticulous records kept by the Spanish Inquisition, has proven -- to take the title of a BBC documentary on the subject -- "The Myth of the Spanish Inquisition." We now know, beyond all doubt, that the Monty Python sketch of inquisitors holding an old lady in "the comfy chair" while they tickle her with feather dusters is closer to the truth than images of people impaled within iron maidens. (One of the standard works of scholarship is Henry Kamen's *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, Yale University Press.) In the course of an average year, the number of executions ordered by the Spanish Inquisition -- which covered not only Spain but its vast overseas empire -- was less than the number of people put to death annually by the state of Texas. And this at a time when heresy was universally considered a capital crime in Europe. The myth of the Spanish Inquisition comes from forged documents, propagandizing Protestant polemicists, and anti-Spanish Catholics, who were numerous. The fact is, far from being the bloodthirsty tribunals of myth, the courts of the Spanish Inquisition were probably the fairest, most lenient, and most progressive in Europe.

The man who heads up the modern office of the Inquisition, the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the *Panzer-Kardinal* of the Vatican. Would that he would subject the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in America to an Inquisition. It needs it. Indeed, here's a new rallying cry that I'd like to see become popular: "Bring back the Inquisition!"

## 8. The Crusades

All right, I recognize that this is another problem area for some milquetoast Catholics, but let's be blunt: Do we believe in reclaiming the world for Christ and His Church, or don't we? Medieval knights took that responsibility seriously, wore the cross on their capes and tunics, and prayed and understood an incarnational faith that acted in the world. It was these knights' defensive war -- and the defensive war of the Church and its allies up through the 18th century, for a millennium of Western history -- that repelled Islamic aggression and kept western Europe free. For that we should be ashamed? No: It is one of the

glories that was Christendom that in the Middle Ages the pope could wave his field marshal's baton and knights from as far away as Norway -- not to mention England, France, and Germany -- would come to serve. Men were Catholics first in those days.

Today, because of Islamic terror groups, the West is again strapping on its armor. We shouldn't be ashamed of our predecessors who were compelled to do the same.

## 7. The Swiss Guards and the French Foreign Legion

Though only one of these institutions is under the direct supervision of the Vatican, both qualify as Catholic institutions that should warm the very cockles of our hearts. Indeed, next time you meet a Protestant who asks you why you are a Catholic, try telling him this: "I'm a Catholic because I believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as founded by Jesus and His disciples and as led through the power of the Holy Spirit by the pope in Rome who is himself guarded by the Swiss guards of the Vatican whose uniforms were designed, at least some believe, by Michelangelo." If your interlocutor doesn't immediately seek instruction to convert, you know you've met a hard case.

As for *La Légion Étrangère*, it seems to me that as the product of a Catholic culture, showcasing a Catholic militarism by accepting men of all nations and backgrounds, devoted to one common goal, and by bestowing a sort of secular forgiveness of sins via its traditional offer of anonymity for recruits, it is a good reflection of the Catholic spirit. Indeed, two anecdotes might help illustrate this fact. First, there is the spirit of Catholic realism, perhaps best told in a story from the devotional book, *The Paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion: From Vietnam to Bosnia*. Here one finds a Catholic chaplain in Bosnia handing out medallions of the Blessed Virgin Mother. He admonishes his legionnaires that the medallion "does not replace good cover and it does not replace armor. I don't do voodoo here. So be careful." Well said, Father.

If that anecdote affirms Catholic realism and natural law, here's one that reminds us why fighting men have always respected Catholic chaplains above others. It comes from the morally offensive Catholic writer Christian Jennings, in *A Mouthful of Rocks: Modern Adventures in the Foreign Legion*:

This was the padre assigned to our unit. He wore full combat kit and a large silver crucifix on a chain, which matched his parachute wings. . . . A Spanish recruit I had been playing poker against suddenly started making faces and gesturing behind the Padre's back, when suddenly, without taking his eyes off the Frenchman to whom he had been talking, the priest jerked his elbow backwards into the Spaniard's face, slamming him against an oven.

Charming, *n'est-ce pas*? And a reminder that for most people, the faith is best taught by action and example rather than by words.

## 6. Art

Certainly the famous literary Catholics of the English-speaking world -- John Henry Cardinal Newman, Hilaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Siegfried Sassoon (who converted later in life), and Thomas Merton -- have all played an enormous part in my own conversion and continuing appreciation of the Faith. Even Catholics of an unorthodox stripe (like Greene) have had a powerfully orthodox influence on me.

Writing, of course, is far from the only artistic testimony to the Faith. Catholicism has always surrounded itself with beauty, regarding it as the splendor of truth. In the words of the German priest, professor, and theologian Karl Adam, "Art is native to Catholicism, since reverence for the body and for nature is native to it." The Puritan influence is foreign to Catholicism -- just as the idea that smashing altars, defacing

Madonnas, and breaking stained glass as a religious act is foreign, and indeed heretical, to Catholics. The Catholic Church leaves such Talibanism to the Protestants and iconoclastic heresies. The Catholic Church, instead, offers a celebration of beauty; and beauty, in our world of pierced faces, body tattoos, gangsta rap, and concrete tower blocks, is something we could use much more of.

## 5. Freedom

Yes, the good old reactionary, repressive Catholic Church has been the most ardent defender of freedom in the history of the world -- though it almost never gets credit for it. We live in an age of determinist ideologies -- with the fate of nations and individuals supposedly determined by race, economics, history, psychology, genetics, or even -- insofar as Protestants have any common doctrinal beliefs -- predestination. The Catholic Church stands alone in radical defense of man's free will.

When the media, Protestants, and dissenters tell practicing Catholics that the impulse to sexual activity is overwhelmingly powerful and can't be controlled or renounced, Catholics alone say, "No, man is free. All Christians are called to chastity, and what they are called to do, they can do, and some can freely take on celibacy as a sacrifice to better serve God and His Church."

When Maximus in the movie *Gladiator* rallies his cavalymen with the words, "What we do in this life echoes in eternity," he is speaking like a Catholic, not like a Reformed Protestant or a Muslim who believes that eternity is already written and that man has no free will.

When skeptics complain that the evidence for God is not clear or that a God who allows suffering and evil is Himself sadistic and evil, the Catholic responds, "Our God has made us free men. True freedom always comes with costs and challenges. You see, ours is not a religion of make-believe where actions have no consequences. Ours is a religion of life as it really is. And life as it really is, is a life of original sin. Catholicism is a religion of pilgrimage, freely accepted, to grow in Christ, to overcome sin."

It is another oft-propounded myth that the Western world didn't taste of freedom until the Protestant revolt of Martin Luther, which led to the division and state subordination of churches in northern Europe and eventually led, in some countries, to the separation of church and state and the irrelevance of church to state.

But who would blatantly say that the Renaissance -- against which Luther revolted -- was not free? Who would deny that the great check on state power throughout the entirety of European history, from the conversion of Constantine until the 20th century, was the Catholic Church?

Think of the Roman Emperor Theodosius, commander of all Rome's legions, stripping himself of all imperial insignia to do penance before an unarmed cleric, St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan. It was the Catholic Church that brought a moral check to bear on the exercise and perquisites of power.

Think of the martyrdom of Sir Thomas Beckett and Sire Thomas More. Think of the Protestant revolt, which argued that the power of the state was scriptural and the power of the papacy -- the power of Christ's Church against the demands of the state -- was not.

Think of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Kulturkampf of Bismarck, and later intellectual and political currents, including fascism, communism, and the liberalism of our own time, all of which saw -- or see -- the state as the essential thing, centralization of state authority as the central task, and state direction as the essential instrument of reform. And what was the roadblock to these "reformers"? The Catholic Church. It was the Church that asserted the independence of "subsidiarity institutions." It was the Church that defended the rights of the family against the state. It was the Church that protested, in the words of Pope Pius XI, against the "pagan worship of the state."

The true Catholic is a natural Tory anarchist -- someone who believes in loyalty to persons, institutions, and the faith -- *semper fidelis* -- and in otherwise letting *les bons temps rouler*.

#### 4. The Saints

The Catholic is never alone. God is always near. The Catholic remembers Mary. He remembers her saying *yes* to the Incarnation. He remembers those who have gone before him: the vast parade of saints whose personalities and attributes are so various, so free, and yet so devoted to the singular path that leads to holiness and union with God.

Catholic women -- as I noted in my agnostic Anglican days, when I was dating them -- had stained-glass minds: an awareness of the romance of the past and of the depth and color of Christian history, even if it was just a velleity, not captured in details or knowledge. Catholics aren't divorced from history. They are not alone with their Bibles and their consciences. Catholics *live* history. They are part of the continuum of 2,000 years (or with the Old Testament, even longer) of man's pilgrimage with God.

In the Apostles' Creed, the earliest formulary of Christian belief that we have, the Bible is never mentioned. Individual conscience is never mentioned. What is mentioned is *history*: "born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." And what is affirmed is belief in God; in the life, resurrection, and coming judgment of Jesus; and then the final litany: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

To the Catholic, life is good; the body is good (which is why it will be resurrected); and it is good for man, if we remember Genesis, not to be alone. In the Catholic Church, he is never alone but lives within the body of Christ, the Church Militant, wherein he receives the sacraments of his earthly pilgrimage; in his prayers for the dead, he remains in prayerful connection with the Church Suffering; and in his emulation of the saints and prayers for their intercession, he looks ahead to the Church Triumphant in heaven.

And what saints there are. "St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle"; the beloved St. Francis, "Lord, make me a channel of Your peace"; the "Dumb Ox" of logic and reason's call, St. Thomas Aquinas; St. Ignatius Loyola, who showed what miracles of conversion "the Pope's marines" could achieve when they were all devoted and orthodox (let us hope that they will be again); and on and on in endless panorama. All this belongs to the priceless Catholic heritage. Catholicism does not circumscribe and narrow the truth and practice of religion as all heresies do but celebrates the fullness of humanity and God's creation.

The saints show us the way. Catholics do not presume that they are saved through faith alone -- as do Protestants. Salvation, of course, comes through God's grace. But as part of our free acceptance of that grace, we are called to become holy: to work, to act, to participate in that constant drama where we struggle to live the life of a saint -- to live, that is, the life of Christ. None of us is the elect, predestined to salvation, with the remainder (the majority) predestinedly condemned to hell, as Calvin taught. The Catholic believes he is called to acts of corporal and spiritual mercy and that these help him, by God's grace, to achieve expiation of sin. Our models and aides in our never-ending effort to achieve sanctity are Jesus, the apostles, and all the saints.

#### 3. Unity

When we affirm the Nicene Creed, we affirm our belief in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." The Creed does not say "many, reformed, anti-Catholic, Bible-based churches." Nor does it say, "several nation-based, auto-cephalous, and selectively conciliar churches." The Church is called to be one -- one

body of Christ, one bride of Christ.

Over the course of 2,000 years, its unity has denied the law of entropy. That it has avoided the most common of temptations -- to embrace nationalism or solipsism as the essence of belief -- always and everywhere affirming the catholicity of the Church, is proof of its authentic teaching. It is indeed a glory of the Church that it encompasses all men and can use the talents of all nations. The "elasticity, freshness of mind, and sense of form of the Roman combine with the penetration, profundity, and inwardness of the German, and with the sobriety, discretion, and good sense of the Anglo-Saxon. The piety and modesty of the Chinese unite with the subtlety and depth of the Indian, and with the practicality and initiative of the American," as Karl Adam enumerates these qualities in *The Spirit of Catholicism*.

Objective truth knows no borders. Surely when Paul preached "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," he did not envisage, and would not approve of, the 20,000 or more varieties of Protestant experience. The story of the early Church is the story of the Catholic attempt to maintain Christian unity in accordance with the truth against a sea of heresies -- a sea that, as a working out of the Reformation, has now in the popular mind washed away the very idea of heresy. The Reformation marks the entrance of relativism into Christian life, and relativism denies unity. More important, it denies objective truth, and therefore relativism itself can't be true, however attractive it might be to those who, in the words of St. Irenaeus writing in the second century, are "heretics and evil-thinkers, faction makers, swelled-headed, self-pleasing." Our unity as the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" is one of the proofs of the verity of the Catholic faith.

That unity is seen in another way, too: namely, in the way that the Church brings together reason and mystery, piety and beauty. It is seen in the way that the Church affirms all positive values -- as found anywhere in history or in the world -- that are in accordance with natural law and fidelity to the deposit of faith. And it is seen in the way that the Church truly accepts the unity of God's creation and Christ's teaching, refusing to let it be parceled up and delimited by nations, philosophers, or pedants who seek to shrink-wrap the faith to their own specifications. The true faith is universal, effulgent, and living.

## 2. The Sacraments

The sacraments and the visible Church are another proof and nurturer of the faith. I am among the least mystical of men, but I will gladly stump up and affirm the efficacy of the sacraments, sincerely and prayerfully entered into. With Pascal I would affirm that one actually learns the Catholic faith by *doing* -- which is why deracinated, prissy, critical *philosophes* standing outside will never "get it." The faith of the Catholic is a great drama unfolding before God, and we are the players in it. There is the awesome reality of the Eucharist, God made flesh at every Mass, and our responsibility before Him and in receiving Him. There is the visible *alter Christus* of the priesthood. Even those sacraments that many Catholics find painful -- such as penance -- are powerful reminders of the reality of God and of the necessity of both our faith and our good works.

For me, Shakespeare captured this best in *Henry V*. Before the battle of Agincourt, Henry pleads with God to remember his works -- not his faith alone -- on behalf of the Church:

Not today, O Lord,  
O, not today, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!  
I Richard's body have interred new,  
And on it have bestow'd more contrite tears  
Than from it issued forced drops of blood;  
Five hundred poor I have in yearly pay,  
Who twice a day their wither'd hands hold up  
Toward heaven, to pardon blood; and I have built

Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests  
Sing still for Richard's soul. More will I do;  
Though all that I can do is nothing worth,  
Since my penitence comes after all,  
Imploring pardon.

It is extremely odd to me that Protestants should take pride in reducing the transmission of God's grace from the seven sacraments held by the apostolic Catholic Church and Orthodox churches to two. When Protestants say that the celibate priesthood and religious life show a lack of respect for marriage, it's worth reminding them that to Catholics marriage is a sacrament, an institution of divine grace -- something rather more elevated than it is for Protestants. And for Catholics, holy orders is a sacrament, making our priesthood rather more important than a Protestant ministry. For Catholics, religion is not all in the mind. It is tangible, present, and living. In short, it is real.

## 1. Truth

Nothing else would matter about Catholicism if it weren't true. But it is our firm belief as Catholics that it *is* true. And, indeed, I believe that the historical case for the Catholic Church is virtually irrefutable, as irrefutable as it was to Cardinal Newman. And there is something else. We know that the Church affirms that its members and servants are all subject to original sin. But while men might falter, the teaching of the Church does not. That has been our rock, tested through the tempests of centuries and undiminished through time.

Innumerable secular and other forces are against us. Even within our own midst we have been painfully reminded of the work that needs to be done to cleanse and purify our Church. Evil stalks the world. But then, it always has. And the Church has survived, and in the heat of persecution, it has grown in numbers and strength. Let us remember that fact. And let us always keep in mind the immortal words of Auberon Waugh: "There are countless horrible things happening all over the country, and horrible people prospering, but we must never allow them to disturb our equanimity or deflect us from our sacred duty to sabotage and annoy them whenever possible."

Amen to that. Keep the faith, dear readers, and remember that our ultimate destination is heaven.

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