



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW®

UPDATED EDITION

JOHN L. ALLEN Jr.

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For the unsinkable Laura Frazier...

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INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church makes some pretty exalted claims for itself. Over the centuries, the Church has described itself variously as the “Mystical Body” of Jesus Christ, the “Spotless Bride” of the Son of God, and the “Temple of the Holy Spirit,” the only path to salvation. Such beliefs rest on religious faith, the “evidence of things not seen,” as the New Testament puts it, and by definition can’t be verified or falsified. At a purely human level, however, here’s one tag for the Catholic Church that seems beyond all dispute: it’s the Greatest Show on Earth.

There’s nothing like Roman Catholicism for sheer drama, whatever one chooses to believe about its supernatural status. No other force on the planet blends mystery and intrigue, ritual and romance, art, culture, politics, history, the greatest heights of the human spirit and the most galling instances of hypocrisy and corruption, in quite the same way, all rolled up into one endlessly fascinating spectacle. Catholicism attracts both awesome devotion and intense resentment in roughly equal measure; either way, the Church is impossible to ignore. Try to imagine another institution that could have inspired, say, both *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene and *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown, or that could have prompted both Beethoven to compose his glorious Mass in C major and Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor to tear up a picture of Pope John Paul II during a 1992 *Saturday Night Live* appearance.

Here’s a comparison Catholic officialdom probably won’t appreciate, but that nevertheless captures something about the

unique spot Catholicism occupies on the cultural landscape. A survey of Howard Stern's mammoth radio audience once found that it included people who loved the notorious shock-jock and those who hated him, and in both cases, their number one reason for tuning in was to find out what he'd say next. Despite the wildly different world views Stern and the Church embody, in this sense they have something in common. Whether people applaud the Church or abhor it, they can't help tuning in to find out what might happen next.

The word "catholic" means "universal," and the Catholic Church certainly fits the bill. In keeping with Christ's command to "Go forth and make disciples of all the nations," the Catholic Church has become one of the world's few truly global institutions, putting down roots pretty much everywhere. As of 2012, there were 1.2 billion baptized Catholics in the world, making Catholicism arguably the world's largest single religious body, and without any doubt its best organized. (Both Islam and Hinduism have followings in excess of a billion too, but both contain multiple schools and movements, without the single point of reference and authority Catholicism has in the Pope.)

The early twenty-first century is a "best of times, worst of times" moment for this universal church. In Europe and North America, Catholicism finds itself reeling from a series of horrifying sexual abuse scandals that have badly damaged its public image and its moral authority (not to mention its finances). The Church also faces significant internal divisions, as well as a decades-long hemorrhaging of members in its traditional strongholds. There are now twenty-two million ex-Catholics in the United States alone, enough to make people who have turned their back on the Church the second largest religious body in the country. Yet there are also multiple signs of new life, especially in the developing world. Catholicism is growing like gangbusters in places such as India and sub-Saharan Africa. During the twentieth century, the number of Catholics in Africa shot up from 1.9 million to 130 million, a staggering

growth rate of almost 7000 percent. Even in the United States, there are roughly six million adult converts to Catholicism, all the more impressive given the beating the Church has taken in the press over the past decade.

If a Las Vegas casino were to open a betting line on whether the rest of this century will be a boom or bust period for the Catholic Church, right now it's hard to say where the smart money should be.

The Catholic Church has faced moments of deep crisis before, whether we're talking about the titanic struggles between popes and kings in the Middle Ages, or the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, or the arrest of Pope Pius VII by Napoleon's troops in 1809. One way or another, it always seems to muddle through. Even the most ardent Catholics occasionally marvel at the way the Church manages to scrape by, sometimes in the teeth of obtuse or short-sighted choices by those who happen to be in charge at any given moment. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-French Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc once wryly described the Catholic Church as "an institute run with such knavish imbecility that, if it were not the work of God, it would not last a fortnight." The fortunes of the Church in this new century will, to some extent, depend on whether its leaders rise to the challenges sketched in this book.

Why does the Church matter?

For Catholics, pondering the fate of their Church is not an exercise that really requires much justification. Whether or not they fully subscribe to the official theology, most Catholics feel in their bones that the Church is the place where they encounter God, where their hunger for the divine and the transcendent is fed. It's their spiritual home, their family. Although Catholicism is a missionary religion, always looking for new converts, it's also in many ways a traditional and ancestral religion, in the sense that most of its members are born into it.

Even lapsed Catholics often feel its tug, a sentiment famously captured in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when the central character, Stephen Dedalus, announces to a friend that he's lost his faith. When the friend asks if he intends to become a Protestant, Stephen replies: "I said that I had lost the faith, but not that I had lost self-respect."

For non-Catholics, however, it may not be quite so obvious why it's a good use of their time to develop a working knowledge of what the Catholic Church is all about. The following are three reasons, therefore, why everybody should know at least a little something about Catholicism.

1. Religion isn't going away

Even the most committed agnostic or atheist would have to admit that confident predictions made not so long ago about the inevitable decline of religion have proven stunningly false. Instead, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed a powerful resurgence of religion as a driving force in human affairs. We can perhaps date religion's comeback to a twelve-month period between late 1978 and 1979, when John Paul II was elected Pope of the Catholic Church, setting the dominoes in motion that would eventually lead to the collapse of Communism, and Ayatollah Khomeini swept to power in Iran, triggering waves of Islamic revivalism all over the world. For good measure, we could also add the election not long afterward of Ronald Reagan, the first modern presidential candidate to explicitly make religious voters a core element of his political base.

Sometimes the power of religious conviction is destructive, the most obvious example being the terrorist attacks of 9/11. On other occasions it's inspiring, such as the nonviolent struggle of the Dalai Lama against Chinese oppression in Tibet. In any event, it's a rock-solid empirical fact that the vast majority of people on the planet hold strong religious beliefs, and those beliefs, for good or ill, influence the way they engage the world. In 2003, David Brooks published an article in the

Atlantic Monthly skewering the obliviousness of secular elites (such as the people who edit that magazine) to the power of religion: “A great Niagara of religious fervor is cascading down around them,” he wrote, “while they stand obtuse and dry in the little cave of their own parochialism.”

In that light, examining the present realities and future prospects of the largest and most centrally organized religious body on earth is at least as obligatory for anyone who wants to understand the world as pondering, say, the United Nations, or the White House, or Microsoft.

2. Cultural literacy

For more than 2000 years, Christianity in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, has been one of the central pillars of Western civilization. It’s impossible to understand much Western art, music, literature, or history without at least a basic grasp of Catholicism. You can find traces of that footprint in ways large and small, all the way down to the very language we speak. Here’s a banal example: When magicians say “hocus pocus” as they pull a rabbit out a hat, they may well be offering an inadvertent tribute to the Catholic Mass (some experts contest this). The phrase is thought by some to be a corruption of the Latin formula *hoc est corpus meum* (“this is my body”) pronounced by a Catholic priest when administering communion. On more solid historical ground, when politicians talk about launching a “crusade” against taxes, or racism, or potholes, it’s a reference to the original Crusades in the tenth and eleventh centuries, in which European monarchs and knights, backed by the Pope, waged an expeditionary war to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslims.

At a deeper level, Catholic literacy is a basic requirement of any effort to make sense of our past and our present. You can’t understand Max Weber’s famous notion of a “Protestant work ethic” as the driving force behind capitalism, for instance, without some background in the celebrated controversy between Catholics and Protestants over whether faith

or works is the key to salvation. To take a more recent case, the Catholic bishops of America have emerged as important players in the national debate over health-care reform, framing the issues raised partly in terms of religious freedom. It's tough to understand why that's such an obsession for them without some grasp of the long and not-so-proud tradition of anti-Catholicism in the United States.

The bottom line is that whether you share Catholic beliefs or not, knowing something about the Church is a *sine qua non* for understanding the cultural world in which we live.

3. Political influence

Among the many things making Catholicism *sui generis* is that it's the only religion in the world to have its own diplomatic corps. The Holy See, the term for the primacy of the Pope as the leader of the Catholic Church, is recognized as a sovereign entity under international law, and it has diplomatic relations with the vast majority of countries in the world. As of 2012, the Holy See had bilateral relations with 179 nations out of the 193 recognized by the United Nations. The only hold-outs include states which basically don't have relations with anybody, such as North Korea, and those which won't recognize the Vatican for religious or ideological reasons, such as Saudi Arabia and China. The Holy See also has observer status at the United Nations. The Church takes great pride in its unique diplomatic standing, styling itself as a voice of conscience in human affairs.

The most obvious example of this political capital in action was the role played by the late Pope John Paul II in the end of Communism. Though historians debate exactly how to parcel out responsibility—whether it was John Paul's "soft power" or Reagan and Thatcher's "hard power" that was more instrumental—virtually everyone agrees that the picture would have been very different had the Polish Pope not inspired and sustained the Solidarity movement in his native land, launching a moral revolution across the entire Soviet sphere.

This was hardly an isolated case. In the late 1970s, Vatican diplomats negotiated a treaty that prevented Chile and Argentina, both ruled at the time by military dictatorships, from going to war over the Beagle Islands. A Catholic movement known as the Community of Sant'Egidio, with tacit Vatican backing, brokered a peace deal in 1992 that ended Mozambique's long-running civil war. To be sure, such interventions are not uniformly successful. For instance, the late French president François Mitterrand blamed the Vatican for triggering war in the Balkans in the early 1990s by prematurely recognizing the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, two predominantly Catholic states, from the former Yugoslavia. Pope John Paul II led the moral opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, but failed to stop it. Even in failure, however, the Church's relevance is clear.

The Church is no less influential in the United States. There are roughly sixty-seven million American Catholics, about one-quarter of the total national population, which means they're an important electoral bloc. That's especially so given that Catholics are disproportionately concentrated in swing states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. For sure, there is no monolithic "Catholic vote." Heading into any presidential election, roughly 45 percent of Catholics are likely to vote for the Democrat no matter what, and another 45 percent will vote for the Republican. Yet that leaves a swing bloc in the middle, which translates into a pool of four million voting-age folks. In recent elections, the presidential candidate who does the best job of moving those undecided Catholics into his column has been the winner. Both George Bush in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008 drew a majority of Catholic votes.

Myths and misperceptions

Even if we can agree that the Church matters, people may think they already know everything they need to know in order

to think intelligently about Catholicism. In truth, however, public discussion of the Catholic Church is dogged by persistent myths and misperceptions, which means that the debate about the Church's role and influence is sometimes built on sand. Here are four examples of such myths, all of which will be debunked in various ways throughout this book.

1. The monolith myth

In public conversation, people typically refer to “the Church” as if it’s an organism with a central nervous system capable of thinking only one thought at a time. For example, pundits and self-described experts refer to what “the Church” thinks about gay marriage, or poverty, or the Arab Spring. From a descriptive point of view, however, there is no such animal as “the Church,” in the sense of an entity with unified positions upheld unequivocally by all its 1.2 billion members.

To be sure, there is official Catholic teaching on a restricted set of matters of faith and morals, codified in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Even on this front, however, there are plenty of respected Catholic theologians who question some of these official doctrines, and at the grass roots, Catholics hold a wide range of views. Birth control is probably the classic example, as polls consistently show that, at least in the West, a strong majority of Catholics don’t share the Church’s official condemnation.

More basically, most of life’s practical questions cannot be resolved directly by appeal to the Catechism, and that’s by design. Circumstances in the real world are constantly changing, and how to apply the fixed principles of Catholic faith and morality to new developments is usually a matter for what Catholic argot describes as “prudential judgment.” More often than not, there is no single answer that can be dictated as an article of faith.

Catholics hold widely differing opinions, for example, about the merits of globalization, or the best way to respond to

Islamic militancy, or how tax policy ought to be crafted. Even at the highest levels of the Church, in the Vatican and among the roughly 5000 Catholic bishops in the world, one can find different views. Among the rank and file, there's pretty much every opinion under the sun. We'll take up plenty of examples of this diversity in the chapters to follow, but suffice it to say here that whatever perspective or point of view you're looking for, you can almost always find it somewhere on the Catholic landscape.

2. The centralization myth

In some ways the Catholic Church is the most vertically integrated religious body on earth, but in other important respects, the Church is far more loosey goosey than the usual stereotypes suggest. To be sure, there's a clear chain of command culminating with the Pope in Rome. Theory and practice, however, aren't always the same thing. In reality, Catholicism is strikingly flexible and decentralized in terms of how decisions are made, and how the faith is lived in concrete circumstances.

There are three key reasons why:

- In addition to the vertical structures of the Church, there's also a vast galaxy of "horizontal Catholicism," including the Eastern churches, religious orders, lay associations and movements, personal prelatures and ordinariates, and institutions such as schools, hospitals, and charities. These outfits have different relationships with officialdom, and most enjoy some degree of autonomy, either *de jure* or *de facto*. We'll consider this "church outside the Church" in chapter 3.
- At the very top of the system, in the Vatican, the workforce is remarkably limited. There are 2200 employees in the Roman Curia, the bureaucracy that assists the Pope in administering the global church. That works out to one

Vatican official for every 545,000 Catholics, underscoring a basic fact of life: The Vatican can't micromanage in anything other than exceptional cases, because it just doesn't have the horses. Management guru Peter Drucker once listed the Catholic Church as one of the three most efficient organizations on earth, along with General Motors and the Prussian army, precisely because it's able to administer a worldwide operation with such a limited central office.

- One of Catholicism's core values is "subsidiarity," which means that higher levels of authority should intervene only to accomplish things that lower levels can't. Sometimes it's more honored in the breach than in the observance, but it's there in the Catholic bloodstream, which acts as a brake on top-down methods of control.

3. The myth of decline

The popular take on Catholicism tends to be that it's a Church in free fall. Rocked by sex scandals, bruising political fights, financial difficulties, and chronically negative PR, it seems to be hemorrhaging members as well as clustering parishes, closing institutions, and struggling to hand on the faith to the next generation.

Seen from a global perspective, however, that's wildly wrong. The last half-century witnessed the greatest period of missionary expansion in the 2000-year history of Catholicism, fueled by explosive growth in the southern hemisphere. In total, the global Catholic footprint grew during the course of the twentieth century from 266 million followers in 1900 to 1.1 billion in 2000, and it stands at 1.2 billion today. While the overall world population grew by 275 percent during that span of time, the Catholic total rose by 357 percent, meaning that what's happening is not just demographic growth but also missionary success. That's not true everywhere, as there are

significant losses in Europe, parts of North America, and in some pockets of Latin America, but it is the global big picture.

To be sure, statistics alone don't settle disputes about the choices facing the Church. Those twenty-two million ex-Catholics in America, for instance, don't necessarily represent a "vote with the feet" referendum against the perceived conservative drift of Church leadership in the last quarter-century, especially when you consider that a sizeable chunk defected to Evangelical Protestantism precisely because they felt the Catholic Church wasn't conservative enough. Nor does the phenomenal growth of Catholicism in the global South necessarily amount to an endorsement of current Vatican policy, because quite honestly, the Vatican has had precious little to do with it. In other words, you can't draw a straight line from population data to who's right or wrong in current Catholic debates.

What can be said with empirical certainty, however, is that anybody who thinks this is an era of Catholic decline needs to get out more often.

4. The myth of Church oppression

Of all the popular misconceptions about Catholicism, and about Christianity in general, the idea that the Church is oppressive is arguably the most pernicious. Stoked by historical images of the Crusades and the Inquisition, and even by current perceptions of the wealth and power of church leaders and institutions, it's tough for Western observers to wrap their minds around the fact that in a growing number of global hotspots, Christians today are the defenseless oppressed, not the arrogant oppressors.

Here's the stark reality: In the early twenty-first century, we are witnessing the rise of a whole new generation of Christian martyrs. Christians are, statistically speaking, the most persecuted religious group on the planet. According to the Frankfurt-based Society for Human Rights, fully 80 percent

of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed against Christians. The Pew Forum estimates that Christians experience persecution in a staggering total of 133 nations, fully two-thirds of all the countries on earth.

As part of that picture, the Catholic relief agency Aid to the Church in Need estimates that 150,000 Christians die for their faith every year, in locales ranging from the Middle East to Southeast Asia to sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America. This means that every hour of every day, roughly seventeen Christians are killed somewhere in the world, either out of hatred for the faith, or hatred for the works of charity and justice their faith compels them to perform. Perhaps the emblematic example is Iraq. Prior to 1991, the year of the first Gulf War, there were more than two million Christians in Iraq, while today the high-end estimate is that somewhere between 250,000 and 400,000 may be left.

Once again, the fact that Christians are oppressed in large numbers doesn't mean the Catholic Church is automatically deserving of sympathy, and it certainly doesn't make the Church correct on all the positions it takes on spiritual, moral, and political questions. It does, mean, however, that thinking clearly about Catholic fortunes in the twenty-first century means letting go of some of the images of the past.

About this book

This book is designed as a one-stop shopping guide to the basic structures, teachings, practices, internal tensions, and future prospects of the Catholic Church. While I try to cover the basics, the book is geared more toward Catholicism's present and future than its past. It is written to be of interest both to those who passionately share the Church's worldview, and to those who equally strongly reject it. The approach is descriptive in nature, rooted in more than two decades of experience as a journalist covering the Vatican, the American Catholic scene, and the Catholic Church in various parts of the world.