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Religion
Catholicism**

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Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity, with approximately 1.3 billion adherents around the world. Before an analysis of the sociological processes of adaptations and negotiations of Catholicism with different sociocultural settings, its system of beliefs and practices is briefly described here. In its etymology, the word *Catholic* derives from Greek *katholikos* and Latin *catholicos* signifying the universal nature of Christian tradition and all-embracing character of the Catholic Church.

Catholicism is a monotheistic religion, which implies belief in one God in three hypostases: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The sacred text for Catholics as well as all Christians is the Bible. It contains the story of Jesus Christ as simultaneously divine and human being and the history of the first Christian community as the image of the future church.

The rites of the Catholic Church, called *sacraments*, represent particular aspects of the relationship between humans and God: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick. The Eucharist is the central Catholic rite that refers to the sacred story of Last Supper of Jesus Christ. The seven sacraments are essential for the participation of Catholics in the life of the church, society, and personal religious well-being, bringing to all these aspects of divine complicity. Catholic teaching about beliefs, sacraments, and morality is affirmed by Church Councils and the Pope's encyclicals. According to the Council of Trent (mid-16th century), Catholic soteriology—that is, teaching on salvation—emphasizes the importance of human works, God's grace, and reception of sacraments for redemption.

The separation from Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 1054 and the Reformation process of the 16th century created a close identity of Catholicism with Western Europe. Medieval Christian reforms and movements, such as the Cluniac (10th century) or reforms initiated by Pope Gregory VII (11th–12th centuries), brought with them considerable internal changes to the Catholic Church's organization, together with a new relationship toward political authority.

Greater autonomy of clergy, strengthening of inner spiritual life and centralization of the church with the supremacy of the papacy resulted in societal changes in European societies. The reformation of the legal system with the development of canon law; university education; scholastic curriculum; the growth of religious orders, charities, and commerce; new architectural styles; and polyphonic choral music were the results of the Christian movement to change the medieval world.

The legal and religious pluralism within the Catholic Church brought into being a variety of Catholic institutes with their rules, charisma, and ways of engagement with society. Among them were religious orders and congregations, including the Benedictines (6th century), the Augustinians (13th century), the Franciscans (13th century), the Jesuits (16th century), and others. The Jesuits and the Dominicans were historically devoted to scholarly work; they founded colleges, universities, and seminaries. Franciscans emphasized the integral spirituality of life through prayer and service to the poor or disadvantaged.

Catholic orders and congregations became widely spread globally through the missions that were initially seen by Jesuits as necessary to Christianize the world. Along with the idea of introducing the Christian faith, the scope of action of Catholic missions varied depending on localities and period; they entailed educational endeavors, health care, improvement of living conditions, and other aims. During the colonial era and post-colonial period, various, sometimes opposing, meanings have been ascribed to Catholic missions, giving them connotations from religious success to agents of imperialism.

In its institutional dimension, the Catholic Church is represented by a governing structure administered by the Pope (bishop of Rome), Curia, and College of Cardinals. The Pope is considered by the Catholic Church as a successor of one of Christ's apostles—Saint Peter. Historically, the supremacy of the bishop of Rome was related to the status of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire, from which Christianity was first spread.

The Curia as a unit of central administration assists the Pope and acts in his name in the governance of the church, exercising his primacy in a hierarchical organizational structure. The Roman Curia is also in charge of foreign affairs for the Vatican City State. The State of Vatican City received its current status in 1929 in the process of signing the Lateran Treaty between the Holy See and Italy.

With its origins in the Middle East and rootedness in European political and cultural history, Catholicism is a dynamic world religion whose geographical physiognomy has changed through the centuries. The global shift of Catholicism southwards began in 1970, signaling the decline of the number of Catholics in Europe and their increase in Africa and Asia. Between 1910 and 2010, the Catholic population in Europe decreased from 65% to 24%, whereas in Latin America and the Caribbean, the number of Catholics increased from 24% to 39%; in sub-Saharan Africa, from less than 1% to 16%; and in Asia, from 5% to 12%. A geographical shift of Catholicism was intertwined with the processes of decolonization, global migration, missionary activities, and secularization.

The changing global context and challenges of modernity led the Catholic Church to the necessity of *aggiornamento*, or updating, and renewal of the church's position in the modern world. Openness to the modernization of the Catholic Church was apparent during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), called by Pope John XXIII. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the Decree on Ecumenism, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church of the World of Today were outcomes of the Second Vatican Council and renewed many aspects of Catholic social teaching and practices.

Translation of the Mass into vernacular languages, the application of human rights rhetoric, and an appeal for a new dialogue with Eastern Orthodoxy followed as a result of reconsideration of the relationship of Catholicism with the modern state, society, and other religions. Global Catholicism, through its geographical shift to the Global South, its concern with modernization, its engagement with international politics through Vatican diplomacy, and its internal diversity engaged with secularism and post-secular regimes at various societal levels: individual, communal, institutional, and state. The debates on female ordination, priests' celibacy, bioethical issues, and same-sex marriages continue to create new dilemmas and ways of Catholic engagement with modernity.

See also [Christianity](#); [Laïcité](#); [Missionisation](#); [Ordination](#); [Postsecular Society](#); [Ritual](#)

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