

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHOLICISM

[The following eight characteristics or ideals are not always realized in history; they reflect what could be called Catholic sensibilities; the Catholic imagination)

1. **Sacramental** (vis a vis evangelical, conversionistic)—the holy, the divine manifested in visible and concrete signs; saved thru signs and the created order

1. • based on (1) doctrine of creation, created order (2) doctrine of Incarnation
2. • presupposes: grace (an ontological, not just a relational concept) supposes nature, or grace builds upon nature, or grace perfects or fulfills nature, it does not destroy, annihilate, or absorb it.
3. • sacramental system: 7 sacraments, concrete ways in which grace (a participation in the divine nature, and divine forgiveness) is communicated to people: e.g., water, bread, oil, words, married love.
4. • gradual immersion into union with Christ--thru catechesis and liturgy
5. • schools, churches, art, architecture--visible and concrete attempts to make holy education, the neighbor, space and time

2. **Communal or Ecclesial** (vis a vis individualistic or collectivist)—emphasis on the common bonds of the Christian life in Christ

1. • community emphasized (created by nature, and by grace): e.g., family, parish, belonging to the mystical body of Christ; we are saved as a people, not just as individuals; interconnected by one baptism, one hope, one church
2. • unity--of mind and heart, with saints and martyrs
3. • universality (catholicity)--throughout the world, transcending national, ethnic, cultural boundaries
4. • cult of saints--one manifestation of the mystical unity

3. **Biblical** (vis a vis the religion of nature) – Bible as the source of Catholic life and doctrine

1. Catholicism is a biblical religion. For Catholics the Bible is an organ of God's revelation to humanity. The Bible is the foundational document of the Church's life and doctrine. It is sometimes said that the Bible is the religion of Protestants and Catholics rely only on the teaching of the magisterium (pope and bishops). The Bible, however, is central to Catholic life: it is used in the church's liturgy, its sacramental life, in the private or individual prayer life of Catholics, as well as in its role as the fundamental rule of doctrine and morals. Thomas Aquinas, a medieval theologian, held: "We do not believe the successor [of the prophets and apostles] except insofar as they declare to us those things which they [the prophets and

apostles] have left us in written form (*in scriptis.*” (De Ver 14.10 ad II; Parma Ed, 9:244). For Aquinas the doctrine of the Church, “which proceeds from the First Truth manifested in Scripture” is an infallible and divine rule of faith. (ST 2-2.5.3 resp)

2. The Bible is read and interpreted within the context of the church’s public worship and sacraments.
3. The Bible is also interpreted in the creeds and through Tradition, and by the official magisterium.

4. **Creedal** (vis a vis non--creedal)—Catholicism is a creedal religion in the sense that it gives an authoritative role to the creeds within the Christian tradition. But, to be creedal means much more than authority.

1. creeds are forms of worship, a way of praising the God of creation and Redemption, acknowledging what God has done for the human race; used in baptism (on entrance into the Christian community) and in the Eucharist (to identify the worshipping community’s creedal identity and its faith as it gives glory and praise to God)
2. creeds are summaries of the basic vision of the Old Testament and the New Testament, indicating how Catholic Christians interpret the world, nature, and history—from the creation to the eschaton, with the Christ event as the central interpretive framework for the whole of life
3. as the rule of faith (*regula fidei*, *regula veritatis*), the measure by which one interprets the Bible.

5. **Traditional** (vis a vis present-mindedness or ahistorical) —on Tradition (not traditions)

1. • Tradition is not just what was done in the past, but a life giving force and instinct that flows thru history connecting past and present in such a way that the community can discern its identity, its continuity with its past, and simultaneously its need to change and develop in the present in order to remain true to its original and authentic identity.
2. • Tradition, ergo, is not opposed to reform and change, but indeed a part of a reforming and living life force.
3. • Tradition—and change or development; on establishing the criteria for determining authentic from inauthentic change and development within a living tradition.
4. • Tradition refers to 2 things: (1) that which (*quod*) is handed down, i.e., the objective content of the faith, that which is revealed. e.g., the Bible as written tradition (2) that by which (*quo*) the content is handed down: e.g. prayers, liturgy, teaching, councils, theologians, monuments, art, etc.
5. • Tradition (with big T) is not customs, ceremonies, practices (those are traditions with a small t)
6. • Tradition, as a living thing, has an unchanging and a changing dimension to it. One must distinguish between the unchanging deposit of faith, and the

changing, changeable manner, mode, language, etc. in which it (the deposit) is presented in different historical periods. See Pope John XXIII: Address at beginning of Council (p. 715) in 1962: "The deposit of faith is one thing; the way that it is presented is another. For the truths preserved in our sacred doctrine can retain the same substance and meaning under different forms of expression."

6. Hierarchical and magisterial (vis a vis congregational, Presbyteral, or Episcopal)—the authority of God becomes visible in an ordered community and is realized visibly in the structured community of faith: clergy, bishops, pope.

1. • ordered community (institutional), a holy order (hierarchical)
2. • teaching community, Christ as teacher
3. • apostolic succession, not just a humanly constructed polity
4. • doctrine, not just opinion (from Christ, from revelation, from Bible, from tradition)
5. • conciliar tradition, doctrines and dogmas defined by hierarchy (bishops and pope in councils): Trent, Vat I, Vat II

7. Missionary (vis a vis non-evangelical)—the church as missionary

“The church on earth is by its very nature missionary, since according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Vatican II’s **AD GENTES, #2) MISSION, FROM THE LATIN MISSIO (A SENT) is based upon Mt. 28:18-20, Jesus’s last command to his disciples after the Resurrection: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.”** (see also Romans 10:14-15) the mission includes: the zeal to spread the faith, that all might be saved a willingness to be sent (mission, “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”) to evangelize and to convert the nations to Christ the church itself as mission (sent by Christ to preach, teach—by word and example—the faith and the Christ) the methods (how to do it) of the mission: methods of evangelization and conversion change from century to century; historically some methods clearly violated the message of the gospel itself; some were ineffective, inappropriate or violent; some reflected the voluntary appeal of Christ himself need to distinguish the religious from the social and cultural in examining various methods of the missionary enterprise; how to incarnate the faith in a particular culture is always a challenge (without imposing a foreign culture) how does one deal with cultures that have values antithetical to the gospel? a recurring question in Christianity (the Christian cannot simply accept a culture in its entirety; some conversion is necessary in Christianity)

8. **Faithful and Reasonable** (vis a vis fideistic or rationalistic)

In Catholicism faith and reason are integral to one another. Faith seeks understanding and uses reason (the philosophical and intellectual movements of the times) to help explore and communicate the meaning of the faith that comes from revelation and “from hearing” (Rom. 10:17). Reason, on the other hand, searches for the truth and is fulfilled only in its openness to faith—to the truth that transcends reason’s own capacity. Faith, without reason, can lead to superstition or religious fanaticism. Reason, without faith, can lead to a closed world view, and an acceptance of the limitations of the human condition as ultimate. Catholic emphasis on the integral relationship between faith and reason is evident throughout history and particularly in the United States in its establishment of schools, colleges, and universities.