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# ON THE THRESHOLD

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMME

FOR CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN  
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND





UNDERSTANDING

FAITH

YEAR 13 TEXTBOOK

# ON THE THRESHOLD

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMME

FOR CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN  
AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

**NCRS**  
National Centre for Religious Studies



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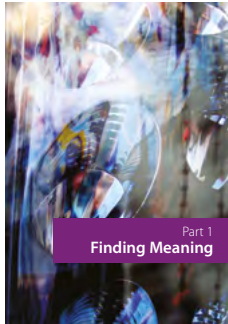
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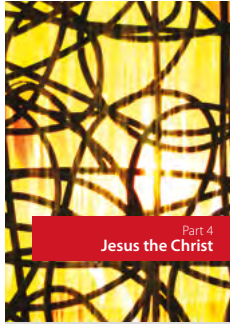


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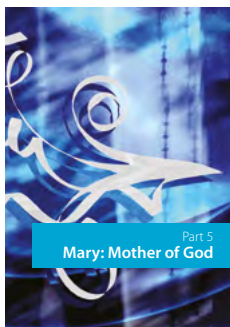


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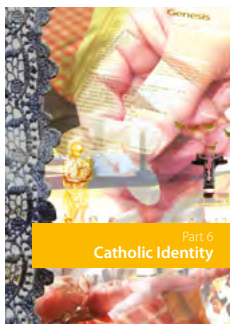




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The background is a complex, abstract composition of overlapping, translucent, organic shapes. These shapes, which vary in opacity and color, create a sense of depth and movement. The color palette is rich and varied, featuring deep blues, purples, pinks, oranges, and greens, often with a soft, ethereal glow. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of cells or a digital data visualization.

# Part 1 **Finding Meaning**



Science without religion is lame;  
religion without science is blind.

Albert Einstein

I have come that they  
might have life and have  
it more abundantly.

John 10:10



## 1.1 Existential Questions

### The 'Big' Questions and Why People Ask Them

Since earliest times humans have questioned their existence in the world, they have questioned the meaning of life and death. Stone Age (500,000–10,000 BC) cave drawings show early humans fascination with the big questions of life such as – what happens when we die? Can we affect the seasons and therefore crops?

Questions about the purpose and significance of life or existence in general are called the existential questions. Some of them are;

- Why are we here? And what are we here for?
- What is the purpose of life? What is the purpose of my life?
- Who is God? How do we know God exists?
- What is the value of life?
- What happens when humans die?
- Why do people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Why is there evil in the world?

These types of question are part of everyone's life at some stage and to various degrees. For some people they will be central issues but for others, peripheral concerns. Certain events in life may cause people to consider these big questions in a new way, such as when somebody that they are close to experiences a life-threatening illness, when a friend or family member dies, at the birth of a child. When we look at these existential questions we are exploring the meaning of life.

Existential questions underpin many of the issues of the contemporary world including ecology, end of life, multiculturalism, feminism and development. For example, looking at the question of euthanasia is considering questions about the value of life, what happens when humans die and why people suffer. Therefore having some understanding of how these existential questions are considered by different people according to the different worldviews that they hold, enables some degree of comprehension as to how such issues are resolved in different and common ways.



S. OWEN





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## How People Respond to Existential Questions

The formal investigation and analysis of ideas about the big questions of life is a discipline called Philosophy. Philosophers grapple with the fundamental problems concerning existence such as knowledge, values and reason. They explore in a systematic way questions around the meaning of life.

Not only was the early Christian Church highly influenced by Greek philosophy in its pattern of thought and the ways it sought to explore issues, it also had important philosophers within its membership. Many of the stories about St Paul (c.5–c.67 AD) recorded in the Acts of the Apostles show him in philosophical debate with Greek scholars.

There have been many other important philosophers in the Christian community. Some of their names are familiar such as Augustine of Hippo (354–439), Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and John Henry Newman (1801–1890). Philosophers explore questions about human existence.

Not everybody is a philosopher and nor do many people continually ask existential questions. However, our life experience leads us to ask these questions. Sometimes they seem so big people question the value of exploring them at all. When such questions about the meaning of life are raised there are two responses. We can engage with the questions or avoid them.

## Avoiding the Questions

People faced with the big questions regarding the meaning of life, can react through avoidance. Such questions are very difficult and challenging to answer, and because they imply that without answers our lives can be meaningless, people adopt all sorts of devices to avoid having to think about questions of meaning and the possibilities of having to change their lives.

### 'Addictions'

People get bored or feel they have nothing meaningful to do so they often turn to activities like play station, texting, or parties to fill up the time. Other people have little idea of where their lives are heading or what they could do with their lives; they often end up waiting for things to happen, socialising, hanging out, waiting for someone to suggest something. Other people are faced with situations where they feel they have little or no control – redundancy, poor health, unhappy relationships – and often take refuge in things that offer the possibility of escaping their misery like gambling, alcohol abuse or drug taking. Seeking relief in these and similar directionless ways is at best a waste of time and human potential, at worst it becomes self-destructive and suicidal.

### It won't happen to me

Even a rapid glance at this morning's paper or tonight's TV news will alert us to pain and suffering in people's lives. The suffering and death of others can bring to mind our own fears when we are faced by our own mortality, the prospect of accident, injury, illness or death. We frequently comfort ourselves by thinking it won't happen to us and so we don't need to worry ourselves about it. The truth is that we will all die sooner or later and there is no guarantee that we will avoid pain and suffering.



## Escaping into Fundamentalism

Some people find that thinking about the meaning of life is a difficult, even painful process. They are often tempted to find, instead, readymade meaning. Such meaning often comes from the superficial reading of some 'great' book or, more usually, from someone else who has done the reading for them and is willing to tell them the 'answer' before they have thought of their question or even before they thought of asking a question at all. The "meaning" can be shown to be certain and obvious and its authority can be pointed to on a written page. Frequently this "meaning" is based on a literal, rigid interpretation of the words of the text.

The authoritative text may be the Bible, the Koran, the Communist Manifesto or, in our environmentally sensitive age, a Greenpeace pamphlet. It does not really matter what the text is. The reality is that there are no black and white answers to complex existential questions.

In its religious sense, fundamentalism occurs where so-called basic principles are laid down and people are expected to stick to them rigidly. It is a view that, typically, tolerates no other points of view. Fundamentalism offers easy, 'pre-digested' answers to the big questions of meaning and actively discourages people from doing their own thinking about such questions. But it is only by grappling with the challenge of finding answers that people can actually begin to discover and understand the truth.

## Engaging with the questions

Engaging with the questions is a complex process. It is not some action which gives a nice, clear-cut answer. It is more a construction of knowing where people happily live into the ambiguity of the questions they seek answers to. Sometimes asking one question of this kind raises further questions. This is done through reflection on lived experiences, the collective wisdom of culture especially religious worldview, and the dialogue questioners are prepared to enter into with the questions themselves. This is often referred to as the search for truth.

There is no exact way to answer existential questions. When interest is raised in them or situations occur that prompt them to be asked, people reflect on and seek to understand the experience. Many things influence the way this is carried out. How we think and the process of discovering what we think and what motivates us can be quite complicated. For example our personality type will influence the intensity with which we reflect on our human experience as well as our attitudes to experience.

## The world experienced

Our world is characterised by an accelerating pace of change. Technological advances in transport, the media and information technology expand our horizons and bring distant people, places and events into our own living rooms. Changes in population distribution, ethnic composition and socio-economic levels affect the kind of society in which we live. Global climate change is increasingly influencing our thinking and planning.

## Local issues

In New Zealand we face health, gender and cultural issues, environmental concerns, changes in the population and the pressures of the global economy. Our national fascination with sport and consumerism pervade our thinking and influence the way that we seek answers to the existential questions.

## Culture

*Culture is the totality of a group's traditions (what they believe), attitudes (what they desire), customs (what they do) and institutions (how they live).*

## The search for Truth

*Looking for answers to the existential questions, the big questions about God, nature, human experience and its meaning is often referred to academically as the search for truth. As a group this search energises the believing community and influences its moral behaviour. To do this humans use their experiences of the world, engage with the wisdom of the Scriptures and the Tradition of the community. The search for truth by the individual requires the help of the community so that a fuller understanding of truth is received rather than just what the individual thinks.*





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What is happening locally can also influence what questions we ask and where we seek the answers. The high rate of teenage suicide and young people's deaths through road accidents are examples of social concerns that are also influential.

### **Living into the questions**

Although the influences on our lives may change and although old traditional answers may be challenged or even rejected, we still have to search for answers to the 'big' questions like 'What is the purpose of my life?'

Our life situation doesn't remain static. Five years ago what was important to you was probably very different from what is important now. Similarly in five years time there will be significant changes or developments in what you value or hold to be important in your life. The meaning you find at any particular time will not exhaust the possible meanings of life.

The engagement we have with the existential questions is likely to change and develop several times during the course of our lives – not totally, but in some major ways. There will be times of clear direction and times of discomfiting change all through our lives. Therefore, the asking of questions around the meaning of life is an ongoing task in the development of each individual.

### **The collective wisdom of a worldview**

The worldview in which we grow up, including the religious worldview, passes on particular values and beliefs that influence how we live and understand our lives. In relatively closed societies, traditional beliefs, values and attitudes are handed down and taught to each new generation. In other worldviews where there has been a reduction of commonly held beliefs and values or in worldviews which emphasise the development of the individual person, values and beliefs are often less definite and each generation must search again for a meaning which may be very different from that of the previous generations.

The cultural wisdom that people engage with is greater than the social-nationalistic form that is often considered when the term 'worldview' is used. Some of the great and lasting worldviews are religious. Engaging with a religious worldview has been the basic way of looking at the existential questions for thousands of years. Catholicism is a worldview. Catholics have a certain way of looking at the world. There are rites, rituals and teachings that form a body of collective wisdom gathered over time. For example, the Church's belief in the innate dignity of the human person (CCCC 358) affects how Catholics see people and believe they should be treated. It also influences how they believe meaning is given to life. This does not mean that you can find a book that answers the big questions but the worldview that is Catholicism does provide a framework for the dialogue between the individuals, groups of people and the questions themselves.



## 1.2 A Secular Worldview – Secularism

In common usage the terms secular, secularism and secularisation are used interchangeably. The word **secular** comes from the Latin *saecularis* meaning 'worldly'. It is concerned with the visible, material world rather than the spiritual and religion.

**Secularism:** is a secular world view that believes that human existence is fully explained in terms of the material without reference to the spiritual.

**Secularisation:** commonly refers to the process whereby any reference to or aspect of the spiritual is removed. It can also refer to the confiscation of Church property by the State.

**Secularist:** A person who lives out of secularism as their worldview.

Many societies including New Zealand are described as becoming increasingly secular. This usually refers to the number of people who describe themselves as not having a religion on the census forms.



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### Secularism – A Secular Worldview

Secularism as a worldview developed from a hostile view of religion during the Age of Enlightenment (18th century). It is a complex and ambiguous movement made up of a variety of elements.

As a worldview, secularism rejects all forms of religious faith and spirituality to answer life's ultimate questions. It maintains that religion should have no influence in society. There is an emphasis on the autonomy of the human person who requires no transcendent being, that is, God to give purpose and meaning to life. This way of thinking can lead to an antipathy towards religious belief which may be considered as a threat to human accountability. Thus, religious faith is seen as a private practice and cannot be allowed to have any influence on the public domain such as politics or economics.

As a social movement secularism promotes the social and material advancement of people's lives. It critiques religion as being indifferent to poverty and human suffering because of a supposed preoccupation with God and eternity. The religious critique of secularism is that it is based on an inadequate understanding of religion. It conceptualises the material and the spiritual as separate realms. Secularism proposes that a person must choose between these two realms. The Catholic worldview however, proposes that religion gives a new meaning and purpose to the material realm. An example of this could be the banking system. From the worldview of secularism the overall aim of the bank is to make profit for its individual shareholders. From the Catholic worldview, while profits are necessary for the viability of the banking system, the overall aim should be for the common good of society.

Secularism is not a negative worldview in itself. Within any worldview there will be extremes of perspective. While some secularists are openly hostile to religion others adopt a more neutral stance. Many aspects of secularisation bring positive outcomes for society. New Zealand was founded as a secular state with no formal state religion as there is in other countries. Consequently enshrined within New Zealand law is the idea of freedom of religion. In the early years of European settlement this saw a legal acceptance of various



Christian denominations and now extends to people of other faiths. In New Zealand, the curriculum in state primary schools is by law secular, meaning that there is no religious dimension to education. An example of the removal of a reference to religion is seen in some application forms. Many forms have changed from using the term 'Christian name' to 'First name'.

As there is no acceptance of the supernatural within secularism there can be no acceptance of divine revelation as a source of human knowledge. Only what can be empirically calculated or experienced exists and at all times the human person is the centre of their own private world. This secular world view is concerned primarily with human destiny as it is experienced by the individual.

Secularism does not exist in a void. A wide range of forces within society affect secular belief and the way that secularism influences human thought and reason. Two of the major influences on secularism are individualism and scientific thought.

## Individualism

For thousands of years society was such that individuals relied heavily on each other for support on a daily level of existence, developing strong social structures as a result. This involved a great deal of give and take as people negotiated arrangements that helped everybody. Since The Age of Enlightenment the idea of the individual who is capable and able of looking after themselves in all aspects of life without necessarily belonging to any strong social support structures has developed and grown. Whereas at the time of the Middle Ages people were seen as very intra-dependent, today society considers people to be very independent.

*I do my thing, and you do your thing.  
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,  
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you and I am I;  
If by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.  
If not, it can't be helped.*  
Fritz Perls (1893–1970)

These lines express very forcibly the need for individuals to think and feel for themselves and to use their right to express their thoughts and feelings. Mature individuals are independent and make their own choices and take responsibility for them. The author views human personality as essentially active, purposive and self-determining.

Healthy adult relationships require people to have a strong sense of their individual self. Individualism is when the self becomes more important than the common good. This may result in alienation, loneliness and an inability to form lasting relationships with other people. The Catholic critique of the conflict between individualism and collectivism is the concept of solidarity.

### Carl Rogers (1902–1987)

Carl Rogers made a significant contribution to the theory of personality from his experience as a counsellor. He believed that each person has a drive towards self-development. We all develop a self-concept, or inner picture of ourselves, which influences the way we see our environment, ourselves in relation to it, and our feelings of relationship to others. The development



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of our self-concept is closely connected with the degree of security we experience. People who experience, from birth, feelings of security are likely to have a stable sense of their own identity so that their interactions with their environments enable them to develop the potential of their personalities.

### Abraham Maslow (1908–1970)

As a result of his work with normal and gifted people, Abraham Maslow maintained that each person's inner nature is in part unique to the individual. Since this inner nature is either good or neutral rather than bad, it is *best to bring it out and to encourage it rather than to suppress it. If it is permitted to guide our life, we grow healthy, fruitful and happy.* Maslow preferred the term 'self-actualisation' to describe his theory because he believed that *every person is, in part, 'his own project' and makes himself.* Maslow believed that a key to living life to the full is to 'find out what one is really inside deep down, as a member of the human species and as a particular individual'. Maslow considered that humans were motivated by needs and that some needs such as that for a human to feel worthwhile were higher than the basic need for food, shelter and clothing. This hierarchy of needs has been influential in secular moral thought since the mid 20th century.

### 'New Age' thinking

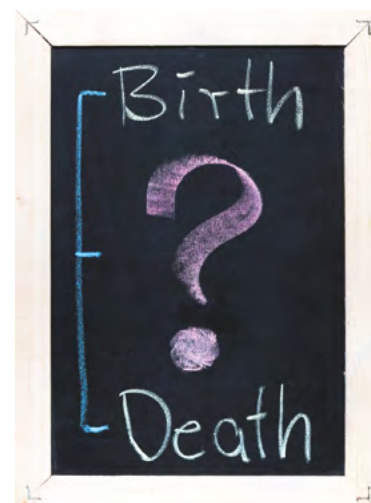
Massive advances in technology linked with increasingly materialistic attitudes, have led to an enormous number of theories to do with the development of the human person. Innumerable programmes have been developed to promote self-actualisation, variously called: authenticity, self-fulfilment, full-humanness, personal achievement etc. Popular methods are things like positive thinking, self-talk, visualisation, affirmation etc.

The New Age (also known as New Age Movement or New Age spirituality) is an extremely loose, unorganised, social and spiritual movement. Its aim is to reach the highest level of human potential. It began in the second half of the 20th century. It is a highly individual approach to life based on no particular teachings or philosophy; individuals and groups borrow widely from, and adapt, all sorts of spiritual and religious traditions. It is debatable whether the highly individual nature of New Age ideas can assist much in answering people's big questions about existence.

*You are everything that is,  
Your thoughts, your life, your dreams come true.  
You are everything you choose to be.  
You are as unlimited as the endless universe.*  
Shad Helmstetter

These words reflect an extreme position of personalist beliefs which claim that life offers people endless opportunities for the fulfilment of all their dreams. In spite of the ideal that the self-actualising person is a dedicated altruistic, self-transcending social being, this belief – because of its focus on oneself – can lead to selfishness, permissiveness, self-indulgence, lack of consideration for the rights and needs of others and neglect of the welfare of the community.

Many psychologists believe that there must be controls upon the psyche (the mental and spiritual aspects of a person) to keep it integrated, organised and unified and a harmonious part of a person's self. They support education that encourages the development of personal controls or self-discipline as well as qualities of spontaneity and self-expression.



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## Science

We hear regularly of 'break-throughs' in the treatment of some disease, or in genetic manipulation or in our knowledge of the universe, or some similar marvel. Scientists are constantly striving to increase our knowledge and understanding in more and more specialised areas of study. Our understanding of the world, including new knowledge and new attitudes to nature, has developed rapidly since two significant events in the 17th century. In 1632 Galileo Galilei published his theory that the earth was not the centre of the world but, like the other planets, revolved around the sun. This theory reversed Ptolemy's proposition – held for thirteen centuries by the European world – that the earth stood at the centre of the universe. In 1666 Isaac Newton published his theory on the universal law of gravitation and went on to explain planetary motion and to develop laws of motion.

### Mechanistic model

Science from the time of Newton until Einstein (1879–1955) adopted a mechanistic perspective. The material world was understood to function like a machine, made up of smaller parts. The scientist's task through observation, experiment and the collection of empirical evidence, was to discover whether the machine be the Universe, the human body or society, worked. The Universe was understood to be ordered and predictable, following the laws of physics and gravity.

### Emphasis on reason

The Age of Enlightenment emphasised the authority of human reason. Reason is our intelligence, our capacity to think logically, rationally and analytically and to make sound, sensible judgements based on our thinking. As more people began to think more and to question traditional understanding so the prevailing philosophical and religious explanations of the world were challenged.

Auguste Comte (1789–1857) contributed largely to the development of scientism, the theory that given sufficient time science would be able to answer all the questions about the origins of the universe and how it works. According to this theory God was confined to the areas which science did not understand and sometimes referred to as God of the Gaps.

### The theory of evolution

Charles Darwin (1809–1882) developed the theory that all living things have emerged from a few extremely simple forms through a gradual process of descent with modification. The theory of evolution has since developed. It has been supported by the work of Hugo de Vries (1848–1935), a Dutch botanist and geneticist. De Vries produced the theory of mutations which explains how genetic variations are possible and, through the evidence of molecular biology, demonstrates the mechanisms involved in the transmission of characteristics. Some biologists have extended Darwin's theory of natural selection to argue that human factors like aggression, sexual differences, behaviour, religious impulses, etc. have a biological basis in people's genetic inheritance. They point out that environmental factors are important influences on the development of these human factors. But they also argue that changes in the environment alone do not lead to change in human factors because these are also influenced by biology and genetics.

A scientific theory will always be provisional, it can never be regarded as ultimately proven. It is an explanation or a description based on observations or experimentation and is always open to correction or replacement.

### The Church and the theory of Evolution

*Darwin himself did not suggest that religious belief was incompatible with his theory.*

*The Catholic Church has no difficulty accepting the Theory of Evolution. Catholic theology stresses that the meaning of the story of creation in Genesis is about the creative and enduring love of God for humanity and the whole created world. Contemporary Catholic theology interprets the data of evolutionary science as consistent with a God of compassionate love.*



## 20th century science

Since the beginning of the 20th century dramatic changes have taken place in physics that challenged the mechanistic view of the universe and has resulted in a paradigm shift. Relativity and quantum theories have changed the way in which science understands the fundamental nature of matter and energy.

In response to the question of how the universe began and developed as it has, many physicists support the theory of a 'Big Bang' which may have taken place fifteen thousand million years ago and produced the whole universe which since then has continued in a state of constant expansion and evolution. Scientific opinion differs about the end of the universe. No serious theory has yet been developed to explain how or why the 'Big Bang' happened.

## Humanism

Humanism is a worldview centred on the belief of the dignity of the human person especially when other views try to deny or diminish the value of human life. There are two key expressions of this worldview.

Secular humanism which is influenced by secularism itself is based on the idea that the world is accessible to ordinary human experience and that the only reality is science. Secular humanists consider that belief in God robs the human individual of their own dignity and creativity because by directing attention toward God the task of developing human powers and a sense of human nobility is lessened.

However not all humanism is atheistic. A strong Christian humanism developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which affirmed the traditional belief that a human person has dignity and in a particular way that dignity is a result of their relationship to God, it comes from being created in the image of God and in being eternally cared for by the infinite love of God. For the Christian humanist there can be nothing of ethical value without reference to the transcendent.

## Aspects of a Secular Worldview

Secularism influences the way people think because of its key principles and beliefs. It is through looking at these that we can see the differences between a secular world view and that of another worldview such as Catholicism.

### The human person

In a secular worldview an individual is seen as having the behaviours and characteristics of the world in which they live. In this respect they are not free or autonomous but react according to their context and worldview. The individual is shaped by interactions with others but there are no norms by which this behaviour is regulated because there is no sense of or need for community. Each individual is a privatised being.

### Society and relationships

To the secularists, all human rights are based on the needs of the individual who is the locus of decision-making. No community is required for existence as long as everyone lets everyone else get on with their lives without interfering in any way. This precludes state involvement in any social action as the individual has all they need to maintain a happy and meaningful life.



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## A worldview

*A worldview is how a person or group sees and responds to the world about them. It comes from foundational beliefs that colour how they respond to life's ultimate questions.*

## Knowledge and truth

For a secularist the only reality is the material universe. All knowledge is obtained, at least initially, through experience by the senses. The only certain truths are those obtained through observation, measurement and experimentation. This is often described as the scientific method. According to this kind of thinking God and revelation are human constructs that are a product of a religious worldview. Any knowledge of the spiritual requires abstract rather than concrete reasoning from the material and is considered to be imaginary.

## Universal stories or narratives

The political upheavals of world wars and communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a disillusionment with the ideas of utopia and universal truths as presented by such human constructs as Christianity and communism. Arising from this was a secularist idea that there are no grand narratives of religious truth but that each person constructs their own truth, their own narrative that tells others what the world is to them.

## The place of authority

Because everything depends on the perspective of the individual or group no position is better than another, all values are equal and therefore there are no power relationships. Values and concepts such as good or evil are relative to the society in which they are held. No-one may impose their beliefs and ideals on others whether the other be an individual or a society. In a secular world there is no place for religion which is considered a mode of ideology and control.

## Conclusion

These are beliefs at the extreme end of secularism. In fact most people who hold a secular world view take bits and pieces from the general idea. Many secularists believe in the idea of the common good. However their reasoning may not be based on the idea of sharing God's gifts but on what the individual needs to live a good and healthy life.

The extent and significance of religion in modern society is a result of a complexity of influences including, pluralism (acceptance that there are a diversity of views and not just one worldview), individualism and technological advances which increase the amount of human control over life. These influences all contribute in some way to the secularisation of society whereby the role of religion in public life is diminished.



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## 1.3 Religious Responses to Existential Questions

Throughout history most people have believed in God or gods, and have practised some sort of religion. The modern age, which had its beginnings in the Enlightenment about three hundred years ago, is the first self-consciously secular age in the world's history. Currently, secularism to one degree or another predominantly affects 'western' societies. In most other societies religious belief in one form or another is a normal part of life.

Religions provide meaning for believers, but believers do not usually choose a religion and then hope to find meaning in it. People choose a religion because they think it tells the truth about life and the world and then, because it is true, a life which is in touch with that truth will usually be experienced as meaningful. They choose a religion that helps them to answer the existential questions of life.

Religious belief provides meaning for believers because it offers them a framework and a purpose much bigger than themselves and their own immediate situations. Their lives become able to touch God's life – either because they believe they are created by God or that they are part of the divinity itself, as in pantheistic religions. This gives believers a sense of wider purpose to their lives – a bigger pattern of which each person's life is a part. Even sufferings, failures and misfortunes can be integrated as meaningful parts of this bigger process. All major religions explore the big questions of life.

Amongst the world's oldest living revealed religions, for example is Zoroastrianism whose central teaching is that there is only one God called Ahura Mazda who is the invisible and intangible creator and ruler of the universe. There are two spirits emanating from Ahura Mazda; one is the Beneficent Spirit and the other is the Evil Spirit.

According to Zoroaster the forces of good are struggling with the forces of evil in the world and human beings freely choose to be part of one of the forces. He taught that human beings are born good and are genuinely free to choose to do good or evil deeds and thus are accountable for their choices. After death the soul of a wicked person will go to hell and the soul of a good person to paradise.

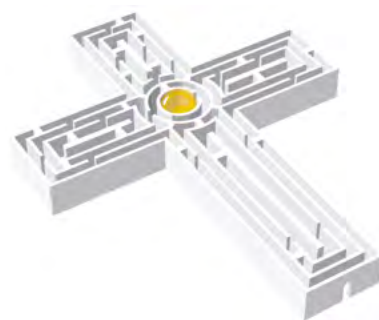
The writings of Zoroastrianism like the writings of other religions contain passages that reflect the human search for answers and stories that help people find meaning.

*This I ask thee, Lord, answer me truly:*

*Who set the earth below and the sky above so that it does not fall?*

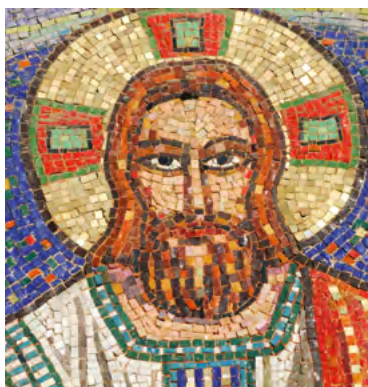
Yasna 44 (song 9), verse 3

All religions including universal religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity offer a view of life that helps people to look at and respond to the questions about the meaning of life as do traditional religious expression such as Māori Spirituality.



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## The Christian Response

Benedict XVI draws our attention to Jesus' teaching and to how a meaningful life involves the three way relationship between God, self and others.

*Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him or her love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much God loves me... Love of God and love of neighbour are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first (God is Love: Deus Caritas Est, 18).*

Christians believe that Jesus shows us the way to meaning and purpose. Jesus has made it possible for us to follow in his footsteps, to confront evil and suffering, to fill our lives with purpose and to search and find the answers to the existential questions individually and as a community, the Church.

Because this is God's work as well as our work, Christians are confident that the whole of each life is significant – that no effort or tear will be lost. This confidence helps us to deal with the tasks and trials of life with calmness and good humour, knowing that all is part of our journey with and, ultimately, to God. The lowliest everyday actions take on a profound significance – for they also go to make up a life which will be lived into eternity.

In the centuries from Biblical times to our own time, Christians have discovered the meaning of our world by returning constantly to the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. For centuries it has been the firm faith of the people of God that Jesus is our guide to genuine human living and our sure way to our ultimate destiny as people who are to inherit God's very own Kingdom.

Christians still believe that Jesus continues to be the focus and centre point for humanity.

*In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear... It is therefore through Christ, and in Christ, that light is thrown on the mystery of suffering and death which, apart from his Gospel, overwhelms us. Christ has risen again, destroying death by his death, and has given life abundantly to us so that, being sons in the Son, we may cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father!*

(Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*, 22)

One of the ways to see how a group or society looks to answer the existential questions is to examine their worldview, the values and principles that they hold dear and that influence their actions and way of thinking.

## The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church holds a particular world view. Although not every single person that calls themselves a Catholic thinks and acts the same way there are common elements. By being a member of the Catholic Church a person absorbs many of these without realising it.

To understand a groups worldview looking at how they consider certain aspects of life can be helpful.

### The human person

How a group considers the human person is very crucial to how they answer existential questions. For Catholics this is based on the reality that every



person is made *in the image and likeness of God* (Genesis 1:27) which gives us innate human dignity. This also makes the human being unique in the world for with our self-awareness and self-knowledge we are able to know God and freely return God's love. God created humans so that they could freely know and love God. Jesus showed us what it means to be fully human with free will and able to make decisions. The Catholic Church teaches that a unified self with full knowledge acts freely and should be entitled to do so.

### **Society and relationships**

Catholicism is community based because the Church believes that human beings have a communal dimension which is essential to their human nature. This challenges Catholics to be aware of the common good. This is not the same as claiming the greatest good for the greatest number of people, a viewpoint called utilitarianism, but a recognition that choices need to be made that assist people to reach their full human potential. This involves respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person, development of the spiritual and temporal goods of people and society, peace and security for all. For Catholics and other Christians love of neighbour is inseparable from love of God (Mark 12: 28–34).

This belief in the common good held by the Catholic Church has resulted in a strong commitment to social justice. The Church considers that we are all dependent beings. We need others around us and are therefore accountable for the things that we do or do not do that affect others. A key dogma of the Church is the belief in the Holy Trinity, the community of persons who live in perfect love. The call to Christians is for them to live their lives in ways that resemble this unity of three persons in one God. For Christians the love of God must translate into a love for all people which impels a commitment to social justice.

### **Knowledge and truth**

How a group considers knowledge and truth also influences their worldview and therefore the way they respond to the big questions regarding life. For Catholics there is recognition that language is imperfect and image bound (CCCC 5), and that the Word of God is inspired through the Holy Spirit and teaches religious truth (CCCC 18).

The Catholic Church teaches that by our reason, starting with the wonder of creation people can know God (CCCC 3). By our experience of life and the world about us we can glimpse the love of God and understand what is right or wrong. Through our ability to use reason to do good humans are able to participate in God's wisdom and goodness and make choices for the good of all people. This natural law is part of our very humanity, part of our human nature. It enables us to understand such objective truths as murder is wrong.

From the Catholic perspective there is no conflict between the truths of faith and the truths of science as ultimately all truth comes from God, the creator of the Universe. Science is incapable of exploring religious truth and is aware of the limitations of the scientific method.

### **Universal stories or narratives**

Every group tells stories as a way of articulating what is important to them and the influences on how they view the world. For the Catholic Church this meta-narrative or universal story in which all human experience is to be understood is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. It tells us that all people are so loved by God that God became



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a human to suffer and save us. The Christian story is more than a means of transmitting a belief that could be told in another way. It is an integral part of the reality and is important in itself.

### **The place of authority**

Where a group gets its authority from influences the way it looks at the world and helps members to answer the existential questions regarding the meaning of life. For the Catholic Church God is the ultimate source of authority, indirectly as the source of creation. Authority for Catholics passes from God directly through society rather than individuals. In the New Testament authority is linked to service, with the apostles holding particular authority as witnesses to the resurrection and the missionary founders of Christian communities. This is manifested in the Church today through the bishops together with the Pope as successors to the apostles constituting one apostolic college.



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## 1.4 Faith and Reason

After Jesus' death and resurrection his followers believed that he had risen. For them there was more than circumstantial evidence. They experienced the resurrection and based on this they rationally knew it to be true. Later followers know that the resurrection is true because they believe these first witnesses. Many of the stories and beliefs we have around significant people in world history such as Julius Caesar (100–40 BC) are based around similar original witnesses and trust that they had a rational experience which enabled them to pass the story on.

Over many thousands of years there has been debate about the relationship between faith and reason. Reason is the process of thinking carefully, consistently and logically about an issue. Christian faith is belief in the existence of God. Some people judge that reason cannot be applied to matters of belief about God.

At one end of the continuum rationalists consider that the only way to know the truth about something is through human reason and intellect. If there is no concrete evidence, then it is not true. Love doesn't exist. What people feel for each other is only a series of chemical reactions, hormones at work. However, there is no emotion or feeling associated with this natural and measurable process. For rationalists God cannot exist because there is no objective proof.

Fideism lies at the other end of the spectrum. Fideists believe that people find God through faith alone and consider that reason has no part to play. There is no need to prove that God exists because of faith. They also consider that reason can harm faith. Support for this stance comes from a conviction that all humans come to believe certain things through faith, not reason, for example, humans believe that the universe is a sensible place and have reached certain conclusions about it not because there is concrete proof but because of faith.

Most people fall between these two extreme ways of looking at existential questions including the Catholic Church.

### The Catholic Church

For Catholics there is a key relationship between faith and reason. Reason helps the Christian to understand and explain faith. Faith and reason are intertwined because Catholics see them as processes that are related to and reinforce each other. As John Paul II put it

*Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth: and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth.*

(Faith and Reason: *Fides et Ratio*)

John Paul's encyclical went on to affirm the notion that faith and reason are essential to each other. Without faith, reason he argues leads to a belief that there is no meaning to life (nihilism) while without reason, faith leads to superstition.

During Medieval times (13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries) the European Christian world was in closer contact with Eastern traditions than in previous centuries. Not only





did this see the rise in religious conflict but also the exchange of ideas. Contact with the East brought to Europe concepts and questions that had not been considered previously from a Christian perspective. With the development of universities and the spread of theological thought beyond the confines of monasteries and cathedrals one of the needs that became apparent was to demonstrate the inherent rationality of theology and belief in God.

## Arguments for the Existence of God

Philosophers have presented many types of arguments to prove that God exists. These include

Type of argument	Explanation
Ontological	Argues from the idea of God to the existence of God. For example, Anslem's insights.
Cosmological	Something needs to sustain the Universe. This something is God. For example, Aquinas' five arguments.
Religious experience	People's religious experiences confirm the existence of God. For example, the conversion of Saul.



St. Anselm



St. Thomas Aquinas

### Ontological argument

Anselm of Canterbury (c1033–1109) was a leading theologian of the Middle Ages and is well known in contemporary times for his two great statements; *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) and *credo ut intellegam* (I believe, in order that I might understand). The insight that Anselm presents is that faith despite coming before understanding, has rational content. He asserts the reasonableness of faith. From these kinds of discussion arose a rival of a discipline within the Church called 'apologetics'. The word comes from the Greek word for defence.

### Cosmological argument

Apologetics defends the rationality of the Christian faith and is exemplified by the work of Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) one of the greatest Christian thinkers and theologians. He formulated five ways in which humans can know that God exists. They present a certain perspective on God. Within his context Aquinas enabled people to grapple with ideas around the existence of God that at the time the Church found useful. They are part of Catholic tradition.

#### Aquinas' First Argument, Motion:

Objects are in motion. If something is in motion, then the cause of its being in motion is something outside of itself. There cannot be an infinite chain of movers/movees; so there is a first, unmoved mover. Therefore, God exists. In contemporary times the term motion in this particular sense, could reasonably be named change. By the nature of reality things are constantly changing. The first changer is God.

#### Aquinas' Second Argument, Causality:

Some events cause other events. If an event happens, then it must be caused by something outside of itself. There cannot be infinite chains of cause/effect. So, there is a first, uncaused cause. Therefore God exists.



**Aquinas' Third Argument, Contingency:**

A contingent thing is something that cannot exist without a necessary thing which causes it to exist. Contingent things exist and are caused. Not everything can be contingent. There must exist a thing which is necessary to cause contingent things. This necessary thing is God. This enhancement of being can only come from the outside of the individual, namely God.

**Aquinas' Fourth Argument, Properties That Come in Degrees:**

Things have properties or qualities to greater or lesser extents. If something has a property to a lesser extent, then there exists some other thing that has the property to the maximum possible degree. So there is an entity that has all properties to the maximum possible degree. Hence God exists.

**Aquinas' Fifth Argument, From Design:**

Common sense tells us that the observable universe and nature work in such a way that we can conclude that they work according to design and order. So there is something which designed and ordered the way the universe and nature work. Hence, God exists.

A simplified version of these arguments would be:

1. Every being (that exists or ever did exist) is either a dependent being or a self-existent being.
2. Not every being can be a dependent being.
3. So there exists a self-existent being, that is God.

**Religious Experience argument**

Many people have experiences that lead them to a sense of the transcendent. These are sacramental moments such as the awe of seeing a new born child or appreciating the glory of a sunset. They offer a profound argument for the existence of God even though there is no objective evidence. For some people these are life changing experiences. One example is the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 3–8; 22:6–11; 26:13–19).

**Pascal's Wager: An insurance policy**

Blaise Pascal (1623–62), a French mathematician and philosopher came up with a novel reasoned argument about the value of believing in God rather than not believing. He reasoned that people should choose to believe in God even though they cannot prove that God exists because this is the best bet (or wager) in terms of life after death. If people believe God exists but, when they die, find that there is no God, they have lost nothing and have gained everything. However, if they believe that God does not exist, and when they die find that there is a God, then they will have lost everything. Therefore it is better to believe in God's existence than not.

Pascal saw reason providing an impetus to seek faith. His wager was not just about proving that God existed but challenging the view that only reason and philosophy can decide what is true.

**Science and Faith**

Advances in science over the last five hundred years have brought new issues around the relationship between faith and reason. The story of The Great Flood (Genesis 6–9) and how people view it can help us see how faith and reason can relate in different ways to each other. The story tells that the earth was covered by water for forty days and nights. Rationally plants would not survive this and to fit all the animals that went into it, the Ark would have to be a massive structure which could not float. There are many ways to approach



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## The Church and Intelligent Design Theory

*The Church does not consider the Bible a more reliable source of scientific information concerning the origins of life than modern science. Science has its own legitimate authority. Intelligent design theory trivialises biblical teachings by suggesting they are in the same style and purpose as scientific discourse whereas Scripture has a different role and a higher moral authority.*

these apparent discrepancies. One rational way is to say that it just cannot have happened and it's all a fairy tale. If the story is accepted on faith alone reason is rejected and complex justifications are made to account for the differences.

For Catholics both these approaches miss the point of the story and the place of faith and reason. Catholics do not believe the details about how long the flood lasted or the size of the Ark are important in themselves but believe in the religious truth of the story. Despite humanity's failure to respond to God's call and the resulting wickedness and lawlessness of society God doesn't give up. Noah and his family survive the flood and new life comes from them. This meaning does not require a literal interpretation of the Scriptures but is reasoned. God created and loves humanity and therefore would not want it to perish whatever people did. Faith accepts that reason has limits; there are things that go beyond reason including the immensity of God's love.



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## The Church and Creationism

*The Church does not support a literalist reading of Scripture and teaches that the truth contained in the Bible is religious in nature. Scripture tells of God's love for humankind and does not try to present a scientific reasoning for creation. The Church does not therefore teach creationism.*

*Creationism is the belief that the world was created according to a literal translation of the biblical accounts. For example the world was created in seven days and seven nights.*



## 1.5 Views about God

The great religious systems help human beings to make sense of their lives. Some of the key existential questions concern God. Who is God? How do we know God exists? What happens when we die? Since gods are usually invisible spirit beings inaccessible to our normal methods of establishing the existence of persons and things, it is not possible either to prove or to disprove the existence of God in a physical sense. Ultimately followers of a religion believe in the existence of their God or gods as a matter of faith.

### People Respond to God's Call

To believe in a Supreme Being is to believe that life has an original purpose which calls the believer to an obedient response. For example, in the Book of Genesis Abram and Sarai experience a call to leave their homeland and to set out on a journey under God's direction. They believed that they were not only being obedient to God's call but also that their response would lead to their own fulfilment (Genesis 12:1–9).

God calls everybody and throughout the ages particular people have responded in significant ways that inspire and encourage others to do likewise. Some of these people are Saints of the Canon; others are members of our families or communities. An example from the twentieth century is Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997) who became famous for her work among the poor and dying. When asked what drew her from the comfort and safety of the convent and school where she lived and worked, her reply was simple, 'I heard the call to give up all and follow Christ into the slums to serve Him among the poorest of the poor. It was an order. I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them.' And that is exactly what she did.

Again and again – in past, present or future – many people realise in one way or another that, like it or not, the deepest inner meaning of their lives is bound up in responding to God's call and going where and to whom it takes them.

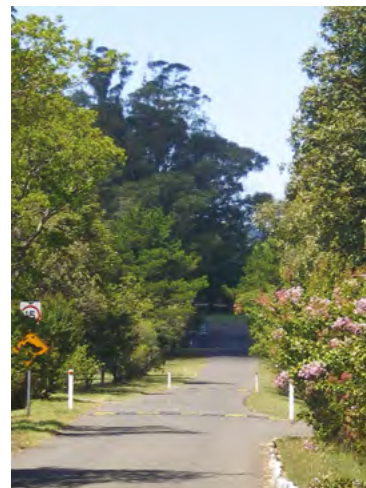
### How People Image God

Religious belief is bounded by two extremes. On the one hand is belief that all aspects of the material world are part of God as in pantheism, or on the other hand a belief that God created everything but has no further involvement in earthly things and so God is aloof and forbidding.

Christians believe that God is more than both those extremes. God is not just the impersonal life-force which underlies everything, including the entire human story but, rather, God is active in, through and with humanity and history, passionate about it, intervening in it, saving it. God is a personal being and enters into dialogue with human beings and their activities. God is not remote and uninvolved. God actively seeks us out. As the writer of Psalm 139 says,

*You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

The central doctrine of the Catholic faith is that there is one God who is a Trinity of three divine, co-equal, co-eternal Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The second Person became a human being, Jesus of Nazareth.



S. OWEN



This God who is love is inviting all creation and especially human beings into a community of love.

When people say they believe in God, each person will be visualising God in an individual way. Their images of God are formed as a result of their experiences of life and the instruction and examples they have received. People tend to identify God with the people who have been significant to them in their early years, their caregiver in particular. Thus if they grow up in an environment where someone is very strict and demanding they may image God in the same way and thus forever try to placate 'God' whom they imagine is alert to correct or punish their every move.



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The images or ideas people have of God are significant. It can be helpful to examine the origins of people's images and ideas. It is important to realise that a person's images can and should change. The adult who 'sees' God as a white-bearded, white-robed old man sitting on a cloud has a particular image of God. This is not the only image contained in Scripture and may need to be evolved if it gets in the way of the holder acting out of that image in unhealthy ways. Someone's ideas and images can either help or hinder our understanding and knowledge about God and, following on from that, the ways in which we relate to ourselves, to others and to our world. Whatever the image of God somebody holds it is sacred to them and must be respected. However, they may need to be challenged if they are unhelpful in building a relationship with God. It is important, to be aware that God is always more than any of our human images, and so be open to changing and growing in our appreciation of who God is.

Language cannot adequately describe God. This is why humans use metaphor. Part of the journey to adult faith is the learning how loving God is and letting go of the false images of God that are carried so that we can discard any old negative images of God and accept God's love and live out of that knowledge.



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## Images from Scripture

The books of the Old and New Testaments reveal God to us. The challenge facing the authors was how to portray God – a Being completely and utterly different from us. So the Biblical writers used a great variety of images of God. It is important to remember that they are using metaphorical language. The image is not God, nor is it a complete description of God. The image captures some aspects of God, For example when the psalmist exclaims,

*The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock...* (Psalm 18),

this is praising God's strength, reliability, dependability, the quality of being 'always there'. The author is not implying that God is hard, unyielding, stony, inert or insensitive.

## Other Views

When Christianity first began, people experienced the new relationship with God that Jesus brought as a liberation. This liberation established the true worth of human beings and allowed people to grow in dignity and self-esteem. However, by the 19th century, what was originally experienced as liberation and an ennoblement was seen by some people as a burden and a yoke keeping believers in a state of childhood. Some felt that, if they were to develop any maturity or self-esteem and gain their freedom, people had to break away from Christianity and its images of God.



During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries various philosophers and academics have developed theories which they consider show that religion is a human construction and that God doesn't exist. Their thoughts have profoundly influenced such movements as humanism and many of their ideas underline secularism.

**Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872): People make the god they need.**

Feuerbach developed a theory which presented religion as a gigantic projection of frustrated human feelings. Because the human spirit was unable to face up to its own greatness, it projected all its best qualities on to a mythical figure or figures in the beyond. People created 'gods' who embodied the highest aspirations of human consciousness. In a sense god is created in the image of humans.

According to Feuerbach the human image of God was one of total perfection and power. When people compared themselves with this image of perfection they saw themselves as poor, weak and sinful. As a result people ended up begging for grace and mercy from a figure they themselves had created, not realising that this God's infinite power had actually been given to God by themselves. To use an image from Pascal: human beings are like children who paint a mask and are then terrified by it.



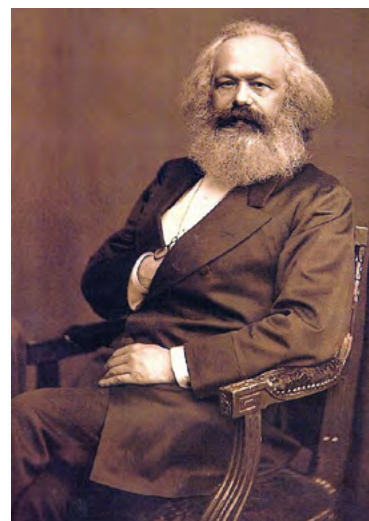
**Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895): Humans invent religion.**

Marx and his student Engels believed that matter formed itself and bears within itself the principle of its own evolution. The world, nature and human beings do not owe their existence to any being or force outside of themselves. Marx and Engels argued that religion is simply a product of human thought. They believed that religion is a human construction.

As they said,

*Man makes religion, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again... Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness.*

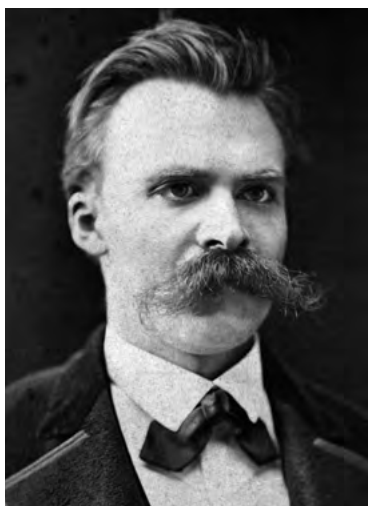
*(On Religion)*



Karl Marx's influence is not strong in today's world. Despite his concern for the poor it was a very benevolent expression that saw those giving to others out of a sense of duty rather than because they had a right to the necessities of life. He offered no response to the human need for salvation, there is no concept of forgiveness or something after death.

In many ways Marx's social commentary was a challenge to institutional religion to remember that their core concern was to bring about the Reign of God where concern for the poor is key. His ideas on the ideal community where goods were shared and all were cared for reflect the ideals of the first Christian community (Acts 3: 44–35) and great religious orders such as the Benedictines. This radical sharing of community can also be seen in the basic ecclesial communities established in Latin America during the nineteen eighties. Marx was however an atheist who attacked institutional religion.



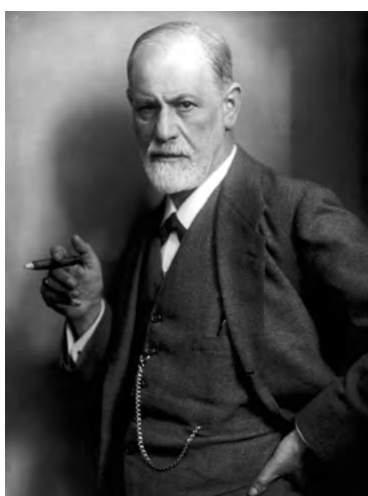


### **Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900): Humans do not need God.**

Nietzsche looked forward to a new kind of human being. These people would be whole and integrated. They would not need to look up to a perfect, all-powerful Creator beside whom the people appear poor and sinful. He put it like this,

*God is dead! You higher men, this God was your greatest danger. Only since he lay in the grave have you risen again. Only now does the great noontide come, now does the higher man become master... Take heart, you higher men. Only now is the mountain of the human future in travail. God is dead: now we desire superman to live.*  
(Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part IV)

Nietzsche's great and romantic vision of how the world might be borrowed heavily from Christianity but did not take into account human nature – the human he envisioned was perfect and would not do anything to hurt another. Thus there was no need for forgiveness and no sense of the need of salvation.



### **Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): God is an unhelpful distraction.**

Freud looked to the coming 'secular' age when people could concentrate at long last on solving human problems without losing energy and wasting time trying to please a non-existent God in the vague beyond.

*By withdrawing their expectations from the other world and concentrating all their liberated energies into their life on earth men will probably succeed in achieving a state of things in which life will be tolerable for everyone and civilisation no longer oppressive to anyone.*  
(The Future of an Illusion)

Freud considered that religion was a form of wish fulfilment a comforting system when things in life were difficult. These ideas had a big impact on religion. Agnostics who consider religion to be 'all in the mind' or only for needy people are working from a Freudian premise that there is no God.



### **Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980): Humans are free to choose their own destinies.**

Sartre denied the existence of God. For Sartre, there is no 'script' written before we begin. Humans make meaning – they in no way discover it. Humans decide the story of their lives and there is no other story. God is a construction of the self-conscience. For Sartre's humans have no moral guidelines. People live their lives without being sure what they are supposed to do. There is no external direction or impulse to do or be anything.

*Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is.*  
(Existentialism and Humanism)

Sartre tries to present human existence without any vestige of faith, hope or love. He wanted to be radically atheistic. Although he writes about moral obligation, this is an obligation of being human rather than religious.



### Richard Dawkins (1941–): God does not exist.

Dawkins contends that a supernatural creator that is God, does not exist and that faith is a delusion. He considers that there should be a strong education in non-religion and a deliberate public consciousness-raising about the evils of religion whose dogmas cause people to act destructively in the name of God. Dawkins considers that atheists have a healthy well-balanced mind while religious believers have been unhealthily indoctrinated. For Dawkins, life has no meaning or purpose beyond natural selection.

*My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a 'they' as opposed to a 'we' can be identified at all.*  
(The Devil's Chaplain)



### Christian Responses

All those who challenge the idea of God draw on lived experience and have some positive critique not of God but on the way God has been imaged, presented and abused by people. Feuerbach was correct in saying that people think of God in human terms and project on to God human qualities and desires. Every day humans project their own fears and attitudes onto others so that they see them more or less in the images which they have constructed of them. As a result they place their own limits on them. However, people are much more than ideas about them.

Marx, Engels and Freud all assume that God does not exist and do not provide arguments for the non-existence of God. The starting point of their assumptions about God is that God does not exist. Each of these commentators fails to accept that human beings depend on God and by the very fact of their existence relate to God. This gives humans personal identity as loved and loving beings. It is against this background that one can see more clearly how God's love reaches to each one in the whole of their lives. Everyone at certain stages of their lives has some kind of cross present. It is by dealing with these challenges to our existence that the Christian reaches salvation. Christianity doesn't need a fantasy world for salvation comes to us in this world.

Those commentators such as Dawkins, who assume that there is no God, fail to address the fundamental question 'Where does the universe come from?' For the Christian the answer is that the universe was created by God.

God is much more than our images or ideas. Images of God are the limitations humans place on God. This does not imply that God does not exist or that God is simply the product of human imagination. It is impossible for anyone to claim that they know God fully. If someone claims to understand God perfectly, then they have reduced God to their own finite, limited perspectives. God is then no longer the personal God, the One who is mystery but merely a false god created by humans. For the Christian the fundamental metaphor for God is love.



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## 1.6 Evil and Suffering

Some of the key existential questions that humans ask are around the sense of injustice in the world. This might include questioning why things happen to certain people for example, 'Why do bad things happen to good people? They don't deserve it.' The world is full of suffering brought upon innocent people by the deeds of others, by accidents of nature or from no obvious cause.

No one can live successfully for self alone; all that we are, we are together with others. Each person inherits the history of their family, of their worldview, even of the whole of humanity. Humans are born into a world in which things like dishonesty, prejudice and injustice are present. These are not just external factors; they are part of the process that moulds the reality of human lives and even of the way people think and act.

Furthermore, human beings continue to sin against God, against one another and against the environment. Sin is unavoidably present in the lives of individuals, in communities and in the structures of society. As humans participate in society and contribute to the way it operates, all share in the responsibility for good as well evil. The root of all evil is sin and sin is never willed by God. By permitting human beings the ability to make choices and to direct their own wills towards better or worse, God bestowed on humanity freedom and dignity so that we are truly made in God's image and likeness. Suffering is not limited only to the spectacular. Many people suffer daily from things such as the dreariness of illness or disability, genetic disorders, redundancy, the breakup of significant relationships, financial hardship, and rejection.



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### The Place of God

Although the pain and darkness may be extreme, God does not abandon the sufferer. God is present with them in their sufferings, loving them with the greatest compassion. In spite of evil and despite the apparent meaninglessness of suffering and death, Christians believe in God who loves all of creation and who desires fullness of life for all. The prophet Hosea shows God's concern for people in these words,

*How can I give you up, ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender... For I am God, and no mortal...*

(Hosea 11:8-9).

Suffering continues to be a mystery but there is the consolation of knowing that Jesus shared our human experience of suffering and death. He did not seek the suffering of his passion – his arrest, trial and crucifixion – he even pleaded with the Father to take it away if that was possible (Mark 14:36). He bravely faced the harsh consequences of having annoyed the authorities with his teaching, and he stayed true to himself and to the Father who was with him in the midst of his suffering and death. Jesus defeated the power of sin through his life, death and resurrection.

On the cross God co-suffered with Christ as Trinity, in solidarity with all that is ugly or shameful. God stands alongside humanity in the terrible realities of the world in the face of which God seems powerless. This brings Christians to the mystery of Jesus' passion and death and their sharing in it.



God is opposed to all evil because it destroys creation. God is in solidarity with all who suffer and all who struggle against evil and injustice. Evil can never be justified and we have every right to rebel and fight against it. Just as Jesus relieved the suffering of many people so, too, must the disciples of Jesus practise the same solidarity with persons in pain and suffering. In spite of often feeling powerless, Christians, and all people of good will, must do everything possible to change the situations and the conditions which lead to evil and suffering or which allow it to continue. God's suffering with and for humanity on the cross obliges Christians to help bear the burden of others. Christians are called to face the reality that many people in the world are suffering and that they must become involved in changing the situation. Through involvement people find and meet the God of compassion.

### Suffering challenges us not to understanding but to faith

Sometimes we have more difficulty understanding the meaning of another person's life than that person does. Many people have lived full lives even with the most dreadful handicaps. Others looking on, ask pitying questions about what meaning they could find in their lives. Such questions need challenging in contemporary society where there is discussion about who should control the lives of the handicapped, the terminally ill and other fragile people. Suffering is a mystery, we are unable to understand it; but faith in God enables us to overcome it.

For many people the Christian way takes a surprising turn in dealing with the problem of suffering. Christians believe that Jesus became human and shared the human condition of sin, even though he did not give in to temptation. Nor did he turn away from sinfulness or try to ignore it. He confronted sin and evil. In a world where people are concerned with protecting themselves and justifying their arrangements to do so, this is threatening behaviour.

It is natural for people to be tempted to want God to hurl pain back to those who inflicted it, with a bit extra added to deter them from acting that way again in the future, but the God whom Jesus revealed offers love and mercy, forgiveness and compassion for all. Furthermore, God has promised the kingdom to those who remain steadfast and faithful even in the midst of evil and suffering, a kingdom where,

*God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away*  
(Revelation 21:4).

Jesus suffered the inevitable penalty of speaking the truth and was crucified. The Christian story however, affirms that this was not the end. The very obedience and openness which resulted in Jesus being crucified meant that he was open to God's love and power. God was with him through his entire lonely journey. Finally, Jesus' Resurrection shows that discipleship is the way to the one real source of life and power, to God who is Life itself.

Through the grace of God, and especially through the sacraments, people can be 'reborn' into Christ's life of obedience and openness to God, and we can make the same journey. Human lives can have the same meaning as Jesus' had. Humans too can stand up for what is right and just, relying on God for defence and salvation.



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### What is the saving meaning of the Resurrection?

The Resurrection is the climax of the Incarnation. It confirms the divinity of Christ and all the things which he did and taught. It fulfills all the divine promises made for us. Furthermore the risen Christ, the conqueror of sin and death, is the principle of our justification and our Resurrection. It procures for us now the grace of filial adoption which is a real share in the life of the only begotten Son. At the end of time he will raise up our bodies.

(CCCC 131)



*Resurrection of Christ (tapestry), workshop of Pieter van Aelst (1524–31).Vatican museum*

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## Part 2

# Sects and Cults







## 2.1 What is Religion?

### What Defines Religion?

Definitions can be a helpful way to start answering the question: what is religion? Note the similarities and differences in the following definitions.

#### **Religion n.**

- The belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship.
- The expression of this in worship.

(Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1995)

**Religion is** the whole complex of attitudes, convictions, emotions, gestures, rituals, beliefs and institutions by which we come to terms with, and express, our most fundamental relationship with Reality (God and the created order, perceived as coming forth from God's creative hand) (*Catholicism*, R.P. McBrien).

Other people have included some of the following ideas in their definitions:

#### **Religion is**

- a belief system that is practised through faith, obedience, prayer, and worship.
- belief in a supernatural power that controls human destiny; an organized system or institution to express belief in a divine power; an approach to human spirituality involving a set of narratives, symbols, beliefs and practices.
- belief in, reverence for, worship of a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine, creator and governor of the universe, in control of human destiny and all other things.
- a personal or institutional system based on such belief and worship.
- a set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader.
- the formal expression of such beliefs.

A definition alone cannot describe or explain fully the religious experience because of the width and depth of meaning in the word 'religion'. Furthermore, the word may not mean exactly the same thing to members of a mainline Church, or to Muslims, to people who belong to a sect or cult, or to agnostics and atheists. Religion is an abstract concept, it cannot be seen or touched. It can be studied only as it occurs in specific and particular forms of belief and practice. Such a study must consider more than one religion to get a balanced view of what religion is.

Religion is a complex experience made up of many elements. To concentrate on one religious activity, such as worship, is to ignore the fact that religious people view the whole of life from a religious perspective. The rites and customs they observe, the festivals they celebrate, the code of ethics they follow, the ways they relate to other people, their attitudes to all aspects of life from prayers before meals to work habits and manners, all are aspects of their religion and its practice.





There are also various reasons for learning about religion. Some obvious reasons are the desire to know something about the beliefs of a country or people; studies that are part of an academic course; interest in the members of religions different from our own; interest in the nature of religion and its various forms and beliefs.

### **What distinguishes one religion from another?**

There are a great many religions throughout the world, each with its own distinctive structure, literature, beliefs, worship and customs. The variety of religions arises from the fact that religion affects people's sense of identity and their way of relating to the world and people around them. The beliefs and practices of each particular religion help its members to answer and to deal with the ultimate questions of human existence. Religions also provide a structure of practice and ritual in which the individual person can find security and support in life experiences.

### **Religion developed**

From the very earliest times human beings have believed that there are forces more powerful than ourselves. When prehistoric men and women looked around them and saw the diversity and complexity of living creatures and natural features, they were sure that everything must have a spirit of its own. They sought to live in harmony with the spirits of the mountains, waterways, plants and animals so that they could survive and prosper. Many thousands of people continue to understand the world around them in this way.

As human beings developed, they began to worship supernatural beings believed to control some part of the world or some aspect of life or who were the personification of a force of nature. The ancient Greeks worshipped Apollo the sun god, and Poseidon the sea god; time and death belong to the Hindu goddess Kali; in traditional Māori belief Papatūānuku, Earth Mother, is sacred.

About two thousand years before Jesus the beginnings of monotheism were evident in the Middle East; monotheism is established now in religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The millions of people who worship one Supreme Uncreated Being (God) believe that God revealed religion and religious truths to human beings.



## Complexities

The story of the development of religion among human beings is a complex and interesting one. Some idea of its complexity is given when we identify some of the more significant variations in different religions as indicated below:

Feature	Religion
An historical founder	Christianity, Islam, Buddhism
No known founder	Hinduism, Shinto
The existence of authoritative, sacred writings	Bible, Qur'an
The formation of oral traditions	Māori Spirituality
Existence of an authoritative teaching tradition	Catholicism
The development of Church	Christianity
Belief in one God	Judaism, Christianity, Islam
Belief in God manifested in human life	Christianity, Hinduism
Belief in God shown in aspects of nature	Indigenous religions
A non-theistic belief	Buddhism
Belief that one must be born into a religion to be a member	Judaism
Belief that only this religion leads to salvation	Judaism, Christianity, Islam
Belief that all religions lead to the truth	Hinduism
Belief that God desires all people to be saved	Christianity

## How do People Know about God?

Human history shows that people of all cultures have speculated as to the existence of some Higher Power which is responsible for creation and human life. Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe in one God, who is deeply involved with humanity. Christians, in particular, believe that this one God is so involved in creation and human life that God became one of us in the person of Jesus. Jesus is the visible revelation of God (John 12:45; 14:7-11). Because of his resurrection, we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, Saviour, Messiah (Matthew 16:16); the chosen one of God (John 1:34). In his letter to the Colossians (2:9-10) Paul asserts that in Jesus,

*the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.*

Any consideration of questions about God's nature, or even God's existence, raises the question of how human beings can find out anything about God. This question is not made any easier when theologians (and logic) tell us that God is ultimately unknowable by human beings without the aid of God.

All this is very confusing. We seem to be stuck before we can even make a start on knowing God. This is one reason why faith plays such a big part in religion;

### Words for God

*When Christians talk about the loving transcendent creator they usually use the word God.*

*Other religions use various terms to refer to the same reality.*

- Higher Power
- Supreme Being
- The Other
- Transcendent One
- The Holy One

*Christians also use images for God a few include:*

- Rock (2 Samuel 22:3)
- Saviour (2 Peter 3:18)
- Father (Matthew 6:9)
- Mother (Isaiah 49:15)



it opens a reliable path to the truth. But where does this faith come from? In his letter to the Romans, St Paul explains that faith develops from hearing or preaching,

*So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.*

(Romans 10:17)



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## Religious Faith

The existential questions addressed by religious faith go to the heart of our human experience:

- 'Why am I here?'
- 'Is there anything greater than human beings?'
- 'What will happen to me when I die?'

In all religions, faith is an essential element. Every religion has a system of beliefs which provides the framework for faith. What members of a religion believe provides guidelines for their attitudes and conduct. Some religions, for example, Catholicism, use creeds and catechisms as official statements and summaries of faith; sacred writings such as the Bible or writings of saints develop the spiritual dimensions of belief; papal and council decrees, constitutions and papal encyclicals further define what Catholics believe.

Islam is another prominent religion in which members' hope of salvation depends on belief. A Muslim is expected to express belief in the unity of God, the Book of God or Qur'an, the certainty of judgment and life after death, and the essential importance of Muhammad and the prophets who have been sent by God. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the actual, literal words of God.

## Faith and Revelation

In the context of religion revelation means the ways in which God makes known to us his own nature and his purpose for human beings. Revelation is necessary because our reason tells us that a Supreme Being must be one, uncreated, unchanging, infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-creating. Consequently this Supreme Being must be absolutely and utterly different from us and any created thing. Reason also tells us that if such a Being (whom we call God) exists, because it must be so totally Other, our only hope of encountering it is if that Being reveals itself to us. This is where religion starts – from an awareness of God's self-revelation.

### General revelation

Christian thinking recognises that by using our natural reason we can know God with certainty from the world around us. God is revealed in many aspects of creation, human life and thought. Paul reminds us that

*what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made.*

(Romans 1:19–20)

We might call this the 'general' revelation of God. The wonderful world humanity lives in points to the reality of God. This does not mean that all people will believe in God, but their lack of belief doesn't negate the existence



of God. God does not require people to believe in God to exist, but does exist and always has existed.

### Special revelation

In particular, Christianity asserts that there is also a 'special' revelation of God. The story of this revelation is contained in the Bible, especially in the account of God's relationship with the people of Israel beginning with the call of Abram and Sara, and ending with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (the Paschal Mystery) which brings salvation to the entire creation and all people. Through this revelation God's very self is finally made known to us through Jesus, with him and in him. Jesus makes known to us God's plan which is to enable all people to be united with God and to share in God's divine nature.

### Salvation

In the beginning God saw that everything that had been created was good. Our first parents chose to ignore God's will and to do what suited them. In this way they shattered the intimate relationship between themselves and God which they had been invited to enjoy eternally. However, in spite of their sin, God promised them and all humanity salvation by repeatedly offering the sacred covenant.

The covenant affirmed through the Old Testament, comes to its completion in the new covenant which Jesus, the human incarnation of God, establishes at the Last Supper and seals with his blood on the cross. Through Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection we receive salvation: forgiveness of our sins, destruction of the power of sin and death over us, and the guarantee of eternal life with God. As St Paul puts it,

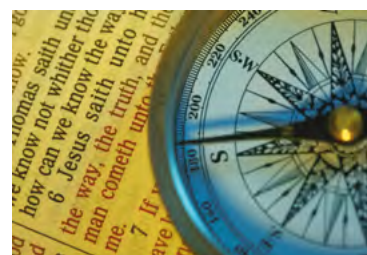
*... God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Jesus Christ. For by the grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*

(Ephesians 2:4–8)

The Catholic Church, basing its belief on the teaching of Jesus and the tradition handed on from the apostles, is the sign of God's salvation in the world. We find, in other words, the fullness of God's revelation within the Church, the baptised People of God, centred on Jesus the Founder and Head.

Salvation is, of course, the free gift of God offered to every human being. Catholic teaching does not hold that there is a privileged group of people who alone are predestined to enter into eternal life. It is certain that God loves all people and this guarantees that no one is excluded from eternal life. Believers of other faiths, other religions, are also within God's merciful love, grace and care and God alone can see into our hearts to know whether we truly love him and our neighbour.

However, faith is of vital importance and believers must continue to work towards the fullness of salvation which will be accomplished in the future (see Philippians 2:12–18).



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## The Word 'Church'

*The word church is used in many different ways and so readers need to take notice of its context.*

*Church – those that gather to worship, the liturgical assembly.*

*Church – the local community, such as a parish or diocese.*

*Church – the universal community of believers:*

- *The People of God,*
- *The Body of Christ,*
- *The Temple of the Spirit.*

*Church – the building, the place where people gather to worship God.*

## What is a Church?

A dictionary definition tells us that church is

*"The Christian community collectively; or a particular organised Christian society, separated from others by differences in doctrine, worship or organisation, or confined to limits territorial or historical."*

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary,

The word comes to us via old English and German from the Greek word *kuriakon (doma)* meaning "the Lord's (house)".

The origins of the word remind us that the Christian Church in its first and earliest forms was essentially a community of people who gathered to commemorate and worship Jesus the Risen Lord and to carry on his work of spreading the Good News of salvation.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) refers to the Church as the whole people of God gathered together by Christ (Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*, 3). Later in the same document the Council adds to this that,

*the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (paragraph 45).*

According to our definition a church is an organisation which holds and teaches the doctrines of Christianity. However, a number of groups who include 'church' in their titles, for example the Church of Scientology, neither hold nor teach Christian doctrine and may display the characteristics of a cult.



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## Characteristics of the Church

There are a number of key characteristics of the Church:

1. *Koinonia* a welcoming community.
2. *Kerygma* a community where the Word of God is central.
  - *Didache* – the preaching of and about the Word of God.
3. *Leitourgia* a worshipping community.
  - *Eucharist* – the source and summit of the community.
4. *Diakonia* a community of welfare that looks after its members and others.
5. *Marturia* a community that witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

These characteristics of the Church are expressed in the four Marks of the Church (CCC 811-812) which are the way that the Nicene Creed describes what is essential about the Church and its mission. The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

### One (CCC 866)

Every Christian believes that all people are children of God, saved by Jesus and made blessed by the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is the very foundation of the Church and unites the Church.





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The Catholic Church has a special sign of unity in the Pope who has a special role in leadership. However within this unity there is great diversity as different people with different cultural experiences and different gifts and roles, conditions and ways of life influence how the Catholic faith is practiced. This does not take away from the fundamental unity of the Church.

### **Holy (CCC 867)**

To be holy is to be united with God. With Christ at the head the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit strives to become holy, spiritually perfect and free from sin.

The Catholic Church recognises that people are not perfect and people make up the Church so presents the community with role models of holiness, ordinary lives lived in extraordinary ways, the Saints especially Mary the Mother of God.

### **Catholic (CCC 868)**

The meaning of the word 'catholic' is universal. The Catholic Church is catholic because the Church is founded on God's revelation in Jesus faithfully passed on through the apostolic line and contains everything human beings need for salvation.

The universal nature of the Church is also seen because the Church accepts the mission of Jesus to the whole human race. No matter what race, nationality or age all people are welcome and add to the rich diversity of people of God.

### **Apostolic (CCC 869)**

To act as the apostles did is the meaning of the term apostolic. That is to go out to the world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people. This mark also recognizes the teaching authority passed on from Bishop to Bishop from the time of the apostles which has handed on the Tradition of the Church from the time of Christ.



## 2.2 The Modern World

A number of features of the modern world have influenced people's response to religion.



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### Accelerating Pace of Change

A characteristic of recent times is the greatly accelerated rate of change in society. The amount of available information is increasing astronomically. Libraries struggle to keep up with the numbers of books written on every conceivable subject. Databases of all sorts make information available at the press of a computer key. The internet features prominently in the lives of increasing numbers of people throughout the world.

Scientific research results in almost daily breakthroughs. There are more scientists alive today than have lived in all previous centuries. Advances in technology are revolutionising more and more aspects of daily life.

Power shifts among political and economic institutions influence changes in the cultural identity of nations and peoples. Long-established patterns of behaviour and responses to situations are being adapted or sometimes lost. Change of this sort causes individuals and groups of people to feel that their place in the world is becoming uncertain.

One of the features of materialist consumer society is planned and unplanned obsolescence. For example, adults alive today have seen the demolition of buildings constructed in their own lifetimes. Modern developed society is sometimes described as a 'throw away' or 'disposable' society; when things become old or unfashionable or in need of repair they are simply thrown away because it is too much trouble or too expensive to fix them. This experience of impermanence has an effect on people's attitudes, their view of the world and of relationships.

In 1965 Alvin Toffler (1928- ) the writer and futurist coined the phrase 'future shock' to describe the shattering stress and disorientation that is induced in individuals who have to cope with too much change in too short a time. Many people feel as though they are no longer in touch with themselves, with other people, or with their society or the environment.

### Changes in family structures

Compared to the stability of families in the mid twentieth century, in many ways, family links in contemporary Western society have become weakened or destroyed under various stresses. Statistics about things like divorces, abortions, housing shortages and so on indicate the incidence and variety of factors that affect families negatively. There is an increasing awareness of the incidence of dysfunctional families in society and the effects of such families on their members.

The causes of family dysfunction include things like the stresses arising from unemployment, temporary or part-time work, shift work ; the absence of parents from the home; alcoholism or drug dependency; physical or psychological abuse of adults or children; inadequate food or shelter; continuing poor health, frequent changes of dwelling. These are the sorts of things which have serious effects on people's physical, psychological and



emotional health. Fortunately many families are stable and supportive despite these negative influences.

In earlier times the extended family and in more recent times the nuclear family were seen as the norm for family life and child-rearing. This view has changed considerably. Single parent homes, reconstituted families, same-sex civil unions and surrogacy are increasingly regarded as normal. However, it is also true that these developments have contributed to the inadequate care and support of both children and older people. The impact also of some practices in new fertility technology leads to some people experiencing uncertainty about their origins, identity and relationships.

Against this background people, especially younger people, who are subject to feelings of isolation and alienation, are vulnerable to approaches from members of religious movements and cults. Many cults appeal to the human need to be loved with strong efforts to make new recruits feel accepted and needed. They begin to find meaning and direction for their lives.

### A questioning of authority

In many Western countries the 1960s saw a marked change in attitude to the authority of Church and State. In the United States of America a significant turning point was the Vietnam War (1959-1975) during which thousands of mainly young people rejected the authority of government to conscript them to fight a war which many people considered unjust and immoral. France in 1968 experienced the largest general strike ever in the developed world and a widespread student revolution. Violent anti-establishment organisations of young people grew up, for example, The Red Army in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy. In Africa European colonies were gaining their independence as anti-colonialist and anti-apartheid movements challenged the authority of foreigners and minorities to dictate people's lives. The "hippie" or "flower power" generation demanded the freedom to run their own lives and demanded that people should 'make love, not war'.

After the Second World War there was also a valuable critique of the blind following of authority. It was noticed that the people who ran Auschwitz and other concentration camps were very obedient and even used their need to follow authority figures as an excuse for their behavior.

These and many other factors contributed to promote radical changes in people's attitudes to authority, especially the traditional authority of institutions like the Church, the State and the family. Laws, rules and traditional conventions imposed by institutions of Church and state were increasingly rejected or questioned. Many people set out to find or choose values and meaning for their lives from insights based on their own personal experience and reflection on their experience. They claimed that the only person who could decide what shape a life should take was the person actually living that life.

Positive consequences of these changing attitudes to authority have been the freedom people have gained to direct and control their own lives free from interference, and an increase in people's human dignity and self-esteem. Negative consequences have been the many people who become lost, confused and insecure because they no longer have the security of institutions, state or church, to make their decisions for them and tell them what to think. Such people are easily drawn into belief systems which offer them a framework for living that provides them with simple, authoritative



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answers to the difficult questions of human existence. This is a significant aspect of many new religious movements, cults and sects; they tell their members what to believe, how to behave, what to think and to be obedient to their authority.

### Fear of death and disaster

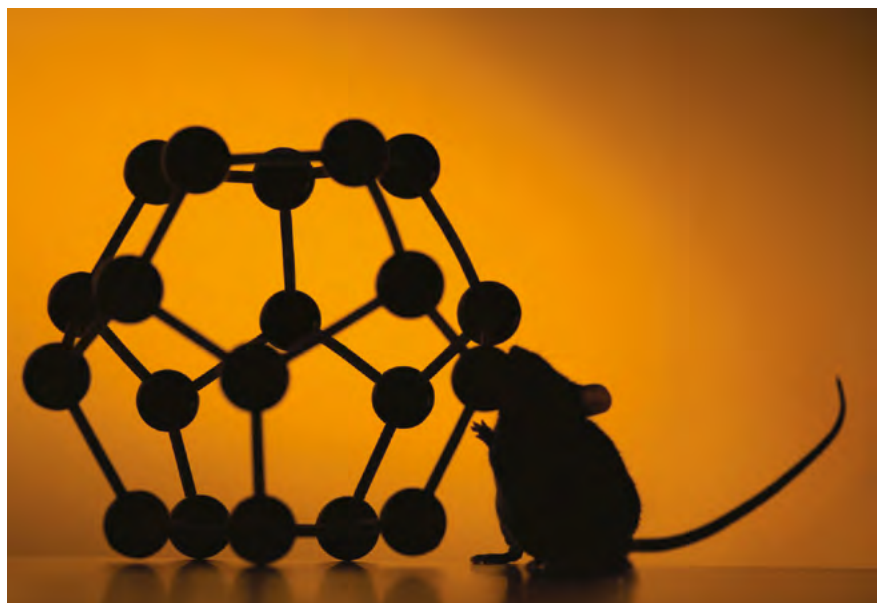
Each new day we are bombarded by newspaper reports, magazine articles, public speakers, television programmes, talk-back radio, etc. which tell us about the many ways in which life as we know it is under threat.

Nuclear attack is not the threat it used to be during the Cold War (1945-1991) but there is still danger from existing stockpiles of nuclear weaponry and from some countries' continuing development of nuclear potential.

Since the 1980s random acts of terrorism have become a continuing threat in many parts of the world. Because terrorist attacks are unannounced, can take place anywhere at any time and large numbers of innocent people are usually killed or injured, these actions are a source of fear, suspicion and deep anxiety. Particularly horrifying is the total disregard shown for human life and property in so-called suicide bombings.

In this 21st century it has become obvious that the health of the global environment is severely compromised. Serious questions are being asked about our ability and our will to safeguard the future of our planet to ensure a future for its people. Our world faces severe challenges – these are a few of them:

The future can seem very frightening as we face up to the mistakes that human beings have made and are still making, and as we consider the possibility of cataclysmic disasters. In the face of such fear for the future some people turn to cults and movements which claim that the end of the world is near. They are attracted by promises that the Second Coming of Christ will be very soon. Others are attracted to groups which separate themselves as much as possible from everyday life and other people so as to avoid the worries and dangers of everyday life and to establish utopian communities.



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## An emphasis on scientific rationalism

Since the 19th century, atheistic humanists have claimed that belief in God must disappear so that human beings can take full responsibility for their lives and be free to develop their potential. As scientists have discovered more and more about the origins, nature and behaviour of our universe, many people have begun to believe that science and technology provide the only sure and necessary knowledge about everything. They believe that, given time, science will be able to answer all the questions about the nature of ourselves and the universe.

This belief that science will provide all the answers may appear to be a rational expectation, though some scientists would question this assumption, but a consequence is that many people are left feeling that such a belief ignores the spiritual dimensions of human life. Science excels in answering questions about the how of things, but it has no answers concerning the why of things.

It is clear that science cannot, and usually does not claim to, provide new meaning for human life, nor can science answer the big questions of human existence. However, many people's confidence in science and the scientific method has given rise to a widespread loss of religious faith. The loss of faith in God as the guiding force in our lives has left many people feeling increasingly isolated in a non-spiritual secular world. The view that humanity and society can be explained in purely physical, biological terms provokes questions in human beings about our true identity. Many new religious movements seem to provide individuals with opportunities to get in touch with, and to experience, the spiritual dimension of their lives.

People can both affirm or deny God without mentioning God. Albert Camus' book *The Outsider* presents the story of a radical atheist whose life reflects the principle that nothing is of importance. Throughout the novel however no mention is made of God. It is clear to the reader, however, that to the main character and the author God is a non-entity. The vocabulary of the New Testament of love, promise, word, trust, forgiveness etc. is essentially theistic; this means that people can talk about God while avoiding the name itself.

## Globalisation of spiritualities

Easier and cheaper travel, the media, the internet and migration are some of the factors that have contributed to people's increasing awareness of the great variety of religious experience and spiritualities in the world. Interest in other Christian and non-Christian religions is not new and is no longer limited to scholars or small elite groups of people. Since the 1960s significant numbers of all types of people have been attracted by beliefs and practices associated with Hinduism, Buddhism, Celtic Christianity, Jewish Kabbalism, and "earth" religions to name a few.



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## 2.3 Sects

Sects and cults are not easy to define. Sometimes the term 'new religious movements' is used as an umbrella to cover the great variety of groups which has developed since the middle of the 20th century. However, even this term presents difficulties because a number of these movements have developed out of ancient belief systems and because some of these movements cannot be called 'religious' in the strict sense of the word.

In the history of every major religion and church there are breakaway movements. What makes movements 'new' at any particular time is their distinctive responses to contemporary society and culture, and their individual ways of formulating what salvation means.

### What is a Sect?

The meaning of the word 'sect' has changed through the centuries and is possibly the term which is most often misunderstood. It is necessary to consider the context of the word to determine how a speaker or writer is using it.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, (1984) defines a sect as follows:

*A religious following; adherence to a particular religious teacher or faith, especially*

- a. *a body of persons who unite in holding certain views differing from those of others who are considered to be of the same religion;*
- b. *in modern use, commonly applied to a separately organised religious body having its distinctive name and its own places of worship.*

A sect can also be regarded as a subdivision of a larger religious group, and one that is often extreme in its beliefs or practices.

Considered in this light a sect typically begins as a movement within an established religion. Christianity itself was a religious movement arising out of Pharisaic Judaism from which it eventually separated. The first Christians, following Jesus' example, continued to attend the temple in Jerusalem as well as gathering in each other's homes for Christian fellowship. There are debates recorded in the Acts of the Apostles about whether Gentile converts to Christianity needed to observe the whole of the Jewish law such as the issue around circumcision. Some time passed before the early Christian Church was clearly distinct from Judaism.

Sects exist within or on the fringes of all major religions, for example, Shi'ite Muslims belong to a sect of Islam, Sikhism is a 16th century reformed Hindu sect, and the Old Catholic Church started in the 1870s within the Catholic Church.

The concept of a sect differs according to the way the parent religion is structured. Within the Christian Church, doctrine (the basic principles of teaching and belief) is the central criterion of orthodoxy; hence, those who hold differing beliefs or who challenge church authority tend to form sects with strong charismatic leaders. Sects separate from their parent church because of differences about religious belief and rejection of its authority.



They often claim independence and self-identity either by simplifying or elaborating accepted liturgy or by developing their own forms of worship. In the course of time many sects have come to be recognized as separate denominations.

A major consequence of the Reformation was the development of sects of the Catholic Church which developed into the denominations that now form a divided Christianity. Subsequently, further sects have emerged and developed into denomination, for example, Methodism which began as a movement of renewal and reform within the Church of England in the 18th century. From being a crisis movement, Methodism became one of the mainstream Christian Churches.

## The Development of Sects

Like other organisations, sects are not static; they change over the course of time with some characteristics being more pronounced at one time than at another. Some sects stay or gradually move closer to accepting the teachings of mainstream Christianity and can be classified as denominations in their own right.

Comparing the characteristics of sects with those of cults shows some similarities between them. Some sects have or develop cultic characteristics. Consequently there is much confusion of terms. Some writers use the words 'sect' and 'cult' as if they have the same meaning. Therefore, in order to describe groups accurately, it is necessary to look closely not only at the stated aims of a group but also at the practical daily living of its members.

A further complication is that the actions of some cult members and the generally unfavourable publicity disseminated by the media, have led to both 'sect' and 'cult' becoming loaded terms with negative connotations. Consequently members of such groups frequently insist that their organisations are neither sects nor cults.

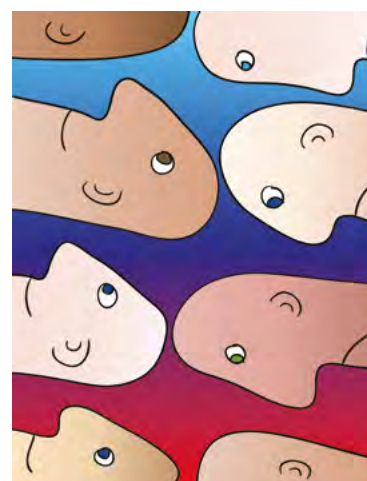
## Characteristics of Sects

### Voluntary membership

Sects admit people, usually adults, as members if they can show knowledge and acceptance of the doctrine of the sect, or if they have a conversion experience, or if they are recommended by people who are already faithful members. Children of sect members are brought up in the belief system of their parents. People may have to pass tests to gain admission or continued membership. Sects demand complete commitment from their members. Failure to meet the sect's standards of behaviour, missionary zeal, or loyalty to the leadership may result in expulsion.

### Exclusivism

Since sects claim to have a more enlightened view of truth than their parent religions, they emphasise their exclusive right to interpret sacred texts in their way as well as any special revelations granted to their leaders. This, for example, is the characteristic of the Exclusive Brethren, a self-isolating group which withdrew from contacts with the wider Brethren movement and from all other persons in 1848. They believe that they alone are the chosen people of God.



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## Elitism

Closely linked to the concept of exclusivism is the idea of elitism. Sects claim to have special knowledge that has come from revelations granted to the founder or other privileged persons. This special knowledge is the answer to the question, 'What must one do to be saved?' Members of a sect, therefore, will be saved because they have the 'answer'; everyone else is excluded from salvation and in some way damned. Some sects claim that salvation is for a limited number of people only. This view both protects the group and justifies its continued existence despite its small membership.

## Separation from the secular world

Sects tend to segregate their members from involvement in what they consider to be worldly activities. They discourage their members from too much involvement in business concerns, sport, public entertainments and cultural activities. Instead, members are expected to be fully involved in activities related to the religious group. Some sects believe that the existing social order is intrinsically evil and has the potential to corrupt their members. Such groups condemn governments, social organisations and established religions which, in their view, maintain corrupt practices and beliefs.

## Founding leader

Many founders of sects have claimed to receive special revelations from God and have usually been charismatic leaders. In order to keep the group together such leaders tend to assume strong, comprehensive control over all aspects of the group and the conduct of its members. After the death of the founding leader, subsequent leaders or ruling groups tend to maintain the same strong leadership style to preserve the group and promote its mission. The policies and decisions of a sects' leadership are not normally open to question or debate.

## High level of lay participation

Within sects there is seldom a distinct group of members who are specifically appointed for ministry; any member with the necessary skills can be a minister. The forms of public worship are usually simplifications of the parent religion's liturgy or, sometimes, the development of new forms of worship involving all members of the group. All members are expected to engage in the sect's activities, including missionary activity in the outside society.

Particular sects may not display all the characteristics outlined above. Although there are a great variety of sects, four types can be distinguished:

### Conversionist / Fundamentalist

Such sects base their beliefs on a literalist interpretation of the Bible and their members are dedicated to converting other people to their religion. An example of such a group is the Assemblies of God in New Zealand which grew out of the Pentecostal churches and was organised as a separate congregation in 1927.

The teaching of such sects is based on a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and on acceptance of baptism in the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:41). They support conservative views on theological and moral issues, place emphasis on family living and insist on the authority of fathers as the heads of their households. Members are expected to live a simple lifestyle according to a strict moral code, in contrast to the permissiveness of society around them. Through the distribution of literature, the support of radio networks, the



establishment of websites and, above all, through personal contact, they have attracted a large number of converts. Converts are required to renounce sin in their lives, to accept baptism in the Holy Spirit, and to enter fully into living, and giving witness to, the Bible message which has been preached to them.

### **Adventist / Millenarian**

Adventist sects look forward to the imminent second coming and reign of Jesus Christ. An example of this type of sect is the Seventh-day Adventists who believe in the physical and personal return of Jesus Christ. They owe their origin to William Miller who set the day for Christ's return in 1843 and then revised it to 1844. Present day Adventists do not attempt to set a precise date to his return. They await the great battle of Armageddon revealed in the Book of Revelation (16) when victory will go to Christ who will reign supreme on the new earth which the redeemed people will occupy as their everlasting home. Seventh-day Adventists interpret the Bible in a literalist manner and keep Saturday as the Sabbath, the day when they hold their worship services.

### **Introversionist**

These are sects whose members withdraw themselves from contact with other people and society at large. Their preoccupation is with the purity and spirituality of the group. An example of such a sect is the Exclusive Brethren formed when John Nelson Darby withdrew his followers from the Brethren movement in 1848. All non-members are strictly excluded because membership is restricted to the chosen people of God and they wish to concentrate on this special relationship with God. When their children attend non-Exclusive Brethren schools they are not permitted to play with other children or take part in religious education classes, drama or sport.

### **Reformist**

These sects seek to eliminate evil from the world through the insights gained by prayerful reflection. The Society of Friends, who are known as Quakers, is one such group whose members try to improve social conditions according to their consciences. Their founder, George Fox, was an Anglican in 17th century England. After much reflection and a personal experience of God, he preached publicly that people should listen inwardly to God to rediscover essential Christianity and not be concerned with the structure and liturgy of the established Church. The Friends meet for silent worship during which anyone may offer spoken prayer or insight. They are outstanding in their participation in social reform movements, relief operations and opposition to warfare.



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## 2.4 Cults

### What is a Cult?

Dictionary definitions of the word cult refer to it as 'a system of religious beliefs and ritual'. However, most people using the word today tend to mean a religious group which has significant differences in belief or practice from religious groups which are regarded as the normal or orthodox expression of religion in a culture.

For many people the image of what cults are and how they operate comes from the news media. Individual cults gain media attention when the actions of some of the members are out of the ordinary: accounts of bizarre behaviour, mysterious rites, unusual sexual practices, mutilation, or occult practices make good copy for the news media. The word 'cult' is a loaded term with many negative connotations. To complicate the issue further, the word 'sect' is often used as a synonym for cult, as explained in the previous section.

### The Characteristics of a Cult

The proliferation of new religious movements since the 1950s includes a great variety of organisations offering some kind of response or answer to the fundamental questions of the purpose and meaning of human life. Those movements which are usually classified as cults are so diverse that any generalisation is likely to be misleading. However, there are some typical characteristics found in enough cults to allow some qualified generalisations to be made. All cults have some of the features described below, but not all cults have all of them.

#### In general

Cults appeal to people on a number of levels.

- They tell people what they want to hear and this often involves deceiving people about the real beliefs of a cult and how it works.
- Cults also go out of their way to make membership attractive to new and prospective members, going to great lengths to fill emotional, spiritual and even practical needs.
- Cults present themselves as having the real answers people are looking for, even if this involves manipulating or hiding the truth.
- Since cults are often small in size, beliefs and practices can cater more easily to people's pre-existing ideas and new members feel a sense of belonging to a group of apparently like-minded people.

#### Authoritarian leadership

Cult members submit to an authoritarian leader or leaders who command total loyalty and obedience. The position of leaders is indicated by the kind of titles they use, for example, 'Perfect Master' (the Divine Light Mission), 'Master' or 'True Parent' (Unification Church).

Some leaders claim semi-divine status or, at least, consider themselves to be messengers of God. Because of their special relationship with God they exercise authority over doctrine and the behaviour of members who must accept the leader's interpretation of 'truth' without question. This strong leadership can lead the follower into total dependence on the group for belief, values, behaviour and lifestyle. When such power falls into the hands of people like Jim



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Jones (People's Temple, Guyana, 1978), David Koresh (Waco in Texas, 1993), Luc Jouret (Order of the Solar Temple, Switzerland, 1994), the results can be tragic.

### Denial of Christian teaching

Many cultic groups call themselves Christian when in fact they deny the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Christian belief is that God is One, a Trinity of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that Jesus, the divine Second Person of the Trinity, became a human being. Through his life and especially through his death and resurrection, Jesus has overcome the power of sin and death and enabled human beings to share fully in the life of God.

In non-Christian belief systems Jesus is usually someone less than this, often regarded as a holy person like other holy leaders and prophets. A cult leader may be given status equal to, or greater than, that of Jesus. By rejecting the divinity of Jesus, cult members deny the Christian doctrine of the Trinity either implicitly or through direct statements. The Jehovah's Witnesses are an example of those who have made such an explicit denial,

*There is no authority in the word of God for the doctrine of the Godhead.*  
(Studies in the Scriptures, C. Russell)

In the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Jesus did not exist as God from all eternity, but was created by Jehovah God.

Those religious cults and groups which reject orthodox Christianity and argue that the Christian Churches have departed from the true faith frequently claim to have received new revelation from God. This new revelation is believed to restore certain truths that have been lost or were previously undiscovered or which have been distorted by others. Joseph Smith (1805–1844), the founder of the Church of the Latter-day Saints or Mormons, claimed that God appeared to him and, when he asked God which Church to join, God told him that they were all wrong.

### Special revelations from God

A number of cults originate from special revelations which their founders experienced. These revelations usually give information not previously known in biblical revelation or even contradicting it.

- Sun Myung Moon the founder and leader of the Unification Church, has claimed that his group is the only one that truly understands the heart, anguish and hope of Jesus' heart.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims that *The Book of Mormon* was dictated to Joseph Smith by an angel called Moroni.

Members of such cults justify their continued existence as separate groups by claiming the need to preserve this special knowledge that has been entrusted to them alone.

Some other groups make no claim to new revelation but believe that they alone can interpret the Bible correctly. Jehovah's Witnesses base their beliefs on their own *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*. This translation is not considered accurate by orthodox scripture scholars.

In some religious groups, their own sacred writings form the basis of their teaching. The founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), claimed that she derived her teaching from the Bible, which she considered the final authority. However, where the Bible contradicted her beliefs, she felt free to dismiss its authority. Her book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* is the authoritative text for Christian Scientists.



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### **A committed segregated lifestyle**

Cultic groups are often protests against established religions. They claim to offer their members ways of gaining enlightenment and the way to a better world. They often set their members apart from the outside world which is presented as being corrupt or even satanic. Members are promised protection from such evil as long as they stay under the direction of the leader and within the group.

Firm commitment is demanded of all members, many of whom are required to live a communal life within the cult community for periods of time. Members may be required to cut all ties with their families and friends and may be denied access to newspapers, radio, television and means of communication.

Within some groups members are required to practise an ascetic lifestyle: no alcohol, drugs and smoking, even drinking tea and coffee may be forbidden. There are often very strict rules governing sexual relationships and individual members may not be free to choose their own partners. On the other hand some groups sanction and even encourage promiscuous sexual behaviour. Although these practices appear to be widely different, the common factor is the leader's authority to decide the rules for the group and for individual members.

Members may be required to give up their former jobs to work full-time in the interests of the group. Enthusiasm for the cause often leads them to work long, exhausting hours within the community, recruiting new members, or fund-raising. Personal wealth and possessions become the property of the group and the use of money and property is decided by leaders.

### **Opposition to society**

Some cults believe that they have a unique vision for the spiritual salvation or the good of the world. They claim, therefore, that their mission places them above mere human standards and rules. This leads them to reject the laws, conventions and social customs of the outside society. Some groups claim that the outside world is such a threat to them that they even arm themselves and train their members in the use of weapons. In some extreme instances a cult may even allow or encourage violent, criminal and destructive acts.



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### **Concerns of the Churches**

Early in the 20th century conservative Christian groups, primarily fundamentalist ones, began to feel the impact of alternative religious movements like Spiritualism and Christian Science. These fundamentalist Christians condemned such groups because their beliefs were unscriptural and their practices were seen as a departure from, and a threat to, historic Christianity.

The rapid growth of alternative religious movements since the 1970s has led the Catholic Church and the other mainstream Christian Churches to greater awareness and concern about the influence of cults on the people who join them. As we have seen, some of these movements claim to be Christian and refer to the Bible. In evaluating the orthodoxy of these groups, mainstream Churches examine their actual teaching, the ways they treat members and non-members, and the extent to which a groups' behaviour and teaching measures up to orthodox Biblical teaching.



## Responses from the Catholic Church

During the 1980s Catholic bishops throughout the world became increasingly concerned at the numbers of Catholics who were joining cults and other religious movements. A questionnaire was sent out and in 1986 the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians published *The Vatican Report: Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Challenge*.

This report concluded that sects themselves and their situations (religious, cultural, social) are so various and different that it is impossible to give one simple answer to the question of what our attitude or approach should be to sects, cults and new religious movements. Answers will also vary considerably depending on whether we are talking about unbelievers, baptised Christians, children or Catholics. The report does point out that there is evidence that the attitudes and methods of some cults and sects destroy people's personalities, disrupt families and society, teach things far removed from Jesus' teachings, and often serve purely ideological, political or economic interests. Experience has also shown that cults and sects are not open to dialogue and actively discourage any move to discuss or debate issues. However, the report says that we cannot simply condemn sects and cults and have their members outlawed, expelled or "deprogrammed" against their will. Our Christian principles require us to respect people and their religious freedom. Our principles also require us to believe that the Holy Spirit works in unfathomable ways to bring about God's loving will for every man, woman, and child. The challenge of religious movements is for us to renew our faith and commitment to authentic, Gospel-centred Christianity.

The Synod of Bishops meeting in 2001 noted that modern culture in the developed world focuses increasingly on materialism, the satisfaction of people's wants and emphasises the importance of individual rights rather than the common good. In this sort of climate people's faith often grows weak and loses touch with the real God; people search for spiritual compensation in alternative movements or DIY religion with no real connection to Jesus or the authentic Christian community (see *The Bishop: Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World*, Synod of Bishops, 2001).

The Bishops conclude,

*Above all, however, what is needed to counteract the influence of these sects and movements are authentic Christian communities, full of life and enthusiasm and promoters of hope, namely, communities characterized by Gospel-sharing, missionary commitment, regard for persons, mutual help and a true and proper spiritual formation, through prayer and the sacraments, for the men and women of our world.*  
(paragraph 137)



## Specialist Interests: Sociologists and Psychologists

Sociologists are not interested in the orthodoxy of cults' beliefs but in studying the ways in which these groups are alienated from dominant social structures and the prevailing culture of a society. Sociologists examine the social dynamics of these groups as they recruit new members, raise funds and interact with the larger society.

Psychologists and psychotherapists are involved in examining and treating conditions frequently displayed by people who have spent time



as cult members. These include guilt, identity confusion, panic, paranoia, hallucinations, loss of free will, involuntary slavery, intellectual sterility, reduced ability to form relationships, diminished capacity for good judgment and occasional neurotic, psychotic and suicidal tendencies. Although these conditions, or the tendency towards them, may have existed in individuals before they joined cults, they are typical of the clinical situations of former cult members.

### **Distress of Families of Cult Members**

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of involvement with many alternative movements and cults in particular is the situation of many distraught parents. They frequently find themselves unable to relate to their sons and daughters. In some cases they cannot even contact them. There are some groups which actively discourage or even forbid members to have any contact with their families or friends unless these contacts are potential converts. Many previously happy families experience enormous strains when family members, not excluding parents or partners, involve themselves enthusiastically in alternative beliefs and values as a result of conversion experiences. Some converts become so absorbed in the new life that they neglect to communicate with their families. The initial anxiety and bewilderment that parents or family members experience can turn to feelings of frustration, anger and rejection. In some instances these feelings have resulted in families resorting to desperate measures to find their "lost" members and to 'rescue' them from the group.



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## 2.5 Scripture and Religious Truth

The Catechism of the Catholic Church points out that in sacred Scripture the Church finds nourishment and strength. Scripture is welcomed and venerated as the real word of God in human words. In the Scriptures God meets and talks with us as our Father (CCC, 101-104).

### Religious Truth

The Bible communicates religious truth. God did not dictate the Bible. It was written in human words by human writers in particular contexts; however, the Church teaches that the entire Bible was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, God chose and guided particular people to compose the sacred books of Scripture. All biblical writers were products of their own particular cultures with their distinctive world-views. They wrote in their own language but the Spirit of God was acting on their minds. All the while that they were busy in this task they were making full use of their own talents and abilities. They were free to use whatever style or genre which appealed to them or was most suitable for their purposes and so the books of the Bible show great diversity: poetry, narrative, song, history, psalm, story or apocalyptic writing. At the same time the Holy Spirit was acting in them and by them. They were filled with the wisdom that enabled them to understand the significance of the events happening in the lives of their people. What they, the authors, put into writing was what God wanted written, no more and no less.

*Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.*

(Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum, 11)

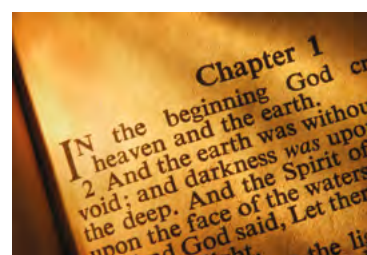
In other words, through all the centuries of oral tradition, writing and rewriting that finally formed the Christian Bible the Holy Spirit was active in the whole process and religious truth was safeguarded and maintained.

### The inerrancy of Scripture

Inerrancy is a word that means that something is free from mistakes. The inerrancy of the Scriptures means that the Bible is not wrong or untrue in what it says about God and God's love to humanity. It also means that what it teaches is exactly and truly what God intended to be recorded about this relationship. Thus Scriptures have a unique and sacred character which ensures their truth. Inerrancy guarantees for believers the truth of Scripture.

### The purpose of Scripture

The books of the Bible are a most important witness to God's self-revelation. They tell of the entrance of God into human history and teach the truth about God's desire to bring salvation to all creation. The intention of the biblical writers was to record faithfully the many facets of the story of God's gift of salvation. The inspired Scriptures enable believers to learn the truth about God and about our redemption in Jesus Christ.



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*By divine revelation, God willed to manifest and to communicate himself and the decrees of his will concerning our salvation, so that we might share in divine gifts which completely surpass the power of the human mind to understand.*

(Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*, 6)

When believers listen to or read the Word of God attentively, it brings them closer to God. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they become open to God's word to them in the word of Scripture. God's communication with them and their response – a conversation in faith – enables people to grow in knowledge and understanding of God and of God's will for us. This process of spiritual growth links believers more closely to God, the author of Scripture. This process is an important part of the duty God has entrusted to the Church: the duty of teaching Scripture to God's people.

### The importance of Tradition

There is a close connection between sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture. Tradition in this context is the whole body of teachings that has been passed on by the Church from generation to generation since the time of Jesus. These teachings come from Jesus and also from the apostles, together with later teachings that have been communicated to the Church through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Examples of these later teachings are the teachings of Councils of the Church and some papal documents. For Catholics Tradition is of equal authority with Scripture.

Scripture and Tradition share the same purpose: to make God known and loved by the people God has created. As the bishops at the Second Vatican Council said,

*...both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.*

(Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei Verbum*, 9)

### Authority

Experience tells us that when people accept information as being true it is because they trust the method, person or organisation which provides the information. People have confidence or faith in these informants. Much of what we know and believe about anything has been passed on to us directly or indirectly from others. How much reliance we place on what we know depends on the authority of the sources of our knowledge and beliefs.

The Church teaches that religious truth is contained in the sacred Scriptures, in sacred Tradition and, guided by the Holy Spirit, in the official statements, declarations and constitutions issued by the popes and councils of the Church.

The authority of the Catholic Church is the authority of God. Before Jesus returned to the Father after his resurrection, he commanded his apostles to teach all people what he had taught the apostles. He said to them,

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me [by my Father]. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations: baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with always, to the end of the age.*

(Matthew 28:19-20).

It is clear in Catholic teaching that Jesus intends the living Church – the community of God's people, to be the medium through which his saving





message should reach all people. The revelation of God comes from Jesus through the apostles and is communicated to the Church community and to the world. Each member of the Christian community is called by God to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Christ is the only one who can lead people to the love of the Father in the Spirit and enable us to share in the life of the Holy Trinity.

It is through this authority within the Church community that the proper or correct interpretation of the Scriptures is made available to individual members. The Church is central to the interpretation of Scripture; the New Testament Scriptures came from the Church, the crucial importance and relevance of the Old Testament was endorsed by the Church, the authority to interpret the Scriptures and to make their truth known comes to the Church from Jesus himself.

## Interpreting the Bible

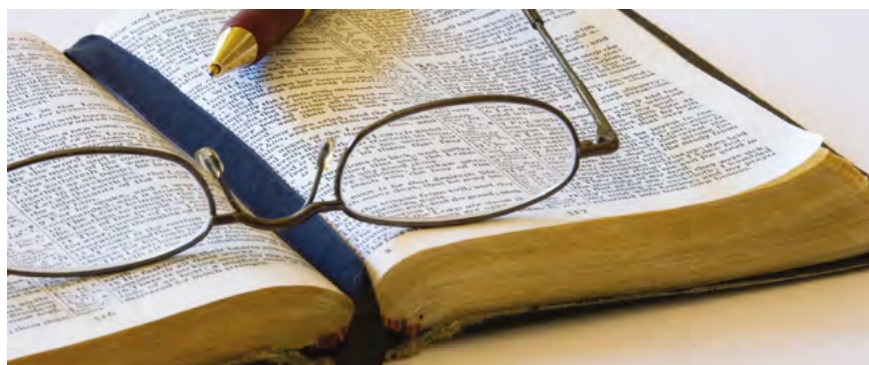
Since the Bible is God's Word addressed to us, we need to read it, understand it and reflect on it so as apply it to our daily lives. This is not as easy as it sounds. Although the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore inerrant, this does not mean that every word should be interpreted literally. Readers of the Bible need to know how to approach the text.

The science of interpretation and explanation of Scripture has grown up over a very long time and has been exhaustively studied by very many scholars. There is a considerable amount of guidance now available to readers. The Church reminds us of two important things: firstly, that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Jesus Christ; secondly, that in interpreting Scripture we must always be attentive to what God wants to reveal to us for our salvation (CCC 133, 137).

The study of the Bible, especially since the 19th century, has provided us with a wealth of methods and approaches to interpreting Scripture. Modern studies remind us that we need to be aware of three things in particular:

1.	The world in front of the text which is our world, the context in which we are now.
2.	We must be aware of the world behind the text, the past historical world in which the text was composed and written, the world in which the text's author and original audience lived.
3.	There is the world of the text or the world which the words of the text itself create.

To interpret Scripture we need to bring all three of these worlds to bear on the text.



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## 2.6 Fundamentalism

Life without iPods, mobile phones, television, DVDs and all the wonders of modern technology might seem to us like a step backwards into the Stone Age. We expect science and technology to continue providing for our every need, keeping us supplied with gadgets to improve our standards of living. The world we live in now is vastly different from the one in which our grandparents grew up.

Progress in many areas of human life has expanded the horizons of our lives, sometimes in dramatic ways. Yet many people experience a deep emptiness. The problems presented daily in our media seem so complex. Racial conflict, random violence, HIV/AIDS, global warming, the possible starvation of entire populations as a result of climate change – these seem overwhelming and beyond our control. All around us there are people searching for meaning in their lives, longing for what seems like a past where everything was simpler and people seemed to have the answers.

In the face of this worry and confusion, simple answers given with absolute authority seem so attractive.

### What is Fundamentalism?

Fundamentalism is a conservative movement or point of view, found especially among American Protestants in the 20th century. It is a reaction against modern ideas and scholarship that seem to question traditional attitudes and beliefs. It is characterised by a desire to return to so-called fundamental or basic beliefs, especially the belief that the Bible is literally true and free from contradictions and errors of any kind. Other features of fundamentalism include rigid adherence to these fundamental principles; the belief that Scripture is the only infallible guide to faith and morals; intolerance of any other views; rejection of modern scholarship; and opposition to secularism (the view that religion and religious considerations should not have any part in moral, social, economic and political matters).

### Emergence of fundamentalism

Many modern fundamentalist movements arise in situations of insecurity, anxiety and rapid social change. Fundamentalist groups offer simple, clear answers to the worries and distress found in most modern societies. Fundamentalism encourages people to aspire to a mythical golden age either in the past or in the future where everything is perfect and happy and all problems are taken care of.

Fundamentalism is a reality of contemporary life in our country and in many other countries and cultures. It is a secular attitude as well as a religious one because, in the face of so much uncertainty and change in economic, political, social and Church structures, many people are searching for clear answers to personal and social questions. There has been a rise in the number of fundamentalist movements whose main message is characterised by extreme simplicity. However, such simplicity is the result of usually dramatic oversimplification.

Some may ask: Isn't it better to join a fundamentalist Church or sect rather than have no religion? It often seems that the discipline such groups impose



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on their members and the strict moral codes they are required to follow produce more law-abiding and upright living than among other people. There may be much to admire in the attitudes of fundamentalist groups but their response is inadequate to deal effectively with the complexities of modern living. Fundamentalism distorts the relationships that need to grow between ourselves, God and others if we are serious about living according to the principles of the Gospel.

## Some Characteristics of Fundamentalism

### Loyalty to a revered book

Christian fundamentalists claim that the Bible contains the exact words of God and must be obeyed literally; Muslim fundamentalists make the same claim for the Qur'an. To disagree with or to challenge this belief is to be labelled a blasphemer or a heretic and to incur severe penalties. The sacred text, or texts, is the absolute prescription for all aspects of a believer's life.

### Restrictive lifestyle

Fundamentalist groups demand from their members a model lifestyle based on a strict code of conduct. There may be regulations dictating the use of alcohol and food, how members are to dress; the living arrangements of members, suitable entertainment and so on.

### Intolerance of disagreement

Fundamentalist groups, because they firmly believe that they are right, also believe that their special insights give them the right to condemn all contrary views. All who disagree with their views are labelled 'sinners' or enemies of the 'true cause'. Other labels such as atheists, communists, homosexuals, politicians are used to reject people who oppose fundamentalist attitudes or behaviour. Censorship of books and the media, discouragement of discussion and debate are some of the methods used to eliminate opposing or critical views. Extensive re-education attempts to bring the unconverted or wrongdoers to see the light.

### Belief in apocalypse

Christian fundamentalism is excessively focused on the apocalyptic writings found in Scripture. Instead of recognising that the apocalyptic genre conveys messages of encouragement or warning to believers suffering persecution, fundamentalists interpret the genre literally as prophecies containing hidden dates for the second coming of Christ, the end of the world and explanations of all sorts of cataclysmic events. There are various scenarios of the Day of Judgment: nuclear holocaust, total environmental collapse, cultural decadence, economic collapses are all possibilities depending on which group is predicting the day of gloom.

### Pessimistic outlook

Fundamentalist groups are often characterised by a deep-rooted pessimism about society. They regard the devil as the basic cause of the problems and evils of a world that is heading for disaster. This problem of evil seems to them impossible to control, let alone overcome. Their solution is to retreat into a defensive and passive mindset that waits for salvation. And the salvation they await is the destruction and reordering of the universe through the cataclysmic apocalyptic second coming of Christ.



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### **Over-simplification**

Fundamentalist groups believe that they know what is wrong with the world and how to put it right. They have “The Answer”. This answer is usually compellingly simple – because it leaves out so much. Fundamentalism either ignores or hides from the challenges of complex questions and issues.

### **Universal**

Many sects and cults show some or all of these fundamentalist characteristics. Fundamentalist views and groups are also present on the fringes of all the major religions of the world. Fundamentalism is also found in other areas of life, especially in economics and politics.

## **Fundamentalism and the Bible**

### **The biblical texts are divinely dictated**

When biblical fundamentalists say that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, they mean that God dictated the text word for word to the writer. They refuse to accept that the text is expressed in human language in a variety of forms and styles and for different purposes. The fact that the authors composed their texts within their own cultural contexts is irrelevant. They ignore the different literary forms and the evidence that many books were edited several times by more than one person before they arrived at their final forms.

### **The biblical text is absolute**

Fundamentalists tend to see the biblical word as an absolute that is they maintain that the text is immediately understandable and needs no further interpretation. In other words, the text means for us today – exactly and unchanged – what it meant to people in the time and culture when it was written. Fundamentalists refuse to accept that the Church community, guided by the Holy Spirit and assisted by the faithful, careful work of Biblical scholars, has gradually deepened and enlarged our understanding of God’s revelation in history.

### **The Bible has no mistakes**

Fundamentalists claim that the Bible is correct not only about religious truths, but also in its scientific, historical and sociological information. They accept without question statements about natural phenomena which common sense and scientific research show to be untrue. Descriptions of events are accepted as fact and little or no allowance is made for the possibilities of symbolic, figurative, allegorical or dramatic meaning.

### **The point of view of the original context is accepted**

A literal interpretation of texts which were composed in different historical and cultural contexts leads fundamentalists to reinforce prejudiced ideas and biased attitudes that are completely contrary to the Gospel.

### **The Bible is regarded as the total message of Christianity**

“Scripture alone” is the watchword of most Christian fundamentalism. This view states that the Bible – and only the Bible – contains the complete and total programme of Christianity. This disregards the fact that the texts that form the Christian bible came initially from within the early Christian Church. They also disregard the fact that the Christian canon or official list of Scripture was not finalised until the time of the Reformation. A consequence of this view is that centuries of prayer, reflection and study that have given us creeds, teachings, spiritualities and liturgical practices (the Tradition of the Church) are dismissed as unimportant.



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### Only one translation of the Bible is accepted

Fundamentalists usually choose only one English translation of the Bible, typically the King James Version (1611), or the translation made by the particular religious group for example, The Jehovah's Witnesses. Any problems presented by the biblical text in its original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek forms tend to be either ignored or denied.

### Prominence given to texts about the end of the world

Fundamentalist groups seem to be attracted to the apocalyptic texts which emphasise the Day of Judgment when God will justify those who have been faithful and destroy those who have done evil or opposed the teaching of the particular group.

## Catholic Fundamentalism

Some Catholics are biblical fundamentalists and there are also those who interpret the Church's teaching documents in a literalist way. They often take a selective approach to the Church's teaching, for example, Statements about personal sexuality are highlighted while statements on social justice questions are ignored or thought to be of lesser importance.

Many of these Catholic fundamentalists are preoccupied with the theology and devotional life of the Church before Vatican II. They are usually deeply anxious that changes in liturgy and religious education appropriate to the contemporary Church are undermining the heritage of Catholic Tradition. For example, many support using only Latin for celebrations of the Eucharist; they fail to understand that the Church has never taught, as a matter of faith or practice, that the Eucharist must be celebrated in a particular language.

It is, of course, of the utmost importance that Christians should remain faithful to the Word of God that comes to us in Scripture, the Old Testament and the life and teaching of Jesus contained in the New Testament, deepened and enlightened by the insights of Tradition. However, we need to remember that in John's gospel (10:10) Jesus says that he has come so that we may have life to the full. Fundamentalism tends to restrict people's experience of life.

### Freedom

The idea of freedom seems very 'airy-fairy' to many people. It can sometimes be made more realistic by adding a preposition after the word like 'freedom to' or '... from' or '... for'. Freedom is not just an ideal nor is it much use if it only remains an idea. Freedom must also be made concrete in our lives and in our involvement in society. Freedom includes the processes and the results of liberating people from poverty, ignorance, injustice, sin, hopelessness and whatever else limits and oppresses us.

Freedom has an exterior and an interior dimension. Externally people may be physically unfree because of imprisonment or disability but at the same time they can be internally free in mind and spirit. Conversely people may be physically free externally to go where and when they please, but are internally enslaved by addictions, prejudice, ignorance or sin.

St Augustine (354–430) once said, Love God and do what you want (*Tractatus*, VII, 8). Faith and trust in God do not destroy or even limit human freedom. Faith in God is, in fact, the most powerful freeing agency in life. It enables people to respect all others unconditionally, to commit ourselves to seek justice and to live in grace. Hope only exists because God, through Christ, has



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granted to humanity the gift of free self-determination that enables us to turn to good.

## Religious Freedom

People have a right to religious freedom. They may not be forced by anyone or anything to act in a way contrary to their religious beliefs. This right comes from our dignity as human beings which we know through the word of God and by reason (Declaration on Religious Freedom: *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2). Sadly, at different times the Church has been gravely intolerant of people who denied doctrines of Catholic faith or who belonged to other Christian denominations or other religions. The dark shadows in the Church's history cannot be denied and the Church has always recognised that it is made up of sinners who have faith and hope in the mercy of God. However, the Church is also the community of people sanctified by baptism and the sacraments. The saintliness of many of its members bears witness to this, to say nothing of the fact that the Church is holy because Jesus himself is the head of the Church.

One of the results of the Second Vatican Council was that many aspects of traditional Catholic teaching were “dusted off” and clearly restated. One of these aspects was the matter of religious freedom. The bishops made it plain that

*It is one of the major tenets of Catholic doctrine that man's response to God in faith must be free: no one therefore is to be forced to embrace the Christian faith against his own will. This doctrine is contained in the word of God and it was constantly proclaimed by the Fathers of the Church*  
(Declaration on Religious Freedom: *Dignitatis Humanae*, 10).

Love and commitment can only be given by people who are not only free to give them but who freely want to give them. There is no value in forced relationships between people, God and their neighbours.



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## 2.7 New Religious Movements

By the middle of the 20th century industrialisation and technology in developed countries had considerably expanded both life expectancy and life expectations. Greater opportunities for communication and travel enlarged the boundaries of ordinary human experience. However, many people experienced alienation in what was becoming an increasingly isolated and unspiritual secular society. Scientific rationalism was insufficient or unable to satisfy people's spiritual needs.

### The Modern World

There is a tendency in modern times to view human beings simply in terms of this life only. God, Christianity and even a sense of the spiritual are often regarded simply as man-made ideas. Increasing secularisation encourages a limited view of human potential and destiny. Although considerable effort and resources are spent on people's earthly needs, on their social, economic, political and cultural liberation, human beings' transcendent reality is either dismissed or ignored. Earthly progress may occur but as Scripture reminds us,

*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*  
(Matthew 4:4).

Nowadays the whole religious scene has become much more varied and changing. On the one hand, people are moving about the world far more than they used to do. Phenomena such as urbanisation, mass migration, the flood of refugees, massive natural disasters and globalisation all contribute to religious and social upheaval. In particular there is widespread indifferentism, in other words, people either think that differences of religious belief are unimportant or they have no enthusiasm or interest in religious matters. Many people's lives seem to be ruled by consumerism, materialism and the pursuit of money and power.

On the other hand there are many people throughout the world who are seeking to make sense of their lives. There is a desire for some sort of inner, spiritual dimension to their lives, for new ways of prayer and meditation. Many people are open to opportunities not to 'have more' but to 'be more', to be more authentically human.



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### New Religious Movements

In response to these factors there has been widespread interest in, and development of, various sorts of movements, groups, practices and writings all aimed at providing the sorts of direction that will satisfy people's spiritual needs. There are a number of common features to this search. Some of the following ideas and beliefs may be found in such movements:

- The entire universe is interconnected and has some direction.
- There is a supernatural force or energy in everything.
- Humans can reach perfection without any divine help or intervention.
- Reincarnation.
- Illness and suffering are the results of being out of tune with nature.
- All religious traditions and ideas refer and lead to the same truth.



What tends to happen in practice is that people collect bits and pieces from various religions or from religious and semi-religious practices. Often the ideas and practices are picked out from old and sometimes pre-Christian sources; for example, ancient Egyptian occult practices, Cabbalism, early Christian gnosticism, Sufism, the lore of the Druids, Celtic Christianity, mediaeval alchemy, Renaissance hermeticism, Zen Buddhism, Yoga and so on. These collected elements are then combined and re-packaged as new “religions” or ways that can bring enlightenment and self-fulfilment to those who choose to adopt them. The terms “God” or “Jesus Christ” are sometimes referred to in these new practices but God is not personal, or transcendent, nor creator but simply an impersonal force or energy within the universe. Jesus is reduced to simply a historical figure no different from people like Buddha or Confucius.

### Broad influences

Some research suggests that the basic element in people’s interest in modern religious or spiritual movements is **individualism**. Individualism is the view that self-centred feeling and conduct is normal and desirable; it believes in the primary and utmost importance of individuals freely developing and expressing in thought and action their own self-reliance and personal independence. Closely linked with individualism is the continuing process of **secularisation** within developed societies whereby people reject any kind of direction from traditional sources like religion or from authority. Linked also with individualism is the value placed on **freedom** of the individual from any limitations or constraints imposed by society or authority or traditional religion.

These new religious or spiritual movements, therefore, encourage their followers to choose whatever suits their own individual idea of the best path to personal and spiritual meaning for themselves. This process is also encouraged by an increasing trend towards **pluralism** – the belief that no single system or view of reality can explain everything about life and, consequently, all points of view are valid and none should dominate. There is also a growing trend towards **relativism** a view that there is no absolute truth or certainty and that truth depends entirely on variable factors of a person’s life such as their character, where they are, time and circumstances.



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### Characteristics of New Religious Movements

Some characteristics of these new movements have already been outlined earlier in this chapter. This section describes some features in a little more detail.

#### A holistic approach

Although there is enormous variety among new spiritual movements, they all tend to affirm that people are inherently good. The movements seek to promote people’s wholeness and well-being through re-integrating body, mind and spirit. They believe that human beings need to be in touch with their real selves; the deeper people’s self-awareness, the more creative and liberated they will be. The methods used to achieve this integration of self include a diverse range from massage to yoga to homeopathic medicine, to meditation, to diet.

#### The interconnectedness of all reality

A common belief in new spiritual movements is that all things are interconnected and interrelated, from a black hole in remotest space to the people closest to us. Every individual, therefore, is an integral part of nature and the whole cosmos. This unity of all things is believed to be the essence



of the divine, variously identified as the Force of the Universe, the Totality of Universal Life Energy, the Living Wholeness of Being and so on. This belief appeals to people who wish for profound social change and it promotes a vision of a new age of peace and enlightenment.

### Human potentiality

Followers of these new movements believe that there needs to be distinctly new ways of thinking about old problems; in particular, that it is necessary to stop seeing individuals as victims or pawns, limited by the conditions and conditioning of their environment. Each person possesses a great potential that can be awakened by using various techniques such as psychosynthesis, self-growth, dis-identification and the like. Human beings are capable of imagination, invention and experience that have so far only been glimpsed but, with the right techniques and training, people can change their life situations and move towards the goal of self-actualisation and self-fulfilment leading to perfection.

### The higher self

Some movements claim that within us there is a Higher Self which is the source of all power and healing and which guides our daily living if we open ourselves to it. Techniques such as deep breathing, yoga, chants and mantras can lead people to greater awareness of this Higher Self. The idea of a Higher Self owes much to Eastern religions in which the divine is understood as a presence within all existence and the spiritual life involves striving for harmony, peace and good for the entire cosmos.

### Awareness of the earth

Many new movements emphasize human beings' integral connection with the entire universe. In practice this concern for the earth involves opposition to things like the dumping of waste; the pollution of waterways, oceans and land; indiscriminate felling of forests; etc. There is usually strong support for the larger environmental movement, including efforts at peacemaking and programmes of international cooperation to promote the survival and welfare of groups of people whose future is threatened through starvation, disease, war, natural disasters and so on.

### Belief in reincarnation

Confronted with the harsh realities of life; poverty, injustice or loneliness many movements respond with a belief in some form of rebirth. People's misery in the present may be due to misdeeds in an earlier existence. Various therapies are on offer to take people back through past lives so that they can be purified and healed. And if this cannot be achieved in this life, the possibility of future lives provides opportunities for further purification and spiritual growth.

### Gnostic knowledge

Gnostic knowledge is a special, hidden knowledge of spiritual mysteries which is usually only known by a few enlightened individuals. Possession of this knowledge allows people to raise their consciousness and to open themselves to unity with the Higher Self. This transforming knowledge empowers people to achieve the transformation or salvation necessary to reach perfection.

### Pluralism

Most new movements hold that no single religion or philosophy contains the truth about creation and human existence. Instead, they hold that all religions, beliefs and philosophies are of equal value and whether a way is right or best depends solely on what individual people think about it.



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## The Christian Response to New or Alternative Religious Movements

Ideas about the interconnectedness of creation, unity between people, the need for the harmonious development of all aspects of our human selves – mind, spirit and body – the search for truth, all these are already long-standing and important parts of the Christian vision.

### Ideas of God

However, the impersonal consciousness ('God' or the divine) in everything that the new movements accept is in strong contrast to the living, saving, personal God of the Scriptures. The Christian understanding of God's revelation is much richer and more developed: God is both transcendent and immanent, that is God is beyond the limits of the universe and human knowledge and, at the same time, God fills and is present in every single part from the tiniest particle to the largest galaxy.



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### The search for truth

Christianity has long recognised the usefulness and validity of various techniques and practices to assist people to gain deeper knowledge and awareness of themselves and of the presence of God in themselves and the world. However, unlike the new movements, Christianity points out that, useful as these techniques are, they cannot on their own lead us to the truth or, as Christians believe, to the Truth which is God. Even though Christianity believes that human beings do have a divine 'element' since we are made in God's 'image and likeness', the new movements' belief that people can gain their own salvation simply by releasing their divine 'spark' is naive. God is within us but we are not and cannot be God. All we have and are is a gift from God and we are known and loved before we are capable of knowing and loving in return.

There is also a tendency in these new movements to believe that there is no such thing as objective truth. The idea that human beings can 'create our own reality' implies that individuals are the centre of their own existence and can decide on what is true for each of them alone; they can make their own rules. The difficulty with such views is obvious: if each person is deciding for him- or herself what is true or right then there is no longer such a thing as truth or objective morality. From a Christian perspective it has the further difficulty that it is a rejection of everything that God has revealed to us.

### The place of self

The emphasis on the primacy of self found in new religious movements contrasts with the Christian emphasis on the importance of the self in its relationship with God, with others and with creation. Remember Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:37-39). Christian reflection on the mystery of the Holy Trinity has led to a greater appreciation that essentially the Trinity (three persons in one God) is a community of persons so closely linked to, and involved with, each other as to be a unity. This reflection leads believers to understand that the way to self-fulfilment is through community where God and others come first in our lives. Christian history is full of examples, people like Mary Mackillop, Marcellin Champagnat, Dominic, Mother Theresa, Vincent de Paul.

### Jesus

The new movements, if they include Jesus Christ at all, regard him as an enlightened human example of how each human being has the potential for divinity and universal cosmic consciousness. His divinity, his resurrection are



not accepted. This is a modern version of the 4th century Arian heresy which was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381. Christian belief emphasises that Jesus, the Son of God made man, has already redeemed the world once and for all through the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection (the Paschal Mystery). Our personal, individual salvation depends on our response to his gift of himself for us and not on any innate qualities we might possess.

### **Sin and evil**

There is no doubt that human beings can be mean, selfish, cruel and evil. The reality is that our world is suffering the consequences of what theology calls original sin. As beings who have both free will and conscience we know how easy it is to choose the thoughts, words and deeds that alienate us, lead us away from God, from others, from ourselves and from creation. Self-reliance and self-knowledge are unable to save us, are unable to generate the love and goodwill that will bring peace on earth. There needs to be a source of love outside ourselves: the grace of God which is Christ's presence with us.

### **'Supermarket' spirituality**

There is a tendency for people drawn to the new spiritual movements to select beliefs and practices rather like shopping in a supermarket, choosing something here that appeals, avoiding what does not appeal, selecting according to one's fancy at the time. Individuals can make up their own syncretic religions or spiritualities by combining a variety of aspects, a sort of mix and match. For example, a person might practise Zen meditation but turn to tarot cards when answers are needed for personal problems and use crystals to "centre one's energy". This random selection leads to a spirituality lacking focus and discipline and, in particular, lacking the support of an organised group sharing the same set or system of beliefs.

While much within the new spiritual movements can be beneficial and is not incompatible with Christianity, it is important to recognise the features which are in conflict with Christian teaching as well as those features which could be harmful. It is also important to make sensible and balanced evaluations about which therapies and practices are genuinely helpful. There are many workshops, seminars, services and courses providing superficial, limited or unhelpful knowledge while making money out of gullible people.



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## 2.8 The Catholic Church

The people of God who make up the Church work and celebrate with all who share a common belief and who treasure the same values. All people are made in the image of God and all have access to the great gift of God – Jesus the Christ, truly God and truly human, who saves humanity from evil and guarantees eternal life. Through baptism every Christian becomes a child of God called to share with all others the Good News of the kingdom of God.

*Christians, by virtue of their baptism, can repeat in an individual way the words of Jesus, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor'*

(On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World: *Christifideles Laici*, 13).

It is true that some people find in other religious movements emphases and practices which they have not found or experienced in the established Christian churches. They have discovered ways of living out their vocations that did not seem to be available to them before. This reminds us of the need to ensure that the message of Jesus is made available to all people in ways that they can understand and respond to.

### The Catholic Church and New Religious Movements

It is important to know what we believe and to develop a deep conviction about our beliefs. The Church and its members are constantly challenged to develop thorough and effective ways of educating all its members. Educational programmes must be biblically based, able to draw on the richness of the Christian tradition and in tune with the life-experiences of participants.

Catholics can learn from fundamentalists to value, appreciate, and to give the Bible an important place in their lives. They can take advantage of the many Scripture courses that are based on modern biblical research. There are also many small groups who meet together for prayerful and reflective reading of the Bible.

Catholics can demonstrate the enthusiasm for Christian faith and the willingness to proclaim it that door-to-door evangelists show. Although we are not all necessarily called to do as they do, we can profitably imitate the dedication which often motivates them.

We need to remind ourselves of the enthusiasm for spreading the good news that Christians have shown in the story of the Church. We need to imitate the passion and commitment of people like Augustine of Canterbury (d.604), Francis Xavier (1506–1552), Therese of Lisieux (1873–1897), Suzanne Aubert (1835–1926) and countless others. We need to pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit to fill us with zeal to fulfil our baptismal calling to witness to Jesus Christ. We need to show the same sense of dedication to the coming of the reign of God as some cult members do in foretelling the end of the world.

Since Vatican II lay Catholics have been urged to play a greater part in the mission of the Church.

*The responsibility of the laity in particular is to testify to how the Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response to the problems and hopes that*



*life poses to every person and society. This will be possible if the laity are able to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to take up again in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel.*

(On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World: *Christifideles Laici*, 34)

## What the Church Offers

### Wholeness through being loved by a personal God

Christians believe that God, the creator and sustainer of everything, is far more than an impersonal force or a power and far removed from any stereotypes. The revelation of God through Christianity shows us a magnificent being.

God is a Trinity of three divine persons united as one, open to all other persons, and longing for all others to join the relationship. God is not only completely loving and totally good – God IS love and goodness. All human ideas and experience of love and goodness come from God. Many of the Biblical images that best describe God are those drawn from loving human relationships, father (Luke 15:11–32), mother (Isaiah 49:15), spouse (Isaiah 54:5), lover (Song of Songs 1).

Jesus, in his teaching and his life, shows that every human person is loved uniquely by this personal God. Jesus emphasised the dignity and worth of each person whom he met; people like the woman accused of adultery (John 8:3–11), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10), the crucified thief (Luke 23:42–43). The experience of being loved by God, so clearly demonstrated by Jesus, frees a people to attend to others and to become loving people.

### A sense of belonging to a community

The Church is the People of God, a community of faith in Christ. Within the Christian community people should be able to find a secure place where each one is taken seriously and all are welcome to participate. It is the responsibility of all members to be aware of each other and to work towards building and strengthening the community.

About one third of the world's people belong to the Christian community half of which is Catholic. Wherever one travels in the world one is likely to find Christian people. In spite of the diversity of such a large and widespread community, our shared faith in Jesus unites us and overcomes differences of race, culture and language.

### A tradition rich in symbolic expression

Catholic liturgy integrates the whole person, body, mind and spirit, with God, the community, and all of God's creation. Symbols and ritual are an integral part of proclaiming, experiencing and nourishing the faith life of the members. In each of the sacraments, symbols such as bread, wine, water and oil play an important part in revealing and communicating the mystery of God's action in the lives of those celebrating the rite. The sacraments are encounters with Christ, opportunities for rewarding personal experiences within the Christian community which enrich the faith and enhance the spiritual growth of the Christian. Through the centuries Christian art, architecture, music and literature have all enhanced people's faith and understanding of God and provided ways for people to give expression to their faith.



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### **Promotion of social justice**

Following the example of Jesus, his Church has always responded to people in need. Increasingly since 1891 when Leo XIII published *Of New Things* (*Rerum Novarum*), an encyclical addressing the social needs of an industrialising Europe, the Church has responded to the signs of the times. This focus was given even greater purpose following the Second Vatican Council (1963–1965). Popes, Church agencies, Christian organisations like Caritas and Pax Christi, and many other groups and individuals are actively involved in programmes and work to promote justice and peace for all in the name of Jesus.

### **An authentic and consistent teaching tradition**

From the earliest times the Church has made vigorous and zealous efforts to remain faithful to the message that Jesus Christ proclaimed. It took confidence from Jesus' words to Peter,

*you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

(Matthew 16:18–19).

The Church continues to trust Jesus' last words in Matthew's Gospel,

*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*

(Matthew 28:20).

In the beginning the Church listened carefully to the testimony of Jesus' apostles. It gave people like Paul the authority to teach. As questions arose the Church established ways, such as Councils, to ensure that the answers were true and faithful to Jesus' teaching. By means of rigorous consultation, scholarship and reflection the Church established the canon of Christian Scripture and made definitive statements like the Nicene Creed.

The Church has exercised the authority to interpret, understand and proclaim the Word of God in Scripture and especially in the Gospel. The source of this authority comes from the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus and given at Pentecost (Acts 2). The Spirit is our assurance that the Church, the whole People of God, believes and acts in genuine and complete faithfulness to Jesus Christ. In particular the Church is directed by the "magisterium", that is the teaching authority which is primarily exercised by the Bishop of Rome and all the bishops in communion with him and each other.

Christians have the assurance that Jesus *is the way, the truth and the life* (John 14:6), and his promise that the Spirit of God

*whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

(John 14:26–27).





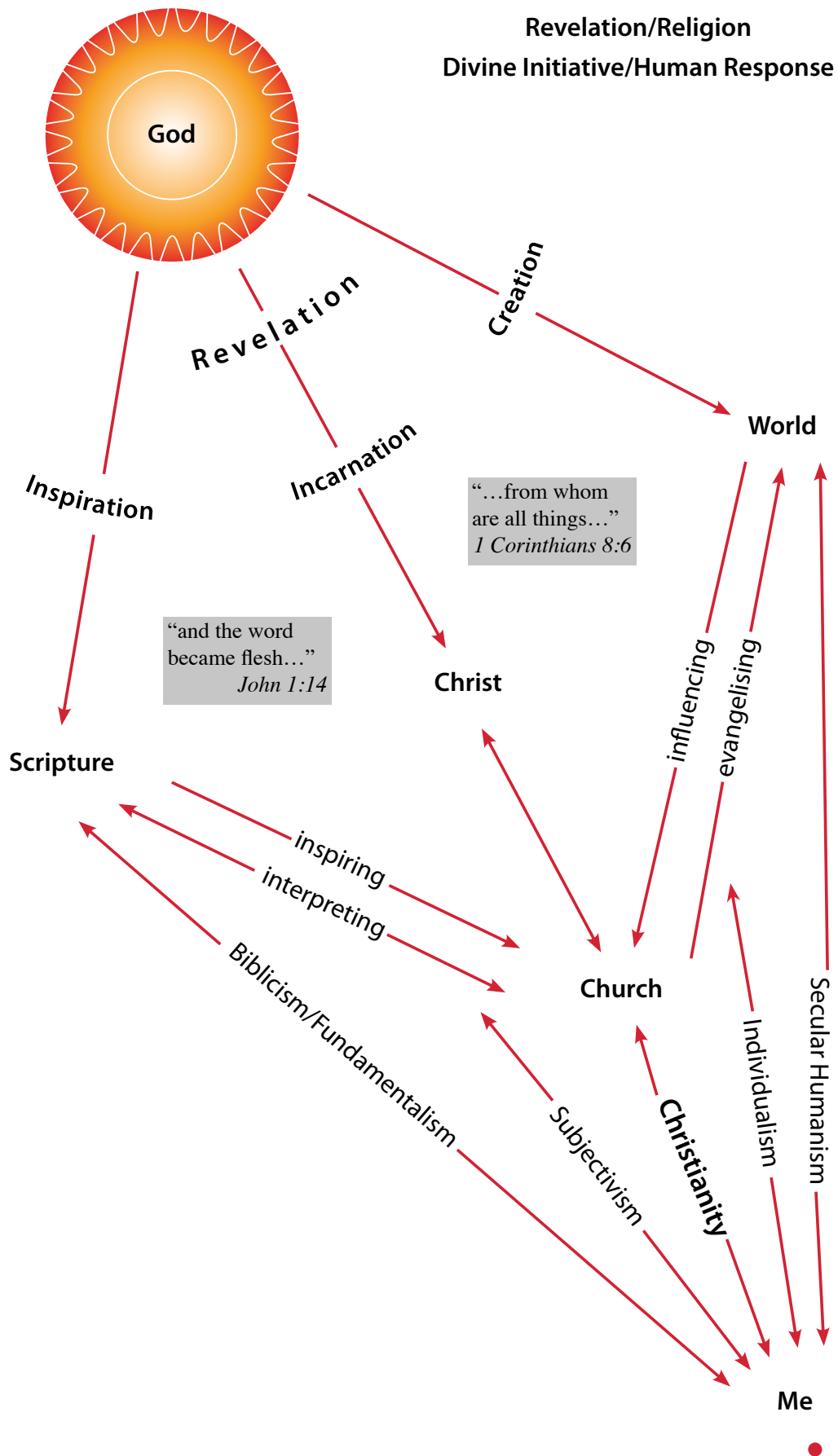
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### **Belief in God's revelation encouraging people to full life**

Religion is ultimately a matter of faith in the revelation of God. The nature of this revelation is such that it cannot be proved by scientific or philosophical methods. However, in spite of that, our faith is not irrational; there are many other matters in our world that we take on faith and cannot prove, for example, that we will be alive tomorrow. Faith in God, as it is communicated by the community of people with Jesus as their head, empowers individuals to find meaning and purpose in the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of their lives and enables them to live fully human lives that, with the grace of God, achieve perfection in the eternal kingdom of God.

The diagram on the following page shows the relationship between a number of the concepts discussed in this chapter. The primary relationship is between the divine initiative and the human response.







The background is a complex, abstract collage. It features a central circular image that appears to be a reflection or a view through a lens, showing a city at night with lights and buildings. This central image is surrounded by various textures and colors, including deep blues, purples, and yellows. There are also some geometric shapes and patterns, like a chain-link fence in the bottom left and some curved lines in the bottom right. The overall effect is a layered, artistic composition.

## Part 3

# Ethics and Ethical Issues



Its voice, ever calling them  
to love and to do what is good  
and to avoid evil, tells them  
inwardly at the right moment:  
do this, shun that.  
Church in the Modern World

Do to others as you would  
have them do to you.  
Luke 6: 31



## 3.1 What is Ethics?

### Introduction

Human beings are mysterious creatures. Unlike other animals humans live in multifaceted situations where people relate to one another, other animals and the created world through a myriad of situations and ways. Human beings are not governed by instinct. Instead they have free will, reason (the ability to think) and a conscience to govern their own behaviour. Humans are social beings; relationships with others are an extremely important part of human existence. For these reasons and in order that all may be safe and happy as individuals and in communities, it is necessary that humans think and behave in ways that will realise our potential as social beings called to live in communities and as stewards of the God-given gift of life.

The actual word 'ethics' is from the Greek *ethos*, a concept that encompasses, 'habit', 'custom', 'character' so has a sense of 'a way of doing something', namely coming to a decision. Simply put, ethics is the way humans relate. One meaning of *ethos* refers to a particular custom or way of doing things; another meaning refers to the character of a person. We call a person honest if he or she regularly tells the truth. The person habitually tells the truth, that is he or she is in the habit of telling the truth. In this example ethics includes both the action of telling the truth, the practice of telling the truth and the character of the person as truthful.

Ethics could be described as the process of having a conversation to decide what to do in a difficult situation. Ethics and morality are words which are often used as synonyms. However, if ethics is the conversation regarding the choice, morality is the voices contributing to the conversation. Thus morality is highly influenced by the experience of the speaker, the historical context that the decision is being formulated within, the cultural background brought with the voice and the religious tradition that has formed the speaker. In the case of ethical situations this voice may not be that of an individual but of a group such as the Catholic Church, thus there is often reference to a Catholic Morality or a Liberal Morality or Māori Morality.

### Definitions

Ethics has been defined as follows:

- It is rational reflection on and about human behaviour.
- It is the study concerned with what people ought to do – their right and wrong conduct.
- It concerns people's duty; that is, the rules or standards, behaviour and attitudes that social custom, law or religion demands.
- It is also the study of moral choices in general as well as in specific cases and situations.
- It is a theory of moral values as well as a set of principles of right or good conduct.



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## The Trinity: The foundation of the moral life

The way that Christians relate to one another is modelled by the Holy Trinity. The community of the Trinity demonstrates to humanity the mutual love and support that each individual is called to have with others. It is in God and in the relationships among the persons of the Holy Trinity that we find our goals as human beings, as individual human beings and members of a community, for example, family, church, society. Within the Trinity relationships are determined by divine love. This means that the framework for Christian ethical principles is love. In a person's daily life, love is the expression of ethics as the individual grows in the likeness of God and is in an active effort towards being in right relationship with all creation.

Each of the persons of the Trinity is a gift of self to the others and lives entirely for them; this is a loving communion of persons. For the Christian, made in 'the image and likeness of God' the very heart of being human is to be in loving communion. This is how humans strive to be ethical by desiring that their actions promote and support the loving communion of creation.

*Jesus answered, 'The first is: . . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these'.*  
(Mark 12:29–31).

This summary of the Law from Mark's Gospel does not focus on rules, theories, prohibitions, philosophy, or ethical theories and systems. Instead it draws our attention simply and unambiguously to all our relationships: with God, ourselves and others. It tells us simply that when these relationships are loving ones, when we take the Trinity as our model, then we are doing what is right.

There were many people who thought that Jesus showed no respect for laws, rules and social conventions. In one sense they were right. Jesus always put people and the needs of people before the rules. He touched lepers and made them feel accepted. He healed people even on the Sabbath because he realised that they were coming to him out of their desperate need for help. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, and he went into the houses of Gentiles because he respected, and responded to, their dignity as human beings. He accepted the weakness and sleepiness of his friends who could not keep awake with him on the night of his arrest. When Peter denied knowing him, Jesus did not love or value Peter less.

Ultimately the standard by which we will be judged is simple: to what extent do our thoughts, words and actions show that we love people as Jesus loves them (Matthew 25:31–46).

## A Response of Gratitude

The Trinity models the community of love which is outward focused. God loves humans unconditionally. God, creator of all, gifts humanity with life. Christian ethics is a response of gratitude for this unsolicited, overwhelming love of God. This gift makes each person special, unique and inclined towards the giver God with a sense of gratitude. Appreciation of this divine gift is shown by people's choices in how they uphold the sacredness and dignity of all life – in how they make choices to be in a good relationship with all of God's creation.



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It is easy to think that ethics is about doing things the right way so that we do not get punished by God. However, God loves us unconditionally and is not limited in love by human ideas of fairness. Gratitude for this bountiful gift is what motivates the Christian to act ethically, to act as God does. While a Christian response to a particular situation may be guided by norms and principles the starting point is always the realisation that all life is a God-given gift.

## The Common Good

Christian ethics is not just focused on the actions of individuals. It is also concerned with how we live as a society and promote the Common Good. By their nature human beings are social and while the human person is at the centre of social life the person is not an isolated individual. People belong to a number of communities. The choices and actions of individuals and the communities to which they belong must support the Common Good. This is achieved by establishing and maintaining those conditions that protect the well-being of all in the community without excluding any individual or group.

Catholic Social Teaching aims to promote the rights and obligations of both the individual and groups at all levels of society. The Church calls for people to be just in their personal lives and also in the social, economic and political areas of life. The obligation to be just springs from the reality that we are made to live in relationship with God, self, others and creation. Social justice requires changes to be made to unjust social, political and economic structures and systems which create and support major evils, such as poverty and the destruction of the environment.



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## 3.2 Approaches to Ethics

### Origins of Ethical Thought

The systematic study of good behaviour began with the Greek philosopher Aristotle (400–320 BC). He based his work firstly on the earlier thinking of Socrates (469–399 BC) and Plato (427–347 BC). Socrates maintained that people behaved badly out of ignorance so that if they were taught about what is good and right they can then act morally. Plato said that a good person is one whose life is directed by a mature and educated reason. Aristotle himself taught that moral or right actions are those that bring about the most positive consequences for human life. He believed that happiness is the purpose of human life and that this is achievable by a life of moderation and right action guided by human reason.

Within the western world the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy together with the Jewish Christian heritage have had a considerable and lasting influence on the development of ethics. The advent of Christianity brought with it strong moral teaching based on the Torah (the Jewish Law) and on the life and teaching of Jesus.



Plato

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### Twentieth Century Influences

Particular situations in a given society influence how ethical thought develops. In the twentieth century on an international scale, the Holocaust has had a significant impact on the way ethics are considered. After World War II many issues were heightened, including discussion about the culpability of those people who did nothing wrong, i.e. those who did not murder or turn in people to the Nazis but who also were not proactive in standing up against the injustices that were occurring.

One of the significant moments in defining ethical thought in New Zealand was the case of the study of cervical cancer at National Women's Hospital in Auckland. Women became part of a study of the best treatment for cervical cancer without their consent. This included women who developed early cancer and were not treated adequately for it. This case raised serious ethical issues in a number of areas. One concern was the lack of informed consent. Another was that medical researchers carried out unnecessary and painful procedures on women who were treated like guinea pigs with no forum to question what was occurring. The exposure of this research programme resulted in significant changes in the procedures of ethical committees in New Zealand hospitals and academic institutions.

Changes in medical technology have also raised debate about ethical issues concerning human life from its conception (Assisted Reproductive Technology) to its natural end (Palliative Care).

### The Importance of Ethics

An ability to reflect ethically is important because life is full of difficult decisions that need to be made whether a person wants to or not. It is obvious that people cannot do exactly as they please; some decisions are likely to be stupid, dangerous, selfish, mean, unfair or unreasonable. This is the purpose



of ethics: to give us a reliable framework of ideas about right and wrong and about how to decide the best course of action when we have to deal with difficult decisions.

## Ethical Approaches

There are many approaches to ethics. These include:

- *Subjectivism* – is where the individual is seen as having the ultimate right to make judgments according to their own freedom and conscience. No-one else has the right to judge what an individual chooses to do.
- *Situation ethics* – here the choices are made in terms of behaving in a spirit of love. As long as the intention of the act is to love then it is morally acceptable.
- *Relativism* when making a decision there are no norms that everyone can be judged upon because the morality of an act depends on cultural context and circumstances.
- *Nihilism* – those working from this ethical approach believe that life has no meaning at all and consequently there is no point to morality or ethical behaviour and no need for it. Good and evil are largely meaningless ideas. In this view anything goes because there is no difference in either doing something or refraining from doing it.
- *Virtue ethics* – use of human freedom to pursue the good and choose to do good. There is an emphasis on what makes a good person in character rather than what makes a good action. What a person does shapes him or her over time.

Every ethical approach can be attributed to one of three types of ethics.

### Deontology (An emphasis on action)

This is sometimes called legal paradigm. The basis of these types of ethical approaches is that the law is the most important thing. Only those acts done from a sense of duty have a moral value. The law must be followed under all circumstances and not matter what the consequences. The right thing must be done. If a stance is taken that to neglect or break one of the rules is always wrong then the type of ethics is deontological.

### Consequentialism (An emphasis on consequences)

At the other end of the ethical continuum utilitarianism stresses that it is the action itself that must be judged as good or bad. No matter what happens as long as the final result of the action is positive for the community, even if widely accepted rules are broken it is a good act. A good example of this is taking a position where torture is considered acceptable if the information gained saves people from dying. These types of positions reason for the most good for the most people.

### Relational responsibility (An emphasis on relationships)

Catholic ethical principles are between the two extremes. Believing that a legalist approach neglects the particular of experience and history but that some things are always morally reprehensible, Catholic moral theologians take the position that faith and reason are both important aspects of ethical thought. John Paul II stated that *reason and faith cannot be separated without diminishing the capacity of men and women to know themselves, the world and God in an appropriate way* (Faith and Reason: Fides et Ratio, 16).

### An example of deontology

*At the Nuremberg trials Nazi officials were charged with committing war crimes. These were ordinary men, not monsters yet they ordered the deportation of civilians, used slave labour and persecuted and murdered people on the basis of religion, politics or race. The argument of the defendants was that they had no option but to obey Hitler's orders, which had the force of law in the German State. This meant in their eyes all though there had been mass killings there were no murders. This was a deontological defence. Most defendants were found guilty and the principle was reaffirmed in International Law that following orders given by superiors is no defence against war crimes.*

### An example of consequentialism

*In the Dachau Concentration camp prisoners were used as human guinea pigs to ascertain what happened to the human body during high altitude flying. The rationale for these cruel experiments was that the discoveries helped save the lives of German pilots and that the prisoners were already condemned to death. This was a consequentialism based argument. On the liberation of Dachau the government of the United States confiscated the results and made use of the experiments for the US Air Force.*





S. OWEN

From a Catholic perspective the elements of ethos, habit, custom and character, come together. Put simply by being good we do good, by doing good we become good. This is the cycle of virtue ethics.

## Freedom From or Freedom For?

Human beings have the free will to choose their actions. Human freedom had two effects. It affects the immediate choice under consideration and it also has a deeper effect on the person's moral character. For example, a person chooses to tell a lie to protect themselves from embarrassment (the immediate choice); if this becomes a regular choice the person may be forming himself or herself as a dishonest person.

Human freedom is not primarily concerned with freedom from constraints but the freedom to make life giving choices that mirror the image and likeness of God. The extent to which a person mirrors God to others reflects the way they exercise their freedom in accepting God's grace so that they might love as the community of persons within the Trinity loves; generously and creatively.

## Natural Law

*Through natural law, human beings attempt to grasp the mind of God and his will for humanity and the world. Natural law presumes that the Creator ordered the world for the good of all creatures and placed within the hearts of human beings an ability to understand that order to some degree and to exercise their freedom consistent with it. The Tradition has always suggested that natural law is based primarily on human reason.*

*The Essential Moral Handbook, K. O'Neil & P. Black, 2003.*

## Sources of Catholic Ethical Principles

Catholics have a particular way of looking at ethical issues that is based on the following:

- **Revelation.** In the Catholic tradition there are two primary sources of revelation, Scripture and Tradition.
  - **Sacred Scripture.** Catholics believe that Scripture is the inspired Word of God. Scripture is an authoritative source of moral teaching in that it expresses in some way God's will about how humans should be and act. Catholics also believe that Scripture needs to be interpreted correctly according to the living Tradition of the Church.
  - **Sacred Tradition.** The Catholic Church has particular teachings about ethical issues which need to be considered when making decisions. By knowing what the Church believes and teaches about a particular issue the person is making a concerted effort to inform his or her conscience.
- **Natural Law.** Natural Law is the innate understanding of the human person about what is right or wrong. It is a sense that human beings know when an action is wrong.



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### 3.3 Christian Anthropology

For the Christian, the key to ethics is how we understand ourselves and how people see each other as human beings. The understandings we have about human flourishing reflect the understandings we have of what it means to be human. The basis for this Christian understanding is to be found in Scripture and Tradition.

Christian anthropology begins with key understandings about human nature:

1. God exists.
2. Human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1).
3. By using their intelligence humans know what is naturally right (Natural Law).
4. Human beings are capable of sin (The Fall).
5. In Jesus, God has restored the fullness of life for all people (Redemption).
6. Jesus Christ showed us what it is to be fully human (Revelation).
7. Jesus taught the Law of Love (John 13:34; Matthew 22:34–40).
8. The Christian life is one of Faith, Hope and Love (Theological Virtues).
9. The Church teaches about moral and ethical issues (Tradition).

#### 1. God exists

Catholics believe in the existence of a loving God who gives himself completely and freely. God created and loves all that exists. God invites into communion with God and one another.

#### 2. Made in God's Image and likeness

Catholic ethics is concerned with human beings. In the first account of creation we read,

*God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...  
God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them,  
male and female he created them.  
(Genesis 1:26–27).*

Unlike any other created being we have been given qualities that belong to God: intellect, will, authority, and we are destined by virtue of God's grace to share in God's divine nature. Therefore, if we are to be true to our human nature, our ethical behaviour should mirror the goodness of God.

### Human Dignity

An important principle for Catholic ethical thought is that each and every human person possesses human dignity. The meaning of the phrase 'human dignity' is not easy to explain. To put it as simply as possible, human dignity is the importance, high honour, respect and worth that belongs to a human person – regardless of age, gender, race, education, possessions, etc – simply because he or she is human. In the Christian context it also means the status that belongs to each human person because we are each made in God's image and likeness. We know about this dignity from both Scripture and reason.

This means that anything to do with ethics must consider the human dignity of all the people who are, or are likely to be, involved. For example, we regard bullying as unacceptable, unethical behaviour. We do this because bullying



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does not respect people's dignity, because it attempts to humiliate, hurt or dominate others. Bullying also diminishes the human dignity of the bully. Our dignity as human beings requires that we be neither abused nor abusers.

### 3. Use of human intelligence to know what is naturally right

Human beings have the rational capacity to come to a knowledge of right and wrong, and to make choices accordingly. This awareness is called Natural Law.

### 4. Human beings are capable of sin

While human beings have free-will, a result of The Fall (Genesis, chapter 3) is that human nature, without being totally corrupted is diminished in its natural powers. The consequence of this is that the relationship which God intended to exist between people and their Creator, people and each other, and people and creation, is broken. Catholics call these broken relationships sin. This capacity to sin distorts our ability to judge between right and wrong and consequently human beings need divine guidance.

### 5. In Jesus, God has restored the fullness of life

Jesus' life (incarnation), death and resurrection (redemption) rescues all people and all creation from sin, and reconciles humanity with God. Human beings are called to be like God and strive for goodness in their lives.

### 6. Jesus showed humanity how to be fully human

Through his life, death and resurrection Jesus shows us what it is to be fully human. Our lives, lived in the love of Jesus, can also be sources of goodness and life for humanity and creation.

*I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full.*  
(John 10:10).

### 7. Jesus taught the Law of Love

Love is the animating principle of Christian ethics; in other words, love makes ethics a living thing not a theoretical, abstract idea. Jesus gave us the law of love,

*I gave you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved love you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.*  
(John 13:34).

Jesus also gave us the Golden Rule,

*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*  
(Matthew 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28).

Love is the key that unlocks the way to understanding God, to understanding why we were created, to understanding that when we love and act in love we are being true to our nature and true to our Creator. To behave ethically, therefore, is to put love into action so that whatever we think or do or say will be whatever is best for ourselves and others, whatever maintains and strengthens the relationship between God and ourselves. *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them* (1 John 4:16).

This love is not an idea, a good feeling, nor is it about being nice to people. This love is what Jesus demonstrated in his human life – from the moment he was conceived in Mary's womb to the day he returned to the Father. His whole life is the example of how to live in love; he shows us what it is to be fully human.



## 8. The Christian life is one of Faith, Hope and Love

In Jesus, Catholics have an example of a life lived in faith, hope and love. Catholics believe in the existence of a good and loving God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. They hope for eternal life in the kingdom of God. Because God has loved us we are able to love others.

## 9. The Church teaches about moral and ethical issues

Catholic ethical thinking emerges from reflecting on moral issues in the light of the teachings of Jesus and the living Tradition of the Church community. The Church teaches with the authority of Jesus. Catholic ethical teaching is continually addressing contemporary issues facing individuals and society. These teachings are found in a number of places including papal encyclicals, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in the statements of bishops.

One of the key areas of ethical concern in recent years is around the belief in the human dignity of the person which is under threat by abuses of technology and selfish actions of individuals and groups. Thus The Church has developed a way of expressing the need to support and enhance the dignity of the person across a variety of situations in statements on the consistent ethic of life.

## A Consistent Ethic of Life

There needs to be a considered consistency of the responses that an individual makes in respect to different areas of their life. It is not consistent to be anti-abortion for example and then to murder someone, even if they are abortion doctors. Cardinal Bernardin (1928–1996) of Chicago, when talking about this need for consistency in ethical decisions, labelled this focus of the pre-eminence of human dignity as the Consistent Ethic of Life.

This way of thinking emphasises the connectedness between all aspects of life and challenges the human tendency to act in a spasmodically ethical manner. This way of consideration calls the individual to respect life in the womb, the life of a criminal, the life of someone dying, in fact the life of everybody no matter who they are or what they have done.

Jesus and how he treated everybody particularly the vulnerable and those not considered of value to society, is at the heart of the consistent ethic of life. There is a challenge in the consistent ethic of life about how the individual acts in their day to day encounters with others. For example, what people say and how they talk to people reflects their basic attitude to life.

The consistent ethic of life also calls people to care for the natural world in its own right and because it sustains and nourishes human life.

*We believe that a Consistent Ethic of Life must be promoted. This places the sacredness of creation and the need to protect and enhance all human life, and the life of our planet on which we depend, as a basic and central moral point of reference.*

*This can act as a counter to the culture of violence which surrounds us. Just as a kahu embraces all that is good and wholesome so the Consistent Ethic of Life forms a canopy of non-violent moral teachings embracing all dimensions of life.*

New Zealand Catholic Bishops  
Conference  
A Consistent Ethic of Life:  
Te Kahu-o-te-Ora 1997



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## 3.4 A Māori Perspective

*Ko tōna mea nui he tapu.*

(One's greatest possession is tapu.)

An understanding of Te Ao Māori can add greatly to the effectiveness of what we – Catholic people living in Aotearoa – do and how we worship God. It also adds insights that can contribute significantly to our efforts to live ethical lives.

Tapu is an extremely important concept in Māori spirituality. It is variously translated as sacred, holy, forbidden, restricted, set apart. These English words are helpful to understanding tapu. A second and closely related concept is mana. This word is often translated as prestige, authority, power, influence, status, spiritual power. The relationship between the two is so close that sometimes the words are used interchangeably.

All interactions between people and God, people and people, people and creation, involve tapu and mana. This has implications for people's ethical or moral behaviour. Whatever respects tapu and enhances mana is good and right, whatever violates tapu in any way or diminishes mana is evil and wrong.

There are important links that we can make between the Māori world view (Te Ao Māori) and the world view of Catholic teaching.



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### Tapu

Tapu comes firstly and most importantly from God (Te Atua). God is the being who is tapu or holiness itself. All the tapu of the entire creation comes from God and belongs to God. Everything, therefore, is tapu - sacred, holy, sanctified, blessed – because all things are created by God, especially human beings who have been created in God's image and likeness.

Tapu also comes from our connections to people (tangata). These connections are those that belong firstly to our genealogy or whakapapa – what connects us to our ancestors, ngā tipuna, and ultimately to Te Atua. Tapu also comes from our belonging to, or associations with, particular people or groups of people.

Thirdly, tapu comes from our links to the land (whenua); to the particular place where we belong and which belongs to us – our turangawaewae or homeland.

There are two important senses or ways in which Māori understand the concept of Tapu.

Tapu in its primary and more important sense is 'being with potentiality for power'. In other words tapu is, firstly, the major characteristic of our existence, our very being. If we were to lose our tapu we would cease to exist and so, for example, the dead still have tapu because they continue to exist. Secondly, it is from their tapu that persons and things derive their spiritual power or mana. In a child, for example, this mana is potential, not yet fully developed. Unlike tapu, mana can be gained or diminished or even lost during a person's lifetime.

In its secondary sense tapu is the extension of the primary tapu of persons and things. It is in this secondary sense that certain things are restricted or



forbidden. For example, a cemetery is a tapu place because the primary tapu of the people buried there extends to include the place itself. The restrictions of tapu in this secondary sense are intended to control the interactions between persons and things, including the environment, so that primary tapu is acknowledged and not violated. For example, visitors to a marae have their own tapu as do the people of the marae. Visitors (manuhiri) are not free to wander onto the marae as they feel like it because that would violate the tapu of the tangata whenua. Instead the ritual of the powhiri is followed: tangata whenua call and invite the manuhiri onto their marae; the manuhiri respond to the call; words of greeting and welcome (whaikorero) are exchanged; manuhiri and tangata whenua share the hongi; food is shared. The ritual of the powhiri acknowledges and respects the tapu of both manuhiri and tangata whenua and allows them to interact freely and safely with each other.

## Mana

Mana is usually translated as the prestige, authority, power, influence, status, spiritual power that someone or something has. Mana and tapu belong together because whatever has tapu will also have mana. This mana may be dormant or undeveloped as in a baby or it may be dynamic and active. As people grow and begin to act their mana will be enhanced or diminished according to the choices that they make and their interactions with the tapu of others.

When people through their attitudes and actions respect and acknowledge their own tapu and the tapu of others, their mana increases. For example, when people show respect for themselves and for other people by being consistently friendly and helpful, their mana will increase. As their mana grows, their tapu with all its potential is being affirmed. With their increase in mana so their power to influence events and to do great things increases. An example is a saintly person like Suzanne Aubert (1835–1926) whose mana grew so great through her actions for orphans and poor people in New Zealand that she was able to achieve great things in her life and, when she died, thousands of people in Wellington turned out for her funeral and lined the streets.

## Three Principles of Action

Tapu and mana are not static, theoretical qualities – they are real and active. Tapu is expressed and mana is enhanced through the attitudes and behaviour people choose to follow. Therefore, because what we do and how we do it are so important there are certain principles of action which, if we follow them, allow us to address tapu and mana in positive and constructive ways. These principles are tika, pono and aroha.

### Tika (justice)

Whatever is correct, right, proper and worthy to be done is tika. Tika means to carry out our duties and obligations to God (Te Atua), to ourselves, to others and to creation. It involves doing what is just and ensuring that justice is done. Tika requires us to find out and know what is right whether it is a matter of natural law or traditional custom or teaching. Above all, tika requires us to do all we can to respect tapu and to avoid whatever violates tapu or diminishes mana – whether it is our own or another's.



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### Pono (integrity and truthfulness)

This principle acts in two ways: firstly it challenges us to act with tika and, secondly, it challenges us to ensure that our actions reflect aroha. It is one thing knowing what is right to do but it is another matter entirely to do the right thing truthfully and with integrity. For example, if we damage someone's property then tika demands that we apologise and repair the damage; but pono demands that we apologise gracefully without any delay and that we repair the damage not simply to what it was like but as good as new.

It is also pono that insists that we do what is right even when nobody is around to notice or when we are tempted to avoid doing the right thing because it is too difficult or demanding, or because we are too tired or busy or whatever. For example, it is right – tika – that we should pray to our Creator but integrity and truthfulness – pono – ensures that our prayers are genuine, honest and a regular part of our daily life.

As these examples show, the principle of pono also encourages us to ensure that our actions are not just right but kind, generous and for the good of others.

### Aroha (compassionate love)

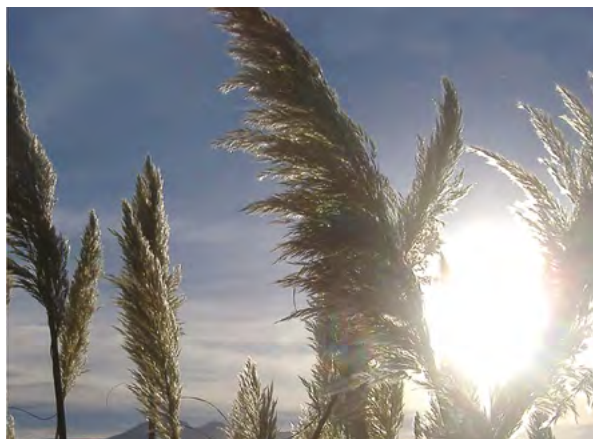
Catholic ethics sets as its standard the love Jesus shows. Aroha is this type of love. Like tika and pono, aroha is not a theoretical ideal but rather it is what we actually do, what we show through our thoughts, words and deeds. Aroha extends to include everybody and everything in creation; it is not limited to family or friends. It is what makes life joyful and ultimately it is what enables us to fulfil our potentiality, our tapu, and to be united with Te Atua from whom all good things come.

## Ethical Implications

In this Māori view, ethics – the principles of right and good conduct – has at its heart tapu and mana. Right and good conduct requires people to act with tika, pono and aroha so that tapu is respected and mana is enhanced. Anything else is less than right and good and leads, at worst, to serious violation, evil and destruction. Ultimately, moral conduct is about the ways in which we relate to Te Atua, God, who is the source of all tapu.

Catholic ethical teaching focuses our attention on our belief, from Scripture, Tradition and reason, that God has created us in his image and likeness. Because we believe that God is love, we know that God has created us in love to love and be loved. We are called to reflect and share God's life; we

are called to live up to our potential by respecting and acknowledging the image of God in ourselves, each other and the whole of creation.



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## 3.5 A Moral Person

Being made in God's image and likeness does not make us perfect. Human beings have a soul, intellect and freewill to make their own decisions. People do not always live up to this ideal but have the disposition to do the right thing and to act justly. It is desirable to be a moral person.

A moral person is a person:

- who is fulfilled and content,
- who reflects on and appreciates his or her life in all its diversity,
- who is both willing and prepared to face up to and to deal with the challenges, problems and sorrows that are an inevitable part of human existence,
- who can escape the prison of selfishness that turns people in on themselves and makes them mean, petty and narrow-minded.

### Virtues and Integrity

When people consider ethical issues they are also asking questions about their own character such as 'what kind of person do I want to be?' and 'What kind of life do I want to try to live?' Humanity's ability to use complex language indicates the reasoning power that humans have and by just looking at the created world there is ample evidence of the human ability to control and remodel the world. Most people have some control over their lives and develop the habits that enable them to live good and productive lives. The development of good habits is essential in that they predispose people to make sound ethical choices.

Virtues are habits that both enable people to distinguish between good and apparent good, and relate to the created world in positive ways. The virtues that an individual brings to a particular situation greatly influences the way in which they see and react to what is going on and its consequences. Virtues are always established and developed within a community that is sometimes referred to as the community of influence and includes the faith community that a person may belong to. The way in which a person is able to relate to others is reflective of the virtues that they hold prominent.

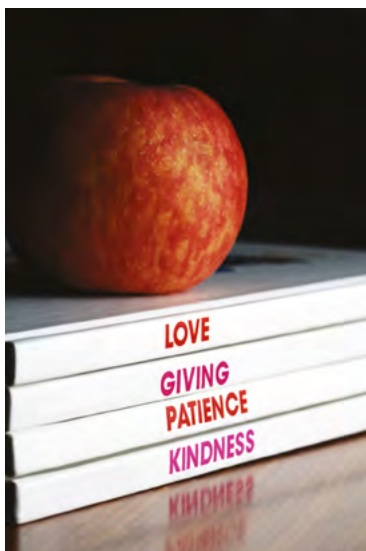
By repeatedly choosing good actions an individual builds up their virtues which become a network of behaviour that is referred to as a person's character. Through developing a positive character a person develops their integrity and personal wholeness because they are making life giving choices. A person with integrity has the ability to act with freedom and without the need to have outward signs of achievement and approval. They are able to make choices based on what is the good and right thing to do.

For a Christian their integrity develops through the practice of the three theological virtues; faith, hope and love. They are called 'theological' virtues because they take us into the heart of God, whereas the other virtues are acquired through practice or habit.



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The Theological virtues	Faith	Trusting in God to provide guidance and for all human need. A belief that God will be present no matter what the circumstances.
	Hope	Being confident that God will help the individuals and the community to make a good future for everyone.
	Love	Choosing to love unconditionally all people and is expressed in action not just word.
The Human Virtues	Prudence	Practical wisdom that enables a person to choose the right action. Right reason.
	Justice	Being fair to all people. Right action.
	Fortitude	Courage to do what is right even when to do so is hard. Standing up to peer pressure and other influences.
	Temperance	Balance and moderation in a person's behaviour. Observing appropriate limits.
The Gifts of the Holy Spirit	Wisdom	The ability to discern God's purpose and will.
	Understanding	The ability to comprehend how a person must live his or her life as a disciple of Jesus.
	Right Judgement	The ability to seek and accept wise advice from appropriate sources including Church teaching.
	Knowledge	The ability to realise the basic meaning and message of the teachings of Jesus.
	Courage	The ability to be strong when making difficult decisions and standing by them.
	Reverence	The ability to honour and respect human dignity.
	Wonder and Awe	The ability to appreciate profoundly God and creation.

## The Characteristics of a Moral Person

Although human beings are unique individuals there are similarities in what characterises moral people.

### Responsible

Moral people are responsible and accept responsibility for their words and deeds. Their sense of responsibility extends beyond their own private concerns to include family, friends, society and the world at large. They are people who contribute to the common good in very many ways. As the word indicates, moral people do not ignore or avoid things; they respond to others, to situations, to needs, to their concerns as well as the concerns of others.

### Open-minded

To be open-minded is to reject actively whatever seeks to limit oneself or other people. Moral people reject discrimination and prejudice. They are tolerant of others' opinions and beliefs whether they share them or not.



They do their best to avoid bias. They are persistent and often courageous in opposing whatever restricts or diminishes the dignity of others.

### **Well-informed**

Moral people take time and trouble to become well-informed so as to avoid the limitations imposed by ignorance. They question their own and other people's attitudes and actions; they look for answers even in awkward, unpopular or controversial situations and issues. They are willing to share their knowledge and insights with others in the interests of truth and understanding.

### **Reflective**

Moral people recognise the importance of thinking carefully and deeply considering the best ways of living life and interacting with others and the world. As we saw in Chapter 6, dealing effectively with ethical issues necessarily involves careful thought and consideration. In order to live a moral life we have to learn to reflect on and to evaluate the decisions we make so that our integrity and our sense of what is right and wrong can develop fruitfully.

### **Obedient to conscience**

A well-developed and informed conscience is the mark of mature and independent people. It allows them to conduct themselves with integrity and to achieve the status of truly free human beings exercising their God-given talents. Moral people listen to their conscience and allow it to guide their decisions and their conduct. Furthermore, they take pains to ensure that their conscience is well-formed, strong and active.

It is important to note that these characteristics are not limited to a certain type or group of people. The possession and exercise of these traits is available to every human being regardless of his or her race, religion, language or culture.

## **Our Catholic Faith**

Unless we have a strong and clear sense of the origin, meaning and purpose of life there seems little to justify spending time and energy on behaving rightly. If there is no such thing as objective truth or goodness, if evil and sin are meaningless myths, then there is no reason for people to behave morally; in fact, the whole idea that certain conduct is moral or immoral ceases to have any importance at all. Reason suggests that such a world would be dangerous, unpredictable and ultimately destructive. In reflecting on this dilemma it is possible to understand the relationship between religion and ethical conduct.

The Catholic Church teaches that there are objective, unchanging, reasonable certainties. It also maintains that truth, goodness, faithfulness, love and all the virtues are objective realities. In other words, it makes no difference whether we and others believe in things like truth and goodness or not – they exist, regardless. In the Christian tradition, these objective realities are ultimately found in God from whom they all flow. God is truth, God is goodness, God is love.

Ethical conduct in the Christian context is precisely that sort of conduct that one would expect from a being created in God's image and likeness. When humans conduct themselves truthfully, honestly and with thoughtful consideration for all other created persons and things, they are doing what



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God does – being truly people of God. This is what ethical conduct makes possible. It is through this sort of conduct that human beings express and realise innate human dignity, tapu and mana, and become the sorts of people that they were intended to be from the beginning of creation.

## Ethical Living

*The whole of human history has been the story of our combat with the powers of evil, stretching, as our Lord tells us, from the very dawn of history until the last day. Finding themselves in the battlefield, men and women have to struggle to do what is right, and it is at great cost to themselves, and aided by God's grace, that they succeed in achieving their own inner integrity.*  
(Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*, 37)

The ethical life, living as a moral person, is not always easy. It needs understanding, courage, and perseverance. Christianity in the Catholic tradition provides an understanding of the ethical life that is firmly rooted in the realities of human existence and in the realities of God's revelation.

## Community Support

Christians are not ethical people in a vacuum. Although individuals make decisions the impact may be far-reaching and some of the information that they use to make their decision will be from the community's wisdom. Although making an ethical decision is complex there is a body of expertise and experience within the Church that can act as a wise guide. Catholic social teaching and other ethical teaching found in such communications as papal encyclicals provide guidance and help in decision making. As the world changes so too does Catholic ethical teaching, although the key ideas can be found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* which acts as a collection point and authoritative reference book.



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## 3.6 Making Ethical Decisions

The Catholic Church believes and teaches that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God with intellect, free-will and the power of self determination. All people are called to discern and make responsible human judgments. Ethical judgments require a systematic and coherent understanding of the issues involved. An important part of this process is conscience.



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### The Importance of Conscience

The Christian tradition has always stressed the important role that conscience plays in our moral life. In modern times this importance has been stressed in Catholic teaching; a typical statement is the following from The Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*,

*Deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Its voice, ever calling them to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells them inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For they have in their hearts a law inscribed by God.*  
(paragraph 16).

Conscience is where the individual is alone with God and where God's voice can be heard. This is not to say that people can do anything as long as they think it is right and feel OK with it. Conscience is the complex voice of human values and convictions that direct a person to making wise choices with integrity. An ethical decision needs to be made using an informed, developed conscience. This requires a proactive attitude towards forming conscience.

### What is Conscience?

Conscience is the capacity of human reason that makes judgements about right and wrong. It is the ability to reflect on possible courses of action and to work out the correct decision to make in a given circumstance. Conscience directs our choices; it is the voice of our values and convictions. In using their conscience people are able to understand principles of ethics, apply these principles in a given circumstance and to make a judgement about their actions.

### An Informed Conscience

An informed conscience is not about making a choice of this action over another based on one's sincere beliefs without consultation with a broader community of wisdom, nor is it about just doing what the Church or some other external body says to do.

Conscience is about making a reasonable judgement about a situation with full knowledge about its nature and consequence. The human conscience is formed in a number of ways:

- **Sacred Scripture.** The Word of God.
- **Sacred Tradition.** Church teaching. By knowing what the Church knows



and teaches about a particular issue the individual is making a concerted effort to inform their conscience.

- **Natural Law.** The innate understanding of the human person about what is right or wrong.
- **Values of family and culture.** Family and culture influences the importance that individuals place on certain aspects of life and what view of life a person has. These in turn mould how people see right and wrong.
- **Christian values.** As well as the values absorbed from their family and culture the individual absorbs a sense of right and wrong from the religious upbringing that they have. For Christians this is centred in Christ and the values that Jesus demonstrated in word and deed.
- **Catholic views about human dignity.** The consistent ethic of life is a strong expression of how Catholics view the dignity of the human person and the Church's understanding of people as spiritual beings with the freedom to choose for the good in rational and creative ways.

## The Primacy of Conscience

Catholic teaching emphasises the primacy of conscience as the ultimate guide for making ethical decisions. Once a person's conscience is informed it must determine his or her actions. However, the judgement of conscience does not necessarily guarantee that a person is doing the objectively right thing.

*People are obliged to follow their conscience in all circumstances and cannot be forced to act against it.*

(John Paul II, World Day of Peace, 1999).

## Conscience is not a feeling

Conscience is not a feeling. The fact that the person feels that something is right or wrong, or that they experience happiness or unease as the result of a particular action does not necessarily mean that their conscience is telling them something. Feelings, whether pleasant or unpleasant are morally neutral and in themselves are not reliable indicators of the ethical status of particular actions.



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## The exercise of Conscience

The exercise of conscience is a process whereby a person is led to make a judgement about the right course of action. It concludes with the self-evaluation of the action.

- a. Desire to know the good – proactive
- b. Discernment of the particular good – alternative and reasons
  - i. Analysis of the situation
  - ii. Gathering of information and seeking wise advice
  - iii. Reflection on consequences
- c. Judge the right action – do this, shun that
- d. Self-evaluation – post action reflection

## Making Choices

In any issue involving ethics and morality, we are wise and sensible when we allow our conscience to prompt our conduct and when we act upon those promptings. Every day we have to make decisions. Most of these decisions are probably not morally significant. However, we need to be aware that our attitudes and behaviour may well involve questions of ethics. For example,



a single argument with someone is unlikely to be morally wrong, however, if we find ourselves constantly arguing with people then it is time to consider whether such behaviour is morally justified.

During the course of our lives, apart from routine daily decisions, we will need to make important decisions affecting our lives and those of others: educational and career choices; who we will choose as our friends; whether we will commit ourselves to the single life, marriage or religious life; how we will treat other people; and so on. Typically these are not spur-of-the-moment decisions and they do involve questions of right and wrong.

### Human action

Human beings have the ability to make decisions about their actions. There is a distinction to be made between a human act and the act of a human person. Human acts are freely chosen actions for which the person carrying out the act may be morally responsible. An example may help the distinction. A person driving a car unintentionally skids on gravel and hits an oncoming car. This is clearly the act of a human person, where the driver may not be held morally responsible. If the driver was intentionally speeding (a human act) and failed to take a corner and hit an oncoming car this is the act of a human person, where the driver may be held morally responsible. The distinction is that the human act is an ethical response where the person has freedom and knowledge.

### Ethical Issues

An ethical issue is a situation in which there are important and far-reaching questions about right and wrong. For example, confidentiality is an important ethical element in doctors' work because it involves the relationship between doctors and their patients and the right of patients to privacy and dignity. However, this confidentiality could become an ethical issue if the parents of a teenage patient asked his or her doctor for confidential information about their child.



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Ethical issues are always going to be difficult to resolve. It is easy to give a quick answer to issues like that of doctor/patient confidentiality mentioned above. In reality ethical answers or decisions are not easy to make; they require careful thought and reflection. This is where a basic set of guidelines can be very helpful.

Guidelines indicate to us the way to go. They alert us to considerations that we might forget or be tempted to ignore. They also allow us the opportunity to reflect before we act. The following five guidelines or steps are neither new nor original but they are clear and practical and assist us in applying a Christian perspective to making ethical decisions.

### A Process of Ethical Decision-making

- Step 1 – Define the issue
- Step 2 – Seek advice, information and guidance
- Step 3 – Reflect honestly on the proposed action itself and its consequences
- Step 4 – Pray for God's guidance
- Step 5 – Decide and act





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### **What does each step involve?**

Ethical issues nearly always involve our emotions and they can give rise to very strong and often conflicting feelings in the people involved. It is important, therefore, to follow a step-by-step process which acknowledges people's feelings but does not allow those feelings to dictate our choices and actions. At each step there are questions to be considered.

#### **Step 1 – Define the issue**

We cannot begin to make an ethical decision or to take effective action in an ethical issue until we know what the whole situation involves. Therefore, the sorts of questions we need to ask at this stage are these:

- What exactly is the issue under consideration? What is happening? When? Where? How? Why? What do I need to know? Some issues are more easily understood than others.
- How morally important is the decision? Some issues are more serious than others.
- What values are involved? E.g. Trust, fairness, respect, loyalty...?
- Are two or more values in conflict?
- Who has a stake in the decision? Be honest and open-minded here.
- What are the relationships between all the parties, including me?
- Do these relationships bring special obligations or expectations?
- What are my motives for acting one way or another?
- Are rules or laws involved; if so, what are they and how do they apply to this situation?

#### **Step 2 – Seek advice, information and guidance**

There is a proverb that says 'Two heads are better than one'. Ethical decisions are not simply matters of personal preference; they involve important matters of right and wrong. They also influence and affect the relationships between ourselves, God, others and creation. For these reasons, common sense and wisdom urge us to gain advice and support from others especially when we are dealing with ethical issues. The sorts of questions we need to ask at this stage are these:

- Who are the people who could help me in my decision?
- Is confidentiality involved?
- How would my family advise me to act?
- What would my friends and community say I should do?
- How would Jesus advise me – what would he do or say?
- What does the Bible say about this situation? For example, how could the Ten Commandments, Beatitudes, Golden Rule, the Great Commandment help me to make a good decision?
- What is Church teaching in this matter?
- What are all the possible choices I could make in this situation?
- What options are available to me and to other involved people?
- Do I know of any similar situations? If so, what action was taken and was it a good decision?
- Might I have to disregard a rule or law? Could I justify following or disregarding a rule or law?
- Who has the knowledge and experience to advise me in this situation?
- What is my conscience telling me?



### Step 3 – Reflect honestly on the proposed action itself and its consequences

Sometimes, although we may be reasonably certain that a particular course of action is right, we are unwilling to carry it out and we may wish to settle for something easier or less threatening. This is where honest reflection is important and honesty requires us to take a good, hard look at the likely consequences of our decisions. These are the sorts of questions to ask ourselves:

- Have I made a creative and positive effort to deal with this situation?
- What are the likely positive consequences, short- and long-term, of my decision?
- What burdens may result from my decision – for myself and others?
- If there are alternatives, which one could have the best overall consequences for everyone?
- What is my gut feeling?
- If I carry out this decision, would I be comfortable telling my family or teacher or clergyman or my mentors what I have done?
- Would I want children to take my conduct as an example?
- Is this decision one which a wise, informed, honourable person would make?
- Can I live with this decision?
- Will this decision respect people's human dignity?
- Does this course of action treat everyone equitably and morally?
- Does this course of action advance the common good?
- Is this the most loving response I could make in this situation?

### Step 4 – Pray for God's guidance

The will of God, what God wants, is that we should love and serve God faithfully and wholeheartedly and that we should also love everyone else in the same way as we look after ourselves. Whenever, then, we are faced with challenges to doing this, God is there to support and encourage us. This is why this step is an important part of a decision-making process. Remember Jesus' words: *In all truth I tell you, anything you ask from the Father he will grant in my name* (John 16:23).

Consider these questions:

- How is God present in this situation?
- How is God with me as I work out what I should do?
- What help do I need from God? Do I need to pray for courage or patience, or...?
- Have I asked the Holy Spirit to help me to a wise decision?
- Have I honestly tried to do what God wants?
- Am I relying on God and trusting in God's support?

### Step 5 – Decide and act

There is a familiar saying: 'Walk your talk'. It is not enough to think about an ethical issue. It is not enough to work out what the right course of action might be. The whole point about ethics is to make sure that we actually DO the right thing, that we ACT. The purpose of the preceding steps is to enable us to reach the point where we can make a decision and carry it out with the confidence that we are doing the best we can.

- What will my decision be?
- Why do I think that this is the best decision I can make?
- How and when will I carry out this decision?
- Get on and do it.



This process was summarised by Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967) the founder of the Young Christian Workers as ‘See, Judge, Act’.

### Finally

We should, of course, never wait to the last minute before dealing with an ethical issue. We need to be well prepared for the big things that we have time to consider deeply. However, we also need to be prepared to deal with the little things that crop up regularly like the way we treat our friends, what we do at parties, how much effort we put into our work and so on. Ethics requires us to be consistent, that is our moral standards, actions, and values should not be contradictory. An important part of our moral development is to uncover inconsistencies in our lives and to modify our behaviours so that they are consistent with our moral standards. This means that we do our best every day to lead ethical lives so that doing good becomes a habit, a normal and valued part of our way of living.



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## 3.7 Applying Ethical Principles

In this section we will examine ethical issues in order to illustrate how to apply the process outlined previously and to clarify how and why such issues are ethical.

### Case Study One: Climate Change

Almost every day the media draw to our attention some new fact or statistic that indicates a radical change in our world's climatic behaviour. Our world environment is changing. Although experts may disagree on the details, the general consensus between scientists and knowledgeable people is that the predictions are accurate. The scale of the problem is very great and specific predictions of what will happen in the decades to come cannot be made with complete certainty. What is certain is that widespread change is a reality.

We do not have the luxury of waiting until we have definite facts and precise predictions. Waiting will simply make the known problems worse and more difficult to deal with in the long run. The time for thinking about action is long gone. Now is when we should be taking active steps to cope with climate change and to minimise its negative effects.

#### Step 1 – Defining the issue

##### Harmful substances

Until recently, carbon dioxide was thought to be the main contributor to climate change. There is evidence that other substances are also harmful.

- Black Carbon Soot, produced by burning coal and diesel fuel, reduces the amount of cloud cover in the sky. Clouds reflect 40 to 90% of the sun's radiation (heat rays) away from earth, so fewer or thinner clouds let more radiation through to warm the earth.
- Sulphur Hexafluoride (SF<sub>6</sub>), an inert gas with industrial, domestic and medical uses, has a heat-trapping potential at least 20,000 times greater than carbon dioxide. Its ratio in the atmosphere is considerably lower than CO<sub>2</sub> but is increasing and its atmospheric lifetime is more than 1,000 years.
- CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) are gases used in aerosol sprays or refrigerants. They are the atmosphere's biggest heat trappers and break down ozone molecules as well. CFCs have been banned from use in many countries but still linger in the atmosphere.
- Nitrous Oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) is a gas found naturally in Earth's soils and oceans but its use in fertilizers, chemical manufacturing, and car emissions has increased its amount in the air. N<sub>2</sub>O both traps heat and reacts to form NO which destroys ozone molecules.
- Methane (CH<sub>4</sub>) is a natural gas emitted by livestock, rice paddies, and wetlands. The use of methane in natural gas and oil production has caused its amount in the air to soar. Methane traps 20 times more heat than carbon dioxide.
- Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) is a natural gas released in the atmosphere by animal respiration and the burning of wood. But the use of CO<sub>2</sub> in factories and refineries has led to a 30 percent increase of the gas in the atmosphere over the last 150 years.

The combined effect of these substances on our global and local environments gives cause for grave concern.



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## Warnings

As long ago as 1994 hundreds of top researchers from more than 80 countries agreed that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas pollutants represent the most important forces that are currently altering the world's climate and overwhelming other forces that can cool the globe.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned in its Climate Change 2007 report that food production will be affected; for example, the growing of plants for bio-fuel production rather than food crops. The resulting changed conditions of trade may well exclude or penalise poor countries as well as increase the risks of disease and poor health due to malnutrition.

The same report advised that in New Zealand climate change is very likely to threaten natural ecosystems, with the extinction of some species. Many ecosystems can be assisted to cope with the effects of climate change by eliminating or reducing non-climatic stresses such as water pollution, habitat fragmentation and invasive species. However there are areas of great concern; for example, increasing urban and rural demand for water has already exceeded sustainable levels of supply.

The report also points out that there are two important dimensions to dealing with climate change. The first is to find ways of lessening the effects of change and to try to slow down rates of global warming. The second dimension is to find ways to adapt to the reality of change. In Australia and New Zealand, we are spending far more money and effort on the first than on the second. Sustainable development for the future needs a better balance between the two, especially as climate change is now so far advanced that any efforts to reduce its effects will take many years to show significant results.

## The reality

We cannot be indifferent to environmental questions. They affect every human individual and every creature on our planet now and in the future. The urgent challenge for us is to promote strong ethical approaches to safeguarding our environment; it is our human duty to look after the world that God has given us.

In 2001 John-Paul II told people at a general audience that if we look at our planet, we immediately see that we have disappointed God's expectations. People, especially in our time,

*have without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric spheres, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken unrestrained industrialization – humiliating the flower-garden of the universe. We must encourage and support the 'ecological conversion' which has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Human beings are not behaving as the Creator's stewards, but as autonomous despots, who at last are beginning to understand that they must stop at the edge of the abyss.*



## Step 2 – Seeking advice

There are numerous international and local agencies nowadays that offer information, advice and suggestions to people and to groups. The Church is one of those agencies and has, at various times, drawn attention to the relationship that exists between human beings and the rest of creation. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century attention has been drawn more and more to people's interactions with the environment and the effects of those interactions. More recent times have seen an increasing concern about environmental issues.

### John-Paul II

John-Paul II made many statements about the importance of “ecological concern” as an essential element in Catholic social teaching. Some quotations from his statements are printed below.

*Man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption. Yet it was the Creator's will that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble “master” and “guardian”, and not as a heedless ‘exploiter’ and ‘destroyer’. The development of technology and the development of contemporary civilization, which is marked by the ascendancy of technology, demand a proportional development of morals and ethics...*  
(The Redeemer of Man: *Redemptor Hominis*, 15)

*...Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. First among these is the indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology. Many recent discoveries have brought undeniable benefits to humanity. Indeed, they demonstrate the nobility of the human vocation to participate responsibly in God's creative action in the world. Unfortunately, it is now clear that the application of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects. This has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations...*  
(World Day of Peace Message, 1990)

*...In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way... Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him...*  
(On the Hundredth Anniversary: *Centesimus Annus*, 37)

*If in his Providence God had given the earth to humanity, that meant that he had given it to everyone. Therefore the riches of Creation were to be considered as a common good of the whole of humanity. Those who possessed these goods as personal property were really only stewards, ministers charged with working in the name of God, who remains the sole owner in the full sense, since it is God's will that created goods should serve everyone in a just way.*  
(The Coming of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium: *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 13)

*...man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question-ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human*



John-Paul II



*ecology" properly speaking – which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life.*

(The Gospel of Life: *Evangelium Vitae*, 42)

### **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has numerous statements about creation and the relationship between people and the world. It reminds us of our duty to respect *the integrity of creation* (paragraphs 2415–18). Its commentary on creation (paragraphs 299–349) emphasises the beauty and magnificence of all that God creates as well as the interdependence and solidarity that exists between all creatures and should be protected.



Benedict XVI

### **Benedict XVI**

Benedict XVI's encyclical: *Charity in Truth: Caritas in Veritate*, draws attention to important aspects of the ecological issues facing us. The document affirms the need for people to commit themselves to an ethic of life. Acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people better able to help each other. By cultivating openness to life, wealthy peoples can better understand the needs of poor ones, they can avoid using huge economic and intellectual resources to satisfy the selfish desires of their own citizens and they can promote instead actions that are morally sound, marked by solidarity and respect for the fundamental right to life of every people and every individual (paragraph 28).

The encyclical draws attention to the connections between ethical issues. The deciding issue in protecting the environment is the overall moral climate of society. When society adopts a lack of respect for human life then the conscience of society will protect neither human life nor the life of creation. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person; when we focus on saving the environment and trample on human beings we reveal a serious contradiction which *demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society* (paragraph 51).

### **Commitment to life**

Human destiny ultimately depends on our ethics and how much they are centred on life. Such ethics always seek to expand, to safeguard and to transmit life. The future of all life on earth lies in our hands and the choices and decisions we make will influence whether life for ourselves and our planet will fulfil its full and true potential.

An urgent task today is for people to be reconciled with all creation, and to carry out faithfully our responsibility to respect and care for God's gifts. We must examine our lives honestly and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed creation through our actions and our failures to act. God calls us to turn away from wrongdoing and to behave in new, life-giving ways.

### **Step 3 – Reflecting on the consequences**

Human greed, violence and selfishness have a destructive impact on people and the environment. Wherever sin and its consequences in the world have fractured our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the whole of creation, reconciliation is needed. We also need to change our ways of seeing the world, of thinking and behaving responsibly to protect earth's finite natural resources.



## Consequences

If we don't act ethically	If we do act ethically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• other people are left in need</li> <li>• limited resources will continue to be wasted</li> <li>• other people's rights and well-being will be trampled on</li> <li>• shortages, famines, ecological disasters will continue and worsen</li> <li>• lower levels of nutrition, health and medical care will occur</li> <li>• richer people and nations will grow richer at the expense of poorer people and nations</li> <li>• there will be increasing global tensions connected with resources like oil and water, and issues like economic migrants and refugees</li> <li>• increasing loss of land to erosion, rising sea levels, salination, desertification and pollution will happen</li> <li>• increasing floods, mud slides, altered weather patterns with their associated hardships for people will occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• we will need to live more simply, moderately and with more self-discipline</li> <li>• non-renewable resources will be protected and the use of renewable resources increased</li> <li>• resources will be shared more fairly between individuals and nations</li> <li>• the common good will be advanced</li> <li>• the life of future generations will be assured</li> <li>• economic and political structures and systems will be more responsive to the needs of people and the planet</li> </ul>

Our personal choices – for example, recycling, waste avoidance, composting, tree planting, car-pooling, responsible water and energy use – are important, but so too are the ways in which economic and political systems are structured. We are challenged to analyse the social structures that force millions to live in squalor, burdened by crippling debt, while a tiny minority accumulate vast wealth from exploiting earth's resources. Although such structural changes need international organisation and cooperation, we each have a responsibility in our own individual lives to make a difference and to carry out our duty to protect the world and to advance the common good.



NCRS

## Step 4 – Pray for God's guidance

Prayer can take many forms but ultimately prayer is our conscientious effort to enable ourselves to focus our minds and hearts on our God who loves and understands us more than we can ever know. It is also very obvious that an issue like climate change is far beyond our individual power to solve – we can do nothing without the help of each other and especially of God. Some formal prayers are printed below.

### Serenity Prayer

*God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.*  
Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)



## Hymn of the Universe

*I live at the heart of a single, unique Element, the Centre of the universe, and present in each part of it: personal Love and cosmic Power.*

*To attain to him and become merged into his life I have before me the entire universe with its noble struggles, its impassioned quests, its myriad of souls to be healed and made perfect. I can and I must throw myself into the thick of human endeavour, and with no stopping for breath. For the more I bring my efforts to bear on the whole surface of reality, the more also will I attain to Christ and cling close to him. God who is eternal Being-in-itself, is, one might say, ever in process of formation for us.*

*And God is also the heart of everything; so much so that the vast setting of the universe might be engulfed or wither away or be creation's dust, which is vitalized by a halo of energy and glory, to be swept away, the substantial Reality wherein every perfection is incorruptibly contained and possessed would remain intact; the rays would be drawn back onto their Source and there I should still hold them all in close embrace.*

Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)



St. Francis

## The Canticle of Brother Sun

*Most High, all powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.*

*To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no one is worthy to mention Your name.*

*Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour! Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom you light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us and who produces varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.*

*Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation. Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned. Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no living man can escape.*

*Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm.*

*Praise and bless my Lord, and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.*

AMEN.

St Francis of Assisi (1181–1226)



### Step 5 – Decide and act

This is, of course, the hardest part to do and the most important. However, there is much that we can do as individuals and collectively. Here are some ideas:

- Clean Up the World: a campaign to inspire communities around the world to clean up, fix up and conserve their local environments
- Plant and look after school or community gardens, especially of edible plants.
- Include creation and environmental themes in the prayer of your family, parish and school communities.
- Become informed about local environmental issues and join or form an action group.
- Write to your local government and Parliamentary representatives to express your concern for environmental issues, and to urge for more effective laws to protect the integrity of creation.
- Buy a re-fillable water bottle and fill it with tap water instead of buying bottled water.
- Educate yourself about where your food comes from, who grew or raised it, and how it was caught or farmed. Ask questions at the grocery store, call the toll-free numbers on packaged food and talk to farmers.
- Switch off lights and appliances that are not in use.
- Close doors and windows when heaters are on.
- Ask retailers for sustainably caught seafood. Let them know there is a demand for seafood that has been caught in a sustainable way.
- Service your motor vehicle regularly; check its exhaust emissions; drive conservatively.
- Support local producers and manufacturers as much as possible.
- Recycle as much as possible.



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## Case Study Two: Personal Use of Alcohol

While it is important to have a framework for looking at ethical issues on a social scale as has been done with the issue of the environment, it is also imperative that individuals making choices use the same level of consideration and awareness. This is where the framework for exploring an ethical issue is personally useful.

### Use of alcohol

Alcohol is a freely available drug in our society. It is morally neutral. In its self it is neither good nor bad. Whether or not it is ethically acceptable to drink or not depends on a variety of factors including the amount that is drunk and the circumstances in which the drinking occurs.

The decision to drink alcohol and the amount to drink is a common choice that people have to make. Due to the circumstance in which the decision is made it is useful and morally responsible to consider the situation before the decision has to be made so that the conscience is able to inform itself. When it comes to responding to an invitation to go to a drinking on Saturday night there may be too little time to consider all the possibilities and consequences of the choice. This limits the maturity and wisdom of the decision.

### Step 1 – Define the issue

Friends of a friend's parents are away and she is having a party at her house. You and your friends are invited to go. There will be no adult supervision and the invitation is to bring all you can drink.

- Alcohol is cheap and readily available to people.
- Alcohol is the main recreational drug used in New Zealand.
- Alcohol is accepted as a normal part of life.
- Alcohol is heavily promoted through advertising and is associated with sporting events and having a good time.
  - Alcohol companies are able to sponsor sporting events such as the Tennis Open.
- The alcohol industry is profitable.
- Alcohol plays a major role in vandalism, assaults, and traffic accidents.
- Many year 13 students are legally able to consume alcohol because they have turned 18.
- Social commentators consider that there is a dangerous teenage binge drinking problem in New Zealand with increasing reports of young people being killed either by abusive drinking of alcohol or road accidents where the driver is intoxicated

### Step 2 – Seek advice

#### Scientific

- Alcohol is a depressant drug, not a stimulant. Alcohol slows down the controlling centres of the brain.
- Alcohol is more dangerous for children and young people than adults.
  - Because of the immature brain (the brain is not fully formed until a person is 25 years old) much less alcohol is required to depress the brain.
- Each person has a different reaction to alcohol depending on size, personality, age, mood and previous experiences with alcohol.
- Too much alcohol can kill a person. This could be due to alcohol poisoning, or long term damage to the stomach and liver.
- Anyone can become an alcoholic. Alcoholism is a dependency and a very serious disease.



- Alcohol affects a person's judgement by slowing down their thinking, self-control and movements. It increases confidence and decrease judgment and sense of responsibility.
- Alcohol is fattening.
- There is no formula for safe drinking for young adults.

### The Catholic Church

- Catholics see all of God's creation as good. Whatever humans create as participants in God's creativity though it can be misused for destruction is never inherently evil.
- Alcohol is part of God's creation, but should be used responsibly and in moderation.

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food of well-aged wines strained clear.*  
(Isaiah 25:6)

*Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise*  
(Proverbs 20:1).

- Drunken excess, along with the use of drugs except for therapeutic reasons is condemned by the Church.

*The virtue of temperance disposes us to avoid every kind of excess: the abuse of food, alcohol, tobacco, or medicine. Those incur grave guilt who, by drunkenness or a love of speed, endanger their own and others' safety on the road, at sea, or in the air.*  
(CCC 2290)

The use of drugs inflicts grave damage on human health and life. Their use, except on strictly therapeutic grounds, is a grave offence. Clandestine production of and trafficking in drugs are scandalous practices. They constitute direct cooperation in evil, since they encourage people to practices gravely contrary to the moral law.  
(CCC 2291)

- Humans need to care for their health as good stewards of the gift of life they have received. This requires a person to take responsible and reasonable attention and care of it, taking the needs of others and the common good into account (CCC 2288).
- Temperance this cardinal (hinge) virtue guides people towards balance and moderation in using what gives pleasure.
  - A temperate person learns to control and moderate the desire for alcohol so that she or he is in control not the desire.
  - Temperance is something that is learnt by practice and reflecting on past situations, good and mistaken choices made.
- A key question to consider is if you accept that we are 'made in the image and likeness of God' how do you treat yourself and others?



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### Step 3 – Reflect on the consequences

Positive	Negative
A lot of friends will be there	Impulsive and risk-taking behaviour
You are responsible you will not over-drink	Accidental injury or death
You have a nominated sober driver	Unwanted and dangerous sexual situations
If you attend you and your friends will look out for one another	Poor decision making
You don't party a great deal	Dependency and serious health problems
You can easily leave if things are getting out of hand	Damage of brain function
It's an opportunity to make new friends.	Crime

### Step 4 – Pray for God's guidance

*God grant me:*

*The serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can change,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

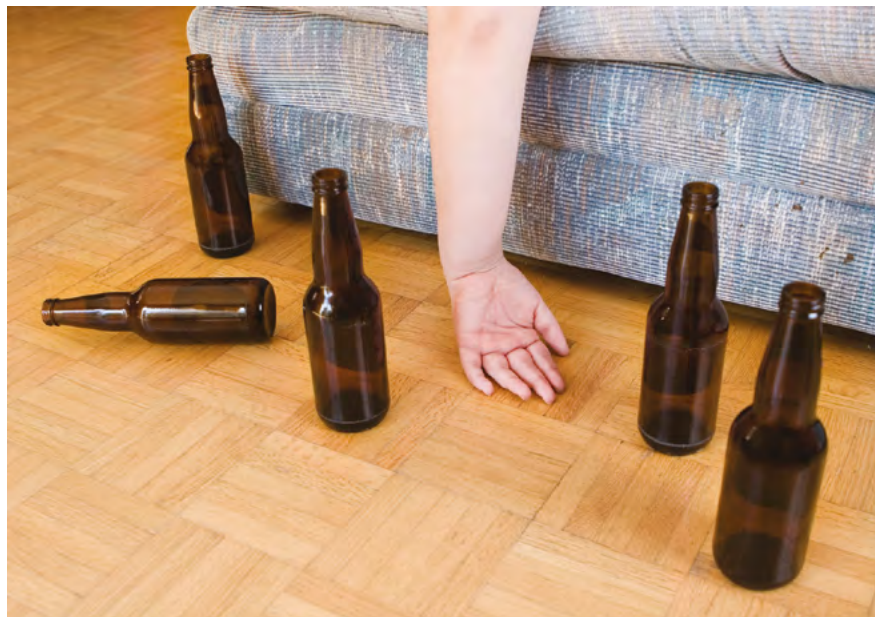
(Author unknown: Prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous)

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*  
Psalm 119:105

### Step 5 – Decide and act

There is a lot more information about the scientific and health risk associated with binge drinking and early patterns of drinking that can be accessed through health professionals or other sources such as the internet.

No one can make this decision for you.



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## Other Areas of Ethics

There are many areas of human endeavour where issues of ethics are raised. These include but are not limited to:

### Bioethics

Bioethics is the field of ethics that asks ethical question about the advances in science and medical technology that can change the way human life is experienced particularly in the areas of health and illness and, ultimately, the way we live.

An example of a bioethical issue is:

What if every child were conceived as a means to prolong the life of other living persons? What would this do to our society and to the self-esteem of children as they progress to maturity?

### Business ethics

Business ethics is a form of professional ethics that examines ethical problems that arise in a business environment. It applies to all aspects of business conduct and is relevant to the conduct of individuals and business organisations as a whole.

An example of a business ethics issue is:

A company that builds obsolescence into its product or designs wasteful and unnecessary packaging for a product.

### Medical ethics

Medical ethics is primarily a field of applied ethics, the study of moral values and judgments as they apply to medicine including issues around the value of human life and death.

An example of a medical ethical issue is:

A terminal patient's claiming the right to die via physician-assisted suicide.

### Scientific ethics

Scientific ethical conduct has two key purposes to assure the reliability of research results and the safety of research subjects.

An example of a scientific ethical issue is:

The scientific research on twins carried out by the Nazis in concentration camp and the use by other scientists of the information that they collected.

### Sexual ethics

Sexual ethics refers to those aspects of ethics that deal with issues arising from all aspects of sexuality and human sexual behavior.

An example of a sexual ethical issue is:

The ethical questioning of the right of any person to create a child in an overpopulated world.

### Sport ethics

There are two dimensions to ethics in sports: the ideal and the effect on society. Equal conditions for all are the sports equivalent of the general moral principle of equal justice for all.

An example of a sports ethics issue is:

The availability of training opportunities to athletes from countries which do not have the money to give to elite athletes as other wealthier countries do. The challenge to whoever has the money to train gets the winner's purse.





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Part 4

# Jesus the Christ



Truly this man was the Son of God.

Mark 15:39

Who is this I hear such reports about?

And he was anxious to see Jesus.

Luke 9:9



## 4.1 Jesus in History

### The Historical Jesus

There are innumerable large and small pictures and statues of Jesus throughout the world. We know that none of them are based on what he really looked like. Some people question whether Jesus ever existed, or if he rose from the dead. Others think that the Gospels are not historical and therefore we can know very little about the historical Jesus. A more important question is the one that Jesus posed to his disciples, 'Who do you say I am?' (Matthew 16:15).

For Christians Jesus the Christ is the focus of our Christian faith. We learn most about the historical Jesus from the Gospels which contain a record of his teaching and information about his life, death and resurrection. However, the New Testament writers were all believers in Jesus. He had made a powerful and lasting impact on them and their first century writings are expressions of their faith rather than historical reporting as we understand it today.

### Non-biblical evidence

There are a number of non-biblical and non-Christian references to the historical Jesus. A significant one is that of Josephus (37–c.100 AD), a Jewish historian. His book 'Jewish Antiquities', written about 94 AD, makes mention of Jesus in the record of events between 26 and 36 AD when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea.

*Now about this time lived Jesus, a wise man, [if indeed he should be called a man]. He was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of men who receive the truth with pleasure, and won over many Jews and Greeks. [He was the Christ.] And when Pilate, at the information of the leading men among us, sentenced him to the cross, those who loved him at the start did not cease to do so, [for he appeared to them alive again on the third day as had been foretold – both this and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him – by the divine prophets]. Nor is the tribe of Christians, so named after him, extinct to this day. (The new complete works of Josephus: Revised and expanded edition © 1999 by W. Whiston (Trans.), p.590.)*

Although some scholars question whether the words in square brackets were written by Josephus himself, it is clear from this text that he certainly understood Jesus to be an historical person who had made a significant impression on the people he met.

There are also three existing Roman references to Jesus.

- **Tacitus**, a historian writing about 116 AD describes the Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians whom he blamed for the great fire of 64 AD which destroyed a large section of Rome. Tacitus explained that Christians *got their name from Christ who was executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate* (Annals, 15, 4).
- **Suetonius**, another historian and lawyer writing in about 120 AD, refers to Jews being expelled from Rome in about 50 AD because they were taking part in riots 'at the instigation of Chrestus' (Claudius, 25, 4). Scholars generally agree that the name 'Chrestus' is probably a reference to Christus or Christ.



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- **Pliny the Younger**, a governor of a province of Asia Minor, wrote to the Emperor Trajan about 112 AD asking what to do with Christians in his province. He described how he put to death those who persisted in their belief in Jesus Christ (Epistola 10,96).

While these Roman writers tell us very little about Jesus, they do accept his historical existence.

However, the New Testament is still our main source of information about Jesus.

### Information from New Testament writings

Historical research examines people's customs and their ways of thinking and behaving. Modern Biblical scholarship combines historical research of biblical times with literary analysis of the biblical writings themselves. In this way it is possible to reach better and more truthful interpretations of Scripture. This method is known as the historical-literary method.

Using this method it becomes possible to understand that the New Testament writings reveal important information about Jesus and what makes him unique; for example, his central message about the coming of the Reign of God, his parables, miracles, moral teaching, his understanding of discipleship, his sense of his own identity, his death and resurrection.

Most scholars agree that **Jesus' basic message** focused on telling people to be ready for the imminent coming of the Reign of God. In proclaiming this message Jesus makes the following aspects clear:

- He had a special and unique relationship to God, whom he addressed as Abba or 'dear Father' (Mark 14:36).
- He saw himself as God's instrument bringing God's power and presence and hope to the Jewish people and further afield (John 14:6).
- This liberation is not through political force, but rather through a radical loving attitude to God and neighbour (Luke 10:25–28).
- His parables and sayings proclaimed this coming Reign of God (Mark 4:30–32).
- His mighty deeds illustrated the power of God liberating humans from suffering and evil (Luke 1:51).
- He saw his death as God's way of bringing salvation to people (John 3:16–18).

The gospels reveal **Jesus' passionate commitment** to his message. This commitment led him to challenge or come into conflict with many of the current values of his culture. For example:

- He spoke of a love without limit that included even one's enemies (Matthew 5:44).
- He preached a forgiveness of 'seventy-seven times seven' (Matthew 18:21–22).
- He made friends of sinners, women, Samaritans, people who collaborated with the Romans, and Gentiles – relationships which defied the 'normal' attitudes to these groups (John 4).
- He confronted Jewish religious leaders about their attitudes and behaviour; this helps to explain their desire to have him executed by the Romans (Matthew 21:28–46).
- The gospels also reveal Jesus' humanity and his Jewish background:
- He experienced fatigue, suffering and pain (John 4:6).
- He got upset and worried (Mark 11:15).
- He showed sympathy and compassion (Matthew 14:14).



- He lived simply, relied on the hospitality of others, travelled on foot (Matthew 27:55).
- He participated in the synagogue services (Matthew 4:23).
- He knew and honoured the Law of Moses and the prophets (Matthew 5:17).
- He fasted and prayed and celebrated the religious feasts as a Jew (Luke 6:12).

## Jesus' World

### What we know of Jesus world

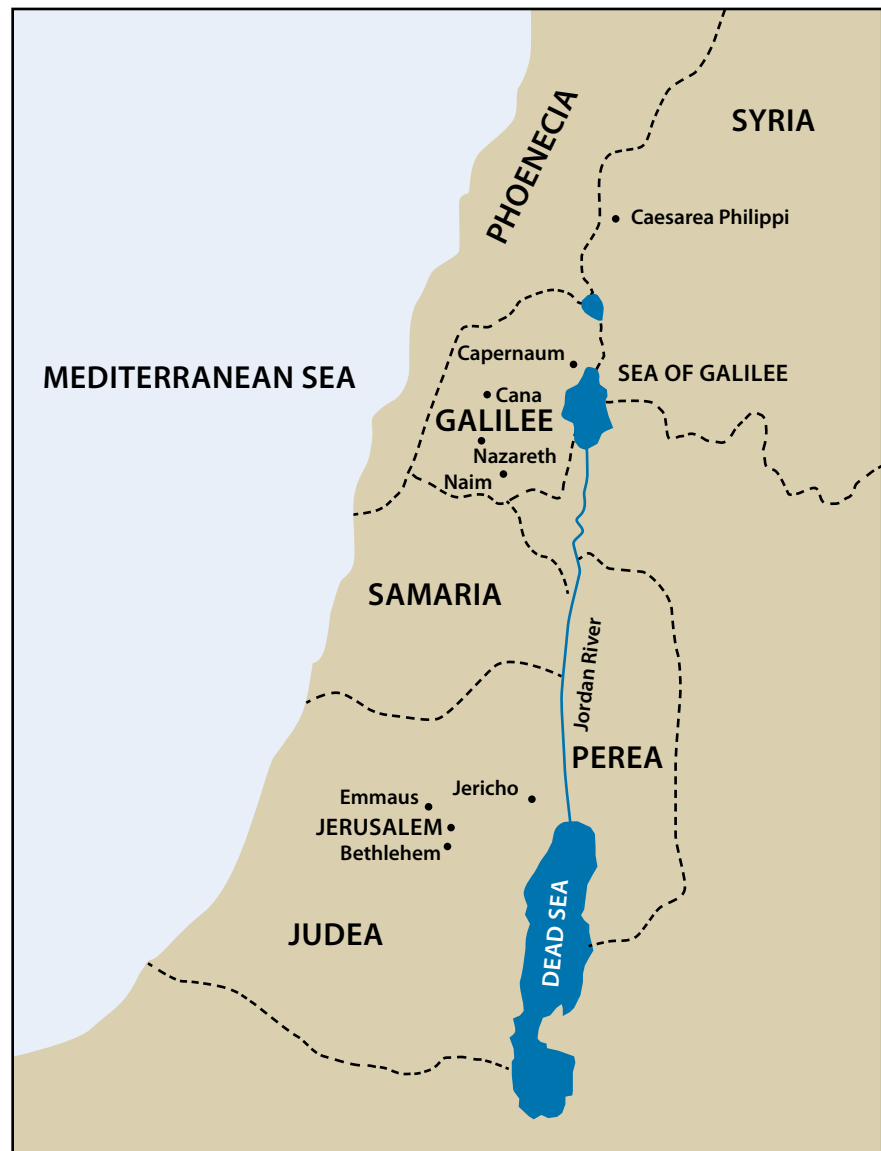
Jesus' world was that of 1st century Judaism. This world with its distinctive languages, history, religion and culture shaped his humanity and way of life. He did not seem significantly different from his contemporaries and even strangers like the Samaritan woman (John 4) and Pontius Pilate recognised him immediately as a Jewish person of his time.

His outlook was based on Jewish religion which was concerned with the relationship of the individual person to God and was also the national religion and way of life. To be Jewish had political, social, cultural and religious implications. The Jews believed themselves to be God's people chosen from all other nations and they expected the coming of a Messiah to restore their dignity as an independent people and nation free from control and occupation by Gentiles.



Map showing the Roman world





*Map of Palestine in Jesus' time*

Archaeological research has revealed a great deal about the buildings and the daily life of the people in the 1st century. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a hill town in the northern province of Galilee. It would have been a stimulating environment. The province was traversed by the major roads running East-West. Merchants brought goods from the East; Roman soldiers and traders arrived from the West. More Gentiles than Jews lived in Galilee. Greek was the commercial language used by people from many nations who came to trade in the towns. It is possible that Jesus spoke a little Greek as well as Aramaic and Hebrew.

Jerusalem was the capital city of Palestine and the Temple was central to the Jewish religion. It was, and still is, a holy city which Jews outside the country dream of visiting at least once in a lifetime. Geographically, it is well placed to be a centre of travel and trade. Archaeological investigations have identified places that Jesus visited and where he was condemned to death and crucified.



Jews of Jesus' time:

- Believed in the one God who had made a covenant with Israel (2 Kings 17:35).
- Hoped that God would step into history to rescue his chosen people from their enemies (Psalm 110).
- Were determined to remain faithful to the covenant obligations of the Law / Torah (Leviticus 18:5).
- Hoped for the coming of the Messiah, an 'anointed' ruler from David's family and foretold by the prophets, who would be the rescuer of God's people (Isaiah 11:1–9).
- Saw the Temple as the focus of national life and hope where God was present with the people (1 Kings 8: 6–9).
- Longed for national independence, a desire strengthened by the harshness of Roman rule and by revolutionary groups like the Zealots (Psalm 137).
- Looked to God to establish the reign of justice and peace according to his promise to Abraham and his descendants (Amos 5:14–15).



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### Historical facts

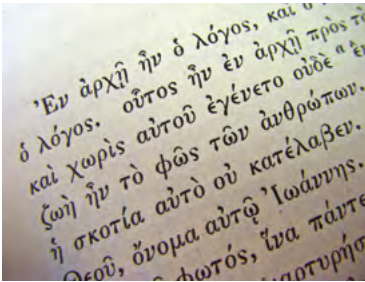
Regardless of what people may believe about Jesus, the following are the facts about his life generally accepted by contemporary Catholic scripture scholars:

- He was born in Bethlehem about 6–4 BC.
- His name was Jesus (meaning 'God saves') and he was known as Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus son of Joseph.
- He spoke Aramaic.
- He lived his early life in Nazareth in Galilee.
- He enjoyed company, conversation and meals with all sorts of people including friends and also those who were marginalised, unacceptable, or regarded as public sinners.
- He spoke of the coming Reign of God.
- He performed mighty deeds.
- The place where he was condemned to death by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, has been located in Jerusalem.
- Calvary and the position of the tomb where he was buried have been located.
- Jesus died about 30–33 AD.

There are many things we would like to know about Jesus and his life on earth. However, it is helpful to remember, firstly, that the historians and important people of his day had either never heard of him or, if they had, did not think him important enough to write about. Secondly, the New Testament writers saw no need to record details of his life which they would have regarded as obvious and, besides, these writers were much more concerned to proclaim his resurrection and his teaching than to provide domestic and personal details. They also considered that the Parousia, the second coming was imminent and thus preparation for that was more important than the details of Jesus life.



## 4.2 Jesus in Paul's Letters



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During his public ministry, Jesus' true identity began to be recognised by his disciples. However, only after his death, resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit did it become clearer that he was indeed God's Son ... *who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord* (Romans 1:3–4).

The disciples were united in the belief that Jesus was alive and that he was the Christ, the fullness of God's promise. This conviction filled them with enthusiasm and the energy to proclaim Jesus and his message to other people. The disciples were not primarily concerned with his biographical details; instead they were passionate about telling their listeners about the treasured words and deeds of the risen Jesus that they now knew had the power to transform lives.

Around 43 AD, about thirteen years after Jesus' resurrection and six years after his own conversion and baptism in Damascus, Paul began the missionary work that would continue until his martyrdom in Rome in about 67 AD. It is his letters which give us the first written records of the new faith in Jesus. Beginning about 50 AD, Paul wrote letters of instruction, exhortation and encouragement to the Christian communities which he had established. He wrote with vigour, passion and excitement about Jesus Christ risen and alive in the Christian community, sharing his gift of eternal life with them.

Paul's letters do not contain a systematic development of his teaching about Christ. Why is this? Firstly, most of the letters were written to the people of a local Church community in response to particular situations which had developed or to questions that they had asked. Secondly, they do not exhaust the subject because they were intended to complement, clarify and emphasise the oral teaching which had already taken place in particular communities. Nevertheless, his letters are a rich source of our theological reflection that contributes significantly to our understanding of Jesus.

Paul knew something about the historical Jesus but what he knew made him at first a fierce opponent of Jesus' followers. He was an approving witness when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death (Acts 7:55–8:3). When Paul's conversion took place he was actually on his way to Damascus with authority from the high priest to arrest any Christians he could find there (Acts 9:1–2). He established a reputation for the intensity and violence with which he persecuted Christians (Acts 8:3; 9:13–14, 21, 26; 26:9–11; Galatians 1:13, 23). Something happened on the road to Damascus that completely changed the direction of his life.

### On the Way to Damascus

Both Luke in Acts (9:5, 17) and Paul himself in a letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:1) affirm that Jesus appeared to Paul and identified himself as the one whom Paul was persecuting. Soon after, Paul was baptised in Damascus by Ananias and spent the next few years there and in Arabia and Antioch before setting out on the first of his missionary journeys.

### Facts About Paul

- Born in Tarsus in what is now Turkey about 10 AD.
- A tent maker by trade.
- Educated in Jerusalem.
- No evidence that he met Jesus before his experience on the way to Damascus.
- Probably discussed the death and resurrection of Jesus with the Sanhedrin at the time of Jesus' death.
- Persecuted early Christians until his conversion about 37 AD.
- Showed knowledge of the apostles' teaching tradition.
- Part of both the oral and written stages of the teaching of the Good News of Jesus.
- Leading figure of the move to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles.
- Undertook a number of missionary journeys.
- His letters, written about 50–67 AD are an important part of the New Testament.
- Executed in Rome between 62–67 AD.



This revelation of the risen Lord had a profound impact on Paul's life and understanding:

- Firstly, it led to his firmly-held belief, shown for example in his concern for gentiles, that the salvation Jesus achieved by his death and resurrection is intended for all human beings without exception. Jesus is the saviour promised by God.
- Secondly, he understood that Jesus was the promised Messiah who, burdened by the sinfulness of the world and unjustly condemned to a shameful and demeaning death, nevertheless transformed evil and death by the power and glory of his resurrection. Jesus destroys sin and death.
- Thirdly, Paul realised that with the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus (the paschal mystery) God's plan for the world and humanity has been finally accomplished. Jesus gives a new and glorious life to believers now that he has established the new age of God's Reign that will be fully realised when he appears again in glory.

### Christ is the centre

The one constant in, and the key to, all Paul's teaching is Jesus Christ. This passage formulates his message well,

*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*  
(1 Corinthians 1:21–25).

Paul came to understand that Jesus was his Lord and saviour through a deep realisation that Jesus has risen from the dead and lives on in his Church and in all who believe in him. His writings focus on Jesus Christ who is the 'Son of God' and 'Lord' and is alive and living in his Church, the community of believers. Paul's understanding of Jesus developed and grew throughout the years of his Christian ministry and especially his understanding of Jesus' importance in God's plan of salvation. The history of this plan can be summarised in three periods:

1. **From Adam to Moses:** Human beings rejected the invitation to live in the harmonious and cooperative relationship that God planned at creation. Sin and pain entered the world bringing confusion and helplessness. As Paul puts it in Romans 5:12–14,

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.*

2. **From Moses to Christ:** The Law (Torah) is given to Moses so that people may order and direct human behaviour so as to live virtuous and upright lives pleasing to God. However, says Paul, the Law has been ineffective in freeing people from sin and death (see Romans 3:20–22). The Law gives information to people and condemns people who break it but it cannot give the spiritual strength that people need in order to prevent sin and to overcome its effects upon them.



*Conversion of St Paul, 1601, by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), oil on canvas, 230x175 cm. Santa Maria del Popolo, Cerasi Chapel, Rome.*

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3. **From Christ to the '*parousia*' and the 'end':** This period began with Jesus, the Son of God, who has replaced the Law of Moses with the law of Christ – the law of love (Romans 14:9-10). Jesus has broken the power of sin and death and the final stage of the history of salvation – the Messianic Age – has begun. The visible return of Jesus on the 'last day' will mark the end of this period and the final realisation of God's purpose (1 Corinthians 15:22–28).



*St. Paul*

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## 4.3 Jesus in the Gospels

### Are the Gospels Historical?

The word gospel comes from the Old English phrase *'god spel'* which means 'good news or tidings' and is a translation of Latin *'evangelium'* and the original Greek *'euaggelion'* both of which also mean good news or tidings. The good news is that Jesus has redeemed us from sin and death. The Gospel according to Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, begins,

*The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ ...*

The four canonical Gospels are called gospels because they record the foundations of early Christian faith in Jesus the Christ who showed God's love in word and deed, died for our sake, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. The gospels are the good news about how the Reign of God has entered into human history and their primary purpose is to proclaim that faith so that others may believe in the Risen Saviour and his message of eternal life. The focus, therefore, of the gospels is not historical but theological; in other words the gospels are about God and, revealed in and through Jesus, about God's relationship to human beings and the universe.

However, the four Gospels are historical in the sense that they tell us of the life and message of Jesus. The gospels record many events in the life of the historical Jesus. Indeed, if Jesus were not historical there would be no point at all in writing them. The events of Jesus' life were remembered in the light of the experience of the Resurrection. They were developed, written and first used in communities that included people who could verify from first-hand experience the things the gospels recorded.

The Gospels come to us by way of a three-stage historical process:

1. During his lifetime Jesus proclaimed the good news in his life, teaching, death and resurrection.
2. After his resurrection and ascension the apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, witnessed to his life and teaching and developed their message and preaching into what we call the apostolic tradition.
3. The evangelists (gospel writers), inspired by the Holy Spirit, made use of the sources and content of the apostolic tradition to write the gospels.

	c.6 BC – c.27 AD	Birth of Jesus and the 'hidden' years in Nazareth.
<b>Stage 1</b> Life and Teachings of Jesus	c.27 – 30	Jesus preaches, teaches, works miracles, attracts followers, is arrested, crucified, rises from the dead.
<b>Stage 2</b> The Oral Tradition	30 – c.64	Early Church: Pentecost, missionary activity, stories, miracles, especially about the passion, death and resurrection, parables and sayings of Jesus remembered, shared, spoken about, collected, passed around; Paul's first letters written.
<b>Stage 3</b> The Written Gospels	c.64 – 70	Mark's gospel written.
	c. 70 – 80	Matthew and Luke's gospels written.
	c. 95 – 100	John's gospel written.





As a result of this process four gospel 'portraits' of Jesus have emerged:

- 1 **Mark** presents Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God who, as the suffering Son of Man, dies and rises again for all.
- 2 **Matthew** writes about Jesus the authoritative teacher, the Messiah who fulfils the Old Testament Law and prophets in humble obedience to the will of God.
- 3 **Luke's** Jesus is the compassionate prophet, concerned for Gentiles, the poor and the outcasts, who proclaims a gospel that embraces the themes of mercy and forgiveness, salvation for all, the importance of the poor, selfless discipleship, prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and joy in following Jesus.
- 4 **John** portrays Jesus as the Word of God, the Son of God through all eternity, who has become human in order to enable us to share in his divinity and who is a living presence in the community of believers or church gathered in his name.

The gospel writers had to meet the challenge of portraying a person who was truly human and truly divine. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they chose words and deeds from Jesus' life and from their sources which would be most appropriate for their particular audiences and their particular purposes. The gospels are, of course, literary compositions but they do contain genuine experiences and memories of Jesus. The gospel writers and their communities selected these and presented them as witnesses to, and explanations of, the mystery of Jesus the Christ. The differences between the gospels are not, therefore, examples of inaccuracies or fiction; instead they provide us with different facets or 'takes' of the same person and his message so that our understanding of Jesus and his message is broadened and enhanced.

## The Gospels and Jesus' Origins

When Jesus was born no one apart from his immediate family would have paid much attention to his birth. At least fifty years later, when the gospel writers began their task, the historical details of Jesus' birth and growing up were not as important to them as the details and significance of his teaching, death and resurrection. Only Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives and in their accounts they are trying to show that the risen Jesus was unique from the very beginning of his human life on earth.

Matthew in his gospel states implicitly that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived,

*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*  
(Matthew 1:20).

More explicitly in Luke's gospel we read,

*Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'*  
(Luke 1:34–35).

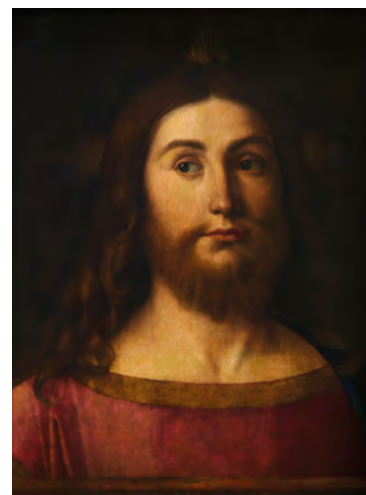
John's gospel alludes to Jesus' conception in the first chapter,

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth.*  
(John 1:14).



Mark's gospel is silent about the origins and birth of Jesus and begins with the proclamation of John the Baptist.

The three gospels that mention Jesus' conception are describing the mystery of the Incarnation. The word Incarnation means God in Jesus becoming bodily human. This begins with his conception in his mother's womb just like any other human being. However, the significant difference is that no human father contributes to his conception. The power of God, with Mary's agreement, causes the conception of Jesus to take place and so Jesus is both human through his mother and divine through God's direct action. Jesus' virginal conception came about because God freely wanted it and Mary freely consented to it. The Incarnation was entirely a free gift from God. John's reference, simple as it seems, is making a tremendous statement: that the eternal infinite Word, the ultimate and complete revelation of God, becomes exactly one of us, a human being in every single respect except sin (see Hebrews 4:15).



*The Saviour* by Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430–1516)

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/ GETTY IMAGES

## How do the Gospels Identify Jesus?

The first followers of Jesus were united in their central belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Starting from the first Pentecost they took up the challenge to preach and witness to the risen Jesus and his message (Matthew 28:20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47–48; John 15:26–27; Acts 1:8). In giving witness to Jesus among people who did not know him or who were hostile to their message, the early Christians were forced to reflect deeply on the words and deeds of Jesus. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, their reflection on how to understand and interpret Jesus led them to focus more carefully on explaining who and what he is. One consequence of this deep reflection was to identify and apply titles to him that were then used by the gospel writers.

Some of these titles may never have been used to address Jesus in his lifetime. Some titles that were used took on new and richer meanings as people's understanding of Jesus became clearer and deeper.

### Lord

This English word translates the Greek word *kyrios*. In ordinary use it was a term of respect applied to people in authority. For Jewish people in New Testament times it already had a religious meaning. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek early in the 3rd century BC, the word *kyrios* (Lord) was used to denote the Hebrew *YHWH* put in Hebrew (the sacred name of God). This name was so sacred that, although it was written, it was never spoken; the Hebrew word *adonai* (my Lord) was used instead.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension and after Pentecost the word *kyrios* (Lord) is applied to Jesus in its sacred sense. It expresses the belief of the early Church that divine power and authority belonged to him. One example of this is Thomas' acknowledgement when he met Jesus after the resurrection, *My Lord and My God!* (John 20:28). This title, the same one used for God in the Old Testament, witnesses to the Christian belief that Jesus is divine and one with God.

### Christ – Messiah

The English word Christ comes from the Greek word *Christos* which translates the Hebrew word *messiah* which means the 'the anointed'. The people of Jesus' time had several different ideas of what a messiah would be like. The Hebrew

### Titles of Christ

**Alpha and Omega**

*Revelation 1:8, 22:13*

**Beloved**

*Matthew 12:18*

**Bread of life**

*John 6:35*

**Bridegroom**

*John 3:29*

**Gate of the sheepfold**

*John 10:7*

**Good shepherd**

*John 10:11, 14*

**Holy one of God**

*Acts 2:27*

**I Am**

*John 8:58*

**Light of the world**

*John 8:12*

**Rising sun**

*Luke 1:78*

**Stone rejected**

*Matthew 21:42*

**Teacher**

*Matthew 8:19, 23:11*

**Word of God**

*Revelation 19:14*



prophets had frequently reminded the Jews that they were God's chosen people and assured them that God would be faithful to his promise to be with them in their sufferings and to free them from oppression. However, many were waiting for a messiah who would enable them to regain political independence and to restore Israel to what it had been in the days of David and Solomon.

This title is frequently used in the gospels and appears to have been applied to Jesus during his public ministry. He appears to have been reluctant to allow people to call him the Messiah, probably because his idea of 'the anointed' was very different from that of his disciples and of the people. While Jesus does not reject the title of Messiah, he does insist that his role is rather that of the suffering Son of Man (see Mark 8:31–33; Luke 9:22). The gospels' use of the title reflects the Christian belief that Jesus is the one promised by God, the fulfilment of Jewish hopes, the descendant of David, who has come to save humanity from sin and death and to inaugurate the Reign of God. In the gospels Jesus is referred to as the Christ so often that the title becomes almost a surname.

### Son of Man

In the gospels the title 'Son of Man' appears more than eighty times. It is the usual phrase when Jesus is referring to himself. Its simple meaning is 'an individual human being'. It also has the sense of the one 'like a son of man' coming on the clouds of heaven who is described in the Book of Daniel (7:13). The use of the title emphasises the Christian belief that Jesus is a human being who must suffer and die but rise again and return later in glory to complete the establishment of the Reign of God.

### Son of God

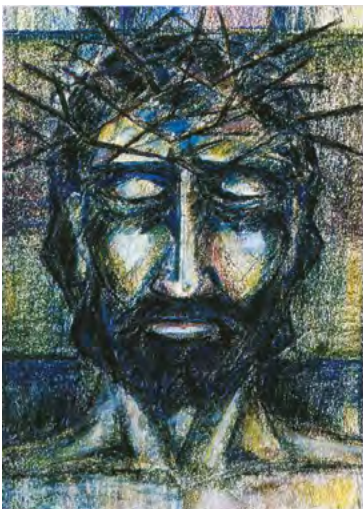
The title Son of God had religious meaning in Jewish history. The king of Israel was regarded as the adopted son of God, a person specially chosen to rule God's people with authority from God. As a member of God's people each Israelite was also considered to be a son or daughter of God. In the gospels Jesus is recognised as a person favoured by God in this way but also, since he speaks and acts with such authority from God, the title is developed to recognise Jesus' unique relationship with the Father (Matthew 14:33; Luke 22:70; John 11:27).

### Saviour

In the gospels this title is found only in Luke and John but the idea of Jesus as a saviour is already to be found in his name Jesus itself which literally means 'God saves'. This title and its use are significant because, firstly, it is a title used for God in the Old Testament (Isaiah 43:3) and, secondly, only God has the power to save. Therefore, when this title is applied to Jesus it emphasises not only that he does the work of God but that he possesses the divinity of God who alone can save us from sin and death. This title is similar to the term 'Lord' in what it says about Jesus.

Elsewhere in the gospels, although the title is not specifically used, Jesus' words and deeds point to his saving role. For example, Luke 4:14–22 records a significant event in the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus read from the book of Isaiah (61:1–2) and applied the text to himself. This reading is of particular significance because it describes the characteristics of a saviour,

*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*



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*and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

Similarly, in Matthew 1:21 we read that Jesus is the one who is to save his people from their sins. John 3:17 gives these words of Jesus,

*She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

In John 12:47 Jesus says, I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

When Luke records Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus the tax collector (19:1–10), Jesus responds to Zacchaeus' welcome and to his decision to make amends for the wrong he has done by saying,

*Today salvation has come to this house.*

## God

One important thing distinguished the people of Israel in Old and New Testament times. This was their firm, uncompromising monotheism. The daily Jewish prayer begins,

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone...*  
(Deuteronomy 6:4).

To even suggest that there might be more than one God or that a person could be God would be shocking and blasphemous. However, by the time that John's gospel came to be written Jesus' followers clearly acknowledge him as God.

At two key times, John's gospel clearly identifies Jesus with God; at the start,

*In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God*

and at the end when Thomas says to the risen Jesus,

*My Lord and my God!*

However, as we have seen in the discussion above, it is clear that the gospel writers and the Jewish Christian communities believed that Jesus is what only God can be and do. For example, Jesus saves people from their sins, he rises from the dead, he is worshipped as God, and he is the 'face of God',

*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...*  
(John 14:9).



*The Marriage at Cana, illustration from 'The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ' (w/c over graphite on paper), Tissot, James Jacques*

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S. OWEN

## Old Testament Prophecies about the Messiah

The Gospels present Jesus as the Christ whose coming fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah in the Old Testament. Some of these are:

Prophecy of the Messiah in the Old Testament	Fulfilled in Jesus Christ
He shall descend from the royal line of David. 2 Samuel 7:8–16; Isaiah 9:6	Matthew 1:6, 16
He shall be born Emmanuel, of a virgin. Isaiah 7:14	Luke 1:34–35
He shall be born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:1
He shall come out of Egypt. Hosea 11:1	Matthew 2:14–15
He shall be a Galilean. Isaiah 9:1–2	John 7:40–42
A messenger will prepare the way. Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1	Matthew 3:3
He shall teach using parables. Psalm 78:2	Matthew 13:10–11
He shall preach the Reign of God as a vineyard taken from Israel. Isaiah 5:1–7	Matthew 21:33–46
He shall be rejected as a stone by the builders. Psalm 118:22	Matthew 21:42
He shall be a Suffering Servant bearing our infirmities. Isaiah 53:4	Mark 9:12

## What do the Gospels say was Jesus' Purpose?

### To establish the Reign of God

At the heart of Jesus' identity, his mission, message and all his words and actions is the idea of the Reign of God. This idea was familiar to the people of Israel but Jesus brought a new understanding to it.

Whenever people tried to make Jesus a king or political leader, his responses make it clear that he did not intend to establish a political state in opposition to the Roman Empire. Instead he urged people to make a change of heart: to turn away from being selfish and to become open to the love of God and love of neighbour. The closest he came to making political statements was in his references to the Reign of God.

In Luke 4:43 Jesus says, *I must proclaim the good news of the Reign of God...* the Reign which he says is close at hand (Mark 1:15). This Reign of God that Jesus proclaims involves relationships, not just between individuals and God, but between each person and God and everyone else. The Reign of God is a new order based on unconditional love for one another, on forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation. The Reign of God is a process that brings



people from slavery to freedom, from sin to goodness, from the darkness of not understanding into the light of truth, from death to life.

In proclaiming God's Reign, Jesus identifies himself with the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah's prophecies. This image refers to a theme of a humble and faithful servant of God who suffers to bring God's salvation to the world which links four sections of the book of Isaiah: 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12. The evidence of God's Reign, says Jesus, is plain to see,

*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers\* are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.*  
(Luke 7:22).

## To give life

In John's gospel (10:10) Jesus says, *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*. In this context the raising of Lazarus from the dead is particularly significant. It is on this occasion that Jesus makes this statement (John 11: 25–26), *I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die*. This theme of life runs constantly through the gospels in Jesus' preaching and in many of his miracles.

## Summary

What the gospels teach about Jesus:

- The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke are written to show that Jesus was special from the moment of his conception.
- Mary's virginal conception of Jesus points to his origin from God and also to his being human just like us.
- Jesus is the good news of God's love made visible. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are written versions of the good news.
- Jesus proclaimed the Reign of God in which all things are reconciled and renewed. God's reign shows itself through Jesus.
- Jesus is the universal saviour who brings forgiveness for sin and is compassionate to all.
- The gospel writers write in the conviction that Jesus who suffered and died on the cross has risen.
- The titles of Jesus reveal his identity and the understanding of Christian faith about him.



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## 4.4 Jesus in the Gospels – The Paschal Mystery

In the Apostles' Creed we say that we believe in Jesus Christ who ...*was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death, and was buried and rose again on the third day... he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father...* This statement stands at the heart of Christian belief.

### What is the 'Paschal Mystery'?

The name of the great Jewish feast of Pesach, the Passover, was translated into Latin as *pascha*. From this word comes our English 'paschal' which means 'to do with Passover'. Because Jesus died and rose from the dead at the time of Passover, the word also means 'to do with Easter'.

A 'mystery', as we use it in its religious sense, is something which is understood only by those who have been initiated into it and is never fully understood. It is not something to be solved but a reflection of awe. A mystery is full of meaning and blessing that is never exhausted and can always be explored ever more deeply. These mysteries give life.

The Paschal Mystery is the name given to the group of events that make up Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection and ascension into glory. This Paschal Mystery is our belief that Jesus,

*though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*

*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of*

*(Philippians 2:6–11).*

The purpose of the Paschal Mystery is two-fold: firstly, it reveals the extent of God's love, respect and concern for human beings and, secondly, it is the means by which we are brought to the fullness of life.



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### Jesus' Death

Of all the events reported in the gospels those concerning his arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and resurrection are the most extensively reported. In fact, these stories seem to have been the first section of the gospels to have been written down. Since his death and resurrection are at the very heart of the Christian message it was necessary to record them very carefully for the early Christians and those who were joining them.

Each Passion account includes different details. However, one thing is certain: Jesus died on the cross and Pilate's soldiers checked that he was dead before his body was taken down for burial. The differences do not disprove the events. They merely reflect, firstly, the writers' different sources but, secondly



and more importantly, each writer's editing of his material to communicate his particular theological emphasis to his particular audience.

## Responsibility for Jesus' death

By the time Jesus made his last journey to Jerusalem, Jewish leaders would have seen him as a threat to Jewish religious traditions, and the Roman authorities as a threat to political stability. Because he was an influential figure who attracted a large following, he was at risk in the volatile political situation of 1st century Palestine. He claimed to have authority to reinterpret the Law of Moses (for example, Matthew 5:22; 23:23) and to challenge the religious conventions of his day (for example, praying Matthew 6:1–2; Sabbath observance Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 3:1–6). He was openly critical of Jewish religious leaders (for example, Matthew 23:27–28). He proclaimed the coming of a new Reign of God, a Reign of love, peace, joy and harmony but warned people of power and influence that if they were not careful they would be excluded while outcasts, repentant sinners and Gentiles would be welcomed (for example, Luke 16:19–31; Matthew 21:31).

Jesus would have been well aware of the hostility which was building up against him (for example, Matthew 20:18–19), but he freely chose to go to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. As Luke writes, ... *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem...* (Luke 9:51). Although he was aware of the risks he was facing, he chose to persist with his task of proclaiming God's love and concern for all people.

In times gone by Jews have been blamed for the death of Jesus and the words in Matthew 27:25 have been used to justify this. Prejudice, hatred and revenge against any group of people are utterly contrary to everything that Jesus taught. Besides, while hanging on the cross Jesus himself prayed, *Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing*. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council issued a strong statement criticising attitudes that hold Jews responsible for Jesus' death.

*True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today... the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.*

(The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: Nostra Aetate, 4)



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## Our Responsibility

Responsibility for the death of Jesus lies with some of the Jewish leaders of his day and with the Roman authorities such as Pontius Pilate the Roman governor at the time. They were not outstandingly wicked people but they abused their power out of fear, misplaced prudence, politics, self-protection and expediency. Above all, we need to remind ourselves that Jesus' love for the world and for us was so overwhelming and compassionate that we could not really comprehend it and the changes that we would have to make in our lives to follow him. So, in a very real sense we also bear the responsibility for his death each time we turn away from his love and his challenge.





*The Resurrection, right hand predella panel from the Altarpiece of St. Zeno of Verona, 1456–60 (oil on panel) (detail), Mantegna, Andrea (1431–1506)*

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## Jesus' Resurrection

The Resurrection is the central truth of Christian belief. Because Jesus is risen from the dead all his words and deeds are confirmed and our faith in him is justified.

What is involved in resurrection frequently puzzles people. The gospels tell of Jesus' raising dead people to life: his friend Lazarus (John 11:43–44); the widow's son (Luke 7:11–17); Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43). These people were restored to a life as it had been before and would, eventually, have died again like all other human beings.

Jesus' return to life is different. His physical body was as alive as it had been before his death but now he is immortal, gloriously transformed in such a way that the ordinary physical laws of mortality, time, space, matter and gravity no longer apply. For example, he asked for food and ate it to show his friends that he was not a ghost (see Luke 24:36–43) but he was able to enter a room in spite of closed doors (see John 20:19). St Paul in a letter to the Corinthians comments on the resurrection and explains that the risen body is imperishable, glorious and powerful where the ordinary body was perishable, disreputable and weak (see 1 Corinthians 15:35–53). Jesus now possesses eternal life that he can share with those who believe in him and in the promises he made.

## Challenges to the Resurrection

From the earliest Christian times non-believers have challenged Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection. They have alleged that the gospel accounts are fictional, that Jesus' body was stolen, that Jesus didn't really die but 'woke up' and went away, that the apostles themselves took and hid the body, that his appearances were hallucinations.

The gospel writers would have been aware of these sceptical views. However, they start their accounts of the resurrection with the open and empty tomb. This is probably the most significant fact since it is also the one on which both the disciples of Jesus and their opponents agree. Although no one claims to have seen Jesus rise from the dead, all the biblical evidence indicates that the disciples of Jesus were convinced beyond doubt that they had seen the body of Jesus that had been crucified and laid in the tomb.

Furthermore, the gospel accounts were not written for opponents and non-believers. They were written to support the faith and understanding of those who believed or wished to join the believers. Consequently the how and why of Jesus' resurrection is of less concern to the gospel writers than the fact itself and its truth rests on the witness of named, trustworthy members of Jesus' disciples who saw him after his resurrection, for example, Mary Magdalene and Peter in John 20. The events of Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as the events at Pentecost, clearly had a profound effect on his followers. His arrest and execution frightened them so much that even the bold Peter denied knowing him (Mark 14:66–72) and they hid away behind locked doors. Their initial reaction to Jesus' resurrection was fear and doubt (for example, Mark 16:14; Luke 24:37–38). But fifty days later, after the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost, Jesus' disciples are giving bold and public witness to his resurrection and to his teaching even at the cost of their own lives (Acts 7:55–60).



## What the Paschal Mystery Means for Us

Earlier in this chapter we read that the Paschal Mystery 'stands at the heart of Christian belief'. St Paul emphasises this when he writes that

*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18  
Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we  
have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*  
(1 Corinthians 15:17–19).

Christianity without Jesus' Paschal Mystery is meaningless. However, there are even greater depths of meaning to be found in this mystery.

### We are liberated

The story we have in Genesis of Adam and Eve is a way of explaining that as human beings with the God given gift of the freedom to respond to God's love, we turned against God, alienating ourselves from God and one another. This basic alienation lies at the heart of the divisions, the wrongs, and the sinfulness that makes us imperfect beings in an imperfect world. This state of affairs was never God's intention and the Scriptures record God's efforts to pave the way for our reconciliation with God and one another. Finally, when the Son of God becomes incarnate through Mary's 'Yes' and becomes one of us, Jesus frees us from the consequences of sin through his life of perfect obedience to God, an obedience that leads to death but which ends in his triumphant resurrection. Through the Paschal Mystery, Jesus restores our relationship with God and therefore with each other and the world.

### Our own resurrection is guaranteed

Through his resurrection Jesus has overcome death as he said he would (for example, Matthew 16:21) and he has shown the truth of his words. The consequence of this is that we now have the sure and confident hope that for us, too, death is not the end of our lives. Jesus, who has risen, promised solemnly that everyone who believes has eternal life (see John 6:47). This life that continues after our physical deaths like Jesus' risen life is utterly transformed, glorious, full and everlasting.

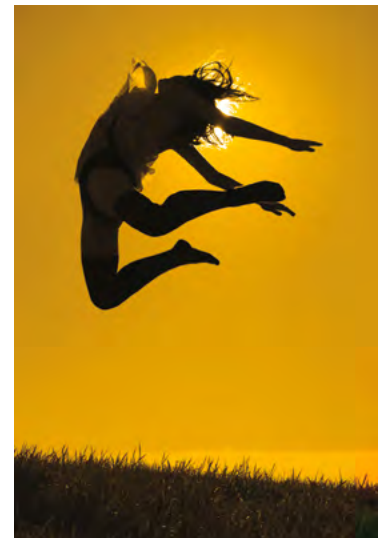
Jesus' Paschal Mystery enables us to share in his life, the life of God. This sharing began at the Last Supper and continues every time we participate in the Eucharist, as Jesus said,

*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just  
as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats  
me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven,  
not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats  
this bread will live for ever.*  
(John 6:56–58)

### God's promises are fulfilled

The Incarnation (God becoming a human being) and the Paschal Mystery mark the culmination or fulfilment of God's promises throughout the long story of the relationship between God and creation.

Implicit in the story of the expulsion from Eden (Genesis 3:8–24) and the story of the flood (Genesis 6–8) is the promise that at God's initiative, the relationship between God and people will eventually be put right. Later and more specifically, God makes a covenant with Abraham promising to be Abraham's God for ever and that Abraham will be the ancestor of nations



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(Genesis 17:1–8). Many years later God rescues the Israelites, Abraham's descendants, from slavery in Egypt (the first Passover) and, at Mount Sinai, offers them a new life as the chosen people of God (Exodus 19:3–8). When the people become a powerful and prosperous nation under King David, God promises David that

*Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.*  
(2 Samuel 7:16).

When disasters strike and all God's promises seem empty or destroyed, God rescues the people from exile in Babylon and restores them to their home and new hope (Ezra 1:1–4). In the years that follow, the prophets continually remind people that God is faithful, concerned for the people's welfare, and committed to saving them from their sins and from whatever diminishes life (for example, Isaiah 49:13–15). Furthermore, the prophets speak of a saviour who is to come, someone who himself *will be peace* (Micah 5:1–4), someone who will be named *Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (see Isaiah 9:1–6).

Finally, when Mary and Joseph present the infant Jesus in the Temple, the child is recognised by Simeon, an upright and devout man, who gives thanks to God because

*my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*  
(Luke.2:25–32).

God is a faithful God who fulfils the promises made.

### The assurance of Christ's presence

Before his arrest, when Jesus' followers realised that he was sincere in saying that he would not be with them much longer (John 13:33), they became anxious and fearful. Jesus assures them that he will never abandon them and says,

*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.*  
(John 14:18–20).

The Paschal Mystery is our assurance that Jesus is alive and present in the community of believers, the Church. He is present in the gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost and to each of us individually at our baptisms; he is present in the people who gather to offer public worship to God: the Church's liturgy of daily prayer and of the sacraments.

God's reliability is certain. We can echo confidently the words of Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, in her song praising God's faithfulness,

*There is no Holy One like the Lord,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.*  
(1 Samuel 2:1–10).



*Christ in the House of Martha and Mary,*  
c. 1654–56 (oil on canvas), Vermeer, Jan  
(1632–75)

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DEAGOSTINI / GETTY IMAGES



## 4.5 Jesus in the Tradition of the Church

### Jesus – Human and Divine

#### Origins of the issue

The story of Jesus does not end with biblical reflections on Christ. Many questions about Jesus remained to be answered after the gospels were written. The same Spirit of Jesus, who brought the Christian community into being at Pentecost and who inspired the writers of the New Testament, continued then and continues now to live within the Church. Through the inspiration and guidance of that Spirit the community of believers has been enabled to clarify and understand better how Jesus reveals God and God's plan.

The first Christians were mainly Jewish. A distinctive characteristic of Jewish belief is that God is one: a single, uncreated and eternal Supreme Being with power, intelligence, will and an infinite capacity to love. Included in this belief is the confidence that God cares for people and communicates the divine will to them. When Jewish people became Christians and were baptised, they believed and accepted that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God and Saviour. Such an act of faith raised significant questions about the nature of Jesus and of his relationship with the one God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

As Christianity spread rapidly through the Roman Empire, it came increasingly into contact with people of other religions and cultures who were accustomed to ponder and to speculate about life in philosophical rather than biblical terms. Inevitably questions arose; for example,

- Is Jesus really the son of God?
- Is there a special relationship between Jesus and God; if so, what is it?
- If he was a man only, how could he be the saviour Christians claimed him to be?
- Is it possible for Jesus to be both divine and human; if so, how?

During the early centuries of the Christian Church (from about 100 AD, the end of New Testament writings, to 451 AD, the Council of Chalcedon) increasing numbers of leaders and thinkers in the Church were well-educated in philosophy with long experience of Hellenistic (Greek) thinking and views of life. Both the belief of the early Church and the New Testament Scriptures present Jesus as both God and human being. In their efforts to communicate and to uphold this fundamental belief about Jesus, especially for non-Jewish audiences, Christian thinkers made use of terms and ideas borrowed from Greek philosophy to discuss and explain who and what Jesus is. In the course of these efforts discussion sometimes went to extremes, either maintaining that Jesus was divine only or that he was human only. It also became necessary at various times to deal with unorthodox views of Jesus' nature and to re-affirm the teaching of the New Testament Scriptures and the witness of the apostles.

#### A Range of Views About Jesus

The discussions about Jesus and Christian faith and practice were many and various. The following are outlines of the main, unsuccessful attempts to explain Jesus. They are also known as heresies.



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*The Ascension, miniature from Book of Prayers by Jeanne de Laval, manuscript*

© DEA / D. DAGLI ORTI / GETTY IMAGES

## **Ebionitism**

- Who:** A mainly Jewish sect.
- When:** Mainly between 70 AD and the end of the 2nd century.
- Views:** Jesus was a messianic figure but an ordinary human being, the ordinary human son of Mary and Joseph, conceived like any other human being. They also maintained that the Law of Moses was binding on Christians in all respects.
- Outcome:** This group's ideas were so out of step with Scripture and general Christian thinking that it soon became insignificant. Both St Irenaeus (c.120–c.200 AD) and Origen (c.185–c.254 AD) in their writings pointed out the error of these views.

## **Docetism**

- Who:** This was one of the earliest Christian sectarian views.
- When:** Quite common in the late 1st and 2nd centuries.
- Views:** Docetists maintained that Jesus was totally divine and only appeared to be a real physical human being. His humanity, life, suffering and death were illusory and so the resurrection and ascension did not happen. They argued that if Jesus were truly God, he would destroy his divinity if he became truly human and therefore could not be God. They believed that God pretended to be a human being for the benefit of people.
- Outcome:** These views were countered by numerous people, especially St Ignatius of Antioch (died c.115 AD). Ignatius pointed out if Jesus' humanity was an illusion and his birth, baptism, suffering and death simply unreal, then we cannot have been saved from anything and Christian faith has no reality either. Docetism developed into an aspect of Gnosticism.

## **Gnosticism**

- Who:** Predates Christianity; included a wide assortment of sects. (Elements of Gnosticism are still found today in some modern New Age thinking.)
- When:** In the 1st and 2nd centuries mainly, persisting to the 5th century.
- Views:** Central importance is given to secret knowledge about God and about the origin and destiny of humankind. Salvation of the spiritual part of human beings comes from finding out this secret knowledge which is hidden from people in general. It cannot be found out through rational enquiry or from trustworthy authorities but only through a kind of interior illumination that some spiritually advanced people are given. Jesus was a created being whose purpose was to restore people's lost knowledge of their spiritual origins – their "divine spark". The material creation was believed to be evil and opposed to the spiritual. However, Gnosticism was characterised by so many obscure, confused and various ideas that it is impossible to give a clear description of what it involved.



**Outcome:** It was opposed strongly from the beginnings of the Church and by St Irenaeus in particular. Christian thinkers pointed out that Gnostic ideas clearly did not belong to the teaching found in the Scriptures nor were they part of the faith passed on by Jesus' apostles and by the bishops who had succeeded them. In other words, there was no Christian authority for Gnostic teachings. Both Scripture and apostolic teaching affirm that Jesus was truly human and that in Jesus the full image of God is to be found. Furthermore, human beings can be saved and raised to a new level of existence to the extent that they grow in Christ; as Irenaeus said,

*'the glory of God is the human person fully alive.'*

### Monarchianism or Adoptionism

**Who:** Theodotus (c.189 AD) and Artemon (c.230 AD).

**When:** 2nd and 3rd centuries.

**Views:** Only God the Father is divine and the Son is not an independent, personal entity. Jesus was the Redeemer and miraculously conceived, though born as a mortal man. He was "adopted" to be Son of God when he was baptised by John because of the degree of divine wisdom and power that filled him; however, he was not divine until after the resurrection.

**Outcome:** This view denied that Jesus was either truly divine or truly human and contradicted the teachings of Scripture and the apostle's witness. The Monarchians were opposed by Tertullian (c.200 AD) and Origen (c.185–254 AD) who insisted that Father, Son and Spirit were three eternally distinct persons and one God.

### Arianism

**Who:** It began with Arius, a priest in Alexandria, who wanted to safeguard the unique position of God as being uncreated, one and indivisible. Many people, both lay and clerical, adopted his views. It continued among some of the Germanic tribes to the end of the 7th century. (The Christology of Jehovah's Witnesses today is a form of Arianism.)

**When:** It started about 318 AD, reaching a peak about 380 and then steadily losing influence till its virtual disappearance in the 7th century.

**Views:** Arius' starting point was that God is unique, uncreated and unchanging. Jesus, the Son who is not uncreated, cannot be God. Because God is unique, the Son cannot be God. Because God is unchanging, the Son who grew and changed cannot be God. Therefore the Son must be a special being created by, and subordinate to, God. The Son can have no direct knowledge of the Father because he is finite and radically different from the Father. Jesus is not of one essence, nature, or substance with God and therefore not like God, or equal in dignity, or co-eternal, or even properly divine. Jesus was something like God but had human emotions. Although he was similar to a human person he did not have a human soul.

### A Ω

*(Alpha and Omega)*

*First and last letters of the Greek alphabet.*

*Symbolises the divinity of Jesus Christ who is the beginning and end of everything that exists.*

### I.N.R.I

*Jesus Nazarenus Rex*

*Iudaeorum*

*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.*



### IHS

*The name of Jesus*

*abbreviated into three Greek letters.*





*The Protection of the Theotokos (Mother of God), Russian icon from the Zverin Monastery, 1399 (tempera on panel)*

© GETTY IMAGES

#### Outcome:

There was major opposition to Arius' views. This opposition emphasised that Christian faith and The New Testament writings about Jesus the Son of God, his incarnation and the paschal mystery clearly show that the Father's very own self is intimately involved with humanity and in the saving events of Jesus' earthly life. Since only God can save humanity and creation from sin and death, Jesus the Son in the singular unity of Father and Holy Spirit (the Trinity) is God, equal in all respects.

The first ecumenical council held at Nicaea in 325 AD, involved some 220 bishops, and adopted a credal statement which declared the Son to be 'consubstantial' with the Father – '*homoousion*' (of one substance) – and, therefore, Jesus is all that the Father is and completely divine. Subsequently a compromise was proposed that Jesus the Son was 'of similar substance' with the Father – '*homoiousion*' (of like substance). Finally, in 381, the second ecumenical council at Constantinople accepted the statement of the Council of Nicaea and what is known as the Nicene Creed was accepted. This effectively ended the Arian controversy.

### Nestorianism

#### Who:

Nestorius (c.381–451 AD) objected to calling Mary '*Theotokos*' ('God-bearer' or mother of God). The Nestorians eventually moved to Persia (modern Iran) and further east to form their own church and they remain a separate church to this day.

#### When:

In 428 Nestorius publicly supported the teaching that now has his name. The controversy was largely resolved by 451.

#### Views:

This was an attempt to solve the problem of how Jesus is both God and human. Nestorianism maintained that Jesus' human and divine natures were completely separate and there was no union of any kind between them. The human Jesus was born naturally of the Virgin Mary who was the mother of the human Jesus only. Jesus had all the faults of human beings but God, foreknowing the human Jesus' triumph over sin, chose to redeem the human race through Jesus by becoming united with him by grace from the time of his conception. Because the human Jesus triumphed over sin he was made worthy to be called Son of God and became God's instrument for the salvation of humanity.

#### Outcome:

Nestorian views were at odds with Christian teaching because they insisted that only the human nature of Jesus had suffered and died but, as we have noted before, the sufferings of a human being are incapable of redeeming all humanity and creation. Cyril of Alexandria (c.380–444 AD) wrote extensively against Nestorian views and maintained the unity of Jesus' human and divine natures. In 431 the Council of Ephesus declared that Mary was '*Theotokos*' (the God-bearer) and condemned Nestorianism. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD reaffirmed the creeds adopted at the Councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD) and confirmed



the decision of the Council of Ephesus that Mary was the mother of the Son of God who is both human and divine.

### Monophysitism

**Who:** Apollinarius (310–390 AD) first developed what became known as Monophysitism. Eutyches (375–454 AD) developed the view further and clashed with theologians and bishops in the 440s. Still found in Coptic, Syrian, Abyssinian and Armenian churches.

**When:** Began about 371 AD and continued into the 6th century.

**Views:** Jesus had only one divine nature (Monophysitism = ‘one naturism’). After Jesus had taken on his human existence, his human nature was absorbed into his divine nature like a grain of salt in a lake. The humanity of Jesus was not of the same substance as that of other human beings.

**Outcome:** In 381 Council of Constantinople rejected Apollinarius’ teaching and in 451 the Council of Chalcedon rejected Monophysitism and affirmed that Christ has two natures, truly human and truly divine, in the one person.

### Hypostatic union

*The technical term for the uniting of the divine nature and the human nature in the one divine person of the Word of God, Jesus Christ.*

## Dealing With the Issues

### The Councils

Clearly these differing points of view can be rather confusing and in reality they could not be confined into neat little summaries as above. Whenever major conflicts arose affecting people’s views about Jesus or about what was authentic Christian belief and practice, the truth or otherwise of conflicting views was ultimately decided by referring to what was written in the Scriptures and to what the apostles had taught. The method that evolved to deal with such conflicts was the council – an assembly of bishops or their delegates to decide matters of doctrine or discipline or, in the first centuries especially, to settle disputed issues.

This method followed the example of the first ‘council’ held in Jerusalem in about 50 AD (Acts 15). The main issue was caused by certain Jewish Christians who insisted that gentile Christians must accept and observe the Law of Moses, including circumcision and Jewish dietary rules. The apostles met under the leadership of Peter and James. Paul and Barnabas led a delegation representing gentile Christians. After considerable discussion the meeting decided that gentile Christians were not obliged to follow Jewish cultural regulations.

This model was the one followed by the early Church to resolve controversy and matters to do with faith and practice. The decisions of each council were disseminated and preserved and so came to provide a record of Christian teaching with its roots in both Scripture and the apostolic tradition. As time passed the original apostles were succeeded by bishops and in this way the continuity of apostolic teaching was safeguarded.

During the first five centuries of the Church’s life a number of councils were held to decide various issues. The most important issues involved questions



Council of Nicea

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about Jesus and who and what he is. Four important councils, known as ecumenical councils (representing the whole or universal Church), were called to deal with the views outlined in this chapter: the Councils of Nicaea in 325 AD, Constantinople in 381 AD, Ephesus in 431 AD and Chalcedon in 451 AD. Other matters were also dealt with at these councils and other councils followed as they were needed. The Second Vatican Council (1963–1965) was the most recent council to be held.

### The first four major Ecumenical or General Councils of the Church

Year	325 AD	381 AD	431 AD	451 AD
<b>Place &amp; called by</b>	Nicaea (in modern Turkey); Emperor Constantine I.	Constantinople (modern Istanbul); Emperors Theodosius I & Gratian.	Ephesus (in modern Turkey); Emperor Theodosius II.	Chalcedon (in modern Turkey); Emperor Marcian and Empress Pulcheria.
<b>Present</b>	220–250 bishops.	About 150 bishops, all from the East (but the Council was later accepted in the West).	About 150 bishops.	Possibly as many as 600 bishops but probably closer to 350.
<b>Major issue</b>	Is the Son who became man in Jesus Christ divine in the same way as the Father?	Continuing heresies of the Arians, and the denial of the full divinity of the Holy Spirit.	The relationship of Christ's divine and human natures.  Is Mary the Mother of God ( <i>Theotokos</i> ) or only Mother of Christ ( <i>Christokos</i> )?	Further clarification of the relationship of Christ's divine and human natures.
<b>Result</b>	Formulated a creed (Nicene) that affirmed that the Son is God in the same sense as the Father.	Rejected all Arian opinions; affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit in the creed now known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (used in the liturgy to this day).	Affirmed that the one person of the Son of the Father exists in two natures, as God and as man. This is called the hypostatic or personal union – the union of the two natures in the one hypostasis (person) of the Son. Confirmed that <i>Theotokos</i> is the title appropriate for the Virgin Mary because Jesus is one Person who is God and so Mary is truly the Mother of God.	Reaffirmed the decision of the Council of Ephesus and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Added a further definition sometimes known as the Definition of Chalcedon.



## The Statements

These Councils produced a great number of decisions and documents that were important at the time and are of great interest to theologians and Church historians. Their consequences were important because they have helped to shape and clarify our understanding of who Jesus is and of his role in the salvation of humanity and of creation. Two documents in particular are of interest: one you will recognise – the Nicene Creed – because we still use it in our Eucharistic celebrations, the second – the Chalcedon definition – will not be familiar. *[The bulleted numbers are not part of the documents but are included to make discussions easier.]*

### The Nicene Creed: Profession of the Christian Faith

The Creed	I believe
Beliefs about God the Father	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. in one God,</li> <li>2. the Father, the Almighty,</li> <li>3. maker of heaven and earth,</li> <li>4. of all that is visible and invisible.</li> </ol>
Beliefs about Jesus Christ	<p>And in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. one Lord, Jesus Christ,</li> <li>2. the only Begotten Son of God,</li> <li>3. born of the Father before all ages.</li> <li>4. God From God,</li> <li>5. Light from Light,</li> <li>6. true God from true God,</li> <li>7. begotten, not made,</li> <li>8. consubstantial with the Father;</li> <li>9. through him all things were made.</li> <li>10. For us and for our salvation</li> <li>11. he came down from heaven,</li> <li>12. and by the power of the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary</li> <li>13. and became man.</li> <li>14. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,</li> <li>15. he suffered death, and was buried,</li> <li>16. and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures;</li> <li>17. he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.</li> <li>18. He will come again in glory</li> <li>19. to judge the living and the dead,</li> <li>20. and his kingdom will have no end.</li> </ol>
Beliefs about the Holy Spirit	<p>And</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. in the Holy Spirit,</li> <li>2. the Lord, the giver of life,</li> <li>3. who proceeds from the Father and Son.</li> <li>4. who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,</li> <li>5. who has spoken through the Prophets.</li> </ol>
Beliefs about the Church, Baptism, Resurrection and Eternal Life	<p>And in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. one holy catholic and apostolic Church.</li> </ol> <p>I confess</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,</li> </ol> <p>and I look forward</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. to the resurrection of the dead,</li> <li>2. and the life of the world to come.</li> </ol> <p>Amen.</p>





*The Good Shepherd (fresco), 3rd century / Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome*

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## 4.6 Representations of Jesus

There have been many developments in Christology from the time of the early Church, from the formal theological statements of belief in the fifth Century Church Councils to the insights of Vatican II and the present day. Artists throughout the ages have taken the ideas of theologians and sought to make them intelligible to the people of their times and culture. By studying the works that such artists have produced we can trace the development of Christology.

### The First 300 Years

Much of the evidence of Christian activity in Rome during the first three centuries comes from the catacombs which were dug into the hills surrounding the city. According to the writings of Cicero in 59 AD, Jews were already numerous and influential in Rome. Among the Jewish population in Rome at this time there was an increasing number of Christians. The Jews were accustomed to carving out funeral chambers in the limestone of Palestine. They continued to do this in the stone around Rome. These funeral chambers, or catacombs, were used not only for burying the dead but also as meeting places during the periodic persecution of Jews during this time.

Paintings and carvings on the walls of these catacombs show gospel scenes of Jesus as shepherd, teacher, and worker of miracles. The image of "The Good Shepherd", a beardless youth caring for sheep, was the most common of these images, and was probably not understood as a picture of the historical Jesus at this period because the viewers understood that this was a portrayal of how Jesus was, not what he looked like. People of the times were not used to representation of a human being as they were. Statues, paintings, art works in general were about people's personality and ethos not their physical appearance.

These images convey a feeling of human compassion but also the sense of divine power. Jesus is portrayed as a saviour bringing God's healing love to the wounded people around him. He was rarely shown being tortured and crucified. The artists at this time were more concerned with representing him as Lord and saviour than in his physical appearance. The scenes presented may well have been used to instruct and encourage those who were new to the Christian faith.

Most of the first Christians were Jewish and therefore reluctant to present Jesus in any way that might be considered as creating an idol. Therefore, initially Jesus was represented indirectly by symbols such as the Ichthys (fish), the peacock, or an anchor (the Labarum or Chi-Rho was a later development). Later well known people were used, including Jonah, where the three days in the whale was aligned to the three days that Jesus spent in the tomb.



*Bas-relief from Christian sarcophagus depicting the Good Shepherd, early Christian period, 3rd–4th century*

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### 313 AD to The Middle Ages

Conditions changed for Christians in the fourth century. By the Edict of Milan in 313 AD freedom of religion was guaranteed to all in the Empire. Emperor Constantine moved the capital from Rome to Byzantium which he renamed



Constantinople. Religious art came under Greek influence and became more symbolic and mystical. As the theological debates raged about the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God, so the art of the time reflected these controversies. Greek and Byzantine art tended to emphasise the magnificence of God and gave to Jesus the attributes of God such as creator, judge and king. Much of the art of this period was produced as icons or as mosaics. The image of 'Christ Pantocrator,' the 'ruler of all,' was developed during this time. The Byzantine artists replaced the ruling gods of Rome with a regal Jesus, an all-powerful imperial image, haloed, awesome, just, and unchanging in majesty. This image continues to pervade Western consciousness.

In 384 AD Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Preaching the Gospel became easier and Christianity spread through most of what are now the countries of Europe. As the Church became influential and powerful after the collapse of the Roman Empire Jesus was often represented as a figure of power and majesty. During this time many new Christian communities formed which saw the building of churches and cathedrals which were decorated with mosaics, paintings and sculptures depicting Jesus as ruler over all creation.

The belief in Jesus as the one who mediates between the God who is infinitely good and glorious, and sinful humankind was shown in crucifixes made about the 6th century. The figure of Jesus was clothed in royal clothes with a king's crown on his head.

In the Eastern Church centred on Constantinople, Byzantine artists usually portrayed Christ as a divine figure with mystical power. He is often shown as the transfigured Jesus (see Matthew 17:2-6; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) with all the magnificence of God, a figure of great power and majesty.



Mosaic of Jesus Christ / Hagia Sophia, Istanbul / Byzantine era

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## The Middle Ages

The late Middle Ages (12th–15th centuries) is often called the Age of Faith. It is characterised by the Gothic style of architecture, the Crusades and the rise of universities, scholasticism and the mendicant orders that moved around the country preaching and teaching about the faith rather than being confined to monasteries. Thus Jesus was often depicted as a warrior who would conquer all that was evil and wrong in the world.

Theologians of this time like St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 AD) addressed the question, "Why did God become a human being?" He argued that the essence of goodness is to communicate itself and so God who is goodness itself chose to communicate himself to human beings. Jesus, the Son of God, became human to unite humanity with God.

Artists at this time began to depict the human participants in the events of Jesus' life. People from the gospel stories, saints, kings, queens, even the people commissioning works appeared in pictures, carvings, stained glass and other works of art. The topics of artistic work expanded from the early focus on Jesus' resurrection to include all the events in his life. His sufferings were more realistically portrayed. His birth was also popular with artists. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226 AD) and his Franciscan friars introduced Christmas cribs as the focus of popular devotion as they moved through towns and villages.



Jesus Christ with the cross (fresco) / San Miniato al Monte, Florence

ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © JOZEF SEDMAK





*Christ Blessing ('The Saviour of the World'), by El Greco, 17th century*

© ART MEDIA / PRINT COLLECTOR / GETTY IMAGES

## The Renaissance

Art work of The Renaissance in Europe (roughly the 14th to 17th centuries) is very familiar to contemporary people because it forms part of the cultural heritage of the Western world. Many of these works of art are reproduced in many places, even on postage stamps. During this period artists and scholars had available to them the learning and culture of the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome and Egypt. Artists stressed the beauty of the human person and sought to represent the human form in as natural a way as possible. There was a new interest in the humanity of Jesus. Nativity scenes depicted very human babies and warmly caressing mothers. Works depicting Jesus' passion and death moved from representing him as King and Lord to images that showed his human suffering, crowns of thorns replaced crowns of glory.

Some artists represented Jesus as the perfect man: he was portrayed as a handsome person and artists began to try to show something of his inner emotions and personality. The Spanish artist El Greco (1548–1614) combined the image of the suffering Christ with the idea of the perfect man in his famous painting called *The Saviour*. El Greco chose a young Jewish man for his model to emphasise the humanity of Christ and used the painting style of Byzantine icons to emphasise the religious theme of Jesus as the one who brings salvation to humanity and creation. Artists produced human but idealised images of Jesus as ways of presenting the complex concepts with which the Church and the individual were wrestling.

## The Enlightenment

In the 18th century a revolution in ideas known as the Enlightenment began. It encouraged people to use reason in a critical reappraisal of existing ideas and social institutions. This change in thinking, together with a dramatic increase in scientific and technological research and experimentation, challenged conventional Christian beliefs. Social instability, the result of far-reaching economic and political changes, contributed to the development of a materialistic world view. A reaction against this increasing materialism led artists of the Romantic school to represent religious figures as idealised human beings often in exotic or far-away settings. Many of these images were adopted by the commercial world and produced in millions for sale as 'holy pictures'. Such pictures, often sentimental and of questionable artistic merit, nourished the devotion and faith of many people because they told a story and appealed to the emotions. Thus there are few great works of art during this period.

## Contemporary Times

The basic teaching about Jesus the Christ changed little from the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD. However, by the mid twentieth century new understandings of humanity emanating from psychology, anthropology and philosophy led several European theologians to consider the Incarnation in the light of modern concepts and changing use of language. These new ideas were influential in the documents of Vatican II where the Church is encouraged to dialogue with the modern world.

Starting in the late 19th century with the first social teaching document, Of New Things: *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, and increasingly since Vatican Council II,



*Aerial view of 'Christ The Redeemer' statue, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*

© JEREMY WALKER / GETTY IMAGES



the Church has responded to the challenges of the modern world. There has been a tremendous interest in and study of the scriptures, and earnest efforts have been made to discover the meaning and relevance of Christ for the great diversity of peoples and experiences in the world. Artists from different cultures are depicting Jesus as a person of their own culture. Jesus is shown as an ordinary man.

In cultures that have no artistic connection to the West, but where Jesus becomes known, artists and artisans today produce images that convey the spiritual qualities of Jesus in the visual language of their worlds. Thus Mary may be presented dressed in the bright garb of the African women with Jesus in a similar context.

## Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)

In the late 20th century the Second Vatican Council brought a new richness to our understanding of Jesus. Although no single decree or document focused exclusively on him, they all present Christ at the heart and centre of Christian belief and activity. The decrees speak of Jesus risen and living in the Church, in the sacraments, in the whole of creation and especially in the hearts and the minds of all who believe in him.

A typical statement is this,

*Christ sent His life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through the Spirit has established his body, the Church; as the universal sacrament of salvation.*  
(Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, 48)

The Council also stressed the solidarity that exists between Jesus and humanity and the privilege and obligation of every believer to make him known and loved by following his example.

*Assuming human nature, he [Jesus] bound the whole human race to himself as a family through a certain supernatural solidarity and established charity as the mark of his disciples, saying, 'By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).*  
(Decree On The Apostolate Of The Laity: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 8)

## Conclusion

The consistent teaching of the Church is that Jesus Christ is a distinct person in whom is united a divine and a human nature. Christians, therefore, relate to Jesus in two ways: firstly by worshipping him and praying to him as God and, secondly, by responding to him as brother and friend, according to his human nature, for Jesus understands our human hopes, fears and dreams.

While our understanding and appreciation of Jesus may well grow and develop further, we believe that Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God to us. There is no secret knowledge about Jesus that awaits revealing. As Paul writes,

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.*  
(Romans 13:11-12).



Second Vatican Council

### ΙΧΘΥΣ

Greek for "fish".

*Ichtyis is the Greek word for fish and the symbol of the fish came to be associated with Jesus in the early Church.*

*An acrostic for the titles of the Lord. Ι (Jesus), Χ (Christ), Θ (Theou – God's), Υ (uios – Son), Σ (Soter – Saviour).*





## 4.7 Jesus in Our World

The world in which the historical Jesus lived has long disappeared. However, the risen and glorious Jesus is as much present in our contemporary world as he was when he was on earth. His presence is different but probably more obvious. In our times we interpret and understand Jesus and his Good News in ways that are different from previous times but firmly based on the foundation of Scripture and the Church's apostolic Tradition. Each generation has to answer for itself the question that Jesus asked his disciples: ...*who do you say I am?* (Mark 8:29).



Resurrection Icon (acrylic on panel),  
by Sophie Hacker

© GETTY IMAGES

### Jesus – Liberator of the World

The Exodus story reveals God's intention to free the oppressed people from their misery,

*I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.*

(Exodus 3:7–8).

God, out of love for the people, is faithful to the promises given to their ancestors and desires that they be able to live in peace and justice. Later, God enters into the covenant of Sinai with the people of Israel whereby they became his people and he their God. These themes of God's faithfulness, of God's loving care for the people in good times and in bad, run through the whole Old Testament.

In Luke's gospel Jesus proclaims his purpose early in his ministry. He announces in the Nazareth synagogue that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him and has anointed him

*..to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

(Luke 4:18–19).

Jesus quoted these words from the prophet Isaiah (61:1–2). The implication is clear. Jesus has been sent to tell the world that God is ending everything that limits, disables or enslaves people. The power of sin and evil to dominate in the world is being broken and Jesus is the one who does it.

When Jesus shared his last supper and then, on the cross, poured out his blood *for the forgiveness of sins* (Matthew 26:28), the covenant between God and the people was renewed. In this renewed covenant the risen Jesus calls us to turn away from sin and to be faithful to him in order that we and our world may enjoy the fullness of life. Through Jesus' paschal mystery (his suffering, death and resurrection) God releases everyone from the clutches of power and domination. Jesus calls us all to become his followers, members of his Church, to turn our lives around and to become a community driven by love in which the dignity of all people is recognised.



## Jesus – Saviour of All Creation

John's gospel begins,

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*  
(John 1:1-3).

The Word is Jesus Christ through whom the universe was created.

St Paul explains the relationship between Jesus and creation like this,

*He [God the First Person] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*  
(Colossians 1:13–20).

Jesus is, so to speak, in charge. It is he who makes all things new, he who brings peace, reconciliation and salvation to the whole world; he is our hope for our future and our happiness.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes of all creation waiting

*that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (8.21).*

Jesus redeems not only humanity from the power and control of sin and death. All of creation has been 'infected' by sin. Since Jesus is the Lord of creation he redeems it as well and through his paschal mystery creation is made capable of renewal.

## Jesus – Saviour of the Poor and Oppressed

In Luke's gospel the words of Mary's *Magnificat* (her response to Elizabeth's greeting) proclaim confidently that God stands with the poor,

*God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good thing and sent the rich away empty.*  
(Luke 1:51–53).

An important inference in her words is that Jesus is the one who will do this.

During his ministry Jesus announced the Reign of God; he put cynics and the arrogant in their places; he healed, freed, saved and gave food to people. He is regularly found among those on the edges of his Jewish society, for example, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, women, lepers. He refused to follow the letter of the Law in numerous situations and, in fact, claimed to be above the Law (see Matthew 12:1–8). He insisted that loving God goes hand-in-hand



*Christ the Redeemer, 1922–1931 /*  
*Rio de Janeiro*  
© ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



with loving our neighbour and that our neighbour is anyone and everyone but especially the “little ones” of our world.

Through the centuries human beings have increasingly realised the capacity we have to transform the world and to exercise control over it. Great and wonderful are the things that have been discovered and developed to enhance human life; awful and frightening are the things that oppress and damage it. Wealth and comfort increasingly mark the lives of many but frustration and desperation are the lot of many millions: the poor, the marginalised, the exploited and the dispossessed of our world. Gustavo Gutierrez (1928–), one of the founders of Liberation Theology, wrote, ‘The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible’. Jesus’ life and the paschal mystery have profound relevance to us in our contemporary world.



“Semana Santa” - Holy Week in Madrid, Spain  
© JAVIER CORBO PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES

## Jesus – Challenge to Christians

The Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed was not a message for his time only; it is also a message for us and for future generations. The Jesus of history is present and speaks to our situation today.

In one of his parables Jesus compares the Reign of heaven to a mustard seed which, he says,

*it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*

(Matthew 13:31–32)

The Reign of God does not arrive suddenly and dramatically in all its glory. It grows from small, apparently insignificant beginnings. When it finally reaches its fullness it will be great and magnificent and provide a place of shelter and security for all who desire it. The Reign of God is Jesus’ work. In other words, the Reign of God is already here but not yet fully here; it is in history and time but transcends them.

We who hear and accept Jesus’ message have the duty to cooperate with him. That means that we continue his work – all of it, not just the bits we like or find convenient. We must, like him, put cynics and the arrogant in their places, heal, free, save and give people what they need. We must be found in solidarity with those on the edges of our society and our world. Wherever this happens the Reign of God is shown to be present. Our task and our privilege is, with Jesus, to prepare ourselves and our world for the full flowering of the Reign of God when finally God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

There is nothing new in this. The Church has been teaching this ever since Jesus began to teach his disciples. Since the end of the 19th century, Catholic Social teaching has emphasised the message more and more. For example, Paul VI wrote,

*It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel’s unalterable words and for action from the social teaching of the Church . . . with the help of the Holy Spirit . . . in dialogue with other Christians and all people of goodwill, to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed.*

(The Eightieth Anniversary: *Octogesima Adveniens*, 4)



## The 'Good News' in Aotearoa-New Zealand

Jesus lived on earth in Palestine at a particular time in history. His story and his message did not remain there because ever since that time his followers have retold his story and handed on his message to the ends of the earth. However, as Scripture reminds us,

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.*  
(Hebrews 13:8).

The first Christians to arrive in Aotearoa-New Zealand were sailors, sealers, whalers and traders. Their faith in Jesus was not a primary factor in their coming to this country. The first people to formally preach Christianity were the missionaries who arrived in 1814 under the auspices of the Church Mission Society (Anglican) and led by Samuel Marsden. He was followed in 1823 by Henry Williams during whose time the Bible was translated and written in Māori. In 1838 the first Catholic missionaries arrived; Bishop Jean Baptiste Pompallier and his companions. Ever since these times Christianity has been a feature in the lives of people living in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Is the Jesus of the Church in New Zealand different from the Jesus elsewhere in the world? No, of course not; the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, quoted above, points out that he is changeless. Jesus' identity and nature have been definitively stated by Scripture, the witness of the early Church and the teaching authority of the Church and its Councils. What is different is that the Aotearoa-New Zealand world in which we live is very different from 1st century Palestine and also different in significant ways from contemporary societies.

Matthew's Gospel records a brief dialogue between Jesus and his disciples about what he has been teaching them. He asks them if they have understood. They say they have. He then says to them,

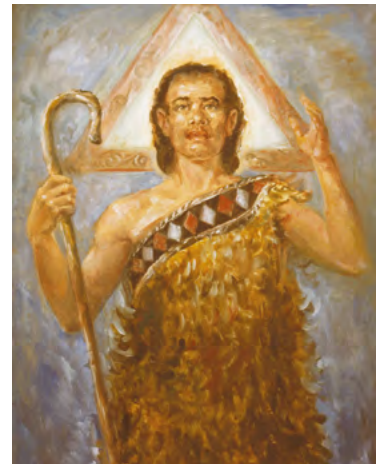
*every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.*  
(13:51–52).

Commentators point out that Jesus is saying that those who become his disciples will make use of the old (the Law and the Prophets) and the new (the Gospel) in understanding his teaching. In a similar way we, today's disciples, must use our modern knowledge together with all we have inherited from Scripture and Tradition in order to live and give witness to what Jesus taught.

Here in Aotearoa-New Zealand, we have a variety of Christian denominations. About half the population call themselves Christian. Two of our public holidays, Christmas and Easter, have religious significance. Many of the values we hold and elements of our legislative and legal systems are based on Christian principles. However, recent census data indicates that about a third of people in New Zealand state that they have no religion.

Another feature of contemporary Aotearoa-New Zealand is its growing pluralism. Many different views, values, cultures, attitudes are present in society and there is a generally held expectation that these differences are to be accepted or, at least, tolerated. It is within this diversity that the message of Jesus is proclaimed. St Paul in describing his preaching of the gospel said,

*To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.*  
(1 Corinthians 9:22).



*Maori Jesus, (oil on canvas), Sr. Mary Lawrence RSM (Julia Lynch), (1896–1975)*  
© SISTERS OF MERCY





A statue of Jesus tied to a pillar in the Facade of the Passion of Antonio Gaudí's La Sagrada Família church in Barcelona

ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © TAYLOR MORRIS

The Church today in Aotearoa-New Zealand offers Jesus' gift of salvation to people in all their different situations.

The voice of Jesus is heard wherever believers are involved in the affairs of our society especially in issues concerning matters of justice, peace, human rights, education, relationships between people and cultures, care for the poor, and responsibility for the environment. The work of Jesus is to be seen wherever believers are involved in rest homes, hospitals, schools, food banks, caring agencies, chaplaincies and various social services.

The voice of Jesus is also heard when we gather together as Church, expressed best at liturgical celebrations. Here we renew our strength and come to know this Lord of ours who transforms us so that we become Christ for the world. In these ways we participate in the liberation and the hope that Jesus brings the world, we build the Reign of God.

## Our Challenge

To build the Reign of God we need to be willing to reflect on our attitudes and relationship to others and the world. When people asked Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1977) why she worked with the poor she simply said, 'I see God in every human being.' That is the beginning.

If we make the effort to see Jesus in every human being, to see with God's eyes, then we begin to do what is right and we begin to respond to Jesus' call. St Augustine once said, 'Love God, and do what you will'. The more we can come closer to God, so much the more can we find the freedom and happiness for which we long.

Jesus is not calling most of us to do spectacular and extraordinary things. It is in our ordinary everyday lives that we are saved. In Matthew's gospel the things that ultimately gain God's favour and approval are simple and ordinary. They are whatever we do:

- to feed the hungry,
- to give drink to the thirsty,
- to welcome strangers,
- to clothe the naked,
- to visit the sick,
- to visit the imprisoned.

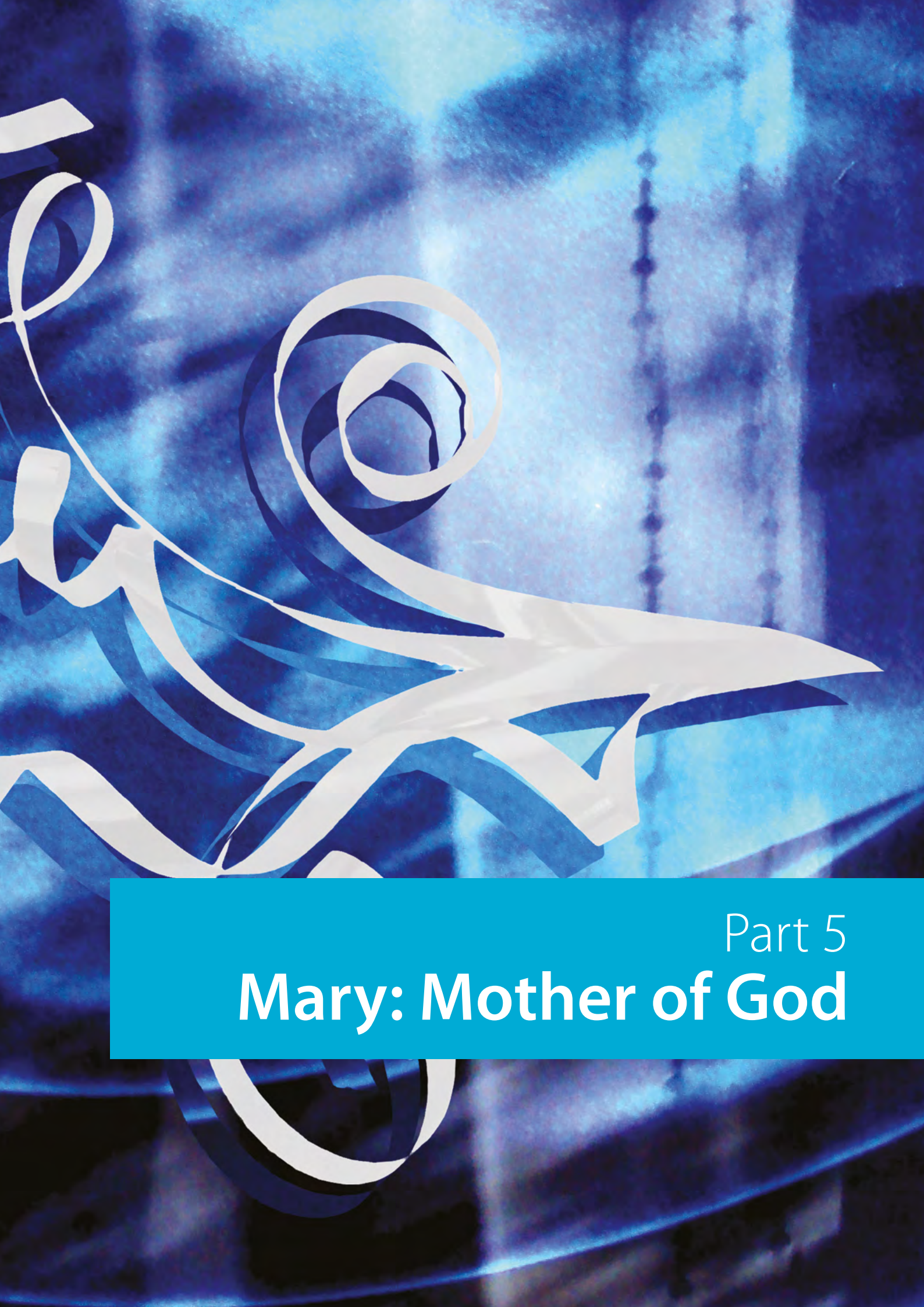
Our commitment to following Jesus is something that requires courage, perseverance, patience and dedication. The things that, above all, help us on this journey with Jesus to God are prayer and the sacraments. Prayer keeps us in touch with God and God with us; the Sacraments give us the grace we need – the spiritual nourishment – to do God's will.

Finally, Paul's prayer for the people of Ephesus is the Church's prayer for us,

*I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, ... so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.*

(Ephesians 1:17-18).





Part 5

# Mary: Mother of God







## 5.1 Mary in History

No historical record exists concerning Mary. The New Testament is our sole source of information and it records very little. Apart from a comment that Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist was Mary's 'cousin' (Luke 1:36) there is nothing of her birth or family background. The most we can say is that she was probably born in Galilee, perhaps in Nazareth. Some of the apocryphal books of the 2nd century claim to tell the story of Mary's birth, upbringing and marriage to Joseph. However these books carry no historical authority.

### First Century Palestine

History and archaeology are useful sources of information and from them it is possible to learn something about the situation of Hebrew women in 1st century Palestine and therefore Mary's life.

#### Politics

When Mary was born, Palestine had been part of the Roman Empire since 63 BC. Although the country was of little economic use to the Romans, strategically it was very important because it lay on the major land trade route between Egypt in the south and Asia Minor to the north. The Roman emperors were content to allow the Jews to govern themselves as long as they paid their taxes and gave no trouble. Herod the Great (47–4 BC) ruled the country as a vassal of the Roman emperor. He collected taxes, created public works to develop vast tracts of land, eliminated unemployment, constructed the magnificent third temple, several cities, palaces and fortresses; but he was a violent, ruthless and cruel ruler. He was followed by Herod Antipas (4BC–39 AD) who is named in the Gospels.

The Jews had no option but to accept the political situation imposed by Rome. However, they acknowledged a rule and authority much greater than that of Rome. For Jewish people God was the ruler of the universe. The city of Jerusalem, in particular, was God's city and the Temple there was the sign of God's presence among God's own chosen people. They believed that Jerusalem was the centre of the world and they found meaning and purpose in their faith that life and society were all part of their God's divine plan for the world.

#### Religion

The Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish worship. Here prayers and sacrifices of corn, fruit or animals could be offered to God. Active participation in the religious ceremonies and the affairs of the temple was entirely in the hands of men from the tribe of Levi. Women could not enter the innermost parts of the temple. The fifteen steps from the Court of the Women up to the Court of the Israelites symbolised the position of women in the society as a whole.

For those who could not visit the temple, numerous local synagogues were available. The original meaning of the word synagogue is a meeting or assembly, a bringing together, and later it came to mean a place where this gathering took place. The purpose of the synagogue was to enable prayer and worship of God and to encourage study and charitable works. The study of Scripture and the conducting of public religious affairs was a male occupation



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © JOEL CARILLET

#### The name 'Mary'

*There are many forms of the name Mary: Maria, Marilyn, Maureen, Maire, Miriam, Moria, Maree. Mary was a common name for Jewish women in first century Palestine. It literally meant 'lady', 'well beloved'. Jesus mother's name would have been a version of the name מִרְיָם or Miryam.*





ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © AMIT EREZ

so women were not normally taught to read or write. When women did attend the synagogue, they were separated from the men and had little or no part in the public leadership of prayers or reading from the Scriptures.

## Family

Hebrew women were defined by their relationship to men as daughters, wives or mothers. Their lives were typically confined to their households where authority belonged to the male head who could be a father, husband, brother or, in the case of widows, a son. Daughters learnt from their mothers the skills of managing a household and caring for children.

As soon as daughters reached marriageable age, about twelve, their families would begin to look for suitable young men for them to marry. All arrangements were made between the families, typically by the fathers of the couple. It was customary for the future groom and his family to offer a 'marriage price'. This was regarded as a present to compensate a bride's family for the loss of their daughter rather than a price paid to buy a bride. Marriage was understood as a covenant in which the couple became partners under God with definite roles for husband and wife.

Once the betrothal of a couple was announced, the legal rights of marriage became effective but sexual intercourse was not permitted before the marriage ceremony had taken place. The bride-to-be usually continued to live in her parents' home. In Galilee the customs surrounding betrothal and marriage were particularly strict. Unfaithfulness during the time of betrothal was considered adultery, for which the penalty laid down by the Law was death by stoning. Betrothal ended with the marriage ceremony and the new husband would take his new wife to live with his family and she then came under the authority of the head of her husband's family. Divorce was possible; where it happened it was commonly the result of infidelity or inability to have children. Women, however, could not initiate a divorce.

Women had considerable influence within their families. One of a wife's obligations was to bring the light of the Sabbath into the home. It was her responsibility to make the day truly a Sabbath – bringing the presence of God into the family. A considerable part of a woman's responsibility involved the efficient running of the household. In particular, the nurturing of children was a primary concern of the women of the household. Children had to be properly cared for, watched over and trained in the traditions and customs of the family. Another responsibility was to create an atmosphere in the home to enable her husband to fulfill his social and religious obligations.

The position of women was largely subordinate to men; however, there is evidence in Scripture of respected women exercising authority and influence not only in domestic situations but also in the public arena.



## 5.2 Mary's Presence in the Gospel

There is only one brief mention of Mary ('a woman') in early New Testament writings: But ...*when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law...* (Galatians 4:4).

This apparent lack of attention given to Mary is because the message of St Paul and the apostles was focused exclusively on the person of Jesus and the significance of his mission. During these initial years (about 30–65 AD) of reflection, discussion, and preaching, the early Church communities developed their understanding of who Jesus was and what he had come to do. They realised that Jesus the man was not only truly the Son of God but that he had always been so ever since his conception in Mary's womb.

With this realisation, the Church's reflection broadened to include Mary and the significance of her role in the life and mission of Jesus her son. By the time the last of the gospels came to be written, (John c.100 AD) this process of reflection on Mary was well under way. She appears in all four gospels but, once again, not so much for herself as for the part she has in each evangelist's specific theological purpose.

### Mary's Appearances in the Gospels

#### Mark

Mark is the earliest of the gospels, written about 64–70 AD. This gospel has the least to say about Mary. Mark merely mentions her in a couple of places in the course of his story about Jesus' public life and ministry. Mark gives an impression of a mother who is anxious and concerned about her son's public role (Mark 3:31–35).

#### Matthew

Matthew's gospel was written about 80 AD by a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian for a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile converts. He wishes to show his Jewish readers that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah and to assure his Gentile readers that Jesus' purpose was to save all people no matter what their race, culture or status. In this gospel Mary appears as the woman who conceives the Son of God as a human being through the power of the Holy Spirit, brings him forth into the world, and shows him to the Gentiles, the Magi, who worship him (Matthew 1 and 2).

#### Luke

Luke wrote for a Gentile community about 80 AD. This gospel has sometimes been called the "gospel of mercy" because it highlights Jesus' concern for poor people and those on the margins of society. Jesus' purpose is to reveal that God is a God of mercy and compassion, who has physically become one of us and who inaugurates a reign of justice and peace for all. It is in Luke's gospel only that we find Mary's prayer, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), and the parables of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar (Luke 16:19–31), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), and the Forgiving Father (Luke 15:11–32), all of which illustrate this principal theme.





## Where Mary is mentioned in the Gospels

### Mark

- 1 3:31–35 *Waiting to see Jesus*
- 2 6:3 *Identified as Jesus' Mother*

### Matthew

- 1 1:1–17 *Jesus' genealogy*
- 2 1:18–25 *Mary's virginal Conception of Jesus*
- 3 2:1–12 *The visit of the Magi*
- 4 2:13–15, 19–23 *The flight to Egypt and return to Nazareth*
- 5 12:46–50 *Waiting to see Jesus*
- 6 13:55 *Identified as Jesus' mother*

### Luke

- 1 1:26–38 *Mary's annunciation*
- 2 1:39–56 *Mary's visit to Elizabeth*
- 3 2:1–21 *The birth of Jesus*
- 4 2:22–40 *Presenting Jesus in the Temple*
- 5 2:41–52 *Jesus found in the Temple*
- 6 8:19–21 *Waiting to see Jesus*
- 7 Acts 1:14 *Pentecost: Mary in the upper room with the apostles and others*

### John

- 1 2:1–12 *The wedding at Cana*
- 2 6:42 *Identified as Jesus' mother*
- 3 19:25–27 *At the cross*

## John

John's gospel was the last to be written (c.100 AD). In its style, content and development of themes it is quite different from the other three gospels. It reflects a deeper insight and understanding of Jesus' identity and his being in God from all eternity. The major themes of John's gospel are stated in the prologue (John 1:1–18). John mentions Mary only twice in his gospel – at the marriage feast of Cana (John 2:1–12) and at the cross (John 19:25–27). However, both these incidents are of crucial importance in John's account and it is significant that Mary has a role in these turning points of her Son's life.

## The Infancy Narratives

Matthew and Luke are the only gospel writers who write about Jesus' birth and childhood and of Mary's part in it.

### Matthew's infancy narrative

Matthew's gospel has been called a Jewish Christian gospel. The writer's chief concern is to present Jesus as the Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures, the one who fulfils the Law and brings about the reign of God. The infancy narrative is written so as to highlight this concern. Mary is thus not simply the mother of Jesus but the personal fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy about the person who would give birth to Immanuel God-is-with-us (Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:2).

### Woman of importance

Matthew signals Mary's special role in the history of salvation by introducing five women into the genealogy which opens his gospel – Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 2 and 6:22–25), Ruth (Ruth), Bathsheba called 'Uriah's wife' (2 Samuel 11–12 and 1 Kings 1:11–37) and Mary. This genealogy traces Jesus' descent from Abraham in the male line and, David, in the kingly line. It has puzzled scholars why these women, who are neither male nor remarkable heroines like Miriam, Judith, Esther or Deborah, should have been introduced into the list. The debate continues but there seems to be a strong case that Matthew intended to show that, at crucial times, the messianic line was preserved and, therefore, the salvation of Israel guaranteed by the intervention of women. Mary, the mother of the Messiah, plays an essential role in the realisation of God's plan of salvation.

### Virgin Mother

Matthew also clearly teaches the virginal conception of Jesus (1:18–25). He first indicates this at the end of the genealogy (1:16) where he writes "...and Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary; of her was born Jesus who is called Christ". Matthew avoids saying that Joseph is the natural father of Jesus but, at the same time, he is saying that Mary is his natural mother. He draws attention also to the fact that Jesus is no ordinary person but the Christ (Messiah, God's Anointed). To emphasise the point Matthew makes it clear in verse 25 that Joseph is not Jesus' natural father even though he carries out the public role of a father in naming the child. However, in every sense of the word, Mary is his mother. She is also the fulfilment of an important Messianic prophecy (Isaiah 7:14).

### Mary shows Jesus to the Gentiles

Matthew's gospel (2:1–12) is the only one that records the visit of the Magi, the wise men from the east. They and their royal gifts echo themes found, for example, in Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:6. Jesus' name means 'God saves' and



Matthew shows Mary as the mother who presents to, and shares her child with, the Gentile world for the salvation of all people. In the persons of the wise men, this world not only recognises his royal authority but worships him. There is also, of course, a contrast between the sincerity and respect shown by these Gentile wise men and the deviousness and violence shown by King Herod and, later in the gospel, by the political and religious leaders in Israel.

### Mother of the new Moses

Matthew's concern here (2:13–23) is to remind his readers of the Exodus story when God, through the leadership of Moses, rescued the people of Israel from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Jesus is being presented here as the new leader who, like Moses, will save the people of Israel from their afflictions. Just as Miriam, the older sister of Moses watched over him to ensure that he did not die when he was set afloat in the river Nile, so Mary, whose name is the Greek version of Miriam, gives life to Jesus who will save all people.

### Luke's infancy narrative

Luke's gospel, written primarily for a Gentile audience, presents Jesus as a compassionate prophet and teacher whose work continues in the Church. Luke shows particular concern for people who are either excluded from, or living on the margins of, Jewish society. Highlighting this concern are numerous themes which run through this gospel. Some of these themes which apply particularly to our study of Mary are the following:

- God's merciful concern for the poor and lowly. This is especially obvious in Luke's infancy narrative (1:5–2:56). Mary is an unknown, unimportant young village woman. Her intended husband is a village 'tekton' (a combination of carpenter, stonemason, cartwright, and joiner). The first people to whom Mary shows her baby are shepherds who, because of their occupation, are on the edges of society and often excluded.
- Dedication to God in prayer makes total commitment to God possible. Mary's response to the angel's message (1:26–38) shows a person of deep faith who is willing to cooperate with God and to trust that God will support her. Mary treasures the joys and challenges of Jesus' birth and growing up and considers them deeply and reflects on them prayerfully (2:19, 51).
- The role of the Holy Spirit. In Luke's gospel the Holy Spirit is the gift of God and associated with power, joy, knowledge and understanding. Mary conceives Jesus through the power of the Spirit (1:35); she is praised and blessed by Elizabeth whom the Spirit has filled (1:41–42); the Spirit inspires Mary's song of praise to God (1:46–55).

The portrait of Mary that emerges from Luke's gospel is a relatively detailed one and Luke draws attention to important characteristics that Mary possesses.

### Favoured by God

Luke introduces Mary at the time of the annunciation (1:26–38). The angel's greeting *Rejoice, so highly favoured!* or the more familiar *Hail Mary, full of grace!* (1:28) as well as the angel's message (1:30–35) point out that Mary is unique in the regard that God has for her. To be full of grace is to have received the divine life that brings joy and wisdom; it is to have been blessed. Mary is presented as a holy person, pleasing to God.

In addition, Mary is told: *The Lord is with you.* Far from being a polite formal greeting, Luke intends that we should notice that this greeting comes from God



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(sent via the angel) and that it is to be understood in a literal sense. It implies that Mary occupies a special, unique and intimate place in relation to God.

### **Mother of the Messiah – God’s Salvation**

Luke is not merely describing Mary as a very good person who is pleasing to God. Because she is so filled with God’s grace, she is the one appropriate human being who can cooperate with God as he fulfils his promises to save humanity and creation. (see 1:32–33) The fulfilment of the divine promises is Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, who will be conceived within the womb of Mary, a young, humble, insignificant, peasant woman! For centuries the prophets have foretold and the people have prayed for the Messiah who would free them from their worries and troubles. Luke shows us that through Mary’s cooperation with God who has chosen her, this long waiting will at last be satisfied. No other human being has ever been called upon to share so intimately in God’s revelation of himself to humanity. She accepts this awesome role with the quiet dignity of a faithful believer: *...let what you have said be done to me* (1:38).



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### **Woman of Faith**

Mary not only responds graciously to the news that she will be a mother but she sets out quickly to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who is unexpectedly pregnant with the baby who will be John the Baptist (1:5–25 and 1:39–56).

Luke describes a dramatic meeting between the women. Elizabeth is moved by the Holy Spirit to acknowledge Mary’s grace. In her first blessing Elizabeth praises Mary for her motherhood, for the blessedness of the Lord with whom she is pregnant,

*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?*  
(1:42–43)

In her second blessing she gives a more profound reason for Mary’s blessedness

*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*  
(1:45).

Mary is ‘blessed’ because she has taken to heart (believed) the word the Lord spoke to her, the word which is growing within her womb and will be fulfilled when Jesus is born. Through faith she accepts her call to be the mother of Jesus; this openness to God’s will is what makes her blessed.

Mary’s faith is emphasised later in Luke’s gospel when a woman in a crowd is moved to praise loudly both Jesus and Mary (11:27–28)

*While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!’ But he said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’*

The woman intends to praise Jesus by invoking the happiness his mother must feel. She is implying: How wonderful you are! Your mother must be so happy and proud of you! Jesus does not contradict her but his reply widens her praise to include not only Mary but all people who, like Mary, hear God’s word and carry it out in their lives. Luke in his gospel emphasises that ultimately what makes people blessed is the degree to which they are disciples or faithful followers of Jesus.



### Woman of reflection and prayer

In his gospel Luke emphasises that prayer and reflection are an important and essential characteristic of a disciple of God. Twice he mentions that Mary reflected on events *in her heart*. The first is after Jesus' birth and the visit of the shepherds (2:19); the second is on their return to Nazareth after "losing" Jesus in Jerusalem for three days (2:51). Luke presents Mary as being actively involved in events, especially those which are not easily understood or explained. She responds by considering them deeply and reflecting on their meaning and significance in order to better understand God's will.

The shepherds who arrive to see the saviour who *has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord* (2:11) astonish their listeners with a story of angels, strange events and instructions (2:8–18). Their story is amazing and puzzling. Twelve years later, Jesus' actions and his mysterious words amaze and puzzle Mary and Joseph. In these events Luke shows us a woman who takes things on board humbly and quietly and who considers and meditates on their meaning and implications. This is another important aspect of her grace-filled life.

When Luke deals with later events he presents Mary in a similar way. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's 'sequel' to his gospel, Mary is shown in the midst of the apostles and followers of Jesus after his ascension (Acts 1:12–14). She is united with them *in continuous prayer* as they wait for the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has promised to send them. Prayer and reflection are normal and usual activities for Mary and make it clear to us that she is a sincere and devoted disciple of God.

### A true disciple

Luke portrays Mary as the model of a true disciple; she is like the seed in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5–8) which falls in rich soil and produces a crop of a hundredfold. She is an example of the people whom Jesus praises as the ones

*who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance*  
(Luke 8:15).

At the annunciation, Mary listens to God's word and responds wholeheartedly and trustingly,

*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*  
(1:38).

When she visits Elizabeth, the latter proclaims that Mary is blessed because she believes and trusts in God,

*And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* (1:45).

In both these events Mary is shown to be a person who believes completely in God; a person who not only trusts in God but who is willing to allow her life to be open and cooperative to whatever God wills. During his public ministry, Jesus affirms that his mother is one of those

*who hear the word of God and do it...* (8:21, 11:27–28).

Jesus is pointing out that Mary is blessed more for her faithfulness in keeping God's word than for simply being his mother. In Acts of the Apostles, Luke presents Mary as an important member of the community of disciples who are inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:13–14).



*The Visitation, circa 1530, by Giacomo Carucci known as Pontormo (1494–1556), Parish of St Michael, Carmignano, Italy*

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These passages help to illustrate some of the different aspects of a true and faithful disciple of Jesus, the sort of person whom Jesus describes symbolically as being like a seed in rich soil (Luke 8:15). Such people are noble, generous and persevering, and Mary is one of them.

Elsewhere in his gospel Luke emphasises the theme that true discipleship involves both the free surrender of one's own will and the total dedication of oneself to the service of God and others. Such commitment involves cost and suffering; e.g. 2:35; 5:11; 6:20–23; 9: 23; 9:62; 12:33; 14:26–27. The true and faithful disciple must realise and accept the hardships that come from doing God's will just as Jesus foresaw and accepted the suffering he would have to undergo; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7,26,46. When Mary said,

*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word...*  
(1:38),

she was agreeing to be God's faithful disciple whatever that might involve and wherever it might lead her.

## Conclusion

The gospel writers' portrayals of Mary are important. So too is study and reflection on her role as the human being who miraculously conceives and gives birth to the Saviour. However, it is also important to remind ourselves of the very ordinary, everyday side of Mary's relationship with Jesus. Like mothers everywhere she is the one who nurtures him from the day of his birth: feeding, cleaning and clothing him. She would have helped him learn to walk and talk; taught him his prayers and the practices of their Jewish religion. She would have attended to his cuts and bruises, kept an eye on him as he grew up, supported and encouraged him through his teen and young adult years, been proud of his achievements. No matter what theology tells us of her role, Mary was first and foremost a loving mother.



*Marriage at Cana, work of Saint Bartholomew Master (active 1475-1510)*

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## 5.3 Mary in the Gospels – Discipleship

### Mary in John's Gospel

John mentions Mary only three times and never by name. He often refers by name to others called Mary but Mary of Nazareth he calls 'the mother of Jesus'. John does this to emphasise her role in the history of salvation which Jesus brings about. As his mother she has given him life, that life which in his sacrifice on the cross gives life to all who believe in him. Mary is presented, in John's gospel, as a symbol of the Church, the living Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–27), and as the new Eve who is the mother of the new life in Christ as the first Eve was 'mother of all the living' (Genesis 3:20).

In John's gospel Jesus speaks twice to Mary, first at the wedding in Cana (2:4) and last from the cross before he dies (19:26). On both occasions Jesus calls her "Woman". John does this deliberately to emphasise that Mary is not simply the individual historical person but that she also represents the archetype or primary model of the faithful, faith-filled follower of Jesus. The word must not be understood in its colloquial English sense where it would sound rather disrespectful; remember that John is writing in first century AD Greek and he is also not primarily concerned with describing the personal relationship between Jesus and Mary.

The other point to note about Mary's part in John's gospel is that she is present when Jesus' public ministry begins at Cana and she is present again when it ends on the cross at Calvary. From John's point of view Mary is an important factor in the theology of his gospel.

### The Wedding at Cana

John's is the only gospel which tells of the wedding at Cana. John presents it as a turning point of crucial importance in Jesus' life. It is at Cana that he begins his public ministry and where he deliberately chooses the path that ultimately leads to his death and glorious resurrection. John shows Jesus leaving behind his quiet private role as the son of Mary and Joseph in the unimportant village of Nazareth, and picking up his role as

*the Word became flesh, ... full of grace and truth. (John 1:14).*

John's gospel is a complex, literary text, the fruit of deep theological reflection. It is very carefully written; no words are wasted and John regularly makes use of their associations and symbolism. Mary's presence at this key event is not a coincidence; John has something very definite and deliberate to say about her.

The Cana story is not primarily about Mary but rather about Christ and the beginning of his public ministry. This is made clear in the conclusion of the story:

*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (2:11).*

Mary appears at the beginning of the story. She is the one who draws Jesus' attention to the shortage of wine. The short dialogue between her and Jesus can be puzzling because the conversation seems illogical. The sequence of events is as follows:

- Mary approaches Jesus, pointing out that the wine has run out, and implying that she would like him to do something to rescue the embarrassing situation (v.3).



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- Jesus seems to refuse her, saying that it is not their concern. His 'hour' has not come yet (v.4).
- Mary seems to ignore what Jesus has just said. Instead she turns to the servants and advises them to do whatever Jesus tells them to do (v.5).
- Jesus then goes ahead and turns the water into wine, as though he had not just moments before refused to intervene (vv.7–9).

The meaning of the language used in verse 4 is not clear in English. The Jerusalem Bible translates the Greek text as:

*Woman, why turn to me? My hour has not come yet.*

The literal Greek question is, 'What to me and to you?' In the Old Testament a Semitic version of this idiom is sometimes used, for example, in Joshua 22:24–25; Judges 11:12. It usually means that a relationship between two parties is being called into question and undergoes a change. Something similar may be happening here affecting the relationship between Jesus and Mary.

This becomes clearer if we look at the second sentence in verse 4. It is usually translated into English as: *My hour has not come yet*. This is a literal translation of the Greek text but it presumes that this sentence is a statement, not a question. Early manuscripts of the New Testament do not contain any punctuation. Later editors have added the punctuation. It is possible that the writer intended this sentence to be question. If so, the sentence would then mean: 'Hasn't my hour come?' This has a very different meaning now – the question implies that indeed Jesus' hour has come.

### Interpretation of the text

If we accept this interpretation of these two sentences, then the conversation between Jesus and Mary seems to make better sense as follows:

- Mary approaches Jesus in the ordinary way of a mother who knows her son well. All she does is to draw his attention to the embarrassing problem that has arisen for the hosts: the shortage of wine. She does not have to ask for anything and she certainly does not ask for a miracle. Indeed there is no reason to suppose that she even knew he could work miracles. She simply says, 'They have no wine'.
- Jesus, however, is conscious that the hour has come for him to begin his public ministry to carry out the mission entrusted to him by God. From now onwards, he recognises only the authority of God the Father; his life is ruled by obedience to his Father's will. No earthly authority or claim on him is more important than this, not even a mother's authority. His 'hour' is that time when everything is in God's hands. Not only Jesus, but every person who follows him, including his mother, must also be obedient to the will of God.
- And so Jesus says to Mary, 'What does this mean for me and you, Woman? Hasn't my hour come?' He is telling her that from now on her authority over him as his mother must give way to God's authority. Their relationship has changed and Mary can no longer make any claims on him on the basis of their previous relationship as mother and son. Instead, like the other disciples, she must be obedient to God's will, have faith in Jesus and follow him.
- Mary seems to understand and accept this. She need say nothing more to Jesus – they understand each other. She turns to the servants and tells them, 'Do whatever he tells you.' In other words, Jesus is in charge and, although Mary doesn't know what he will do, she trusts him. She has faith in him.



- Jesus then proceeds to work the miracle that shows forth his glory and leads the other disciples to believe in him.

This interpretation also recalls an event recorded only in Luke's gospel: the finding of Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41–50). Jesus has been missing for three days. When Mary and Joseph eventually find him, she says to him, like any upset and worried mother

*When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety' (2:48).*

Jesus, however, tells her that there is a greater authority that he must obey: "Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" This is another moment when the human relationship between mother and son has had to come second to Jesus' need to be obedient to the Father's will.

### **What the Cana story tells us about Mary**

If we reflect on the story and use our imagination, we can begin to draw reasonable conclusions about Mary and how she might have thought and felt. Some of the things we can draw from the story are the following:

- Mary is sensitive and alert to the good of others and she pays attention to what is going on.
- She is confident that her son shares her concern for others and that he can find solutions to the difficulties or problems that people experience.
- She directs others to Jesus. She does not draw people to herself but rather leads them to follow and cooperate with him.
- She has faith in Jesus without having to witness a miracle.
- She accepts that he has become independent of her and that his public work will take him in unpredictable and unknown directions.
- Most importantly, she is willing to accept and cooperate with the will of God, even when it means giving up her rights as Jesus' mother.



*The Marriage Feast at Cana, c.1305 (fresco), Giotto di Bondone (c.1266–1337)*

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## Mary in the Synoptic Gospels

As shown in the earlier table: Where Mary is mentioned in the Gospels they say very little about Mary in general and even less about her involvement in Jesus' public ministry.

One incident, which seems to be the same one, is mentioned by all three of the Synoptic writers. The three accounts are set out below side-by-side.

Mark 3:20–21, 31–35	Matthew 12:46–50	Luke 8:19–21
<i>and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'</i>		
<i>Then his mother and his brothers came...</i>	<i>While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers...</i>	<i>Then his mother and his brothers came to him...</i>
<i>...and, standing outside,...</i>	<i>... were standing outside...</i>	
<i>... they sent to him and called him.</i>	<i>wanting to speak to him.</i>	
<i>A crowd was sitting round him...</i>		<i>... but they could not reach him because of the crowd.</i>
<i>... and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.'</i>	<i>Someone told him 'Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.'</i>	<i>And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.'</i>
<i>And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'</i>	<i>But to the one who had told him this, Jesus* replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?'</i>	
<i>And looking at those who sat around him...</i>	<i>And pointing to his disciples,</i>	
<i>...he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.'</i>	<i>...he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'</i>	
<i>Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'</i>	<i>For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'</i>	<i>But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'</i>



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## Mark

At a first reading of Mark 3:31–35 it seems that Jesus is snubbing his mother, leaving her to wait outside. He indicates a clear preference for those sitting about him whom he identifies as his mother and brothers. The background to this incident is outlined in verses 20 to 21. This story seems to be about a worried Mary and Jesus' relatives coming to rescue him and being ignored by him.

However, there are some points which need to be noted.

- a) Mark's intention in this passage is to emphasise Jesus' teaching that the members of his true family are those who do God's will. To highlight this important teaching Mark uses a typical Semitic literary technique: deliberately creating a strong contrast between Jesus' 'biological' family and his 'spiritual' family.
- b) As the table in Chapter 2 makes plain, Mark does not seem to consider that Mary's part in Jesus' life and teaching is important for the purposes of his gospel.
- c) Mark frequently describes the opposition or lack of comprehension that Jesus experienced as a result of his words and actions. Mark seems to suggest that even people close to him failed to understand his message and failed to realise that doing God's will is the only thing that is important.

## Matthew

Matthew's account of this incident does not add much to our understanding of Mary. The most significant difference between Matthew and Mark is Matthew's indication that it is Jesus' "disciples" who are his family. Matthew suggests that the intimacy of family relationships is an important characteristic of believers' relationships with Jesus.

## Luke

Luke's account is gentler than the previous two. His version is much shorter and he places it in a very different context – following the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4–8, 11–15) and the parable of the lamp (Luke 8:16). The parable of the sower praises people who hear the word of God and respond generously and fruitfully; the parable of the lamp affirms those who give witness to God. Luke seems to link Jesus' family with people who put the word of God into practice. Jesus holds Mary up as an example of those who are obedient to God: My mother... [is one of]... those who hear the word of God and put it into practice. In the infancy stories Luke has shown Mary as one who hears the word of God and follows it in her life.

## Mary at the Cross

Jesus' crucifixion on Calvary is the climax of his human life and mission. John presents the cross both as the instrument of Jesus' degradation and humiliation and as the way in which he triumphs over the powers of evil (see John 12:23–32). As John sees it, Jesus simultaneously undergoes destruction in death and passes into the glory of the Father.

John's is the only gospel which records Mary's presence at Jesus' death (19:25). John places her near the cross, the mother of Jesus together with the person identified as the disciple he loved (19:26). They, together with the other two or three women, form a little community of believers gathered at the feet of Jesus.

## Good Marian Theology

*Catholics are sometimes accused of worshipping Mary and placing her above Jesus in their practices.*

*Paul VI suggested that in the changing world of the 20th century people needed to view Mary within their own cultural context. He named five key characteristics to good Marian theology.*

1. **Biblical**  
*Marian theology should be influenced by the witness of Scripture.*
2. **Liturgical**  
*It should always reflect the liturgical season.*
3. **Ecumenical**  
*Mary should unite the Church not divide so what we teach about Mary is in harmony with what fellow Christian Churches believe.*
4. **Anthropological**  
*Anything we say about Mary should reflect the changing role of women in society.*
5. **Theological**  
*God is at the centre of all practice and belief with Mary placed in relation to Christ and the Church*





*Crucifixion (Crocefissione)*, by Scipione Pulzone, 1586 (oil on canvas). Church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, Rome, Italy.

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## John's Presentation of Mary at Calvary

*When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (19:26–27).*

The disciple at the cross with Mary has traditionally been identified as John, the writer of the gospel. Whoever he was, in this scene he represents all the people – then and now – who follow Jesus, do God's will, and believe that he is the Saviour, the Second Person of the Trinity. Jesus' last act before he dies is to entrust his mother to the care of his beloved friend. When we reflect on these few words in the gospel account they reveal levels of meaning.

### A woman alone

On one level this passage shows Jesus arranging, as a good son should, for his mother to be looked after when he has gone. Even in the torture of his dying agony he is still 'the man for others', still thinking of the needs of others. The passage suggests that Mary has no other male member of her immediate family to protect and care for her; in fact, the traditional understanding of the Church has been that Mary was a widow by the time Jesus died.

### A woman bereft

On another level these words can be said to reflect a final example of Jesus' willingness to give everything away, to embrace poverty, for the sake of God's kingdom. Throughout his passion all human supports and relationships have been stripped from him one by one. When he was arrested his friends ran away. His reputation was destroyed by the lies told to convict him of offences that carried a death penalty. His human dignity was trampled on by the mockery of the soldiers who treated him brutally. His right to justice and life was ignored by Pilate who allowed him to be executed although he was innocent. On Calvary he was even stripped of his clothes and left to die naked. Facing death he and his mother are forced to part and he gives her into the care of another. In the end, stripped of everything, he says, 'It is accomplished' and he gives up his spirit and dies that we might live.

### The new Eve – a life-giving woman

On yet another level John is presenting Mary as the new Eve, the mother of all those who now live the life of faith in Jesus, the mother of what will become known as the Church. Mary, the first faithful one, was present at the beginning of Jesus' ministry at Cana and she remains faithful to the end and beyond. John shows us that Mary is closely associated with Jesus' saving work. The beloved disciple, who stands for all faithful Christians, is committed to Mary as to his own mother – to honour her and to respect and care for her. From this point on Mary is to be in the heart of the community of Jesus' disciples – the Church. She is not apart from the Church or over and above it in some way. She is, rather, the greatest and most outstanding member of the Church and, since Jesus has made her the mother of the beloved disciple who stands for the Church community, she is also now the mother of the Church and, as such, she plays an important part in it. It is also now through Mary that every disciple of Jesus – past, present and future, relates to him as his brother or sister.

There is clearly something important going on in these last words which Jesus addresses to his mother and the beloved disciple. Jesus brings them into a mother-son relationship. However, he is doing more than just telling



them to treat each other as though they were mother and son. Rather, he is stating that in a very real sense they are, from now on, mother and son to each other. Just as, biologically, parents and their children share the same human nature that unites them intimately to each other, so spiritually Mary and all whom the beloved disciple represents are intimately united by their common discipleship in Jesus.

### **Mother of the Church**

John's account of Jesus' passion and death is presented as a victory even though many people would not see it as such. John presents Jesus as being in command of the situation from the moment the soldiers and guards come to the garden to arrest him to the moment when he gives up his spirit. His death is about his glorification and not at all about what might look like failure. Through his death on the cross he returns to the Father and his body, glorified and soon to be raised, is like a spring of water, the source of the divine life-giving power of the Spirit. In a symbolic sense Mary and the small group of faithful disciples on Calvary are the first to receive the Spirit breathed upon them by Jesus. In a symbolic sense John is saying that the Church, the family of God, is born on Calvary in the persons of Jesus, Mary and the beloved disciple.

The Vatican II document, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (paragraphs 60-65), points out that Mary was intimately and uniquely united with Jesus in his life and mission on earth. Not only was she united with him in his suffering, she cooperated with obedience, faith, hope and love in his work of salvation. Consequently she is our mother in faith and continues to care for all who believe in her son.

### **Conclusion**

There is no indication that Mary herself played a significant role in the public ministry of her son Jesus. However, it is reasonable to conclude that she kept in touch with what he was doing and, on occasion, was with Jesus. She would certainly have been there when he visited Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30) and John tells us that she accompanied him from Cana to Capernaum (John 2:12) and may well have been in Capernaum with him at other times. We know also that she was with him in Jerusalem at the end. Even though her role was not public she, like any mother, would have been proud of his achievements, glad at the great things he was doing for the poor and lowly, concerned and worried at the opposition that he met even in Nazareth. She would have been with him in heart and mind every step of his way.



*Pentecost, 16th century, Portuguese painting.*

© DEA / G. DAGLI ORTI / GETTY IMAGES





Detail: The Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus (mosaic)

HAGIA SOPHIA, ISTANBUL / BYZANTINE ERA / ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

## 5.4 Mary in Tradition

### Mary the Mother of God

As early as 319 AD the Greek word *Theotokos* meaning God-bearer or Mother of God was being used by Christians to describe Mary's role in Jesus' incarnation. The earliest evidence is in a letter written by Alexander (d. 328), a bishop of Alexandria, against Arianism. Alexander refers to Jesus as having received his real human body from Mary whom he describes as the *Theotokos*.

### The Council of Ephesus

Finally, in 431 AD the Council of Ephesus stated the following,

*We confess, then, our Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God perfect God and perfect man consisting of a rational soul and a body, begotten before all ages from the Father as to his godhead, the same in the last days, for us and for our salvation, **born of Mary the virgin, as to his humanity**, one and the same consubstantial with the Father in godhead and consubstantial with us in humanity, for a union of two natures took place. Therefore we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord. According to this understanding of the unmixed union, **we confess the holy Virgin to be the mother of God because God the Word took flesh and became man and from his very conception united to himself the temple [body] he took from her.***

The statements made at the Council of Ephesus were a response to questions and debates that had been taking place for more than a century. In particular this Council was responsible for asserting two things:

- a) It affirmed that the one person of the Son of the Father exists in two natures, as God and as man. This is called the hypostatic or personal union – the union of the two natures (divine and human) in the one hypostasis (person) of the Son.
- b) It confirmed that *Theotokos* (God-bearer / 'Mother of God') is the appropriate title for the Virgin Mary because Jesus is one Person who is God and so Mary is truly the Mother of God.

### The drive to evangelise

Why did it take so long to decide that it is appropriate to call Mary the Mother of God? Firstly, the Church in its earlier years was primarily concerned with evangelisation – spreading the Good News of Jesus. As increasing numbers of people began to accept the message and became followers of Jesus, so it became necessary for the Church to clarify, define and understand who Jesus is so that people could be certain that their beliefs and practices were true. This was a long and slow process and at least two major councils met before the Council of Ephesus: Nicaea in 325 AD and Constantinople in 381 AD.

### The focus on Jesus

The council of Ephesus was not primarily concerned with Mary herself. The Council's concern was to ensure that the truth was taught about Jesus and that erroneous teachings like that of Nestorius were dealt with. And so it was that, in defining the nature of Jesus, the fact that Mary was his mother had to be taken into account. Once the Councils declared that Jesus was the divine Son of God and Second Person of the Trinity and, at the same time, a human being, then it became clear that Mary was in truth the mother of God become

### Some traditional titles for Mary

Ave Maria  
First Disciple  
Holy Mary  
Mother of God  
Mother of Perpetual Help  
Mother of the Church  
Our Lady  
Our Lady Help of Christians  
Queen of the Disciples  
The Immaculate Conception  
Virgin Mary



human. Mary's importance comes from, and depends completely on, Jesus – not the other way round.

### The connotations of 'mother'

Secondly, the idea of 'mother' carries with it the implication that Mary in some way causes her child to exist. Some of the associations connected with this idea created difficulties in people's minds. The idea that Mary in some way causes Jesus is, of course, completely opposed to the fundamental Jewish and Christian belief that God is uncaused, uncreated and without beginning or end. God cannot have a mother; therefore, the title 'Mother of God' must be properly understood to refer to the consequence of God being incarnated (taking on his human nature) in Mary's womb. Mary, we can say, is the mother of God-made-man-in-Jesus who is at the same time both human and divine.

Bear in mind also that the relationship between mother and child is a relationship between persons. A mother does not give birth merely to a human nature but to a unique person; and each person is much more than simply his or her human nature. As Scripture reveals and the Councils explain, we believe that Jesus, the son of God and the son of Mary, is one single person and in that sense it is appropriate to call Mary the mother of God.

### East and West

The early Church in the East differed from that in the West in many ways; in fact, many differences persist to the present day. The differences were in language (Greek in the East, Latin in the West), literature, art, culture, customs, feasts, and celebrations. Interest in, and devotion to, Mary began in the East and it was there that the ideas of Mary as perpetual virgin, as mother of God, and as queen of heaven originated long before councils or dogmatic pronouncements made their formal statements. In the West it is not until the 5th century that the first example of a Latin hymn addressing Mary is found, the 6th century that Mary's name was included in the Eucharistic prayer, and the 7th century that the feasts of Mary's annunciation and visitation were celebrated.

### Growing use of the title

The statements of the Council of Ephesus were later endorsed by the Council of Chalcedon (451). In teaching about Jesus' human and divine natures, this council reaffirmed that Mary is rightly called the mother of God:

*... as regards his divinity, begotten of the Father before the ages, for us and for our salvation; as regards his humanity born of the Virgin Mary, the God-bearer (theotokos); one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten...*

Note that Mary's status as mother of God was never the object of an independent or exclusive dogmatic declaration. The statements concerning her status are always found in texts which define the person and natures of Jesus. The belief that Mary is the mother of God is an integral part of Christian belief in Jesus the Christ and is generally accepted by all Christians.

The title Mother of God is a very important one in the history of Christian faith. It not only says something very important about Mary and her relationship with God, it also safeguards important truths about Jesus and the mystery of the incarnation. It tells us much more about Jesus than it does about Mary.



Our Lady of the Island, New York  
ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © SYLVANA REGA



First two letters  
Hail Mary in Latin  
Ave Maria





*Ecce Ancilla Domini*, 1850 Rossetti, Dante  
(1828-1882) / Tate Gallery

## Other Key Beliefs about Mary

In addition to Mary's motherhood, there are three other important beliefs (also known as doctrines or dogmas) about her and her part in the history of salvation. These beliefs concern

- **Mary's perpetual virginity** – Catholics, like Protestants, believe that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. However, Catholic and Orthodox belief is that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life.
- **Her immaculate conception** – Catholics believe that Mary was conceived without original sin so that she would be a sinless mother of Jesus, God incarnate as a human being. This sinlessness was brought about only through God's grace and not on account of anything done or deserved by Mary. Orthodox belief is that Mary was sinless when bearing Jesus but the moment at which she became sinless is debated.
- **Her assumption** – Catholic and Orthodox belief is that when her earthly life ended, Mary was assumed (taken) into heaven to be with God and all the angels and saints.

### Mary's Perpetual Virginity

Both the gospels of Matthew and Luke state clearly that Jesus was conceived virginally by the power of the Holy Spirit without any human intervention.

- *Matthew (1:20) writes, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*
- *Luke (1:34–35) writes, Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'*

### The Virgin Birth

The virginal conception of Jesus points to the mystery of the incarnation (that is, God becoming a human being). Jesus is conceived in Mary's womb so he is a human being; but his conception happens by the power of God and not of a man and so Jesus is the divine Son of God. His virginal conception also emphasises that the incarnation happens at God's initiative only. It was entirely God's doing and God's decision to which Mary gave her free consent.

The early Christians were insistent on the virginal conception of Jesus. The polytheistic religions which surrounded them had many stories of immortal gods coming to earth in human or animal form and using physical sexual intercourse in the seduction or rape of mortal virgins. These women then conceived demigods who often grew up to be heroes or important people. Christians were anxious to prevent any superficial comparisons being made between such mythological stories and the origins of Jesus Christ.

In addition Christianity is firmly rooted in Hebrew scripture and belief. The God of the Jews is the same God in whom Christians believe. God is one, there is no other; God is true, completely good and all powerful. The bible tells of miraculous pregnancies involving couples who were childless; e.g. Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 21:5–7), Elkanah and Hannah (1 Samuel 1), Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–25) but these all resulted from sexual intercourse between husband and wife. In the case of Jesus' conception God's power works uniquely and miraculously to cause Mary's pregnancy without any human involvement at all.



It is quite clear from the gospel accounts and from the teaching of the early Church that Mary had a distinctive role in Jesus' incarnation and, therefore, in God's work of salvation.. God invited Mary to cooperate actively, freely and knowingly in what was proposed. Her consent to God's invitation was free and responsible (Luke 1:38).

Mary's act of free consent was also her generative act, the act which allowed Jesus to be conceived in her womb. This act which gave rise to Jesus' conception, although not an act of loving union with her husband, was an act of loving faith in God. When Mary said,

*... let it be with me according to your word* (Luke 1:38)

Jesus was conceived.

### Mary, ever-virgin

Catholic teaching about Mary's virginity has not been limited just to the virginal conception of Jesus. The constant Catholic tradition has maintained that Mary remained a virgin all her life even though she was truly the mother of Jesus, was married to Joseph, and despite gospel references to 'brothers and sisters of Jesus', for example, Mark 3:31-35. Scholars have shown that in Hebrew and Aramaic the words 'brothers' and 'sisters' include close family relatives like cousins, half-brothers and half-sisters. The 'brothers and sisters of Jesus' do not necessarily mean children of Joseph and Mary, they could just as easily be members of the extended family in which Jesus grew up.

John-Paul II said,

St. Luke's Gospel states that Mary conceived the Son of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, not knowing man (see Luke 1:34 and Matthew 1:18, 24-25). Mary was therefore a virgin before the birth of Jesus, and she remained a virgin in giving birth and after the birth. That is the truth presented by the New Testament texts, and which was expressed both by the Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 553, which spoke of Mary as 'ever virgin', and also by the Lateran Council in 649, which taught that,

*the mother of God... Mary... conceived (her Son) through the power of the Holy Spirit without human intervention, and in giving birth to him her virginity remained unaffected, and even after the birth her virginity remained intact.*

### The significance of Mary's perpetual virginity

The Church has always seen a symbolic meaning in this belief in the lifelong virginity of Mary. Virginity in the Christian tradition is regarded as a positive thing, as a readiness for total commitment to another person. To be virgin is to maintain one's personal integrity or wholeness so that one can give oneself totally and exclusively to another person. Virginity is, therefore, much more than simply a matter of physical integrity. Physical integrity is a sign rather of the personal integrity that a virgin person presents to his or her beloved to whom he or she makes a total commitment of self.

In a religious context virginity transcends or, in other words, goes beyond the commitment of self in human relationships. It still involves a person's total commitment but to God and not to another human person. Religious virginity is the total gift of self to God. Its sign is a life lived in chaste celibacy, that is unmarried and without any sexual intimacy with another person.



*Our Lady of Guadalupe*  
ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © BLUEBIRD13



## Major apparitions of Mary

Apparitions are the appearance of someone who has died.

Even when the church designates an apparition as authentic, Catholics do not have to believe in the appearance.

Authenticated apparitions are not articles of faith.

1531	Guadalupe Feast day: 12 December
1858	Lourdes Feast day: 11 February
1915	Fatima Feast day: 13 May



Our Lady of Lourdes: The Immaculate Conception

At the annunciation Mary gave the perfect virginal response to the message of the angel,

*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*  
(Luke 1:26–38).

In calling herself the servant of the Lord, Mary was affirming her willing and complete openness to God's wishes. She generously made a gift of herself and her life to God. Since her commitment was total, it involved not only all that she had been and was at the time of the annunciation, but it also involved all that she would be, into her future.

This is the significance of Mary's perpetual virginity. It symbolises her total commitment to God for her whole life and also her continuing acceptance of what God asked of her at the annunciation, that she should be the mother of Jesus the Son of God and, through him, of all who came to believe in him.

## The Immaculate Conception

This doctrine is about Mary's conception in her own mother's womb. In this context the word 'immaculate' means to be completely free from any trace of original sin.

On 8 December 1854, Pius IX solemnly stated that,

*the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.*

(Apostolic Constitution on the Immaculate Conception: *Ineffabilis Deus*)

## The four essential elements of Mary's Immaculate Conception

### 1. Preserved free from original sin

Genesis 3:1–24 is known as the story of The Fall. The first man and the first woman disobeyed God and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. The consequence was that they were banished from the Garden of Eden and their descendants after them. Catholic teaching does not require people to adopt a literalist and fundamentalist interpretation of this story but it does expect people to understand that this story communicates important religious truths.

The major consequence of our first parents' disobedience was to separate us human beings from God and to make us prone to sinfulness. The meaning of Mary's Immaculate Conception is that when her parents conceived her she was, by God's power, conceived without sin and without the human tendency to sin. She was, as the angel said at the annunciation, favoured by God; and, as Elizabeth said of her,

*Blessed are you among women...* (Luke 1:28, 42).

In other words, Mary is not alienated, made a stranger to, God; in fact she is filled with the grace or life of God which is what makes her blessed. In every other way her human nature was exactly the same as everyone else's and, as a human being, she was not freed from the other consequences of Adam's sin – the suffering, temptations, labour pains, work and death which were also part of the curse that fell on human beings as a result of our first parents' disobedience. Mary certainly worked hard, suffered and died but she remained a sinless friend of God.



## 2. *From the first moment of her conception*

The privilege of her immaculate conception is personal to Mary alone. It is a specific gift which God granted to her in her human nature. In other words, from the moment that Mary existed as a person she was sinless, free from original sin. There was never a time when she had original sin and was later cleansed of it – as in Orthodox Church belief.

## 3. *By a singular grace and privilege*

Mary's Immaculate Conception was a particular privilege, a special favour which God freely granted to her only. As theologians explain, God's purpose was two-fold.

Firstly, Mary's freedom from original sin enabled her to grow up in holiness and love of God and neighbour. At the annunciation it enabled her to make a completely free choice to accept or reject God's invitation to be the mother of Jesus; in a similar way to the freedom that the woman in Genesis had to accept or reject God's command. In saying to God,

*... let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38).*

Mary made a choice that would ultimately affect the whole human race and the whole of human history just as our first parents' choice has affected us all.

Secondly, when Jesus became a human being he did so fully and completely – he took on our human nature in its entirety. However, because Jesus did not stop being divine it was impossible that he should be tainted in any way by sin or sinfulness. Since Jesus took his human nature from his mother Mary, it was necessary that her human nature should be free from sinfulness; hence the special privilege granted to her.

Although through his incarnation the Son of God would assume the fullness of human nature and become like other human beings, it was impossible that Christ should inherit original sin or be tainted by sin in any way. Since Mary was Jesus' only human parent, she would have passed it on to him if she herself had been subject to it. God could not be subject to sin; therefore Mary was preserved from original sin herself, so that it could not be transmitted to her Son.

## 4. *By virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race*

God in the Second Person of the Trinity became a human being like us to save us from the disobedience of our first parents and the consequences of that sin for the rest of us. God became a human being because human nature could not, on its own, overcome the breakdown in relationships between God and human beings and, in fact, the whole of creation. So the purpose of Jesus' life, death and resurrection (the Paschal Mystery) was to live in such total and selfless obedience, willing to lose absolutely everything for our sake and in cooperation with the Father, so that we human beings could be rescued from sin and death and be reconciled to God.

When God granted Mary the gift of being conceived free from original sin, it was granted in anticipation or in the expectation of the salvation that Jesus' life, death and resurrection would bring to all human beings. It is through Jesus' sacrifice of himself that Mary is free from original sin, even though she was freed, so to speak, in advance. It is Jesus who saves.

## The significance of Mary's Immaculate Conception

The sole difference between Mary and ourselves is that Mary always enjoyed the gift of God's grace from the moment of her conception whereas we



*Immaculate Conception, by Lorenzo De Caro (1719-1777), oil on canvas*

© DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / GETTY IMAGES



receive God's grace through the Holy Spirit at our baptism, when we become members of God's family, and through the sacraments. The gift of God's grace is what enables us to live in a right relationship with God and, therefore, with everyone and everything else. Grace is the life of God within us; it is light, love, freedom, strength and the promise of eternal life.

Through her immaculate conception Mary always enjoyed and lived this right relationship with God. She was graced with the gifts of the Spirit that come to the rest of us through baptism. Furthermore, Mary was always able to grow in grace and favour with God because, not being burdened by original sin and its disordering effects, she could always be totally responsive to the Spirit dwelling within her. Mary shows us what ordinary human beings are capable of and what we are destined to be.

The Immaculate Conception also shows forth very clearly that salvation is God's work. God takes the initiative. God saves and no one and nothing else can save humanity. Salvation is not something that we can gain for ourselves; no matter how much we may desire it. Salvation cannot be earned by our own efforts. It is a gift, a free gift freely given by our God because he loves us more than we can know or imagine.

Mary shows us what it means to cooperate with God in the work of salvation, in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Our vocation, just like hers, is to *hear the word of God and put it into practice* (Luke 8:21).

## The Assumption

On 1 November 1950 Pius XII solemnly defined the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary,

*...We pronounce, declare and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory...*  
(Mother of All Peoples: *Munificentissimus Deus*)

The essential point of this definition is that Mary went 'body and soul' to heaven when her earthly life came to an end. What happened at the end of her life on earth, how and when it happened is not known. Her assumption is not recorded in Scripture nor is it referred to in any of the early councils of the Church. Stories do exist that claim to describe the end of her life but these are not regarded as historical.

Although the stories about the end of Mary's life provide us with no credible historical evidence about what took place, they should not be ignored. What they do tell us is that Christians were convinced that Mary died and was taken bodily to heaven. This conviction is common to both Eastern and Western Christian Churches, it spans centuries and its influence is seen in things like sermons, art and liturgy. Also, there is no other tradition that contradicts it.

The document *Mother of All Peoples*, which affirms Mary's assumption, was not something dreamed up in 1950. It points out that,

*Various testimonies, indications and signs of this common belief of the Church are evident from remote times down through the course of the centuries; and this same belief becomes more clearly manifest from day to day.*

The formal declaration simply affirmed what had long been generally accepted within the Church.



*Coronation of the Virgin, 1486, by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), tempera on wood*  
© DEA / A. DAGLI ORTI / GETTY IMAGES



## The Assumption explained

The Christian tradition has always emphasized the close connection that exists between what we believe about Jesus and what we believe about Mary. Furthermore, the reason the Church has defined specific beliefs about Mary is to make clearer and to develop further our understanding of God's plan for us and for our salvation. In honouring Mary we are, in fact, honouring and glorifying God who made her and Jesus whose life, death and resurrection have saved her and all of us from sin and death.

The assumption also recognises the human reality of death or the end to our human experience of life on earth. Mary had a body just like us and so was mortal just as we all are. There are some who hold that Mary did not die but was taken to heaven in a similar way to Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Enoch (Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5). However, the formal declaration on the assumption leaves the matter open.

Death, as we know, is followed by the decay of our bodies. This is a consequence of the disobedience of our first parents. St Paul reminds us that,

*... the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life...*  
(Romans 6:23).

Death came into the world with our first parents' disobedience. Mary was freed from original sin because of Jesus' paschal mystery (his passion, death and resurrection), his offering of himself for us. Mary was the first and most faithful of Jesus' disciples. She also remained sinless and faithful to God throughout her life and, as a result, death and corruption could have no power over her.

When Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, welcomed Mary she greeted her with the words,

*...blessed are you among women...*  
(Luke.1:42).

Mary is uniquely blessed by being so intimately and physically bound up with Jesus as he grew in her womb, as she fed him at her breast, comforted him in her arms and did all the physical things that mothers do for their children. It seems only right that her body should not decay in the grave but be raised immediately to eternal life by the Son whom she loved so much.

Mary lived her life on earth in a spirit of faithful and loving cooperation with God as the mother of Jesus. The longing of a child for its own mother and of a mother for her child helps us to begin to understand something of the relationship between Mary and God and why it is right and proper that she is enjoying the final resurrection before everyone else. Scripture insists again and again that God does not forget or abandon anyone; for example, speaking through the prophet Isaiah God says,

*Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. 16See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands...*  
(Isaiah 49:15–16).

How much more must Mary be remembered by God? With this in mind her assumption into glory becomes more understandable.

## Implications

The Christian hope is that there is life for all of us beyond death; death is not the end. We trust Jesus' promises that we will join him in a risen and renewed

## Feasts of Mary

*Feasts of Mary's faith journey and relationship to Jesus are celebrated throughout the year. Some of them are:*

**1 January:** *Mary Mother of God*

- *The oldest feast of Mary celebrating Jesus fully human and fully God.*

**25 March:** *Annunciation of Our Lord*

- *Jesus' conception by Mary through the Holy Spirit.*

**31 May:** *The Visitation*

- *Elizabeth recognizing Jesus as saviour and Mary praying the Magnificat.*

**15 August:** *The Assumption*

- *Mary body and soul enjoying the fullness of salvation. (This is the patronal feast of the Church in Aotearoa New Zealand.)*

**22 August:** *The Queenship of Mary*

- *Mary first among the saints.*

**8 September:** *The Birth of Mary*

- *The actual date of Mary's birth is unknown but we celebrate the dawn of salvation in this feast.*

**8 December:** *The Immaculate Conception*

- *God gave Mary everything she needed to be Mother of Jesus so she was born without sin.*



life of glory and happiness where death is no longer possible (see John 11:25–26). Mary is the living proof that these promises are not empty, that faith in Christ is well-founded.

By emphasising Mary's bodily assumption, this doctrine affirms the dignity, goodness and worth of every aspect of the human person, especially our bodies. Our bodies are not simply disposable they are an integral part of who we are and so it is reasonable to believe in their resurrection. The Church teaches that the body is an integral part of every person so, if there is to be a state of fulfilment which is our human destiny, then it must include the body as well.

Finally, the doctrine of Mary's Assumption reaffirms our faith that, saved by Jesus, we human beings are destined to enjoy eternal glory like Mary where, as St Paul puts it, ... *we will see face to face*... (1 Corinthians 13:12). The assumption is a celebration of our human dignity as people whom God loves. Human beings are intended by God to share eternally in the life of the Trinity in the kingdom of God where,

*They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*  
(Revelation 7:16-17).



*Our Lady of Perpetual Help c. 13th century, (icon)*

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## 5.5 Mary in Art

Christians have imagined Mary in a great variety of ways according to different times and influences. Since there are so few references to her in Scripture and no information at all about her appearance, people's imaginations have had a free rein. However, there are certain broad boundaries in the Christian Tradition about how to portray her:

- Mary is always a human person; never a goddess or divine.
- Mary is an historical person; the real mother of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Mary is always a holy person, close to Jesus.
- Mary is often seen also as a representative or symbolic of particular qualities or virtues.

The wide range of imaginative and creative works portraying Mary provides us with considerable information about the makers and their times, including the feelings, thinking, values and beliefs of the people of their culture. They help us to understand how people's views of Mary have changed and developed. Taken together they provide a rich source of material to assist and to deepen our relationship with her and, more particularly, her Son Jesus.

### The First Three Centuries

The gospels contain the beginnings of theological reflection on Mary and her role in the story of salvation. Paintings on the walls of 2nd century Roman catacombs show Mary as a strong mother with her child on her lap looking directly at the viewer. These early paintings generally have a scriptural connection.

In the 2nd century, influenced particularly by St Justin Martyr (100–165 AD) and St Irenaeus (c.125–202 AD), Mary was seen as the new Eve who restores life to the world. This symbolism had its roots in St Paul's teaching about Christ as the new 'Adam' (see Romans 5:12). Just as the woman Eve and the man Adam brought sin and death into the world through their disobedience, so the woman Mary and the human Jesus bring goodness and life through their obedience to God.

In 313 AD the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which recognised Christianity as a legal religion and the persecution of Christians ended. Christianity tended to become more popular and fashionable and many felt that people were forgetting what Jesus taught about love of neighbour, about witnessing to the kingdom of God and about following Jesus' example faithfully. Many turned to the ascetic life instead and monasticism began to develop as a way of life in the Church during the 4th to 6th centuries. In this context, Mary was portrayed as the model of asceticism, for example, as a perfect nun.

### After 313

In 380 AD the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire. Now that Christianity was officially promoted, magnificent churches were built, the cross became the sign of victory and the earlier unsophisticated portrayals of Mary were replaced by more politically powerful



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*The Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus (mosaic)  
/ Hagia Sophia, Istanbul / Byzantine era*

ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



and magnificent portrayals of her as queen. By mid-6th century the classical style blended with the impassive style to produce the new Byzantine art.

The painting of icons developed at this time. Icons are inspired religious paintings showing Christ, God, Mary or other saints. They do not intend to represent the subject in a realistic, natural form because icon painting is not simply an art form, it is a prayer. Painters of icons fasted and prayed so that they could be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and, through the icon, be able to reveal something of the mysteries of God and the work of God.

Icons of Mary the mother of God have certain specific details intended to express clearly her unique relationship with her son, Jesus.

- Mary is usually shown holding the child Jesus in an effortless, non-possessive way on her left arm.
- Mary's open right hand with its long, slender fingers, points toward Jesus in a gesture of honour and at the same time this gesture indicates that Jesus is the central focus and source of faith.
- Jesus is usually holding a closed scroll in his left hand, a symbol of the Word made flesh.
- The right hand of Jesus is extended in blessing, symbolising his divinity.



*Coronation of the Virgin, 1295 (mosaic)  
Torriti, Jacopo (active c. 1270-1300) / Santa  
Maria Maggiore*  
WWW.WGA.HU

## The Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages women of high estate were honoured and respected. During this time Mary becomes known as our “Lady” and Jesus as our “Lord”; these titles reflected the feudal organisation of society during this time. Mary was thought of as one who was privileged, of much higher status than ordinary people and responsible with Christ for the good order of the world. She was often portrayed as the “fair lady” for whom knights would battle to win her favour.

Paintings influenced by the Byzantine style emphasised Mary’s courtly and heroic dignity by their furnishings, by placing her in central, exalted positions and by making her significantly larger than other figures. As time passed, differences between Western and Eastern art became more marked. Byzantine art was more spiritual, more stylised, ceremonial and symbolic than the humanistic developments in the West.

Drawing inspiration from Greek and Roman mythology, European art in the Middle Ages flowered in the Romanesque style, basing itself more on guessing and imagination than on Scripture. Creative artists presented gospel episodes with a profusion of legends and embellishments on stained glass, in tapestry and mosaics, in drama and literature. The creative arts flourished because wealthy people and influential members of the Church commissioned artists to portray religious topics, often as a way of instructing those who could not read.

An example is a mosaic of Christ crowning Mary as Queen of Heaven in the midst of saints and a crowd of angels. Pope Nicholas IV (1227–1292) commissioned the Franciscan, Jacopo Torriti to create this mosaic. Beneath the main figures are scenes of the annunciation, the visit of the wise men, and of Mary’s death. In such works legendary stories about Mary were often given as much or more emphasis as the incidents actually described in Scripture.



## The Renaissance

The Renaissance was the cultural rebirth of the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe. It was marked by the rediscovery of the writings of the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece and Egypt and a by a celebration of all things human.

The creative artists of this time were thinkers whose central task was still that of presenting the truths of Christian religion in visual or written form. The visual arts developed a new artistic style using precise perspective and presenting religious subjects in a secular manner. Human attributes were presented in beautiful human physiques and Mary became the ideal, beautiful mother, warm and loving, nurturing and caring. This is the age when many of the great masterpieces of the 'Madonna and Child' were painted. Mary was consistently represented as the gentle virgin, bearer of light in our darkened world and the pure one assumed into heaven.

With the revival of learning in the Renaissance and the weakening of the social and political power of the Church, many people began to discuss and write about reforming society by applying the principles of the gospels in more radical ways. There grew up a desire to reform the Church and society. The Church tended to adopt a defensive attitude to the new thinking and was often portrayed as a great army battling the forces of evil under the leadership of Christ the King. Mary naturally appeared as a queen standing alongside him. Her power and glory were exalted and she was portrayed as the great Queen of Heaven and Earth.

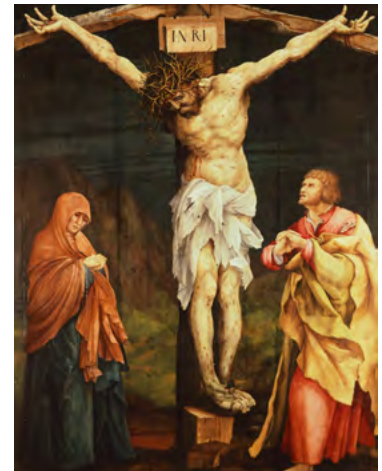
## After the Council of Trent

The Council of Trent (1545–1563 AD) laid so much emphasis on God's work in the sacraments that less attention was paid to the people's role in celebrating them. People became passive spectators at Mass and at the other sacraments. As a consequence of this, devotion to Mary developed which provided an outlet for people to express their faith. Processions and pilgrimages to Marian shrines, litanies, rosaries and novenas all provided opportunities for Catholics to express their prayer needs and to feel that they were participating fully in community worship.

Increasingly heavy emphasis was placed on the divinity of Jesus so that his humanity was obscured and people often felt that they were too unworthy to approach him in prayer. Mary came to be seen as the one who could intercede with God for us weak and sinful creatures. An exaggerated Mariology placed Mary alongside Christ, sharing his work of redemption. Even though she was recognised as being fully human, she was treated as if she were in a privileged position separate from, and above, ordinary humanity. Representations of Mary increasingly reflected popular piety.

Early in the 20th century when social changes and pressures were threatening traditional family values, Mary was presented as a model for family life and womanhood. The Holy Family at Nazareth were considered the ideal for Christian families.

Protestants have frequently accused Catholics of the idolatrous worship of Mary. Catholics have never worshipped Mary – only God is to be worshipped. Catholics honour Mary and revere her for her role in the history of salvation. However, some of the more extreme forms of devotion to Mary have given a wrong impression.



*The Crucifixion, c. 1525 (oil on panel), Grunewald, Matthias (Mathis Nithart Gothart) (c.1480-1528)*

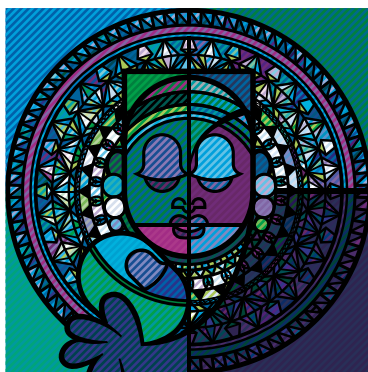
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*Pietà, (marble) 1499, Buonarroti, Michelangelo (1475–1564) / St. Peter's, Vatican*

ISTOCKPHOTO.COM





Mother Africa

ISTOCKPHOTO.COM © STEPHEN MOORE

## Since Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) linked Mary's role closely with the main theme of the Church in the document *Lumen Gentium*. Chapter 8 explicitly deals with Mary. It refers closely to Scripture and places Mary fully within the Church as a redeemed human being with a definite role in the Church. Mary is presented as truly the mother of the faithful because by her love she has helped to bring about the spiritual birth of all who are members of the Church. Therefore her role is unique and in her faith and in her love she is recognised as an example and model of the Church itself. Paul VI in his closing speech at the end of the third session of the council explicitly called Mary 'Mother of the Church'.

The Council carefully defined Mary's role in the scheme of salvation, pointing out that her role is always subordinate to that of Christ. It quoted St Paul's teaching,

*For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind,*

*Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all (1 Timothy 2:5–6).*

Mary in her role as our mother and as mother of the Church in no way hides or diminishes Jesus' central role; her roles depend completely on him and reveal his power and glory.

The Council also placed Mary firmly within the context of the pilgrim People of God as the woman who is close to all men and women everywhere. She is the most outstanding follower of Jesus but she represents more than just that. Mary personifies the fully-integrated woman: she is mother, sister, servant, leader, healer, and a true lover, not of one or some, but of all. Mary is the model of a human being as God intended us to be.

Paul VI in *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary: Marialis Cultus* outlines the qualities and virtues that make Mary an outstanding model of holiness. Mary is a model of these virtues of the Christian life:

- faith and the willing acceptance of the Word of God (Luke 1:26–38; 1:45; 11:27–28; John 2:5);
- generous obedience (Luke 1:38);
- genuine humility (Luke 1:39–56);
- profound wisdom (Luke 1:29, 34; 2:19; 33,51);
- worship of God shown
  - in readiness to carry out religious duties (Luke 2:21–41) and
  - in gratitude for gifts received (Luke 1:46–49) and
  - in her offering in the Temple (Luke 2:22–24) and
  - in her prayer in the midst of the followers of Jesus (Acts 1:12–14);
- her courage in exile (Matthew 2:13–23) and
- in suffering (see Luke 2:34–35, 48; John 19:25);
- her poverty reflecting dignity and trust in God (see Luke 1:48, 2:24);
- her attentive care for her Son, from his humble birth to the humiliation of the cross (Luke 2:1–7; John 19:25–27);
- her sensitive forethought (see John 2:1–11);
- her virginal purity (see Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38);
- her strong and chaste married love.

Earlier in the same document, the Pope mentioned that we have always been encouraged to imitate Mary's example because she is the first and the most



perfect of Jesus' disciples. Mary shows in her life how to accept the will of God fully and responsibly. It is done by hearing and listening to God's word and then doing it, and by making charity and the spirit of service the driving forces of our lives.

## Changing Appreciation of Mary

During the last decades there has been a growing realization of the equal dignity of women and men, and a growing awareness of the role of women in history. Consequently there have been great changes in the way women see themselves in society and in the ways in which people relate to Mary.

Many women have rejected the image of Mary as a submissive, self-sacrificing virgin and mother. Feminist theologians have criticised and called into question the male-inspired images and attitudes to Mary, and to women which have dominated Church teaching, devotion and attitudes for much of its history. Women have felt that in the effort to understand Mary's role in God's work of salvation too much emphasis has been placed on Mary as a submissive, passive, relatively powerless participant. The great emphasis also on her motherhood has overshadowed the other ways in which Mary – and women generally – relate to God and to other people.

Women scripture scholars have been using critical methods to discover from the texts the real historical woman. From the references to Mary in the New Testament they have built up a picture of Mary as a strong, mature woman, free and independent, going out to others, and supportive of the saving programme undertaken by her Son. They present her as the first of Christ's disciples standing as a model for both women and men. Her entire life is interwoven with the creative power of God's Spirit, enabling her to cooperate freely and courageously in the work of salvation.

## Mary is one of us

Mary's story endures from generation to generation. Theologians and thinkers will find more to say about her, more insights about her to explore. Popes and bishops will write more documents about her. But what is really important is that we remember that Mary is one of us – a simple human being. She is not superhuman, not a different sort of creature – she is an ordinary person. That is what is so important for us to keep in mind about her: that God chose what is simple and ordinary to bring about the salvation of our world; that our weak and limited humanity is so loved and valued by God that we are assured of everlasting glory and happiness in the kingdom where one day, in the company of Mary and the faithful departed, we too will see her son, Our Lord Jesus, face to face.

## Mary in Aotearoa – New Zealand

In 1838 Bishop Pompallier (1802–1871) with Marist Fathers and Brothers arrived in New Zealand at the Hokianga. The first Mass was celebrated at Totara Point on 13 January 1838 and after the Mass Pompallier dedicated the whole country to Mary under the title of her Assumption. It is interesting to note that this was 112 years before the Church formally declared that Mary was assumed into heaven.

Bishop Pompallier's first two companions, Father Louis Servant and Brother Michel Colombon, were both members of the Society of Mary and from 1839

### Mo Maria

*Mō Maria aianeī  
o tatou waiata.  
Kia kaha rā tātou,  
kia nui te aroha*

*Tēnā hoki ngā ahere  
e whakahonore ana  
ki te ratou rehina  
ki a Maria anō rā*

*Aroha ki te Atua  
aroha ki a Maria  
i te rangi  
i te whenua  
āke tonu, āke tonu*

This popular Māori Marian Hymn is attributed to Bishop Pompallier.



*Madonna and Child, Tekoteko (gabel figure)  
an Ariki Tapairu, Te Huringa II 1850 / Iwi  
unknown / wood and paua shell / Museum of  
New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa*



more Marist priests and brothers followed them from France to New Zealand. These missionaries travelled on foot or by canoe through both the North and South Islands preaching the Gospel and establishing mission stations. Their preaching and writings show the deep love they had for Mary and how they relied on her protection.

Fr Petitjean in a letter home in 1859 wrote,

*My second mishap took place in the north of Otago. I was lost for nearly twenty hours. It was the depth of winter, too, and I had to pass the night among the flocks; I was glad to seize a little lamb, which I held in my arms to warm me. The next day, while I wandered about the plain, coming back on my tracks, unequal to more exertion through fatigue, hunger and sleeplessness, I was discovered by a shepherd who by chance – or rather by the designs of Providence – was passing by. It was the Feast of the Assumption and I had faith in the protection of Mary and I felt the prayers of my friends.*



*Maori Madonna (oil on canvas) 19XX,  
Sr. Mary Lawrence RSM (Julia Lynch),  
(1896–1975)*

© SOCIETY OF MARY

Many Māori were drawn to Christianity and whakairo (carvings) exist that portray Mary with Jesus in her arms. These carvings are unique in that Māori carvers were integrating Christian insights and Māori cultural and spiritual traditions. The tekoteko illustrated here is believed to have been carved about 1890. The unknown carver was trying to convey to the people his interpretation of the virgin mother giving birth to the Son of God. According to a written account of the period, the full facial tattoo is that of a man and in this way the carver was portraying Mary as a virgin.

## Mary as Patron

In 1843 the first Catholic Church in Wellington was dedicated as the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord and the parish was called St Mary's. Two later churches on the same site were both named St Mary of the Angels. At the northern end of the city Bishop Viard consecrated the Cathedral as St Mary's in 1851.

In 1855 Wellington experienced a very severe earthquake. Bishop Viard who was overseas at the time decided, on his return, to consecrate the city to Mary under her title of the Immaculate Conception. Thus each year on 8 December, Wellington Catholics ask Mary to protect the city from further earthquakes.

The work of the Church in New Zealand has been enriched by members of religious congregations, many of which have Mary as their guide or patron. Among these congregations are:

- Society of Mary (Marist Fathers), 1838
- Marist Brothers, 1838
- Sisters of Mercy, 1850
- Congregation of Our Lady of the Missions, 1865
- Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, 1892, (a congregation founded in New Zealand by Mother Suzanne Aubert)
- Marist Sisters, 1927

These congregations have been much involved in the growth of Catholic parishes, schools, colleges, hospitals, homes for the care of the elderly, children at risk, and differently able persons. Catholic institutions have been placed under Mary's patronage from Te Kura o Hata Maria (St Mary's School) at



Pawarenga in the far North, to St Mary Star of the Sea Church at Bluff in the far South.

In 1992 the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' Conference proclaimed the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Assumption to be the national patron. This feast is celebrated on 15 August and recalls the dedication of the country to Mary by Bishop Pompallier in 1838.

### Mary in the Catechism of the Catholic Church

*Mary is mentioned in the Catechesis in paragraphs;*

484-511, 963-975, 2617-2619, 2622

### Mary in everyday Aotearoa-New Zealand

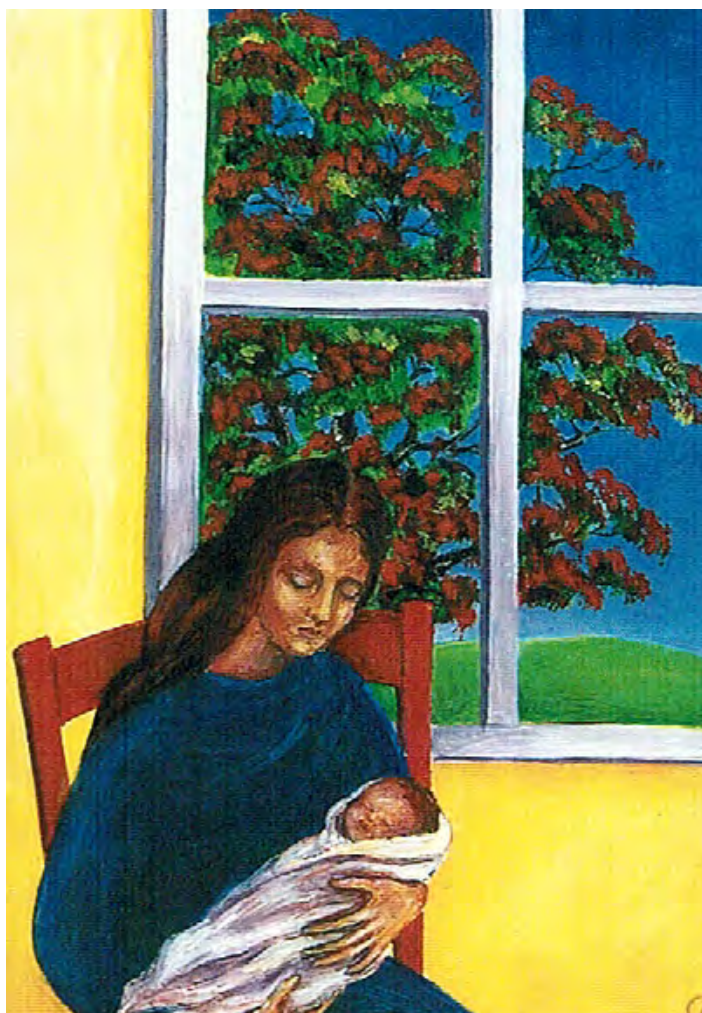
On a hill above Paraparaumu stands a huge statue of Our Lady of Lourdes made by Dutch artist Martin Roestenberg to commemorate the centenary of the appearance of Mary at Lourdes. It was completed in August 1958 and officially blessed in October when a large crowd gathered to celebrate the centenary. The statue has become one of New Zealand's well known public artworks. Annual pilgrimages to the statue take place every summer.

Within parish life there have been numerous movements and groups which encouraged prayer in honour of Mary. The **Children of Mary** was an association of young women and of young men who met regularly to pray and encourage one another in the living of their Christian lives. Members of the **Legion of Mary** promote the praying of the rosary, a tradition that has been handed down from pioneer times. **Marian Mothers** is a network of groups of women who meet for prayer and discussion. The groups began in 1981 with a group of mothers in Wellington meeting to find support and encouragement in their role as Christian mothers. These groups have spread the length and breadth of New Zealand and have become a focus group for mothers of all ages.

Throughout the years many people have turned to Mary as a loving mother, asking her to pray on their behalf. People have long been accustomed to invoke Mary Help of Christians, whose feast was for many years the patronal day of New Zealand, as well as St Therese of Lisieux and St Peter Chanel.

#### A Letter from our Bishops

In 1988 the New Zealand Catholic Bishops wrote a letter to the people of New Zealand called *And the Mother of Jesus was there*. In their message they said that by looking closely at Scripture and the Tradition of the Church and by looking at them in the light of our times and of our world, we find that Mary still has a message for us and is a sign of hope to us who are still on our earthly journey to God's kingdom.



*Pohutakawa Madonna, Gael O'Leary RSM*  
CATHOLIC SOCIAL SERVICES, CHRISTCHURCH



## Mary and Prayer

Catholic prayer is not directed to Mary, it is directed to God. Mary is asked to pray for us.

### The Rosary

The Rosary is the most common non-liturgical Catholic prayer.

It is based on aspects of the life of Jesus and Mary.

In this letter the Bishops wrote the following about Mary's example in the context of Aotearoa,

*She was a strong determined woman who called down God's justice on the unjust and who was committed to taking sides with those who seemed destined to lose the struggle. In the face of the inequalities and poverty in our own country, we should follow the example of Mary. She identified herself with the poor and downtrodden and made the liberating message of God's mercy available to all.*

*In New Zealand where so many people live in comfort and security it is not always easy to identify with the ethical indignation of a Mary who prays to God to scatter the proud in the conceit of their hearts, to topple the mighty from their thrones, and to send the rich away empty handed, so that the lowly can be raised to human dignity, the hungry filled with the necessary things of life.*

*Yet this is what we are asked to do. For in New Zealand there are many people who are poor and marginalised because of unemployment, illness, racism, sexual orientation, addiction, and ill fortune. Many of the comfortable majority turn a blind eye and ignore their plight. They pretend the poor do not exist or wish that they would just go away. But not so Mary.*



*This image of Mary has now become known in New Zealand as "the Pompallier Madonna". It is believed to date back to before 750AD. The Madonna was presented to Pius IX in the 1840s by the Benedictine Nuns of Campus Martius. In turn, it was given to Bishop Pompallier by Pope Pius IX on the occasion of Bishop Pompallier's visit to Rome in April 1847. He brought the Madonna back to Aotearoa New Zealand and had copies distributed widely.*



# Genesis

## INTRODUCTION

*Genesis* means "origin or beginning." Ranging from the cosmos to the family, this book tells of the creation of the universe, the origin of the human race, the beginning of suffering in the world, and about God's way of dealing with humanity. *Genesis* can be divided into two main parts: (1) The creation of the world and of the human race. There are the accounts of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Tower of Babel (chapters 1-11). (2) The history of the early ancestors. The first is Abraham, who was notable for his faith and his obedience to God. The stories of his son Isaac and grandson Jacob (also called Israel), and of Jacob's two sons, Joseph and the events that brought Jacob and his other sons with their families to the land of Canaan, are the central stories of the book. Particular attention is given to Joseph, and the events that brought Jacob and his other sons with their families to the land of Canaan.

## Outline of Contents

Creation of the universe and of the human race 1:1-2:25  
The beginning of sin and suffering 3:1-24  
From Adam to Noah 4:1-5:32  
Noah and the flood 6:1-10:32  
The Tower of Babel 11:1-9  
From Shem to Abram 11:10-32  
The patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob 12:1-35:29  
The descendants of Esau 36:1-43  
Joseph and his brothers 37:1-45:28  
The Israelites in Egypt 46:1-50:26

## The Beginning

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

It was so. God there was.



Part 6

# Catholic Identity









# Catholic Identity: Beliefs and Practices

## 6.1 What Makes us Catholic?

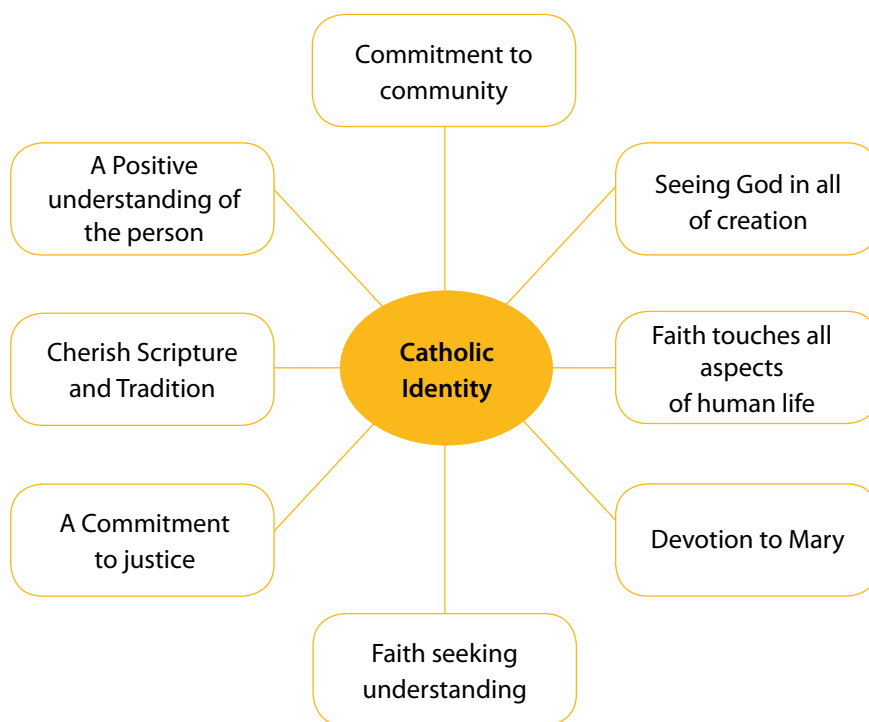
The heart of the Christian faith is 'a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son of the Father' (CCC 426). Through Baptism all Christians become disciples of Jesus Christ and follow 'the way' that Jesus modelled and made possible in his life, death and resurrection.

It would be very difficult to list all the things that a person who says they are a Catholic believes. This is a summary of some of key Catholic beliefs and practices. Many of them are referred to in other parts of the text, others are explained more fully here.

*The Church is the sign that points beyond itself to Jesus Christ and it is an instrument in the hand of Jesus Christ, since he is the author of all saving activity in the Church.*

(Theology and Church, W. Kasper)

Some of the key of Catholic identity are:





## 6.2 Ways to Relate

### The Beatitudes (CCC 1716)

These are sometime referred to as the 'attitudes for being'. They are two accounts the more familiar is that found in the Gospel of Matthew (5:3-12) but they are also found in Luke (6:20-26).

Blessed are the poor in spirit for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart, they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

### Two Great Commandments

- You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind, and with all your strength.
- You shall love your neighbour as yourself.  
(Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27)

### Ten Commandments (CCC 2084)

1. I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.
4. Honour your mother and father.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
9. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.

### Corporal Acts of Mercy (CCC 2447)

- Feed the hungry.
- Give drink to the thirsty.
- Shelter the homeless.
- Clothe the naked.
- Care for the sick.
- Help the imprisoned.
- Bury the dead.



## 6.3 Being Community

### Precepts of the Church (CCC 2042-2043)

1. Participate in Mass every Sunday and on Holy Days of Obligation.
2. Lead a Sacramental Life – receive Holy Communion and Reconciliation regularly.
3. Study Catholic teaching.
4. Observe the marriage laws of the Church.
5. Strengthen and support the Church local and universal.
6. Do penance, including abstaining from meat and fasting from food on appointed days.
7. Join in the missionary spirit and apostolic work of the Church.

### Holy Days of Obligation in New Zealand

Christmas Day (25 December)

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (15 August)

### Fasting and Abstinence

To mark the importance of certain days in the liturgical calendar and as a way of expressing penance for personal sin the Church asks its members to observe certain dietary rules; abstinence and fasting.

- On a day of fast people aged between 18 and 60 are required to eat just one full meal, two smaller meals and refrain from eating between meals.
- On a day of abstinence Catholics over 14 years old refrain from eating meat.
- Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are days of fasting and abstinence in New Zealand.
- The Church encourages all adult members to do some kind of penance on every Friday of the year. This might include fasting or abstinence.
- An hour of fasting before receiving Holy Communion is required.
  - These regulations do not apply if following them would cause harm, for example, if someone was sick.



## 6.4 Welcome, Strength and Service

### **Baptism (CCC 1214–1274)**

Through the sacrament of Baptism we are made one body with Jesus and become members of the People of God, the Church. The water of baptism symbolises the purification and beginning of new life through union with Jesus in his life, death and resurrection. This unity between ourselves and Jesus allows us to share in his roles of priest, prophet and king. This same unity also requires us to care for all members of the Church and to make Jesus known and loved throughout the world (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, 31).

### **Confirmation (CCC 1286–1314)**

The sacrament of Confirmation in the earlier centuries of the Church was celebrated at the same time as Baptism. This sacrament completes the grace of Baptism by giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to the newly baptised (Acts 8:14–17). It fulfils Jesus' promise to his followers that he would send the Spirit to be their guide and comforter so that they would not be left alone and helpless. This gift of the Spirit enables us to live as mature, responsible, courageous, faithful Christians. It also makes these gifts available to us: knowledge, wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, reverence and fear of the Lord (awe and wonder), (see Isaiah 11:2).

### **Eucharist (CCC 1322–1405)**

The Eucharist is the greatest sacrament of the Church, the prime symbol of God's love for human beings. The Christian community gathered around the altar celebrates its unity with one another and with Jesus. The Eucharist is both the sign of unity and its source. The community recalls the salvation Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection, makes present his sacrifice on the cross, and receives him in communion. In addition, the elements of the celebration each have their own meaning and significance.

The bread and wine are transformed to actually become the risen body of Christ, given to us as an eternal and unbreakable covenant-bond between God and human beings. We who participate in the Eucharistic celebration are enabled to join our lives to Jesus and to offer them in praise and love to God.

When believers receive Holy Communion, Jesus transforms them not for themselves alone but so that they may take the love of Christ to all whom they meet. The liturgical words 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord', remind and challenge us to live out the implications of this celebration of the paschal mystery of God's love.

### **Penance (CCC 1422–1484)**

We usually refer to the sacrament of Penance as Reconciliation. Older people might refer to it as confession. The sacrament of Reconciliation enables us to meet Jesus and to receive forgiveness and healing. Jesus came to forgive sin and to break its power over us. He came to heal the damage that sin causes to our relationships with God, with others, with ourselves and with creation. Jesus commanded his followers to continue his ministry of healing and reconciliation when he said to them,

*... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained...*  
(John 20:22).

In this way Jesus empowered the Church to continue his work.



**Anointing of the Sick (CCC 1499–1525)**

Through this sacrament Jesus extends his healing and strengthening power to those who are suffering, just as he did when he was on earth. This sacrament brings the grace of strength, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that accompany serious illness or old age. It assists in leading people to healing of their souls and, God willing, their bodies. This sacrament also forgives sins, as St James reminds us above. The power of this sacrament enables sick people to unite themselves more closely to Jesus' own passion and death so that their suffering gains meaning as a sharing in the saving work of Jesus.

**Marriage (CCC 1601–1658)**

In the sacrament of Marriage which is sometimes called Matrimony, a man and a woman give themselves unreservedly to each other. They enter into a covenant with each other that mirrors God's covenant with his people. The bride and groom freely make an exclusive commitment to love and care for each other all their lives as well as the children who are born to them. In a very real way married couples show, and share in, the unity and love that exists between Jesus and his Church; they also reflect and share the creative power of God in the children to whom they give life.

**Holy Orders – Priesthood (CCC 1536–1589)**

All baptised Christians are called to ministry and to share in the priesthood of Jesus. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders certain men of the community are consecrated in the name of Christ and with his authority to serve the People of God. The ordained priesthood is often described using the images of teacher, priest and shepherd, roles which Jesus carried out. Priests are called to teach in the name of Christ, to proclaim the word of God and to assist the People of God to live Christian lives. Priests lead the people in worship and celebrate the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Priests are shepherds to care for God's people and servants to imitate Jesus' service of others, especially the poor and suffering. United with the local bishop, priests are called to strengthen and protect the unity of God's people and, in union with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, to lead them safely to God the Father.



## The Structure of the Mass (CCC 1346 –1355)

Introductory Rite	Entrance	The community gathers
	Penitential Rite	The community gives thanks for God's forgiveness
	Collect (opening Prayer)	The community prays
Liturgy of the Word	Readings	The community listens to the Word of God
	Homily	The community
	Profession of Faith	The community confesses its belief
	Prayer of the Faithful	The community prays for the Church and the world
Liturgy of the Eucharist	Preparation of the Gifts	The community prepares the altar
	Eucharistic Prayer	The community gives thanks
	Communion Rite	The community shares Eucharist
Concluding Rite	Blessing and Dismissal	The community is sent on mission

## 6.5 Mary and prayer

Catholic prayer is not directed to Mary, it is directed towards God.

Mary is asked to pray for us.

### The Rosary

The Rosary is the most common non-liturgical Catholic prayer. It is based on aspects of the life of Jesus and Mary.

The Rosary			
Joyful Mysteries	Luminous Mysteries	Sorrowful Mysteries	Glorious Mysteries
1. The Annunciation	1. The Baptism of Jesus	1. The Agony in the Garden	1. The Resurrection
2. The Visitation	2. The Marriage Feast at Cana	2. The Scourging of Jesus	2. The Ascension
3. The Birth of Jesus	3. The Proclamation of the Kingdom of God	3. Jesus is Crowned with Thorns	3. The Coming of the Holy Spirit
4. The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple	4. The Transfiguration	4. Jesus carries his Cross	4. The Assumption of Mary into Heaven
5. The Finding of Jesus in the Temple	5. The Initiation of the Eucharist at the Last Supper	5. Jesus dies on the Cross	5. Mary is Crowned Queen of Heaven



# Glossary of theological meanings

## **Anthropology (3.2)**

In theology this term refers to the critical reflection on the origin, purpose and destiny of human life in light of Christian belief.

## **Apologetics (1.1)**

Theological method by which a belief or doctrine of a community is defended against criticism.

- From the Greek word for defence.

## **Apocalypse (2.5)**

The end of the world described in highly imaginative language incorporating fantasy and symbolism.

The Book of the Apocalypse is also called the Book of Revelation. Using visions the author describes the trials of the early Christian community and encourages them to have courage and keep trusting in God.

## **Authority (1.2)**

In the Catholic Church authority comes from Jesus and is held in a particular way by those who descend in from the apostles as witnesses to the resurrection i.e. the teaching authority of the Church the Bishops in union with the Pope.

Scripture has authority for Catholics because the Scriptures they are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are therefore an expression of the authority of God.

## **Church (2.2)**

A group of people, who live, worship and express their faith in particular ways.

The Church is the whole body of Christians who follow Christ.

## **Common Good (3.1)**

The sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively through and ready access to their own fulfilment. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26)

## **Culture (1.1)**

A complex symbol system reflecting the broad social values and world system of a given group of persons.

## **Enlightenment – The (4.6)**

Period of philosophical, political and scientific movements in the eighteenth century that rejected tradition and authority and relied instead on human reason alone.

## **Ethics (3.1)**

A set of standards for judging if an action is right or wrong.

## **Existential (1.1)**

Regarding human and transcendent (God) existence.

## **Fideism (1.4)**

A theological position that asserts the primacy (greatest importance) or faith (belief in God) over reason.

## **Fundamentalism (1.1)**

The rejection of understanding of sacred texts from a historical-critical study because of a belief in the absolute and unerring authority of the Bible.

## **Heresy (4.5)**

The teachings of a group within a religion that is different from the teachings of the main religion. Any false teaching about Christianity.

## **Inerrancy (2.5)**

Teaching of the Church that the Scripture teaches religious truth without error for the sake of human salvation. This truth witnesses to the truth of God's divine wisdom and self-revelation.

## **Morality (3.1)**

The codes a person holds about what is right and good that influences how they think and act.

## **Mystery (1.5)**

The sense of a belief being so deep and complex that humans will never fully explore its meaning and never completely understand it meaning.

- From the Greek word for secret.

## **New Age (2.7)**

General term given to groups and belief systems that advocate an expanded notion of human spiritual potential linked with hopes for social and planetary renewal. In the late 20th century very influential in the 'self-help' movement.



**Nihilism (1.4)**

A rejection of all values and beliefs. Nothing really matters, the world is absurd and no point in trying to improve it.

**Parousia (4.1)**

The second coming of Christ at the end of the world. Early Christians thought that it would occur during their lifetime.

**Paschal Mystery (4.4)**

A term that refers to what God has done for the human race through the death of Jesus which enabled people to pass from the slavery of sin to freedom.

**Penance (4.7)**

The official name for the sacrament that is referred to as Reconciliation or confession.

**Perpetual (5.5)**

Permanent, never-ending.

**Rationalism (1.4)**

A way of approaching religion that assumes that religion is a cognitive (to do with the intellect) way of explaining belief. Belief provides a consistent and complete account of everything in the known world.

**Reincarnation (2.1)**

The belief that on a person's death their soul goes into a new body and they are reborn. This is not a Catholic belief.

**Religion (2.1)**

A group of people who organise themselves so that they can express a common set of beliefs which are presented in rituals and practices in an effort to be true to their God and others.

**Revelation (2.1)**

God's communication with humanity that enables people to grow into the fullness of life. Catholics believe that the revelation takes place in the scripture, the community of Church and in a special way in the person of Jesus Christ.

**Secularism (2.2)**

A secular world view where religion has no primary part, there is a clear split between those things that are of the world, the secular parts of life and those that are of the religious sphere.

**Theotokos (5.5)**

Teaching from the Council of Ephesus that Mary is the Mother of God not just the mother of a dualistic human Jesus.

**Tradition (2.5)**

The process by which the faith is handed down through the generations and the content that is handed on. For Catholics this includes Scriptures, teachings of the Church, liturgical practices and the living faith of the Church throughout the ages.

**Utilitarianism (1.4)**

The theory that the utmost good lies in the greatest good for the maximum numbers.



# Acknowledgements

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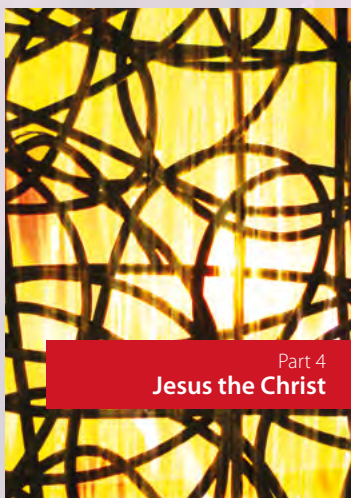
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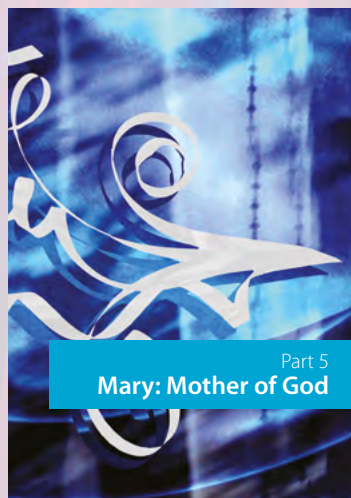
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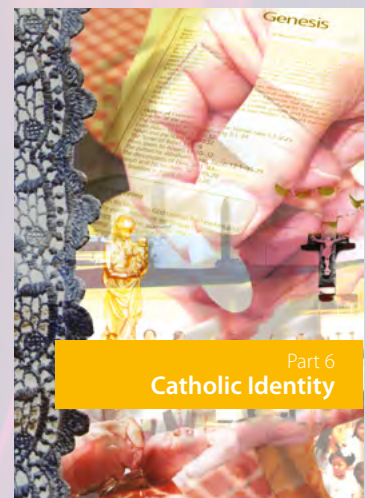
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