

Sacred Heart Parish, Luton

A Primer of the Catholic Faith

CATHOLIC DEANERY OF LUTON



Our Lady Help of Christians



Holy Ghost



Sacred Heart of Jesus



St Joseph's



St Margaret of Scotland



St Martin de Porres



Holy Family



St John the Apostle



St Thomas the Apostle

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO BEING A CATHOLIC

NEWS OF GREAT JOY

"Today a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."

God had come among his people, to live as one of them, to tread the path of life with all the joy's, celebrations and sadness's that life brings.

The news of great joy is: we know about it! We bear his name as Christians, we make our journey through life, connected to God, through his church.

He came to help us reach our full potential, be the person we were created to be, help us live in communion with others, open the way for us to heaven, show us how to reach our destination and to bring us on board in sharing the good news with the rest of the world, which for most of us, is our immediate family and circle of friends and contacts.

The Catholic Church is the largest religion in the world, with 1.2 billion members. It is the oldest institution spanning some 2,000 years.

We have been observing and delving into human nature, for all of this time. Faith is the glue that binds us together in the church. We give expression to our faith in the articles we recite at every Sunday and Holyday Mass in the *Creed* when we say “*I believe in one God ...*”.

Faith is not just a mental or verbal acknowledgement that Christ exists. So for e.g. it is one thing to *say*, I believe the moon exists, it is another to know the moon actually impacts my life, it controls the tides, illuminates the night sky and affects blood which rushes to the brain at full moon.

It is not sufficient to say I believe in Jesus, or I am a Catholic if there is nothing in our life to substantiate it. (A well known saying goes: if you were accused of being a Catholic, would there be enough evidence to convict you?).

Being a Catholic is not a state of mind or like a club membership. It is what we are, it shapes our life, it gives us purpose, it gives us companionship and support on the way. Jesus’ love is freely given but it *is not free of obligations!*

To be a Catholic is to accept the invitation to be a part of God’s family and to play our part in the church and in the world.

The Sacraments are God’s gifts to us in the church, connections between him and us, maintaining the link between heaven and earth.

It takes courage to be a Catholic, today as in the past. Our guiding principle is love, the commandment of love (love one another as I have loved you). *Knowing* this and *doing* this are not the same thing.

We are human. We know what is right yet still we can do wrong. It is the tension that always exists within us.

The Sacraments, liturgical celebrations, the scriptures, the teachings of Christ all help us to keep focused and faithful to Christ’s expectations of us, lest we forget.

What does it mean to be a Catholic? What does God expect? What guidance does the church supply?

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO BEING CATHOLIC

SACRAMENTS

The seven sacraments are Christ's gifts to his church, connections between him and us. Baptism is the first sacrament and no one can receive the others unless they are first a member of the church.

BAPTISM

We become Christian at the moment of our baptism, a part of the church, a part of God's family and the Holy Spirit is at home in us.

Clearly adults that becomes Catholic make their own mind up to follow Christ, weighing all the options and jumping in with both feet. Converts are usually strong in faith, for they make an adult decision to commit to Christ.

Babies are a different matter. Faith must be present at Baptism and there must be a reasonable hope they will be brought up in the faith. It is the parents faith that allows the baptism to go ahead.

Parents must be people of their word, the promises they make must be sincere and true otherwise it is *unfaithfulness* that is present at the baptism and that does not bode well for a special relationship with God.

In our time honoured tradition, it is parents who share, show and teach the faith to their children. It is a misconception to think Catholic schools teach the faith, "*so I don't have to.*"

The schools are supports but not replacements, so for example children entering the school system should be able to make the sign of cross. It is a sign of a good home where Christ is not a stranger.

PENANCE

Baptism removes all sin and we will never be as pleasing to God as in our baptismal state. But staying pure and free from sin is not easy for any one of us. Jesus gives us the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also known as Penance or Confession).

He said to the Apostles, *whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven*. Sin can keep us from entering into the heavenly presence - sin cannot enter heaven, so in grave (mortal) sin we cannot enter heaven.

Confession encourages us to look in on ourselves and see the state of the union, our spiritual life. We then see what God sees and can come to him humbly and “fess up,” confess our sins.

It is not just an *unloading* but a *receiving* of grace (an infusion or sharing of Christ’s life and the certainty of forgiveness). People feel at peace and at one with God after celebrating this great sacrament.

Catholics are bound to go to Confession at least once a year (at Easter or thereabouts, from the six precepts of the Church) but if we are aware of serious sin (e.g. missing Mass on Sundays or Holydays through our own fault) then we must go to confession a.s.a.p. and must not receive Holy Communion until we have made our peace with God.

Parents have a particular responsibility in teaching their children the need for confession and helping them to learn how to celebrate the sacrament, especially their first number of confessions, as the children can become more comfortable in coming and this helps them for their adult life and needs.

EUCCHARIST

Jesus said to the gathered Apostles at the Last Supper, “I have longed to eat this Passover with you.” He was preparing for his Exodus and this would be **the** Memorial of his entire life and mission and the means of his abiding presence with us - the Mass.

It is the reason the community gathers together each Sabbath to meet with the Lord obeying God’s command to “keep holy the Sabbath Day” (third divine commandment). This means, as Catholics we fall into line and walk alongside Christ rather than make our own rules as to when we will go to Mass and expect him to fall into line and walk with us.

The Mass is meant to be a means of enriching us in our relationship with God and each other. The scriptures teach us about God’s relationship with Man over the centuries and help us to understand something about human nature and ourselves.

The familiar format provides a setting for us to focus on God and help us to praise, thank and seek God.

There is a certain peace that belongs to the devout which really does seem to help people handle stress and promote healing, as hospital studies seem to show.

As a sign of respect, we fast from all food, cigarettes, gum etc for one hour before receiving Holy Communion (a three hour fast from alcohol).

The sick and their carers are excused the fast. It is essential, we do not receive Holy Communion if we are not in a state of grace, properly disposed to receive Our Lord so for e.g. if we have missed Sunday/Holyday Mass through our own fault, we MUST NOT receive lest we commit the sin of sacrilege.

Receiving Holy Communion in a sinful state gains us no benefit at all, quite the opposite and imperils our immortal soul.

When the devout can no longer come to the church (through illness or old age) the church comes to them not least with the help of Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion.

CONFIRMATION

Each parish spends a great deal of time trying to find the way to help our young people appreciate the enormity of the gift being bestowed at Confirmation. It can change the world!

The first Confirmation of the Christian era was at Pentecost when frightened Apostles hid in a room afraid to go out onto the streets and speak about Christ.

The church might never have got off the ground but the Holy Spirit came upon them to strengthen and endow them for the task.

The Apostles took the gospel to three continents in their lifetime. Catholics need to be confirmed, it completes the sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation) and we then become full members of the church, christened.

Before moving onto other sacraments such as Matrimony (wedding) the gifts of the Spirit should have been received and made use of.

Those to be confirmed take a new name (of a saint they admire) because God changed the name of those he called to His service e.g. Abram became Abraham, Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul. They had a whole new direction in life from that moment.

MATRIMONY

People have been living together as “husband and wife” since the dawn of time. Christian Marriage is at an altogether higher level. Jesus was outraged at the treatment of women in his time on earth when a man could just dismiss his wife and that was the end of the marriage.

The man could go on to marry again, the woman could not. He made it clear, this is not what God intended. *From the beginning God made them male and female, that is why a man must leave his father and mother and cling to his wife.*

A new family is born! All Catholics must marry in the Catholic Church before a Bishop, Priest or Deacon (otherwise with a dispensation).

It is the only form of marriage the church recognises for its members as both parties would have studied the promises and implications of what they do and enter into marriage with their eyes open.

It is a sacrament, a connection with God. The ceremony is not just a public pronouncement that this is your chosen one to whom you pledge permanent attachment to the exclusion of all others but you ask God to be part of the equation, your partnership.

Those who enter into sexual relationship without the benefit of marriage, who marry outside the church or remarry without the church's blessing cannot receive the sacraments, they in effect ex-communicate themselves.

It is always advisable to have a chat with a Priest or Deacon about such a matter. A marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

HOLY ORDERS

The Lord commissioned his first priests at the Last Supper when he told the apostles to *Take this and eat it and take this and drink from it.*

They were to offer the Sacrifice of himself, bequeathed to the church. He gave them the power to *effect* what he said.

They were our first Bishops, given a special charge to lead the community. Our Bishops today are their successors also charged with leading the Community (or an area known as a Diocese).

The Diocese of Northampton consists of the county of Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Slough in Berkshire).

Deacons were the next order brought into being. The apostles took it on themselves to bring a whole new order into existence to serve the church. Bishops are appointed by the Pope and Deacons are ordained by the Bishop.

There are two types of Deacon. One is transitional (on their way to Priesthood) so they usually remain a Deacon for about a year. The other is the Permanent Diaconate where usually, a married man can be ordained for the service of the church and remains a Deacon.

A Deacon can baptise, marry, conduct funerals, celebrate Benediction and preach the homily among other duties.

Priests came on the scene later as assistants or helpers to the Apostles (or Bishops) to look after communities etc and this is their function to this day. We need priests to serve our communities. Please pray for more priests.

SACRAMENT OF THE SICK

When Our Lord saw people who were suffering, his heart went out to them and he cured as many as he could.

His compassion still reaches out today through the Sacrament of the Sick.

St James in his letter said, *“if anyone is ill, let them call for the priest of the church, let them lay hands on that person and anoint them with sacred oil and this prayer made in faith, will save that person.”*

Those going through a medical episode can seek the sacrament to help and support them. You need to make contact with the priest. If you are going into hospital let the priest know *beforehand* (if possible).

Please do not leave a request for the sacrament to the last minute. If a person dies, it is too late to administer the Sacrament of the sick (the sacraments are for the living).

MORALS

Are God's laws and different to ethics (which are man-made agreements). As a church and in obedience to Our Lord, there are certain guiding principles by which we live and by which we should stand even if it cost us popularity or conflict with the state.

We should not lie, steal, be unfaithful in marriage, treat others with contempt etc. We should value and respect life from its earliest moment of conception (even though the state does not place the same value on a child's life) and at the other end of the spectrum we should respect a person approaching the last days of their life and never countenance, plan or participate in their termination.

PRAYER

Jesus often disappeared to pray (commune with his Father). It is a most essential part of being Catholic – to take time out and speak with God, to give praise and thanks. It is a way of centring/focusing on our relationship and restoring balance in our spiritual life particularly when there are great pressures on us.

A prayer book from church shops can help us as well as the rosary but there is no better way to pray than to use our own words.

DEVOTIONS

Coming together to pray using ancient devotions such as the Stations of the Cross in Lent and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament are trusted ways to be with Our Lord.

PILGRIMAGES

As Catholics, the value of pilgrimage cannot be stated too highly. If opportunity presents itself, a visit to the Holy land can bring the Bible alive as we see the places associated with Our Lord.

A pilgrimage to Rome, Walsingham (the Marian shrine in England), Lourdes or a Saint's shrine helps us appreciate our place in the global family of God.

THE ROCK ON WHICH WE ARE BUILT

"I will be with you always." That was the promise of Jesus to the Apostles. He keeps that promise. Through the Sacraments Christ is truly present to us.

He knew he would die and return to heaven and the church would live on guided by his word. He chose Peter to represent him on earth.

Peter was the new name Jesus gave to Simon, his Apostle. They were near the Golan Heights (Caesarea Philippi) between Israel and Syria.

They came to a place of interest, where springs bring the water from the depths of the earth and create a deposit of water (which the locals regarded as fathomless – gates to hell).

On top of the cliff there was a temple to worship Caesar as divine. The cave was an ancient shrine to the god, Pan – god of mischief. It was here that Jesus asked the Apostles who people thought he was.

They responded, a prophet. Who do you say I am? Simon spoke up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, the one who was to come into this world." None of us could have said that nor any of the Apostles but Simon was inspired by God to say it.

Now someone else knew who Jesus was and so he said to Simon: *"Blessed are you Simon son of John because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father in heaven. I now say to you, you are PETER and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of the underworld will never prevail against it."* **Peter means rock.**

The Pope is the successor of St Peter charged with the same task of being a foundational rock for the church, keeping us true to the deposit of faith and maintaining the unity of the church.

We look to the Pope for the guiding hand on the tiller of the church. We have been blessed with a succession of Popes as devoted pastors, two of whom have recently been declared saints (Pope St John Paul II and Pope St John XXIII).

PARISH

The parish is made up of individuals and families that meet to worship God, support each other and establish the Kingdom. You are part of this on-going work of Christ as part of his Body on earth.

Why did God make us? To know him, love him, serve him and to be happy with him in this world and forever in the next. This is his world. We are all his people. Our life on earth is a preparation for our eternal life.

This is a core understanding of our Catholic faith. All of us are capable of straying off message, of losing sight of God and his way. He made us, we belong to him. We are always welcome in his church even if we have lost our way for a time.

Parents have the difficult task of sharing in a heartfelt way, their faith, the faith, with their children, to equip them for their life-long relationship with God.

May God bring to completion, the good work he has begun in you.