

# Why We Do The Things We Do

75 bite-size explanations of Catholic practices

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## Part I. Sunday Mass

### **Why Sunday?**

On Sundays we celebrate Christ's resurrection from the dead. According to the biblical story, on the seventh day God rested having completed the creation of the world. Appropriately, on the first day of the week Christians commemorate the 'new creation': the renewal of the world through Christ's loving sacrifice. Traditionally Christians approach this day as a day of worship and celebration, focusing on their faith community and their family. This Sunday, take time out to give extra emphasis to this celebration. (E.g., Spend time with your children, take a walk with a friend, prayerfully review the Sunday readings.)

### **Why go to church when I can pray alone?**

'Why go to Mass when I can pray to God by myself?' some people ask. To understand the Mass we need to understand the Church as a community, as a family. A simple analogy: Family members come together for meals, not just for physical nourishment, but as a way of sharing life together. The Sunday Eucharist is a bit

like that for Catholics. It is the sacred meal, our 'family meal', whereby we come together to worship God, not just for our private spiritual nourishment, but to acknowledge that we belong to one another as God's family, that we are a people who share in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

### **What's that word mean?**

The word 'liturgy' comes from two Greek words meaning the 'work of the people.' We are reminded that when we gather to worship it is the whole community that participates. It is not simply the work of the priest and altar servers with the rest of the congregation looking on.

The term 'eucharist' comes from the Greek word 'eucharistia' ('thanksgiving'). It was used in the early Church to refer to the entire celebration as well as to the consecrated bread and wine. The Mass is the greatest act of worship by which Christians give thanks for the salvation God has offered us through Jesus Christ.

### **First things first**

The initial part of the Mass (the Introductory Rites) is an important time of gathering and preparation. The entrance song helps to open the celebration, unite us as a body and lead our thoughts towards the mystery of God's love which we have come to celebrate. The priest's greeting ('The Lord be with you') and the congregation's response ('And also with you') affirms that Christ is present in our midst. This is a time for focusing on the importance of the opportunity for worship that lies before us.

### **Why do we make the sign of the cross?**

Do you rush through the sign of the cross as if swatting a fly? Don't! This gesture contains powerful symbolism connected with the Trinity and with your baptism. Indeed, it can be viewed as a prayer in itself. By making this sign you are declaring: I am completely under the power of the risen Christ, our Redeemer. You are identifying yourself with generations of Christians, for the common usage of the familiar formula - In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen - can be traced back to the second century.



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## The Penitential Rite

'To prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins,' says the celebrant at the penitential rite. Far from being a negative focus, the emphasis of this prayer is the infinite love of our compassionate God, personified in Jesus. In a healthy family, members are not afraid to recognize that they are always in need of forgiveness. Similarly, for our faith family, the penitential rite is one way of acknowledging that we always stand in need of reconciliation. This part of the Mass often includes the 'Kyrie eleison' ('Lord have mercy') which is one of the most ancient of Christian responses.

## Why do we sign ourselves before the Gospel?

The Church distinguishes between the 'large' sign of the cross (made with right hand outstretched on forehead, chest and shoulders) and the 'small' sign of the cross (made with the thumb on forehead, mouth and chest). With this latter action just prior to the reading of the Gospel, we are asking God's blessing upon our thoughts, words and desires. Next time you make this sign, be aware that you are praying to open yourself to God's Word.

## The Sunday readings

Does your family enjoy looking back over treasured photo albums and re-telling the stories behind the pictures? While every historic detail of your ancestry may not be recorded, the photos do capture the highlights and carry a 'sense' of your family's history, identity and values.

The scriptures are a bit like that. They are our faith family's 'photo album', the inspired recordings of our ancestors, re-telling the stories of God's revelation in their midst. As you listen to the readings each Sunday at Mass, allow God to speak to you through the stories of your faith heritage.

## Why do we say 'alleluia'?

Alleluia comes from the Hebrew word which means 'Praise God'. It appears as a prayer in the Old Testament psalms and as the chant of the saints in heaven in the Book of Revelation. It was adopted by the Christian liturgy as the response of those redeemed through Christ. In the Mass, the alleluia verse is our way of responding to the second reading and preparing for the proclamation of the Gospel. For Christians, 'alleluia' is a bit like a cheer leader's whoop! It reeks

of celebration, life, strength, freedom and all those wonderfully liberating qualities offered us through the resurrection of Jesus. To mutter it is to contradict its meaning!

## Why a homily?

The homily is an essential part of the Sunday Mass. The homily, the Scripture readings, the Profession of Faith and the Prayers of the Faithful form a unity which we call the Liturgy of the Word. The goal of this part of the Mass is to proclaim God's word and to illuminate its meaning and its ramifications for our lives. The homily, therefore, is usually based on a theme arising from the readings or from the particular mystery of faith being celebrated that day.

## Why do we recite the Profession of Faith?

Why do people pledge allegiance to their national flag? Why do married couples renew their wedding vows? They do so as a public declaration of their commitment to a particular relationship and to ideals which guide their lives. Similarly for Catholics, the profession of faith ('We believe in one God...') is a declaration of commitment. Having listened to God's Word



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through the readings, we stand and declare our assent to the message proclaimed. Yes! We believe in God. Yes! We belong to this community that professes to live by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Why do we have a Prayer of the Faithful?

In these prayers (also called the General Intercessions) the congregation intercedes for all humanity. We pray that the Church will be a life-giving sign of salvation to the world. We pray for Church leaders and public authorities, for those oppressed by various needs, and for all people. In making these petitions we are conscious that the Church exists for others rather than for its own sake. United at the eucharistic table as the body of Christ, we are powerfully equipped to reach out as a loving and liberating force in the world.

## The Liturgy of the Eucharist

Having been nourished through the scripture readings at the Liturgy of the Word, we turn to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. At this part of the Mass, the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar and we begin the

Eucharistic Prayer which is one of the most ancient prayers from our tradition. We ask the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. We also ask that, in receiving Jesus, the entire assembly will be transformed as the body of Christ. By re-enacting the eucharistic words and actions of Jesus we remember and live anew the great events of his death and resurrection.

## Why do we shake hands?

Before receiving communion, the celebrant invites the congregation to 'offer one another a sign of peace', usually in the form of a handshake, smile or embrace. By this action we affirm our relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a genuine sign of reconciliation that prepares us for the profound act of intimacy which is signified when we share at the one eucharistic table. So, you see, the sign of peace is more than a 'nice' thing to do. It is an expression of the bond that unites us as Christians. Think about it next time you offer this sign. Please. No 'dead-fish' handshakes! Extend your hand with warmth and conviction.

## Why do we say 'amen' when we receive communion?

'Amen' is a prayerful way of affirming our religious convictions. When we say 'Amen' as we receive communion we affirm our belief in the great mystery of the Eucharist. St Augustine had a great way of looking at it. He suggested that when we receive the host we should say a double amen. 'Amen' (Yes!) I believe this to be not just a piece of bread but the body of Christ. And 'Amen' (Yes!) I believe this to be not just a bunch of people but the body of Christ, a faith family called to a life of loving unity (a communion).

## What's that little light?

Christ is the light of the world! That little red light you see glowing on the sanctuary near the tabernacle indicates the presence of Christ in the form of eucharistic bread. We acknowledge this eucharistic presence when we genuflect (kneel on one knee). In our Christian tradition, genuflection is an act of adoration of Jesus Christ as Lord.



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## Go!

'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,' says the celebrant at the end of Mass. This concluding rite is best understood as a commissioning. Renewed in our relationship as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, we are sent forth to share Christ's love with others. In fact, the word 'Mass' is derived from the Latin word *missa* which in turn is derived from 'mittere': to send. As you leave church today, think of how you can reach out to one specific person. Find a practical way of sharing with that person the strength you have drawn from this eucharistic celebration.

## Why do we take up two collections each Sunday?

The simplest answer is that, as with any organization, it costs money to run the Church: schools, hospitals, maintenance, wages, projects for the spread of the Gospel and caring for those in need, crisis appeals in the wider community...

But the Church is more than an organization. It is a community with a familial character and operates as such. There are no membership fees. No one is excluded from church services because they cannot pay. Rather, Catholics are

asked to 'pitch in' according to their means. Normally the first Sunday collection is devoted to the living costs of the priest and the presbytery. The second goes to various Church ministries and building projects. A third collection is sometimes included for a special appeal.

## Part II. The Church Year

### Why do we have a Church calendar?

Life can be hectic. So many dates to juggle: school holidays, birthdays, grand final day, election day... As a Church family, too, we have a busy calendar. We call it the liturgical year because it is comprised of the various Christian feasts and seasons celebrated over the course of a year. The Church year begins with Advent. Easter is the pinnacle. The readings in the Sunday Mass vary according to a three year cycle (A, B & C). This calendar allows our faith community to focus on the mysteries of our faith in some kind of systematic and unified way.

### Why do we have 'ordinary' Sundays?

In between all the special festive occasions that occur in the life of a family there are many days which we might call

'ordinary'. Filled with daily rituals - preparing meals, fronting up for work, dropping the kids at footy practice - they are an essential dimension of family life. Our Church calendar, too, has periods called Sundays in Ordinary Time or Sundays of the Year which are numbered consecutively. In between all the 'special occasions' (the various Christian feasts and seasons) they are the sustaining celebrations of our life together as a faith family.

### Why the different colours?

You may notice over the Church year changes in the colours of the vestments of the priest and the altar. This has nothing to do with the whims of fashion! Different colours are used to symbolize the truths and sentiments expressed by the various liturgical celebrations. Purple (symbolizing preparation and penance) is used for Advent and Lent; red (warmth and blood) for Pentecost and for feasts commemorating the sufferings of Christ and the martyrs); white (joy, purity, innocence, glory) for celebrations such as Christmas and Easter, weddings, baptisms and funerals; green (life) for Sundays in Ordinary Time.





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## **‘Today is the feast of...’**

When families and friends celebrate birthdays, graduations and anniversaries they are making a statement about a person or a value which is collectively important to them. The Catholic Church, too, is full of celebrations—saints’ feast days and holy days—that affirm certain people and truths that are important to us as a faith family. Such occasions help unite and keep alive important events and relationships which have shaped our very existence as a Church.

## **Advent**

The Church calendar begins with the Advent season, the four weeks leading up to Christmas. This period is a time of preparation, not just for Christmas gifts and luncheons and holidays, but for the great celebration of God’s revelation through the birth of Jesus Christ. How privileged we are to live in this age of salvation! For centuries before Jesus’ birth, the Jewish people waited for the coming of the promised Messiah as foretold by the Scriptures. We find ourselves in a similar position as we look forward to the second coming of Christ at the end of time. In this sense, Jews and Christians share in a messianic

yearning. Although we do not know the hour or the day, each Advent we renew our faith in this great promise.

## **A Christmas question**

Since we do not know the exact historical date of Jesus’ birth, why do Christians celebrate Christmas on 25th December? In the ancient world, a pagan festival held on 25th December worshipped the sun as the divine controller of all life. The Roman Emperor Aurelian established this festival in 274, naming it *Natalis Solis Invicti* (‘the Birth of the Unconquered Sun’). By choosing this day as the birth of Christ, Christians intended to counteract the pagan belief as they celebrated Christ as the true light of the world, the Saviour who dispels the darkness of sin with the light of God’s love.

## **The Jesse Tree**

No, it’s not just another Christmas tree you see in churches at this time of year. In Christian tradition the Jesse Tree represents the family tree of Jesus. Beginning with Abraham, the names that you see decorating the tree are the characters listed in the genealogy of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-16). The name Jesse comes from the father of

King David who is listed in verse 6. The tree reminds us that Jesus our Saviour is revealed not as an isolated super-hero, but as the Messiah intimately connected with the people of God. He is God-with-us.

## **The Holy Family**

On the feast of the Holy Family we pause to reflect on our own families. For some of us this raises happy thoughts. For others, painful. For most of us it is a mixture of both. Undoubtedly, blood bonds are the most life-affecting relationships we have, even if by their absence! It is precisely because of their significance that families can teach us so much about the Gospel and about the Church. In the ups and downs of relating to one another, family members cannot help but be confronted by the challenge to love, to forgive and to put others before one’s own agenda. Families often underrate their holiness. In fact they are among the greatest of witnesses to the depth of love that Christians are called to share.



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## Why do we celebrate the Epiphany?

'Epiphany' comes from the Greek word meaning 'appearance' or 'manifestation'. This feast celebrates the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles (non-Jews). In the Gospel story the wise men, foreigners from the East, represent these 'outsiders' to the chosen people of God. Today, the feast of the Epiphany reminds us that our faith in Christ is not a gift to be kept to ourselves but to be offered to all peoples of the world. A question we might ask ourselves: How is the light of Christ manifested through our faith community? How have we experienced the light of Christ through friends 'outside' our faith community? Have we ever thought to tell them this and to invite them to share in the life of our community?

## Why Lent?

In the early Church Lent originated as a time of repentance for those preparing for baptism. Having experienced the call to conversion, those seeking initiation into the Christian community resolved to turn away from sin and embrace a gospel life. They were baptized at the Easter Vigil.

Today, the six week period of Lent is a time of repentance and renewal for the whole Church. It is a time when we prayerfully take stock of our lives, turn away from all lifestyle habits that contradict the Gospel and renew our commitment to Christ and each other.

## Why do we have so many ceremonies at Easter?

The Easter Triduum refers to three key days in the Church's calendar which together express the central mystery of our Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Christ. It begins on Holy Thursday as we focus on Jesus' farewell words and deeds at the Last Supper. It moves to Good Friday when we ponder the events of his suffering and death. It climaxes with the Easter Vigil when we celebrate the liberation of humankind through Christ's resurrection.

This three-stage sequence of worship allows us to take in an enormous mystery in small, digestible chunks and to relate it to the various facets of our own lives - the sorrows, joys, successes and failures. Of all the Church's celebrations throughout the year, the Easter Triduum is considered the highpoint.

## Easter symbols

The Easter vigil reeks of powerful symbolism. We begin with fire, for Christ the light of the world has shattered the darkness of sin. The Easter candle is lit and in turn sets alight the small candles held by the congregation until the whole church is ablaze. We sing 'alleluia' to uplifting music to express our joy. We use water, a symbol of life and cleansing, to baptize newcomers into our Church and to remind us of our own baptismal vows. The newly baptized are adorned with white robes representing their release from sin. They are anointed with oil (chrism) symbolizing the indelible mark of the Holy Spirit. Finally, they partake in the Eucharist as a sign of their union with the Christian community.

## The Easter Season

Easter, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, is the climax of the Church's life marking Christ's victory over sin and death. Traditionally, the Easter vigil is the time for baptizing newcomers to our Church. The season of Easter extends for 50 days after Easter Sunday, closing with Pentecost Sunday. In the early Church this period was a time of catechesis for the newly baptized. Called mystagogy ('reflection on the



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mysteries'), this catechesis led the baptized to a deeper understanding of what it meant to bear the light of Christ to the world. Appropriately, the Gospels of the Easter season reflect this missionary theme. It is an opportune time for all Christians to ponder the missionary significance of their baptism.

## Why do we celebrate the Ascension?

On Ascension Sunday we celebrate Christ's final appearance after the resurrection whereby he was taken up into heaven. To some ears this might sound like celestial theatrics! As Christians we understand it to be a profound affirmation of the fact that Jesus is indeed the Son of God who lives on forever beyond the material confines of this world. We are led to reflect on our own humanity from the perspective of the promise of eternal life. Christ has shown us God's love, and God's love is forever - limited by nothing, not even death. As Christians, our belief in this 'tomorrow' allows us to live 'today' with hope and courage.

## Why do we celebrate Pentecost?

Pentecost commemorates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples as tongues of fire (Acts 2). The name 'Pentecost' (Greek: 'fiftieth day') originally referred to the Jewish Feast of Weeks (in Hebrew: 'Shavuot') which fell fifty days after the Passover. This feast celebrated the first fruits of the harvest offered to God and also the giving of the Law to Moses. The early Church gave it Christian significance, rejoicing in the 'first fruits' and the 'new law' heralded by Christ's resurrection. Today we celebrate Pentecost as the conclusion of the Easter season, fifty days after Easter Sunday. Conscious of the apostolic zeal that galvanized the disciples into a united body, we often think of Pentecost as the birth of the Church.

## Why do we celebrate Trinity Sunday?

God is love. That is the simple, profound truth at the heart of Trinity Sunday. Consider a husband and wife who have loved each other for many years. They approach life with a sense of 'we' rather than 'I'. Paradoxically, instead of losing a sense of self-

identity, each spouse discovers a greater sense of uniqueness through the love of the other. This analogy helps us to glimpse the unity of the three persons of the Trinity. God is persons in a relationship of perfect unity; unique persons, but completely one. In a society full of isolated individuals crying out 'Who am I?' on a restless search for self-identity, the feast of the Trinity calls us to ask another question: Whose am I? To whom do I belong? Through relationships of love, we discover God.

## Body and Blood of Christ

The feast of Corpus Christi focuses on the Eucharist as a symbol and sacrament of unity. While we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, today we give special consideration to the Bread of Life nourishing our lives. When we break bread and share the one cup we recall that sacred meal between Christ and his disciples just before sacrificing his life on a cross. Like those disciples, Christ's death and resurrection has bonded us in a love relationship. For this reason, the Eucharist is never a private affair but always a call to unity. In receiving communion today, be aware of Christ's presence not only in the Eucharistic host, but in those receiving with you.





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## Part III. Saints & devotions

### **Why do we have statues of saints?**

Does your home display photos of deceased family members? Do you sometimes visit the grave of a loved one on special occasions of remembrance? Sometimes painful, sometimes comforting, gestures like these allow families to continue to include their ancestors in the fabric of daily life. The Catholic community, too, has ways of acknowledging its ancestors, the communion of saints, with whom we are bonded through faith even beyond the grave. Statues, art and various devotional practices that abound in Catholic churches are concrete expressions of our enduring relationship with those who have gone before us in faith.

### **Why do Catholics 'pray' to saints?**

It is a common and beautiful practice for Christians to turn to one another for support and encouragement as they journey through life. The Catholic way of 'praying' to the saints is simply an extension of this practice of drawing support from our faith family. Far from undermining adoration of God, devotion to the saints strengthens our love

of God. Awareness of the saints raises our sights, empowers us to aspire to gospel qualities and helps us to see our earthly lives from the perspective of the promise of eternal life.

### **Why do Catholics hold Our Lady in such high esteem?**

Every community has its heroes and heroines; people whose lives embody an ideal and inspire us to greater heights. The Church, too, looks up to men and women who are outstanding witnesses to the gospel. Of all the saints, prophets and holy people who have gone before us in faith, Catholics honor the Jewish woman Mary in a special way because of her unique role in the story of salvation. As the mother of Jesus, she was the first to bear the Gospel to the world. Mary's life is the most perfect example we have of a life lived under the grace of the Holy Spirit. Her feminine presence opens us to essential dimensions of the Gospel and draws us closer to the heart of Christ.

### **Bells and smells**

Why is the Catholic Church so full of 'things': bells, incense, candles, holy water...? Catholicism is a very 'earthy' religion. In God becoming human

through the person of Jesus Christ, we are reminded that material realities are not to be scorned but embraced as part of our loving response to our Creator. While we know that no image or 'thing' can capture the presence of God who is Mystery beyond all comprehension, we also recognize that human persons need to express themselves in a human way. When we portray the mysteries of our faith through human realities we are not 'confining' God but simply making a statement about the truths we hold dear.

### **Why do we hold palms on Palm Sunday?**

On Palm Sunday, the Sunday leading into Holy Week, we commemorate the Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The Gospels that describe this event speak of large crowds laying palm branches on the road before Jesus and proclaiming him as king. Here is a man with charisma, with a stirring message! And yet, before the week is out, he has been betrayed into the hands of his enemies and crucified. Palm Sunday (also called Passion Sunday) highlights the paradox of Christ's kingship. Our palms represent his victory, but a



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victory that comes only through suffering and self-sacrifice.

## Why ashes?

The ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday remind us of our mortality and symbolize the spirit of penance that marks the Lenten season. Ashes were commonly used in ancient religions (including Judaism) as an expression of sorrow. In the early Church, Jewish converts introduced a similar practice into the Christian liturgy. By being marked with ashes, a Catholic today is recognized by the community gathered as one who has chosen to repent of sin and believe in the Good News. A sign to be worn with conviction!

## The cross

Is the cross you wear around your neck just an attractive piece of jewelry to you? Have you ever pondered the startling paradox of this symbol? After all, in Jesus' day the cross was an instrument of execution. Translated into modern terms, it's a bit like wearing a miniature electric chair around your neck! The repugnance of such an idea highlights the radical edge of the Gospel. Jesus' life led to suffering, loss, failure and even death. Yet it was precisely through such self-sacrifice that

the resurrection was possible. As Christians we are called to life by walking the way of the cross. Not a religion for the faint-hearted!

## Penance

'Penance' is not a terribly popular word these days. Yet the 'offering up' or denying ourselves of a simple desire (e.g. a favorite TV program, an extra dinner serving) is still a rich and fruitful practice embedded in our Catholic tradition. Far from being a negative thing, regular acts of penance strengthen our will-power, develop perseverance and free us from self-centredness. Just as an athlete prepares for a race with months of regular training, so does the practice of penance prepare a Christian for the 'tough' side of Gospel living; those days that require you to 'give your all' when you thought you had already.

## Why do we pray the Rosary?

One might look upon the rosary as a precious heirloom passed down through generations of our faith family. Essentially, it is a simple, repetitive prayer by which we reflect on the life, death and glorification of Christ through the eyes and heart of his mother. According to a tradition that dates back to the 15th

century, St Dominic founded the devotion to the rosary. Other evidence, however, suggests that it developed gradually, especially under the influence of the Cistercian and Dominican religious orders. The rosary is one way we can prayerfully contemplate the mysteries of our faith.

## Why do we have Stations of the Cross?

Have you ever made a journey retracing the steps of an ancestor? In the early Church a tradition developed whereby Christians would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, retracing the journey that Jesus took to Calvary. Visual representations depicting the Passion of Jesus were erected along the way. In memory of this sacred path, the stations were popularized in art and as a devotional practice, encouraged especially by the Franciscans. There are fourteen stations in our modern day devotion whereby people move from station to station, reflecting on the sacrifice Jesus made for us.



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## Why do we bless ourselves with holy water?

From the earliest days of Christianity (and, even earlier, in Judaism and other ancient religions), water was used in baptismal rituals as a symbol of life and cleansing. Today, when Catholics sprinkle themselves from that little bowl of holy water at the church door and make the sign of the cross, they do so as a reminder of their baptism. The holy water itself is simply water that has been blessed by a priest.

### Part IV. Signs & Sacraments

## Why do we have sacraments?

Relationships grow through communication. We communicate in many ways beyond words: smiles, handshakes, gestures of affection, gifts, cards, flowers. In our relationship with God, too, we use signs to express the mystery of God's loving presence. There are many ways we do this, but some community rituals have developed in our Church which we hold to be particularly sacred and which mark the various stages of a person's life as a member of the Church. We call these sacraments: signs or symbols that 'make present'

within us the reality of God's love that is signified.

## Why do we baptize?

An adult baptized into the Church enters into a relationship. He or she no longer lives as an individual entity but as a member of the body of Christ. Like a wedding, the baptismal ceremony marks the beginning of this new life of union and ongoing commitment. A baptized person says 'Yes, I want to be one with you; I want to live a life faithful to the Gospel'. (When an infant is baptized, the parents and godparents make this commitment on the child's behalf.) Likewise, the community pledges itself to be one with that person. Two other rituals, Confirmation and Eucharist, complete this process whereby a person becomes part of the Catholic Church. Together the three are known as the Sacraments of Initiation.

## Reconciliation

'Why go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation?' people sometimes ask. 'Isn't it enough to say sorry to God in my heart?' The Catholic approach to Reconciliation is deeply community-oriented. For us, sin is never a private affair. When one member of the body of Christ hurts, the whole body

suffers. Imagine a husband and wife who harshly criticize each other. They can regret their words and say sorry to God. But for the forgiveness of God to really take effect in their marriage, they also need to reconcile with one another. Similarly, in Reconciliation we offer a public sign to our faith community that we are sorry for the ways we have undermined the unity of the Church and that we desire to renew our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

## Why confirm?

As the name implies, the Sacrament of Confirmation confirms or strengthens the new life received at Baptism. Symbolically, the bishop or priest makes the sign of the cross on the forehead using an oil called chrism. As he does so he says, '(Name), be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Although the Holy Spirit is received at baptism, Confirmation focuses on this gift by recalling the promise of Jesus to send the Spirit. In the case of youth, Confirmation is often regarded as a sign of maturity in Christ. Having been baptized as a baby and raised in the Christian life, the youth is now called upon to make a more mature commitment to the Gospel.



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In particular, Confirmation underlines our commissioning to be bold, apostolic witnesses to the gospel.

## Why do we celebrate the Eucharist?

For Catholics, the sacrament of the Eucharist, the sacred meal whereby we break bread and share the one cup, is the paramount sign of our unity with and in Christ. It has been described as the source and summit of the Church's life. When we receive the Eucharist we believe that we receive Jesus in an extraordinarily intimate way: we take him into our very beings in the form of food and drink. In doing so, we remember the way he died for us and rose again to lead us into eternal life. The Eucharist not only commemorates past events, it draws us into the mystery of Christ in the here and now and ultimately towards our eternal life with God.

## Why do couples 'marry in the Church'?

When a couple is married in the Catholic Church, they not only say 'yes' to each other and to God's blessing on their marriage; they say 'yes' to being a sacrament. That is, they declare before the community of faith that they will be a special sign to that community; a sign of the life of unity that Christ desires for his Church. That's a lofty calling! By the example of their daily witness, sacramental couples summon all members of the Church to live as one, to be united in mind and heart.

## Why do we ordain?

Like a husband and father, a priest in the Catholic Church is called to a sacred, lifelong relationship of love; however instead of giving his love exclusively to one woman and to one family unit, he is called to give his love in a non-exclusive celibate manner to the community in his care.

Through the sacrament of holy orders, priests are called to empower the gifts of the community into a workable whole. They live out their baptism through a specific mission of leadership, service, prayer and

teaching. In the midst of the community, the priest stands as a sacred sign, a sacrament of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who personally cares for his people. The priest also stands as a witness to the Holy Spirit's action in the Church. The Spirit continually breathes life into the community and guides it to ever new depths of unity and faith.

## Why do we anoint people?

The practice of anointing with oil goes back to ancient times. In the Old Testament it was used in the consecration of priests and kings. The healing and fragrant properties of the oil made it an appropriate symbol of the strength of God and the sweetness of a virtuous life. The Christian Church adopted this ritual to indicate the imparting of the Holy Spirit. Today we anoint the sick and those in danger of death to invoke God's healing and comforting presence. We also anoint people in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and holy orders as a sign of their consecration to Christ through the transforming power of the Spirit.



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## Why do Catholics have a Pope?

In any organization, community or family, there is usually somebody whose presence gives the group cohesion and direction. This person might exert such influence in a specified role such as the managing director of a company, or less formally, as a parent around whom family activities revolve. For Catholics, the Pope fulfils a unique role as a sign and guardian of the unity of our faith community. The title 'Pope' comes from the Greek 'papas' and Latin 'papa' meaning 'father'. As the bishop of Rome and the successor of St Peter, he is regarded as the representative of Christ the Good Shepherd. The Pope's role implies a relationship of love with Christ and his people.

## The Parish

If a hallmark of the Church is its love and unity, how does this happen in practice? How can millions of Catholics all over the world love one another?! Part of the answer is that the universal Church is comprised of many small cells of community. Individual members experience love and unity at a local level. One way this happens is through the parish. The word 'parish' comes from the Greek word 'paroukia' (district) which, in the

early Church referred to a section of the Christian population under the leadership of the bishop; that is, the equivalent of the modern diocese. From the late 14th century, however, it applied to subdivisions of the diocese.

## Why do we use incense?

Incense is a symbol of our prayers ascending to God. It also symbolizes purification, honor and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Based on Old Testament tradition, the use of incense in the Christian liturgy dates back to the fourth century in the east, later spreading to the west. The word 'incense' comes from the Latin 'incensum' (literally: something burned) and from 'incendere' (to kindle).

## Why pray?

Relationships thrive on good communication. Married couples especially will attest to that. To grow in love and friendship we need to communicate, not just honestly but often! When we pray, we express our desire to grow in relationship with God. We use our human capacities to open ourselves to a profound mystery. Through prayer we can praise, thank, ask, cry, argue and express many emotions. We can speak, listen, sing, chant, dance,

smile, embrace or just sit with our God. As Christians, our prayer takes on a specified character. We approach God through the person of Jesus Christ and with a consciousness of being part of a Spirit-led community, the Church.

## Why do we bless things?

Quite apart from the blessing of people and the blessing of the eucharistic bread and wine at Mass, Catholics are renown for blessing objects: houses, medals, statues, vestments, food...even computers! As found in scripture, a blessing is an authoritative pronouncement of God's favor. We bless as a way of placing our lives under the power of Christ. When we bless objects we acknowledge the goodness of God's creation and our desire to use these gifts for the service and glory of God.





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## Why candles?

Ever been to Carols by Candlelight? If so, you will agree that there is something about the glow of candle flames on a dark night that evokes feelings of warmth, hope and festivity. No wonder, then, that Christians use candles as a symbol of the life and enlightenment that comes from God. The practice of using candles in the Christian liturgy is based on early Christian traditions of lighting candles in pre-dawn services, in the catacombs and on the graves of Christian martyrs. Next time you light a candle, pause to consider how you can bear the light of Christ to our troubled world.

## Grace before meals

The practice of pausing at meal times to give thanks to God is a way of acknowledging the divine source of all our life-sustaining gifts. As many a family will attest, this brief prayerful interaction with God and with one another is a sure way of strengthening the bond of faith in a household. As one person put it: 'It's a bit like kissing my wife when I come home from work. It's only a small thing but it means a lot to our marriage.' Small habits build strong foundations! If only for your children's sake, make grace before meals part of your lifestyle.

## Part V. RCIA

### Why do we have the Catechumenate?

When people enter your home for the first time, it is hospitable to welcome them! In simplest terms, this is the idea behind the Catechumenate.

The Catechumenate is the process of initiation through which people are baptized Christians. After a period of preparation, the catechumens are baptized, confirmed and receive the eucharist at the Easter vigil. A period of further catechesis follows. Various smaller rituals are celebrated at points along the overall journey.

In the early Church, initiation was a joyous celebration of the immersion of the newly baptized into the Christian community. Over the centuries, however, the communal orientation of this process died out. Until relatively recently, more often than not, 'converts' slipped into the Sunday pews unannounced, uncelebrated.

In 1972, under the name Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, (R.C.I.A.) the ancient Catechumenate was revived as the norm for adult baptism. Its introduction has challenged parishes to develop a greater spirit of welcome and celebration involving the whole parish

community in the way it relates to enquirers and newcomers. The Catechumenate today is gradually becoming an established part of parish life.

### Enquiry

When two people meet each other for the first time there is usually a 'getting to know you' period before the relationship proceeds to a deeper level. The initial stage of the R.C.I.A. - the period of Enquiry - is a bit like that. As a person expresses initial interest in the Catholic community, parishioners respond to the enquirer's questions and share something of their own experience of being Catholic. No formal commitment is called for at this stage. It is a time of initial exploration as the enquirer, with the help of the parish community, decides whether he/she will undertake the journey towards baptism and full communion with the Catholic Church.

### Rite of Welcome

The Rite of Welcome is a parish liturgical celebration which marks a person's decision to undertake the process of becoming a Catholic. Having established a certain relationship with the Catholic community, this person now enters into a deeper period of formation. The public nature



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of this celebration highlights the fact that the catechumen's commitment to Christ involves a commitment to a specific community of people. The parish community in turn welcomes the catechumen and pledges its support in the weeks and months to come.

The period of the catechumenate

The catechumenate is the second of four stages of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. During this period an unbaptized person becomes more deeply acquainted with the people, teachings and practices of the Catholic Church with the expressed desire of becoming a Catholic. He/she is no longer called an 'enquirer' but a 'catechumen' (from the ancient Greek: one who 'echoes the gospel'). The relationship between catechumen and the parish community is a bit like an engaged couple who are seriously preparing for marriage. The length of this period is open-ended, taking anything from weeks to years according to the pace of the individual's experience of conversion. The word 'catechumenate' is also used as a general term to refer to the overall process of Christian initiation.

## Why do catechumens leave early?

In the early Church, catechumens did not participate at the eucharistic table until they were baptized. So deep was the people of God's appreciation of the bond of intimacy signified by the sharing of the eucharist, that it was considered inappropriate for anyone not fully immersed in the community to be present.

In modern catechumenate practice, we send our catechumens forth after the Gospel and homily, with the catechist and with their community's blessing, to a nearby room where they reflect prayerfully on the Word of God. This practice is not to be mistaken as a rejection! Rather, it is a dramatic reminder to the congregation of the importance and the demands of the eucharistic bond shared by members of the Church.

## 'Who's who' in the R.C.I.A.?

For parishioners who are little baffled by the multitude of titles (often derived from ancient Greek) relating to people in the R.C.I.A., here is a simple glossary of common terms:

- Enquirer: A person who approaches the Catholic Church with an initial expression of interest.
- Catechumen: (Greek: one who 'echoes the gospel.') An unbaptized person who is undertaking preparations for baptism in the Catholic Church.
- Candidate: A baptized Christian of another Christian denomination who seeks full communion with the Catholic Church.
- Neophyte: (Greek: 'new nature') A recently baptized Catholic.
- Sponsor: a Catholic who acts as a companion to a catechumen or candidate on his/her journey to becoming a Catholic.
- Catechist: A parishioner with a role of teaching and facilitation in the catechumenate process.
- Catechumenate team: The core group who oversees the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in a parish. Since the initiation of adults into the Church is regarded as the responsibility of the whole parish, the actual involvement of people in the process is far wider than the team.



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## Why do we have catechists in the catechumenate?

Those preparing to become Catholics meet regularly with parishioners who assist them in their understanding of the scriptures and the traditions and teachings of the Church. The role of these catechists is more than one of imparting information. It is a role of listening to the unique questions and issues faced by each individual and encouraging each to discern the action of the Holy Spirit in his/her life. The work of these catechists is supported by the priest and other parishioners such as sponsors, friends and relatives of the catechumens.

## Why do we have sponsors in the catechumenate?

Everybody needs a friend along the journey of life. For a person on the journey to becoming a Catholic, the sponsor is a parishioner who 'walks with' the catechumen. The sponsor's role is not to be a theological expert but to act as an encourager and guide in the catechumen's faith experience, to respond to questions and to witness to the Gospel in everyday ways. Of course, sponsors are not alone in

their role. The catechumen is also supported by catechists, friends and relatives, the priest and other parishioners.

## Rite of Election

If we think of the Church as a loving relationship between believers, then the Rite of Election is a bit like the later stages of a couple's engagement. At a ceremony held at the diocesan cathedral, at which the bishop presides, the catechumens declare before the Church community their intention to receive baptism at Easter. In turn, the community affirms their readiness to take this step. The catechumen is now referred to as one of 'the elect' and enters into the third stage of the R.C.I.A.: the period of enlightenment.

## Period of Enlightenment

Imagine an engaged couple a few weeks before their wedding. Expectations mount. Preparations intensify. They are acutely aware of the important life step they are about to take. Anticipation is often tinged with anxiety. For people in their final weeks of preparation for baptism, the experience can be somewhat similar. This stage - the Period of Enlightenment - normally coincides with Lent and is a time

of heightened reflection and repentance as preparations for baptism (usually at Easter) come to a head.

## Scrutinies

For those preparing for baptism (and, indeed, for all Christians), turning away from sin is a gradual and life-long process. The R.C.I.A. includes three short ceremonies called scrutinies which contribute to this process. During a scrutiny we call on God's healing presence to free the catechumens from the forces of darkness and to be open more fully to the goodness and fullness of life promised us by Christ. The scrutinies are held on designated Sundays during Lent.

## Presentation of the Creed

In family life, values are handed on from one generation to the next, often symbolized through a particular custom, document or treasured heirloom. Throughout the centuries the Church, too, has passed down its most precious beliefs, often symbolized in rituals and prayers. The Presentation of the Creed is one such example. In a short ceremony several weeks before their baptism, catechumens are formally presented with the Creed, a statement of Catholic



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belief. More than an acquisition of a document, the focus of this ceremony is on the people of the community handing on an enduring tradition of faith to yet another generation of believers.

## Catechumens and Candidates

'Why do we distinguish between catechumens and candidates in the R.C.I.A.?' people sometimes ask. 'Aren't they the same thing? Not exactly. Catechumen refers to a person who has never been baptized. It was for the unbaptized that the catechumenate originally developed in the early Church. Candidate, on the other hand, often refers to a baptized Christian of another denomination who is seeking full communion with the Catholic Church. When we distinguish a candidate from a catechumen we are acknowledging the validity of the former's Christian baptism in another Christian church. (That's why a candidate is not baptized again when he/she becomes a Catholic.) The modern Rite of Christian Initiation, which is designed for the unbaptized (i.e. catechumens), is often and easily adapted to the needs of Christians seeking full communion with the Catholic Church.

## Why do we baptize at the Easter vigil?

The Church's greatest celebration of the year, held on the eve of Easter Sunday, marks the victory of Christ over sin and death and our sharing in the life of God. In the early Church it was at this celebration that 'newcomers' were baptized. Although today a person may be baptized a Catholic at other times of the year, the newcomer's decision to reject sin and embrace the new life of Christ makes Easter a highly appropriate time for baptism. Since the Easter vigil is the climax of the year for the parish community, it is fitting that it also be the climax of the newcomer's journey of faith into the Catholic community.

## Why do catechumens keep meeting after Easter?

Actually, they're not called 'catechumens' any more. Since their baptism they are known as 'neophytes' (from the ancient Greek: 'new nature') and they meet for a further period of formation and catechesis.

Think of an event that deeply touched your emotions and impacted on your life. You will

know how important it was to talk about it afterwards with friends. 'Wasn't it great when...', 'Did you notice that...', 'I especially loved the...'. This process of reflection helps to clarify and confirm the significance of the event.

In a similar way, when the newly baptized meet they are 'unpacking' the experience of their baptism and all that has happened on their journey of conversion. This period is called *Mystagogy* ('reflection on the mysteries' in Greek) and has a particular focus on the call to mission. It is the concluding stage of formation in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

## Write up your own Why We Do

Is there something you wish to explain to your congregation? Research and write up your own item explaining "Why We Do The Things We Do."

