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EIGHT GOOD REASONS FOR BEING CATHOLIC

The Church's rich 2,000-year history comprises a "wisdom tradition" that provides us the answers to the questions of being, or remaining, Catholic.

by Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos



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EDITOR: JACK WINTZ, OFM REVISION EDITOR: CHRISTOPHER HEFFRON ART DIRECTOR: JUNE PFAFF DALEY EDITOR IN CHIEF: JOHN FEISTER

Today, many people are asking the question, “Why be Catholic?” They ask that question when their parish liturgy becomes intolerably boring, when they disagree with the pope or bishops on social issues, when they divorce and remarry and are told they can’t receive Communion. Often the question is “Why *remain* Catholic?”

The answer is Catholicism’s rich 2,000-year tradition of living the gospel. And this tradition is a “wisdom tradition.” Unlike some of the younger Churches that sprang up after the Protestant Reformation and often splintered into further divisions, Catholicism has maintained unity and diversity over the course of twenty centuries. It embraces the wisdom of the ancient world, the Middle Ages, and modern times.

We can summarize the wisdom of the Catholic tradition under eight headings. Each of these values represents not only a challenge but also a good reason for being Catholic.

1 AN OPTIMISTIC VIEW OF CREATION

From time to time, some Christians have not believed in the full goodness of creation. Early Gnostics and other “super-spiritual” groups felt that the material world was bad—but they were regarded as heretics by the majority of the Christians. In the Middle Ages, some monks thought sex was sinful—but the Church replied by affirming the sacramentality of marriage. A few centuries ago, Catholic puritans (called Jansenists) condemned all worldliness and sensuality—but the Church officially rejected their teaching.

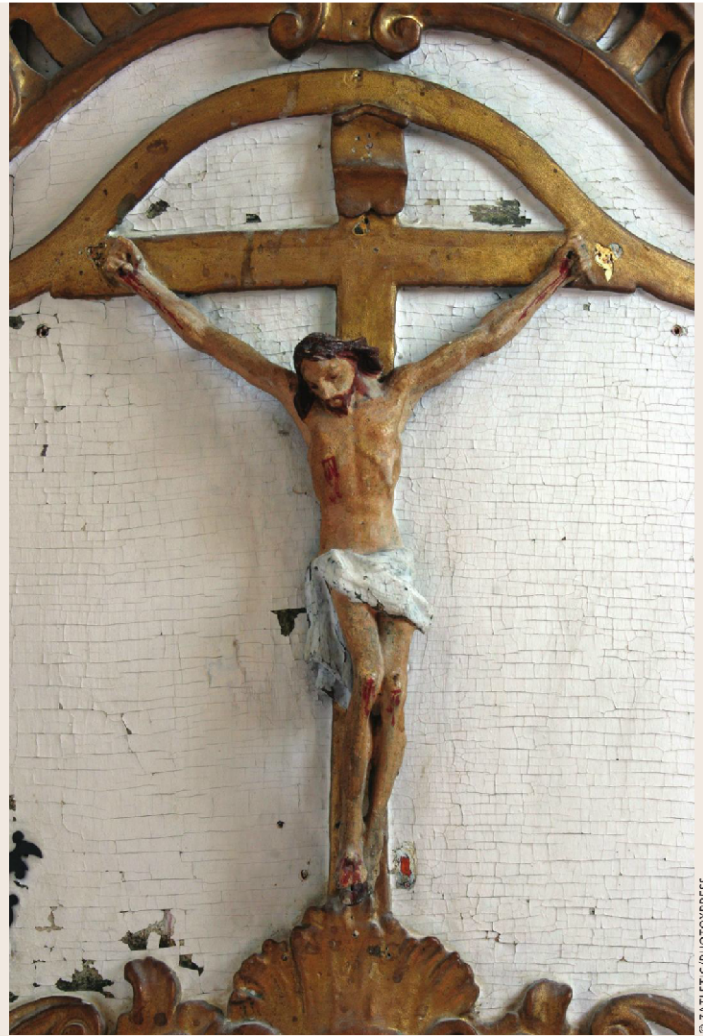
Food and drink, sex and children are the simple but most basic pleasures life can give us. They are, after all, gifts from God intended for our enjoyment when wisely used.

This is why Catholicism is fundamentally sacramental. A sacrament is a sign of God’s goodness to us. Catholic wisdom says that the world and everything in it is a gift from God and a sign of God. The seven sacraments we celebrate in church use water and oil, bread and wine, and human touch as signs of God’s graciousness. Catholics see God shining through all of creation, and so we use the gifts of creation in our most important rituals.

2 A UNIVERSAL VISION

The original meaning of the word *catholic* is “universal.” The Church was first called catholic in ancient times after the entire Roman Empire had been converted to Christianity. The first universal Church council met in Nicaea in the year 325. In this and similar councils, the world’s bishops formulated creeds of the Church’s faith. The summary of that worldwide faith is the Nicene Creed, which we say at Mass every Sunday.

The Catholic Church is one of the few truly international institutions in the world today. The Catholic Church is also a multicultural Church. It is not just European and American but also Latino, African, and Asian, and Oceanian. People of every race and culture embrace the Catholic faith and are embraced by the universal Church.



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Because the Church is universal, it calls us to a universal vision. As the world gets smaller every year, we need to regard everyone in it as our neighbor. The Catholic vision, when fully lived, reflects God’s concern for the entire human family.

3 A HOLISTIC OUTLOOK

Catholicism has never said you need to be a secluded monk or a cloistered nun to be holy. When we look at the Church’s calendar of saints, we see fishermen and farmers, husbands and wives, rich and poor, soldiers and scholars, even kings and queens honored there. Everyone is called to achieve his or her fullest potential, to be a truly whole and holy person.

This holistic spirituality is very rewarding, but it is also very demanding. Catholic holiness is not a Jesus-and-me attitude. It’s not enough to go to Church on Sunday and leave the rest of your life unchanged. True holiness requires a conversion of the whole person, a transformation of the total personality, a concern for bodily as well as spiritual health, and a balance between prayer and action. This might require a conversion of our lifestyle, no matter where we live or what we do for a living.

4 PERSONAL GROWTH

The Catholic vision of human potential begins with conversion—a conversion that is ongoing. It sees life as a process of continuous conversion and growth. There is no one moment when a Catholic claims to be “saved,” as fundamentalists do.

Fortunately, our salvation and our happiness do not depend on us alone. God is with us and lovingly takes the initiative in offering us salvation and calling us to holiness. This is the meaning of grace. Grace is God’s invitation and power reaching into us. But we have to open ourselves to God in order to be filled with the Spirit. We have to cooperate with grace.

Curiously, our cooperation is not so much a “doing” as a “not doing.” The wisdom of the saints is that they stopped long enough to listen to God in their hearts and let God tell them how to be truly happy.

Paradoxically, personal fulfillment means abandoning ourselves and putting others first. In the Catholic tradition, ultimate satisfaction is promised to those who give up their desire for self-satisfaction. When we let go of ourselves, our lives become filled with grace. The lives of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope John XXIII, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta radiate a grace that people of all religious traditions admire.

5 SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Society has been transformed again and again by Christianity. Jesus proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom, and the Church has tried again and again to make the kingdom real. The Church has always been concerned for human betterment.

In ancient Rome, the Church protested against gladiator fights and other forms of killing for sport. In the Middle Ages, prophetic voices in the Church were raised to defend peasants against the tyranny of nobles. Monasteries were the first hospitals for the sick and the first hotels for weary pilgrims. The Church has always cared for widows and orphans. It has fought against slavery, against the dehumanization of factory workers, and against the exploitation of migrant laborers. In the 1960s, Catholics marched for civil rights, and today they march for the right to life in its many forms as well as for many other social causes.

The gospel is a message to be shared at every level of human life, and the good news is that God’s power is available to redeem the world.

6 A COMMUNAL SPIRIT

Individualism and self-centeredness are disastrous for community. It is not the ideal taught to us by our Catholic tradition. The Christian way of living is communitarian. Early Christians were so connected to one another that St. Paul called each community a “body of Christ.”

(continued on back page)

OUR HERITAGE POINTS TO CHRIST

To be truly Catholic, therefore, means to enter into the Catholic wisdom tradition. It means appreciating all of creation and looking at the world from a universal perspective. It means adopting a holistic outlook that encourages personal growth and social transformation. It means building community and learning from history. It means not being afraid to ask questions about faith, about the Church, or about the world in which we live.

Yet all this heritage is pointless unless it also points us to Christ and to living the gospel. The reason for accepting the Catholic tradition is to learn better from our past how to live our faith more deeply today.

DIG DEEPER

What attracts you to Catholicism?

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Are there aspects of the Church that trouble you?

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How would you assess the Church’s impact on world history?

(continued from page 3)

Today, Catholics are searching for new forms of communal life. Many in religious orders are moving into smaller, more personal living arrangements. Prayer groups, spiritual movements, and base communities are all attempts to revive this Catholic charism in a modern setting. In our individualistic society, there is a felt need for this gift of community.

7 A PROFOUND SENSE OF HISTORY

The Catholic Church has been around for a long time—nearly twenty centuries. That’s four or five times the age of the oldest Protestant denominations and ten times as old as the United States. Belonging to a Church with that sort of history gives us a unique historical perspective. At least, it should!

In its 2,000 years, the Church has lived under kings and emperors, in democracies and dictatorships, under capitalism and communism. The Catholic perspective on history shows that we do not have to fear any political or economic system. The gospel can be lived in any place, at any time, under any conditions. Our strong sense of roots and continuity with a rich Catholic past is certainly a value to be cherished.

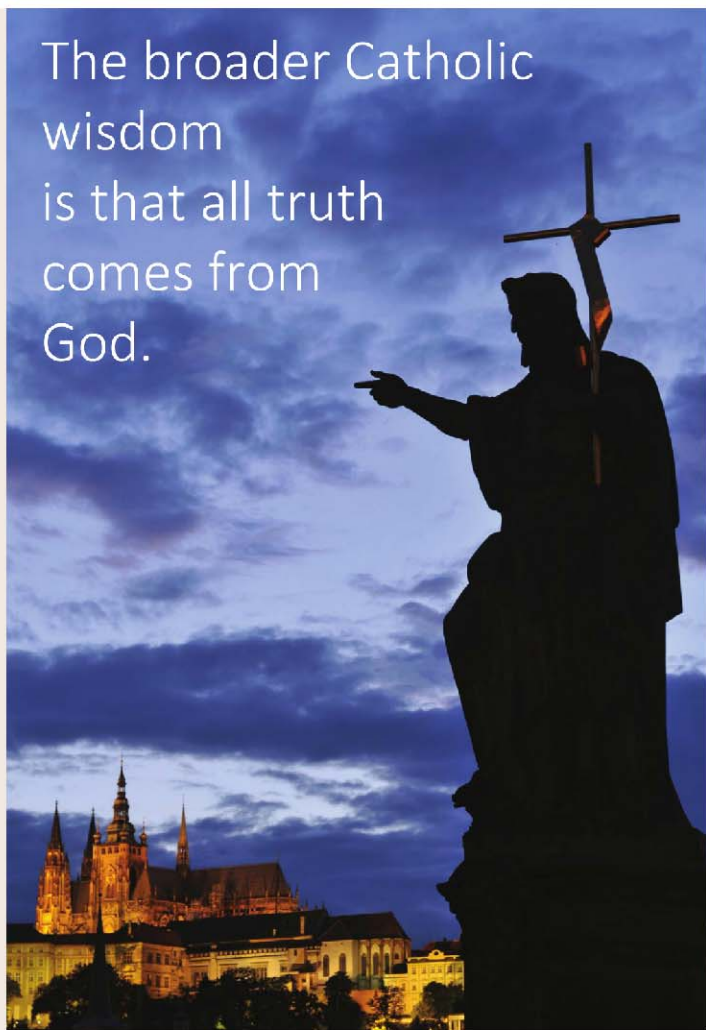
8 A RESPECT FOR HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

After philosophy, the oldest intellectual discipline in the world is theology. Catholicism has never been a matter of blind faith. One of the earliest definitions of theology is “faith seeking understanding.” The Catholic ideal is to respect reason and promote understanding.

St. Augustine tried to understand all of history from the perspective of Catholic faith. St. Thomas Aquinas studied all medieval science before writing his great *Summa Theologica*, a four-volume “summary” of theology. Other Catholic scholars advanced medicine, law, astronomy, and biology. Catholics believe that if we are firmly grounded in our faith, we do not have to feel threatened by any scientific knowledge. Teilhard de Chardin integrated evolution into his Christian understanding of the cosmos.

This openness to human knowledge is not true of all Christians today. But the broader Catholic wisdom is that all truth comes from God, whether it is revealed or discovered.

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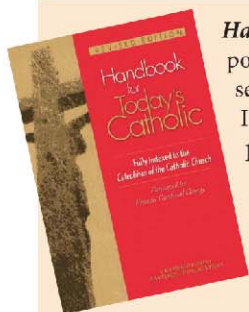
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Franciscan priest Richard Rohr is founding director of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Author of numerous books, including Breathing Under Water and Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality, he gives retreats and lectures internationally.

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Joseph Martos recently retired from full-time teaching. He has been a visiting professor in universities and theology schools in Canada and Australia, as well as around the United States.

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This Update is adapted from Rohr and Martos’ book, Why Be Catholic?

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