

The Essential Catholic Handbook

**A SUMMARY OF BELIEFS,
PRACTICES, AND PRAYERS**

With a Glossary of
Key Terms and Cross-Referenced to the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION



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Foreword

The intention of this book is to help us grow in faith and love. To be a Christian is to embrace and live the truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ. This truth is handed on securely in the Tradition and the Scriptures of the Catholic Church by means of the teaching office with which Christ endowed his Church. Pope John Paul II's call for a new evangelization is prompted by the silent loss of faith in a large part of Christianity. Faith is replaced often by a tolerance which makes all truth relative.

No one is Catholic on his or her own terms: not the pope, not bishops or priests, not religious, not laypeople. It is necessary to accept with integrity the body of belief which the Church, the Body of Christ, holds to be true. Whether one is a member of the company of believers or a theologian or teacher of the apostolic faith, all of us are bound by the Church's rule of faith. It is not enough for an individual to read the Bible, praiseworthy though that is in itself, in order to grasp the meaning of what is in those inspired texts. It is necessary to do so in light of the faith of the Church. There are aspects of understanding which become available to the individual only because the Church's Tradition makes them intelligible.

This book carries in it a selection of Catholic prayers. We cannot know Christ, we cannot live the faith of the Church without prayer, which unites our hearts to God. It is essential to accept the truths of the faith, but those truths have to become one's own personal adhesion to God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The objective truth of the faith has to be interiorized to become the basis of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that will change and shape one's life. Here and now one must begin to live by the knowledge that one day will be the vision of God in heaven.

Foreword

The Essential Catholic Handbook comes as a challenge to Catholics to be alert to contemporary difficulties of belief. It is a support in living the faith. It is an invitation to keep close to the teaching of the Church in order to draw closer to God. The immediate source of the teaching set out here is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is the “new authoritative exposition of the one and perennial apostolic faith.” The *Catechism* is “a sure norm for teaching the faith” and remains the basic text; a useful piece of writing such as the present book simply helps make some of its teaching more accessible, not claiming to be complete or to cover all important questions equally well. It can, however, serve to lead the reader to the text of the *Catechism*. May the reader use it well and grow in faith and love.

Francis Cardinal George, OMI
ARCHBISHOP OF CHICAGO

Introduction

We live in a new century. We live in a place where we can explore the planets around us and talk about living on the moon. This is much different from the beginning of the twentieth century. That was a century of dreams and plans and promise. Sometimes the dreams succeeded beyond all expectation. For most of the twentieth century the Catholic Church stood as a seemingly unchanging reality that helped us keep our balance.

The Catholic Church in the third millennium is both different from the Church of the twentieth century and the same as that Church. The Second Vatican Council in the second half of the twentieth century set the Church on a path of renewal. In the midst of that renewal, we look to the unchanging things that we believe and the developing ways in which we can express those beliefs.

The purpose of this handbook is to look at some basic doctrines of the Catholic Church and explain them for the present generation. Here you will find the unchanging truths revealed by God seen through the filter of modern culture. There is no new teaching here. There is no ambiguous explanation. There is today's language and scholarship explaining the truths from Genesis to Revelation. The explanations are faithful to the great ecumenical council of our age, Vatican II.

You will also find in these pages some of the prayers and practices of the Catholic Church. These things do change, of course, over the centuries. Each culture and age finds appropriate ways of celebrating Mass, praying to God, and honoring the saints. The essentials, though, do not change.

One of the great projects of the Church in the past century was to prepare and publish a universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. This edition of the handbook is fully indexed to the *Catechism*. The numbers found in square brackets, “[],” refer you to specific

articles in the *Catechism*. You will also find references to documents from Vatican II cited in the text where appropriate.

Section One: Beliefs. This section relies upon the Nicene Creed, the summary of our beliefs as Catholics, to explain the revelation Jesus gives us. In this part of the *Handbook* are the teachings about Jesus, the Holy Trinity, the Church, the sacraments, and other basic dogmas that Catholics believe and by which they live.

Section Two: Practices. Here you will find the fundamental moral teaching of the Church. Morality is about how we behave—how we act—in this world. The basis of the moral teaching is the Ten Commandments, but the precepts of the Church are also mentioned here. There are some practical points about sacraments, holy days, and some other elements of Catholic practices.

Section Three: Prayers. Prayer is communication with God. As individuals we pray and as the universal Church we pray together in our liturgy. Section Three offers some prayers common to Catholics.

Section Four: Living the Faith in the Spirit of Vatican II. This expanded section of the *Handbook* explains the influence Vatican II continues to have on Catholic practice and belief. The Church after Vatican II is one that offers expanded roles for the laity in the Church. This Council also emphasized the importance of the liturgy in the life of the Church and called for renewal of our understanding of Scripture, sacraments, social responsibility, faith formation, and evangelization. This section also treats the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults that was renewed and expanded after the Council.

Section Five: A Summary of the Documents of Vatican II.

Since Vatican II provides guidelines for renewal, this section includes an outline of the sixteen Documents of Vatican II, which Pope Paul VI called “the great catechism of our times.”

Section Six: A Dictionary of Essential Catholic Terms. This section provides a select yet comprehensive alphabetized list of essential Catholic terms, from *abba* to *zucchetto*. It is hoped that this listing, compiled by experienced pastors and catechists, will give a handy reference to those who do not have ready access to the larger dictionaries of Catholic words and phrases.

Section Seven: A Calendar of Catholic Saints. Finally, this *Handbook* provides a day-by-day listing of Catholic saints designed to acquaint readers more fully with the wide spectrum of saints honored by the Catholic Church. It serves also as a guide to celebrating one’s name day rather than, or in addition to, a birthday; and finally it indicates patronages in order to increase devotion to and interest in those saints who have long been seen as intercessors for us in heaven.

SECTION ONE

Beliefs



1. You the Seeker, God the Seeker

Man is by nature and vocation a religious being. Coming from God, going toward God, man lives a fully human life only if he freely lives by his bond with God.

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 44

YOU: A HUMAN BEING WHO SEEKS GOD

As a human person you ask questions and you make decisions. You wonder about things, which is where your questions come from, and you choose what to do and how to act, which are your decisions. These two things reveal that you have a *free will* that enables you to choose, and a questioning *intellect* [1–3].

Things change over time. The way you look, the way you view life will change. At your core, you do not change. You are constantly reaching out, seeking that for which you were created. This questioning, spiritual core of your being has been called by many names. Common names for it are *soul*, *spirit*, or *heart* [27, 44–47].

The Ultimate Reality you seek—which is present in everything you reach out to—has also been called by many names. The most common name for this Ultimate Reality is *God* [43]. You are so bound to God that without him you would not live or move or have your being. You are so bound to God that if you did not sense his presence in some way, you would view life as pointless and cease to seek [1701–1715, 1718].

GOD: THE DIVINE LOVER WHO FOUND YOU

Meanwhile, as you seek God, God seeks you. The Vatican II *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* expresses it this way: “The invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (2) [1719].

As a Catholic you are called to seek and find Christ. But you did not begin this quest on your own initiative. The initiative was all God's. All who follow Christ were once lost but were searched for and found. God first found you and made you visibly his in baptism. What he seeks now is that you seek him. In a mysterious way your whole life with God is an ongoing quest for each other by two lovers—God and you—who already possess each other [50–53, 521].

2. Revelation, Faith, Doctrine, and Doubt

God wished to manifest and communicate both himself and the eternal decrees of his will concerning the salvation of humankind.

DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION, 6

REVELATION AND FAITH

In revealing, God has not only communicated information; he has communicated *himself* to you. Your personal response to God's communication of himself and his will is called *faith*. "By faith one freely commits oneself entirely to God, making 'the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,' and willingly assenting to the revelation given by God" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 5) [36–38, 51–53, 142, 143, 153–164, 1814–1816].

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

The words we use to explain what God has revealed to us about our relationship with him are called doctrines, or dogmas. The key characteristic of the Church's dogmas is that they agree with sacred Scripture. The teachings communicate the unchangeable content of revelation by using the changeable thought-forms and languages of people in every new era and culture. A dogma is a statement of

truth, a formulation of some aspect of the faith. As a coherent set of teachings, Church dogma is a faithful interpretation of God's self-communication to humankind [88–100, 170–171].

FAITH AND DOUBT

The Church's dogmatic formulas, however, are not the same thing as God's self-revelation; they are the way in which Catholics express their faith in God and pass it on. God unveils and communicates the hidden mystery of himself *through* Church teachings. The teachings are like sacraments through which you receive God. Through the medium of doctrinal formulas, you reach God himself in the personal act of faith [88–90, 170].

The life of faith is very personal and delicate—and ultimately mysterious. Faith is a gift of God. A person can lack faith through his or her own fault; we are free—even to reject God. But when a person “doubts,” we should not jump to conclusions. For example, some people cannot bring themselves to believe in God as their “good Father” because of painful memories of their own father. This is not a lack of faith. They have no context that lets them appreciate God as Father. Negative memories can block a person from receiving God's self-revelation in a particular form. But such images cannot block out all forms in which people perceive and express God's mystery. God seeks us until we find him [153, 215].

A person seeking deeper insight may sometimes have doubts, even about God himself. Such doubts do not necessarily indicate a lack of faith. In fact, they may be a sign of growing faith. Faith is alive and dynamic. It seeks, through grace, to penetrate into the very mystery of God. Faith is a living gift that must be nourished by the word of God. Even when inclined to reject a particular doctrine, the person should go right on seeking the revealed truth expressed by the doctrine. When in doubt, “Seek and you will find.” The person who seeks by reading, discussing, thinking, or

praying eventually sees light. The person who talks to God even when God is “not there” is alive with faith [162].

3. One God, Three Divine Persons

The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three gods but one God.

ATHANASIAN CREED

The Catholic Church teaches that the fathomless mystery we call God has revealed himself to humankind as a Trinity of Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit [238–248].

THREE PERSONS, ONE GOD

The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of Catholic faith. Upon it are based all other teachings of the Church. In the New Testament there is frequent mention of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A careful reading of these passages leads to one unmistakable conclusion: each Person is presented as having qualities that can belong only to God. But if there is only one God, how can this be [199–202]?

The Church studied this mystery with great care and, after four centuries of clarification, decided to state the doctrine in this way: in the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—truly distinct one from another [249–256].

CREATOR, SAVIOR, SANCTIFIER

All effects of God’s action upon his creatures are produced by the three divine Persons in common. But because certain effects of the divine action in creation remind us more of one divine Person than another, the Church ascribes particular effects to one or the other divine Person. Thus, we speak of the Father as Creator of all that

is, of the Son, the Word of God, as our Savior or Redeemer, and of the Holy Spirit—the love of God “poured into our hearts”—as our Sanctifier [234–237].

To believe that God is Father means to believe that you are son or daughter; that God your Father accepts and loves you; that God your Father has created you as a love-worthy human being [238–240].

To believe that God is saving Word means to believe that you are a listener; that your response to God’s Word is to open yourself to his liberating gospel which frees you to choose union with God and brotherhood with your neighbor [2716, 2724].

To believe that God is Spirit means to believe that on this earth you are meant to live a sanctifying, supernatural life that is a created sharing in God’s own nature—a life which is the beginning of life eternal [1691, 1703, 1704].

4. God, the Father of Jesus

The Incarnation of God’s Son reveals that God is the eternal Father...the Son is one and the same God.

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 262

The Book of Exodus records one of the most profound revelations in human history. The revelation is narrated in the story of God calling Moses to be the leader of his people. Speaking from a burning bush, which “though on fire, was not consumed,” God called out: “Moses! Moses!” God then told Moses to organize the Israelites and persuade Pharaoh to let him lead that enslaved people out of Egypt. Hearing the plan, Moses was apprehensive. The dialogue goes [204, 210, 211]: