

Chapter 1

What It Means to Be Catholic

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting an idea of what Catholicism is all about
- ▶ Enjoying religious traditions and customs
- ▶ Belonging to a parish is a good thing

Being Catholic means living a totally Christian life and having a Catholic perspective. To Catholics, all people are basically good, but sin is a spiritual disease that wounded humankind initially and can kill humankind spiritually if left unchecked. Divine grace is the only remedy for sin, and the best source of divine grace is from the *sacraments*, which are various rites that Catholics believe have been created by Jesus and entrusted by him to his Church.

What's the bottom line from the Catholic perspective?

- ✔ More than an intellectual assent to an idea, Catholicism involves a daily commitment to embrace the will of God — whatever it is and wherever it leads.
- ✔ Catholicism means cooperation with God on the part of the believer. God offers his divine grace, and the Catholic must accept it and then cooperate with it.
- ✔ Free will is sacred. God never forces you against your free will. Yet doing evil not only hurts you, it also hurts others, because a Catholic is never alone. Catholics are always part of a spiritual family called the *Church*.
- ✔ More than a place to go on the weekend to worship, the Church is a mother who feeds spiritually, shares doctrine, heals and comforts, and disciplines when needed.

In this chapter, you get a peek at what Catholicism is all about — the common buzzwords and beliefs — a big picture of the whole shebang. (The rest of this book gets into the nitty-gritty details.)

10 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

What Exactly Is Catholicism Anyway?

The cut-to-the-chase answer is that *Catholicism* is the practice of Roman Catholic Christianity. *Catholics* are members of the Roman Catholic Church, and they share various beliefs and ways of worship, as well as a distinct outlook on life.

The basic beliefs

Catholics are first and foremost *Christians*. Like Jews and Muslims, Catholics are *monotheistic*, which means that they believe in one God, but Catholics, like all Christians, believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, which is unique to Christianity. Catholics also believe that

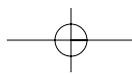
- ✓ **The Bible** is the inspired, error-free, and revealed word of God. (See Chapter 3 for more on the Bible.)
- ✓ **Baptism**, the rite of becoming a Christian, is necessary for salvation — whether the Baptism occurs by water, blood, or desire. (See Chapter 6.)
- ✓ **God's Ten Commandments** provide a moral compass — an ethical standard to live by. (For more on the Ten Commandments, see Chapter 10.)
- ✓ **The Holy Trinity** — one God in three persons — is also part of Catholic belief. In other words, Catholics embrace the belief that God, the one Supreme Being, is made up of three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. (See Chapter 3.)



Catholics recognize the unity of body and soul for each human being. So the whole religion centers on the truth that humankind stands between the two worlds of matter and spirit. The physical world is considered part of God's creation and is, therefore, inherently good until an individual misuses it.

The *seven sacraments* — Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick — are outward signs that Christ instituted to give grace. These Catholic rites marking the seven major stages of spiritual development are based on this same premise of the union of body and soul, matter and spirit, physical and spiritual. The seven sacraments involve a physical, tangible *symbol*, such as the *water* used in Baptism and the *oil* when anointing, to represent the invisible spiritual *reality*, the supernatural grace given in each sacrament. (For more on the seven sacraments, see Chapters 6 and 7.)

Symbols — from burning incense and candles to stained glass windows depicting the saints, from cruets of oil or water to unleavened bread and wine — are an important part of Catholic worship. The human body has five senses that connect to the physical world. Catholicism uses tangible symbols (see



Chapter 5) that the senses can recognize so to be reminded of an invisible reality — the delivery of *divine grace*, which is God’s gift of unconditional love.

Grace is a totally free, unmerited gift from God. Grace is a sharing in the divine; it’s God’s help — the inspiration that’s needed to do his will. It was grace that inspired the martyrs in the early days of Christianity to suffer death rather than deny Christ. It was grace that bolstered St. Bernadette Soubirous (see Chapter 18) enough to sustain the derision of the locals in reaction to her claims to have seen the Virgin Mary. You can’t see, hear, feel, smell, or taste grace, because it’s invisible. Catholic belief, however, maintains that grace is the life force of the soul. Like a spiritual megavitamin, grace inspires a person to selflessly conform to God’s will, and like the battery in the mechanical bunny rabbit, grace keeps the soul going, going, going, and going. Granted purely out of God’s love, grace is necessary for salvation. Catholicism says that grace is an undeserving and unmerited free gift from God that wasn’t owed to his people. As a gift, however, a person can accept or reject it. If accepted, it then must be cooperated with. Grace is given so that the will of God may be done. Grace must be put into action through those who receive it.

The primary way of worship

Catholics belong to their own churches, called *parishes*, which are local places of worship. The Catholic daily and weekly church service is the *Holy Mass*, a reenactment of *Holy Thursday*, when Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, and *Good Friday*, when he died to purchase the rewards of eternal life in heaven for humankind. (See Chapter 8 for more on the Mass.)



Sunday attendance at a parish isn’t just expected; it’s a moral obligation. Not going to Sunday Mass without a worthy excuse, such as illness or bad weather, is considered a grave sin.

Many Christians attend church services on Sunday, but Catholics actually don’t have to attend Mass on that particular day. They can go to Mass on Saturday evening instead.



The practice of attending what’s called the *Vigil Mass*, the Saturday evening Mass, wasn’t universally allowed until 1983. The rationale for this relatively new practice is that in the Jewish tradition *after sundown* means the next calendar day, so Mass celebrated after sundown on Saturday evening can count for a Sunday obligation.

Originally, the Saturday evening Mass was intended to offer a solution for Catholics who had to work on Sunday, while Mass was being celebrated. Sunday is still the preferred day of Christian worship, a day to go to Church as a family and spend time as a family. Nevertheless, the option of going to Mass Saturday evening isn’t restricted anymore just to Catholics who work the next

12 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

day. The obligation to refrain from unnecessary work, however, still remains on Sunday, because it's the *Day of the Lord* for Christians all over the world.

This night-before worship is somewhat unique to Catholicism. To accommodate the busy schedules that so many families have today, most parishes have Mass the evening before a holy day, too, and then some Masses on the morning of the holy day itself. (For more on the holy days of obligation, see Chapter 8.)

It may appear that Catholics can just go to Mass to fulfill a duty and obey a church law, but attending Mass is actually much more than just being physically present in Church. Catholic worship involves the whole person — body *and* soul. That's why Catholics use different postures, such as standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing, and do plenty of listening, singing, and responding to phrases. For example, if the priest says, "The Lord be with you," Catholics respond, "And also with you" or "And with your spirit."



Unfortunately, some Catholics don't fully appreciate or accept God's grace nor do they practice what's preached. It's been said that one of the most dangerous places on earth is the Catholic parish parking lot! Some people — not out of necessity but mere convenience — always have to be the first one in the car and out on the road before Mass even ends. These are the same Catholics who hug the end of the pew nearest the door; they make others step over them to sit down. Most Catholics, however, show respect and stay until the end of the last hymn, after the priest and deacon leave the sanctuary.

The fundamental perspective

Catholicism offers a distinct perspective on the world and life. The Catholic perspective sees everything as being intrinsically created good but with the potential of being abused. It honors the individual intellect and well-formed conscience and encourages members to use their minds to think things through. In other words, instead of just giving a list of do's and don'ts, the Catholic Church educates its members to use their ability to reason and to apply laws of ethics and a natural moral law in many situations.

Catholicism doesn't see science or reason as enemies of faith but as cooperators in seeking the truth. Although Catholicism has an elaborate hierarchy to provide leadership in the Church, Catholicism also teaches individual responsibility and accountability. Education and the secular and sacred sciences are a high priority. Using logical and coherent arguments to explain and defend the Catholic faith is an important characteristic.

Catholicism isn't a one-day-a-week enterprise. It doesn't segregate religious and moral dimensions of life from political, economic, personal, and familial dimensions. Catholicism tries to integrate faith into everything.



The general Catholic perspective is that because God created everything, *nothing* is outside God's jurisdiction and that includes your every thought, word, and deed — morning, noon, and night, 24/7.

The General Ground Rules

The minimum requirements for being a Catholic are called the precepts of the Church:

- ✓ Attending Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation.
- ✓ Going to confession annually if not more often or when needed.
- ✓ Receiving Holy Communion during Easter. Receiving weekly or daily is encouraged, though.
- ✓ Observing laws on fasting and abstinence: one full meal on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday; not eating meat on Fridays during Lent.
- ✓ Obeying the marriage laws of the Church.
- ✓ Supporting the Church financially and otherwise.

You can find out more about the precepts of the Church in Chapter 9. More generically, however, Catholics are basically required to live a Christian life, pray daily, participate in the sacraments, obey the moral law, and accept the teachings of Christ and his Church.

Knowing the faith is the first step to being Catholic, and it entails *catechesis*, the process of discovering the Catholic faith and *what* is to be believed and finding out all the important doctrines.

Accepting the faith is the second step, and it entails *trust*. The Catholic believer must trust that what's being taught is indeed the truth. After knowing *what* the Church believes, the Catholic is then asked *to believe* all that they have been told. It's the act of saying, "Yes," to the question "Do you believe?"

Practicing the faith is the third — and most difficult — step. Obeying the rules isn't just mindless compliance. It involves appreciating the wisdom and value of the various Catholic rules and laws. Believers are asked to put that belief into action, to practice what they believe. Catholics are taught that all men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and that all men and women have been saved by Christ and are adopted children of God. That belief, if truly believed, requires that the person act as if she really means it. Behaving like a racist or anti-Semite would contradict such a belief.

14

Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

So are you a cradle Catholic or a convert?

Some Catholics remain close to their faith from the beginning of their lives to the present, and other Catholics may change their focus for a time, to return wholeheartedly later on. Still, some Catholics may have come from another religious background or were completely unfamiliar with religion until converting to Catholicism.

✔ **Cradle Catholics** are born, baptized, and raised in the Catholic faith.

✔ **Converts** previously belonged to another religion or no religion and came into the Catholic religion later on.

✔ **Reverts** are cradle Catholics who left the Church, perhaps joining another religion. Eventually, they return or *revert* back to their Catholic heritage later on.

Celebrating Year-Round



A really cool thing about Catholicism is that many days of the calendar year are a cause for celebration. The date may be reserved to honor a saint or commemorate a special passage in the life of Christ, such as the Feast of the Transfiguration when Christ transfigured himself before the apostles (Luke 9:28–36; Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8). You may notice, as you continue reading, that many Catholic celebrations and customs involve their fair share of the priest blessing this and that. See the “Hey, Father Joe — bless this, will ya?” sidebar in this chapter, for more on priestly blessings.

✔ January 6 is the traditional and universal Feast of the Epiphany.

Catholic parishes in the United States, however, that say the Mass in English, celebrate this feast on the first Sunday after New Year’s Day. Epiphany commemorates the visit of the Magi, the three kings bearing gifts for the newborn Christ in the stable at Bethlehem.

A Catholic custom among Polish, Slovak, Russian, and German families is to have their pastor bless chalk on this day. Then, with the blessed chalk, they write over their door the numerals for the current year and, in the middle of the numerals, the initials CMB for the three wise men, Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar. So on Epiphany Sunday 2005, for example, the custom is to write “20 + C + M + B + 05” over your door with your blessed chalk. This custom merely reminds all in the home to ask the prayers of Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar during the calendar year 2005.



Besides being an abbreviation for the names of the three wise men, CMB is also the abbreviation for the Latin *Christus Mansionem Benedicat* (may Christ bless the home).



✓ **February 2 is the Feast of Candlemas.** Also known as the Presentation of the Christ (Luke 2:22–38), Candlemas is celebrated on the day before the Feast of St. Blaise when Catholics get their throats blessed. (For more on St. Blaise, see the “Hey, Father Joe — bless this, will ya?” sidebar, in this chapter.) White beeswax candles are blessed during or after Mass on February 2, and people take a few home with them. Then when Catholics pray in their home, asking for God’s assistance especially during a time of anxiety, distress, calamity, war, dangerous weather, or illness — and when the priest is called to administer one of the seven sacraments — the Anointing of the Sick (formerly called *Extreme Unction*), these candles are lit before the Priest enters the house. Folks really pray up a storm at times like these.

Hey, Father Joe, bless this, will ya?

Catholics love to have priests or deacons bless them, as well as some of their personal belongings — their home, car, or dog. More often, however, Catholics ask priests to bless a personal and tangible religious item — their rosary, medal, statue, Bible, and so on. Any article of devotion or something integral to human life and activity can be blessed, but that doesn’t mean it becomes a lucky charm. The priestly blessing is merely a way of showing gratitude to God for his divine grace and putting these blessed items under his watchful care.

For example, if you see an outdoor statue of Mary in the front or back yard of a Catholic home, chances are it’s been blessed. It’s not magic and does nothing to help the grass grow. It’s just a gentle reminder of Mary, the Mother of God, and of Catholic affection for her.

Throats are blessed in church every year on February 3, the Feast of St. Blaise (see Chapter 16), a bishop and martyr who saved a choking boy. From that point on, candles blessed the day before (February 2) have been used to bless all throats of Catholics, asking St. Blaise’s intercession from all ailments of the throat. Palm branches are blessed on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, and Catholics take them home and often weave them into crosses and place them on a wall crucifix. Last year’s palms

are burned and used on Ash Wednesday to impose ashes on everyone’s forehead to remind them of prayer, fasting, and penance.

Some Catholics who don’t attend Mass regularly get the dubious title of PAT (palms, ashes, and throats) Catholics, meaning they only come to church when freebies are handed out. Thankfully, they’re a small minority. The ashes, the throat blessing, or the palms aren’t magical. They’re merely tangible symbols of a spiritual life.

Anytime a priest or deacon blesses a religious article, such as a rosary, statue, or medal of one of the saints, he makes the sign of the cross with his right hand over the object(s) and sprinkles holy water on it after saying the prayers of blessing. The holy water reminds the owner that the blessed item is now reserved for sacred use (to enhance prayer life, for example) and shouldn’t be used for profane (nonreligious) use.

So almost anything can be blessed, as long as the item will only be used for moral purposes and isn’t going to be sold. Blessings aren’t magical, but blessings do change an object into a *sacramental*, which means that it’s a reminder of God’s grace and generosity and, particularly when used in conjunction with prayer, invokes God’s blessing on all who use it. (For more on sacramentals, see Chapter 16.)

16 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

✔ **March 17 is St. Patrick's Day.** Who doesn't know about the wearing o' the green to commemorate the Emerald Isle on the Patron Feast Day of Ireland? Morning Mass, parades, Irish soda bread, potato soup, green beer — all great customs. Because many Irish immigrants came to the United States during Ireland's potato famine, it's no wonder that more people celebrate St. Patrick's Day in United States than in Ireland.

St. Patrick was born in A.D. 387 at Kilpatrick, near Dumbarton, in Scotland and died on March 17th in the year 493. His father was an officer of the Roman Army. Irish pirates captured 16-year-old Patrick and sold him into slavery for six years in Ireland where he learned the Celtic language and combated the Druid religion. His *Confession* and his *Letter to Coroticus* are all that's officially known of St. Patrick. The *Confession* reveals his call by Pope St. Celestine I to convert the Irish, and Coroticus was a warlord with whom Patrick communicated. Pious tradition contends that he explained the Trinity — three persons in one God — by showing the converts a three-leaf shamrock.

✔ **March 19 marks the Solemnity of St. Joseph, the Husband of Mary and Patron of the Universal Church.** Even though Lent is a time of penance and mortification, some feast days are so special that the Church wants us to celebrate them with gusto even if they happen to fall during the penitential days of Lent. (For more on the Lenten season, see Chapter 8.) This was extremely important in the old days when many Catholics refrained from eating any meat or dairy products all 40 days of Lent and also only ate one full meal a day. You can imagine how weak and frail that could make many people. So to ease up on the penance done in Lent, the faithful were dispensed from fasting on special feasts called solemnities, such as St. Joseph on March 19 and the Annunciation on March 25, when the Archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus. Italians and Sicilians take full advantage of St. Joseph's Day being a Solemnity and really whoop it up by eating foods normally given up for Lent, erecting tables with a statue of the saint and asking a priest to bless breads and pastries. The breads are distributed to the poor, and family and friends consume the pastries. A favorite is *Zeppole*, a special cream puff made in honor of St. Joseph or as he is called in Italian, *San Giuseppe*.

✔ **May is a month dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus.** It's also the month of Mother's Day. Catholics traditionally have May Crownings — (see Chapter 14) crowns of roses adorn a statue of Mary, and boys and girls who just made their First Holy Communion wear the same outfits for the occasion. Catholics sing Marian hymns, and in some places, outdoor processions take place; a statue of Mary is carried through the streets.

✔ **June 13 is the Feast of St. Anthony of Padua.** Many local Italian communities celebrate the Feast of St. Anthony of Padua with special Masses and processions. Ironically, Anthony himself wasn't Italian but

Portuguese. Yet he did spend some time in Italy. St. Anthony, an eloquent preacher, came into this world in 1195, when St. Francis of Assisi (October 4), was 13 years old. Although they were contemporaries who both lived in Italy, history didn't leave any records to confirm that these two great saints actually ever met. St. Anthony is the patron saint of lost items and marriages.

What's your preference?

If you went to a Catholic parish on the west side of town for Sunday Mass last week and go to Mass on the other side of town next Sunday, you may notice a difference in the language that the priest says the mass in, or you may notice that a healing service takes place at the end of the Mass. Both services are Catholic, which means that both Masses are sanctioned by the pope in Rome, but each Mass is celebrated a little differently.

The **Latin (Western) Church** follows the ancient traditions of the Christian community in Rome since the time of St. Peter and St. Paul in the first century A.D. As the capital of the Roman Empire, the Latin language and Roman culture, from law to architecture, greatly influenced the Catholic Church in this region. It spread all over to embrace present-day Western Europe and Poland. Most of the parishes and dioceses in the United States and Canada and almost all the churches in Central and South America belong to the Latin Church. Even though the Mass and other sacraments are no longer exclusively said in the Latin language, the same gestures, prayers, vestments, and so on are used in all the churches of the West. The Mass after the Second Vatican Council is called the *Novus Ordo* (new order) Mass and is usually celebrated in the vernacular (common tongue), or it may still be said in Latin.

The **Eastern Catholic Church** is in full union with the Vatican and includes the Byzantine Church and other Eastern Orthodox Churches that were restored under the authority of the Bishop of Rome in the 17th century. The seven sacraments

are valid, but the Eastern Mass is exactly like the Greek or Russian Eastern Orthodox Churches — the Churches of the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Moscow, respectively, which separated from the authority of Rome in the Schism of 1054 and follow the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. Eastern Catholics make up the other lung of the church, along with the Latin (Western) Roman Catholics, which most people in the United States and Western Europe are familiar with.

The **Tridentine Mass** is said only in the Latin language. Often attended by those Catholics who have a great love for the so-called *old* Mass, the Tridentine Mass was the only Mass used in Catholic parishes from the Council of Trent (16th century) to 1963. To celebrate the Tridentine Mass, the priest uses the Roman Missal of 1962, which contains all the necessary and essential prayers, Scripture readings and liturgical directions. The priest also celebrates the Tridentine Mass facing the altar. In 1988, Pope John Paul II granted permission for priests to celebrate the Tridentine Mass again in an encyclical called *Ecclesia Dei*.

Charismatic Masses aren't a separate type of Mass; rather, they are *Novus Ordo* Masses celebrated in the charismatic manner. *Charismatic* means sharing in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as healing or speaking in tongues. Folks who are unfamiliar with the Catholic Charismatic Movement often mistake Charismatic Masses for Pentecostal services. Similar to Pentecostal Protestants, Charismatic Renewal Catholics are devoted to the Holy Spirit and to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

18 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

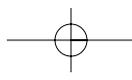
- ✓ **October 1 is the Feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897), also known as the Little Flower.** Roses are traditionally blessed and given to the sick, infirm, elderly, and other special-needs parishioners on this date. This tradition is undoubtedly the result of the saint's promise, made while she was on earth, to spend her heaven sending "a shower of roses" to the faithful still on earth. (See Chapter 18 for more on St. Thérèse.)
- ✓ **December 12 is the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.** Catholics, especially those of Hispanic heritage, celebrate this feast about two weeks before Christmas every year. In Mexico City, the Basilica of Guadalupe stands on Tepeyac Hill, the site where a dark-skinned Virgin Mary appeared to St. Juan Diego, a poor Indian peasant, nearly 500 years ago. The Virgin of Guadalupe left her image on Juan Diego's cloak. Today, a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe decorates just about everything Hispanic, from storefronts to T-shirts and from cars to shrines; many Hispanics identify with and devote themselves to her. (To read more about this basilica, see Chapter 19.)

Understanding the Four Marks of the Church

Nearly 2,000 years, 265 popes, and more than 1 billion members in the Catholic Church means something is working to keep the thing going. One of the primary cornerstones of the Church is the *Four Marks of the Church*. The belief professed in the *Nicene Creed* (see Chapter 3), which is said at every Sunday Mass, expresses the Four Marks of the Church. The Creed professes belief "in one holy catholic and apostolic Church." The *Creed* is a summary of all the essential points of Christian doctrine formulated by Sacred Tradition (see Chapter 3), which the Church believes is part of the unwritten word of God.

One (unity)

The first characteristic of the Catholic Church is her unity. The office and person of the pope means that the Church has one supreme head. One *deposit of faith* means one set of doctrines for the entire Church now presented in the universal catechism. Catholics on all continents everywhere in the world believe the same articles of faith. One set of laws, known as *canon law* (see Chapter 9), governs the entire Church. The Code of Canon Law for the Western (Latin) Church is different from the Eastern (Byzantine) Church, yet both come from one and same source, the pope, the supreme lawgiver. Both sets of canon law overlap each other in the most significant areas, so continuity is kept. But whether you're Roman Catholic or Eastern Catholic, you're under



the authority of one supreme court, one supreme legislator, and one supreme judge, the Roman pontiff, alias the pope. One set of Catholic rites, the *seven sacraments*, marking the seven stages of major development, and they're celebrated the same way everywhere. Worship services may be in different languages, but only bread and wine are used at every Mass; no one may substitute anything else, no matter what the culture is in that location.

This unity of liturgy, doctrine, and authority is a hallmark of Catholicism. Other religions are unified in belief and practice, but Catholicism is unique in that unity is personified in one single person, the pope, who ensures that the same seven sacraments are celebrated correctly all over the world, that the same set of doctrines are taught everywhere and that every member, religious, lay or clergy, accept the supreme authority of the bishop of Rome.

The Eastern Orthodox Church, for example, has the exact same seven sacraments all over the world and a body of laws to govern them, but the patriarch who governs their churches — the patriarch of Constantinople for the Greek Orthodox Church and the patriarch of Moscow for the Russian Orthodox Church — is on equal par with the other Eastern Orthodox patriarchs in Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch. They have *Synods*, gatherings of bishops, but no one single person is supreme head of all Orthodox Christians all over the world. Preferential respect and honor is given the patriarch of Constantinople, because he predated the patriarchate of Moscow, yet the former can't interfere with the authority or ministry of the latter.

Before the Schism of 1054, the other patriarchs viewed the pope as the patriarch of the West; he was given the title *Primus inter Pares*, which is Latin for *first among equals*. Since the Schism, however, the Eastern Orthodox Church no longer recognizes the supreme authority of the pope, and each church is governed by its own spiritual leader (patriarch). Catholicism on the other hand, both the Western and Eastern branches, has one set of doctrines, one means of public worship, and one and the same supreme authority — the pope. Even though the seven sacraments are celebrated a little differently depending on whether you're in a Western or Eastern Catholic church, it's still the same seven sacraments.

Holy (sanctity)

The second characteristic of the Catholic Church is her holiness. Not all members, leaders included, are *de facto* holy. The scandals that riddle Catholic history prove that painfully enough. But the Church as a whole is holy, because she's considered the bride of Christ, and also, the Mystical Body of Christ. (For more on the Mystical Body of Christ, see Chapter 14.) Individually, members are capable of sinning, but as something founded by Christ himself to save souls, the Church as a whole can't sin. Her sanctity is expressed in her daily prayer.

20 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

All over the world, priests, deacons, sisters, brothers, seminarians, and laity pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*, otherwise known as the *Divine Office* or the *Breviary*. Mostly made up of the Psalms and including many other readings from the Bible, this ancient collection and manner of praying goes back to the early and ancient church.

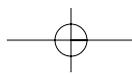
The holiness of the Church is also experienced in the daily celebration of Mass. Somewhere in the world every hour on the hour a Mass is being celebrated. The Church is also the guardian of the sacraments so that they're properly, validly, and reverently celebrated all over the world and all the time. As vehicles of grace, the sacraments sanctify Catholics every time they're received.

Often, someone will name a corrupt pope, bishop, or priest from history or more recent vintage as an argument against the holiness of the Church. Just as you see individual examples of a bad husband or a bad wife here and there, the institution of marriage isn't bad just because some married people can't fulfill their vows and maintain a permanent, faithful, fruitful, and loving relationship. Likewise, you've heard of abusive fathers or mothers who abandon their children, yet the institution of family isn't tainted or tarnished by the minority who don't live up to the family values and commitments they ought. So, why should the Church be any different? As a whole, the Church, unlike a government, which is the creation of mere mortals, is like a family — the family of God. God is its founder, and as such, its core and structure are perfect, but individual Catholics are where the imperfections, flaws, faults and mistakes happen. Catholicism sees the Church as a divine institution that has had some sinful Catholics in its ranks, beginning with the pope in Rome to the layperson in the pew. Yet, it's more than the mere sum of its parts. The Church includes all the living baptized on earth and all the saints in heaven and all the departed souls in purgatory as well.

Catholic (universality)

The third characteristic is the *catholic* (universal) nature of the Church. Not limited to any nation, country, or culture, the Catholic Church maintains unity within diversity. Every spoken language on earth is used in some way, either in the translation of Scripture or in the Mass and sacraments. Although the head of the Church is also the bishop of Rome, it's not just an Italian church. A Polish pope proves that. His numerous pastoral visits all over the world remind people that it's a universal faith that transcends all boundaries. The fact that the Catholic Church incorporates both East and West (Byzantine and Latin traditions) is another example of universality.

On all the continents of the world, at least one priest celebrates Mass, teaches Catholic doctrine, and honors the authority of the pope. Spanning time and space, Catholicism seeks to spread the Gospel through missionary work. Whether it was Matteo Ricci bringing the Catholic faith to China in the 16th



century, St. Peter in Rome during the first century, or Pope John Paul II visiting Africa, Asia, North and South America, and Europe in the 21st century, the point is that the Church belongs in all places all over the earth, and that's truly universal.

Watch the next Mass on television from the Vatican at Christmas or Easter, and see how many cultures and peoples are represented just among the cardinals and bishops who work in the Vatican, as well as all the pilgrims and visitors who come to Rome every day.

Apostolic (continuity)

The final characteristic is one of connection with the past, particularly the ability to trace origins back to the original *apostles*, the 12 men personally chosen by Jesus in addition to and separate from the *72 disciples*, who also followed him, but from a distance. The word *apostle* comes from the Greek *apostello*, which means *to send forth* or *to dispatch*, and the word *disciple* comes from the Latin *discipulus* meaning *student*.

Jesus founded the Church on the apostles, and the need to maintain roots is more than mere nostalgia. Every ordained deacon, priest, or bishop can trace his orders back, ultimately, to one of the 12 apostles. That's how vital and crucial the link remains. Credibility and authority can be traced back to the original fishermen handpicked by Jesus to lead his Church. *Apostolic* means that the Church has distinct ties, roots, and connections to the original 12 apostles Jesus chose to begin his Church: Simon Peter, his brother Andrew, James and John, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew or Nathaniel, Matthew, James the Less or the Younger, Simon the Zealot and Jude Thaddeus, and of course, the infamous Judas Iscariot who turned traitor. (For more on deacons, priests, bishops, and the hierarchy of the Church, see Chapter 2.)

Membership Has Its Privileges

Belonging to a parish and diocese isn't really optional in the Catholic Church. Not belonging is, well, not beneficial. Catholicism tries to balance the individual with the community. Communal public worship has its time and place, such as every Sunday at Mass; quiet solitude, such as private meditation, mental prayer, silent retreats, holy hours, and such, also have their time and place.

Catholics don't have a choice when it comes to worshipping both communally and personally. Catholics believe that human beings need both dimensions. This is why the cross is such a powerful symbol to Catholics: The vertical bar represents their personal relationship with the Lord, which only

22 Part I: Getting Familiar with the Basics

they can cultivate. The horizontal bar represents their obligation and duty to also belong to the faith family of the parish and diocese. When Catholics are registered in a parish, they get more than weekly envelopes to drop in the basket. They also get a spiritual family that wants to pray with and for them. When Catholics are asked to be a godfather or godmother for Baptism or a sponsor for Confirmation, only registered Catholics can get verification from the pastor that they're Catholics in good standing. When they're in the hospital for an appendectomy or any type of surgery or treatment, registered parishioners are often listed on the census as being Catholic. And who do you suppose the Catholic chaplain visits? Unregistered Catholics slip between the cracks, getting lost unintentionally.

Ever notice remarks in the newspaper and media that so-and-so is a "former" or a "fallen away" Catholic? You almost never read of former or fallen away Muslims, Jews, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, or Lutherans. They exist — just ask their pastors. The media, however, is always fascinated by *ex-Catholics*. The mystery and mystique are still a part of Catholicism even though the Mass isn't necessarily in Latin anymore. Celibacy, the male priesthood, vestments and incense, Mary and the saints, the Pope, nuns, and all other practices and paraphernalia that are uniquely Catholic always capture the curiosity of non-Catholics.

Not everyone agrees with what the Catholic Church teaches or likes how she prays or approves of all her policies, but like all well-established and ancient religions, she's here to stay. (And, yep, just as Harley Davidson owners call their motorcycles *her* and as sailors call their ships *her*, Catholics call their Church *her*, too.)