

Handbook For Today's Catholic Teen



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introduction

You're a Catholic teen. That means the rest of us in the Church need you, even if you don't always feel that way—and that's not a superficial, “let's make the author look cool” statement. Except for those who joined the Church as adults, every adult Catholic was a Catholic teen.

But this is not about “keeping young people Catholic” just so our membership is numerous enough that we look good in front of the world. This is about truth and reality. It's about where we find meaning and where we're headed. It's about understanding the spiritual dimension of life—things beyond pizza and sports and dating and finding a career. Nothing is wrong with any of those things. In fact, they can be positively filled with God. But, by themselves, they're not what life is all about.

Being Catholic means...what? How would you answer that? If *Catholic* is just a label we stick on ourselves because we were “born Catholic,” but it doesn't affect or direct our lives in any particular way, then it's pretty meaningless. We may as well say, “I'm Whatever,” instead of, “I'm Catholic.”

It's about understanding the spiritual dimension of life—things beyond pizza and sports and dating and finding a career.



Why are we called Catholic?

Catholic comes from a Greek word, *kaqolikos*, which means *universal*. It was used to describe the Church as early as the first century, although at that time there were no other Christian churches or denominations. Christians were simply followers of the Christ. Everyone who believed in Jesus Christ's teachings was a Christian. It meant that the faith was intended for all people of all time everywhere. The first split in the Christian faith came in the year 1054. Christians in the east (basically the area we call the Middle East today) separated from Christians in the west (basically Europe). In the sixteenth century, splits formed in the Western (Roman Catholic) Church. From these came the many churches which today are called *Protestant* (based on the word *protest*). *Protestant* is a very general word. Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and many others are all Protestants.

Can religion be boring? Well, can pizza ever get stale?

This book won't try to argue you into "staying Catholic," and it won't try to persuade you to become a religious nut who has decided to get holy at the expense of enjoying life. (That's not a true Catholic Christian lifestyle anyway, by the way.)

It will present the very basics of the Catholic faith. They're good to know for a number of reasons.

A friend may ask you, "Do Catholics really believe...?" or, "Why do Catholics...?" or, "Is there really any difference between the Catholic faith and other Christian faiths?" What will you say? "Uh...I dunno" is not a cool answer.

Another reason is that *you* may have some of these questions yourself. Why not get an answer?

This book contains four sections. They're not all the same length. The first explains "doctrine," which is simply an official word for what Catholics believe about God and how we relate to God. The second explains Catholic practices. (Why Catholics sometimes use holy water, for example.) The third talks about prayer and presents some basic Catholic prayers, sometimes with a small explanation or comment. The fourth talks about moral issues, meaning how we behave—what's right and what's wrong and why.

We'll try hard not to be boring.

Can religion be boring? Well, can pizza ever get stale? But it doesn't have to be. Millions of Catholic teens find it interesting and sometimes exciting. Maybe you will too, or maybe you already do.

But for that to happen, you have to understand at least something of what it's all about.

And that's what this book is all about.

Section One

doctrine

what do we believe?

1 if God exists, then what?

You've never seen Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster. Chances are you're not sure if they exist or not; some people say yes, others say no. Chances also are, you don't much care one way or the other. You've never been to Mount Everest either, yet you're certain that it does exist. In both cases, your attitude is probably something like, "If Bigfoot comes knocking on my door, or if I somehow get transported to Mount Everest, I'll deal with it then. In the meantime, so what? I have things to do."

For some people, God is like that. They think, "Maybe God exists, maybe not," or, "Sure, I believe there's a God." But their attitude in either case is something like, "It doesn't matter all that much, at least not right now. If I ever feel the need to sort it out, I'll do it then." You might call this putting God on hold. It's especially easy to do this when your life seems like an almost endless stretch of future, although some people are still putting God on hold at sixty and seventy.

But if God matters at all, then God matters all the time, not just when you're really old and finally ready to start thinking about God. If God matters at all, then God matters when you're a little kid, a teen, a young adult, a middle-aged adult, and a senior citizen. If God has created us, given us every good thing we have,

and invited us into a relationship, then it doesn't make sense to largely ignore that relationship.

As with every relationship, that means we have to *know* something about the other person. There are two ways of gaining knowledge about anything. One is to try to arrive at answers on our own. The second is to tap into the experience of other people.

If God Did *Not* Exist?

"You don't really appreciate something until you lose it," a common saying goes. Fantasize for a moment that it has been undeniably proven God does not exist. How would life change? How would your life change? Some people immediately cite two things: They wouldn't need to go to church, and they wouldn't have to keep any rules. The first is certainly true (for some folks, that would free up as much as 2-3 hours per year!), but not the second. It's not likely that society, even without God, would suddenly erase everything on the law books. (And would you want that?)

How would your attitude, feelings, and actions change in these situations: You're at the funeral of someone you love...and there is no God—therefore, no afterlife, no heaven. How do you feel? A parent or other loved one is about to undergo serious surgery for a life-threatening condition. Doctors say there's a 50-50 chance of recovery...and there is no God. Whom do you talk to inside your mind and heart? You see a tornado a hundred yards away heading toward you. What do you cry out: "Dear Laws of Physics and Meteorology, please help me?" You're now ninety-one years old. You probably have some time left, but certainly not decades...and there is no God. How do you feel about your future?



2 what can we know about God on our own?

Some people say almost nothing, while others say quite a bit. Try it yourself; it's not easy. You'll have to put aside everything you've ever heard about God and pretend you never heard it. Just from looking around you and examining your own experience, what can you reasonably conclude about God?

You may arrive at some version of what people came up with a long time ago. They observed the movement of the sun and the moon, watched the rain fall, saw the vast expanse of the ocean with its thundering waves, and concluded: "That's big—and *we're* not making it happen. There must be somebody bigger and more powerful than us making it happen." That's a logical and intelligent conclusion.

Few people, however, arrived at the idea of *one* God. They assumed that a different bigger-than-us person or god was responsible for or in charge of each phenomenon of nature, and each aspect of life (love, war, etc.). This reasoning produced the gods we read about in mythology. With no other source of information available, this reasoning was not silly.

People also concluded, quite sensibly, that they needed to have a relationship with these powerful gods. They drew on their experience with very powerful (and very imperfect) earthly people. The gods, they figured, must be like that, only a lot more so. Consequently, they often envisioned gods who threw their power around and who needed to be won over, paid off, and bribed with anything from

You'll have to put aside everything you've ever heard about God and pretend you never heard it. ★

incense to human sacrifice. They visualized gods who were sometimes in a good mood and sometimes in a dangerously nasty one, and who sometimes fought with one another.

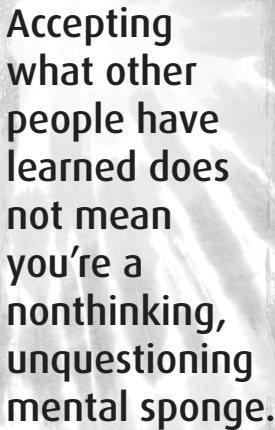
The concept of one God who deeply loves and cares about every human being and who has promised us eternal life and happiness is hard to come up with just from looking at the forces of nature or from studying the often-violent course of human

history. If your concept of God is like the above description, it's almost certain that you have been guided toward it by the experience of other people.

This doesn't mean you don't have a mind of your own. It simply means that you have accepted much or all of what you have learned from others, thought about it, and made it your own. Accepting what other people have learned does not mean you're a nonthinking, unquestioning mental sponge. We

human beings build on the experience and discoveries of others in every arena of life from cooking to football, from mechanics and medicine, to astrophysics and rocket science. It's how life works.

The question now is, how did those who came before us get this knowledge of God that neither they nor we can figure out all on our own? And exactly what does it consist of? That brings up two key words: **doctrine** and **revelation**.



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3 what is doctrine?

The word *doctrine* literally means *teaching*—things presented as true by a community based on those beliefs. The doctrine taught by the Catholic Church is contained in a book entitled *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Any particular individual truth (for example, that Jesus was truly God and truly human) is called a **dogma**. Not everything in the *Catechism* is equally central to the Catholic faith. The teaching about the person of Jesus is far more fundamental than the teaching about the acceptability of cremation, for example.

Catholics believe that the Church has been given the mission of handing on what is true about God and how we should respond to God. Here we have to realize that *what* is taught is not the same as the personality and/or actions of people who teach it. This is true in any area. For example, a health teacher may teach the truth about healthy living but still have an irritating personality and even live an unhealthy lifestyle. That doesn't alter the truth.

4 where do we get doctrine? revelation

Most of what we believe about God and our relationship with God cannot be figured out on our own. Where did we get it? The only way we could have—from God. Put as simply as possible, *God told us* or *revealed* truth to us. That's what the word *revelation* means in the religious sense. God included a few things that we could have arrived at on our own, such as the fact that God is powerful. But most of it would have been hidden if God had not told us.

Catholics believe that God revealed (and continues to explain) truth to us in two ways: through sacred Scripture—the Bible—and through what we call *sacred Tradition*. We'll examine each of those separately very shortly. For now, it's really

important to realize this: each of those involves a *group* or *community*.

The Bible, for example, didn't float down from heaven already printed. Jews recorded their experience of God in what we call the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament over a period of several hundred years. But the Jews had existed as people of God for hundreds of years before any Bible writing.

The Bible didn't float down from heaven already printed.

Early Christians wrote the New Testament based on their experience of the risen Jesus. Much of both the Old and New Testaments was *spoken*, handed down by word of mouth, before it was written. The Bible

recorded and further explained the faith that was active, at least in beginning ways, in both the Jewish and Christian communities.

5 the Bible

Catholics, along with almost all Christians, believe that God inspired the writing of the Bible. It truly is the personal message of God to us, and therefore one of the sources of revelation. But in the Catholic approach to Scripture, inspiration does not mean that God dictated the exact words to the Bible's human authors, and they simply copied them down. God left them free to use the images and language styles of their times. God also did not upgrade their knowledge of science to twenty-first-century levels. God inspired writings of *faith*; what is guaranteed to be true in the Bible is *the religious truth about salvation*—not science or even history the way we write and understand history today.

So when the creation story of Genesis describes the earth as flat, is that true in the sense of factual? Of course not. Did creation take six days as we know them? Not likely. It's the religious truth

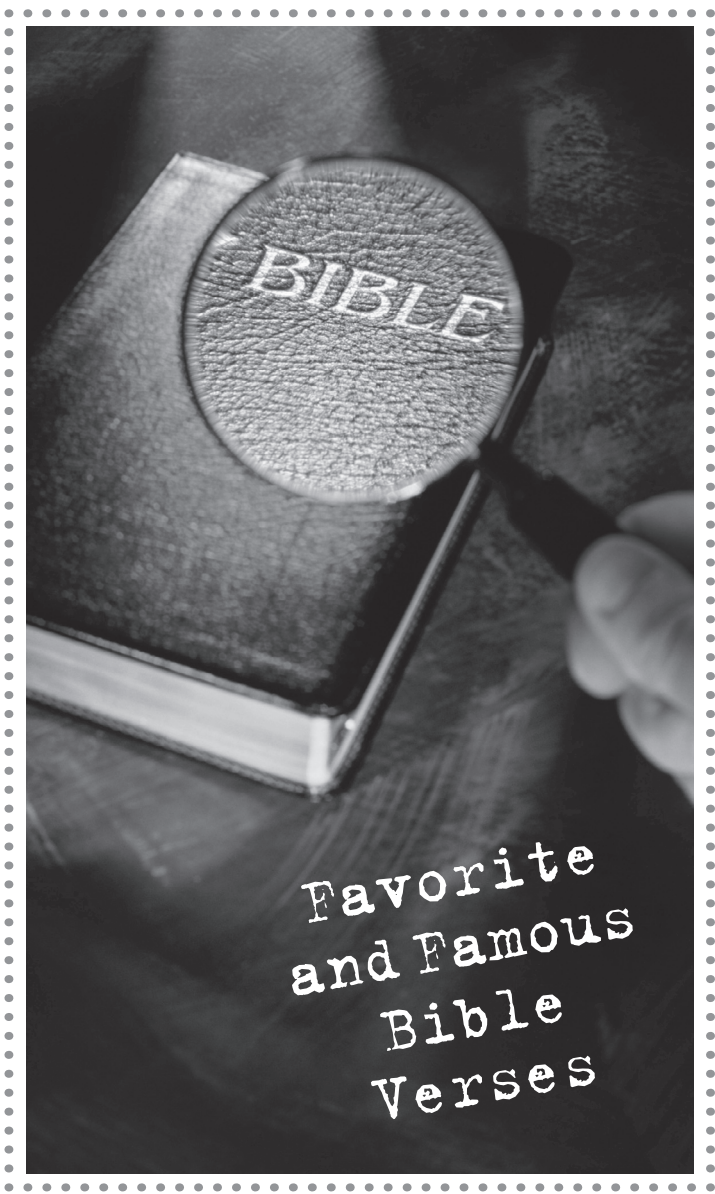
that matters and is guaranteed—namely, that God created the universe—and us—from nothing because God wanted to share life and joy. God left the human authors free to communicate that and every other religious message *in a way that made sense to the people of the time*. This means that sometimes—not for every single verse, but sometimes—we need to learn a little about how those people wrote, thought, and lived.

The Bible is a collection of seventy-three “books,” although most of them are not what we consider “book length” today. Opening the Bible is like walking into a library. You’re surrounded by *many kinds of writing*. A library contains books of history, fiction, essays, poetry, biography, fantasy, letters, collections of advice, and wise sayings. You don’t expect them to be alike, and you don’t approach them the same way. For example, even though there really is a Mississippi River and a place called Missouri, you don’t expect the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to be the same kind of writing as *A History of World War II*. But you know that you can learn something about life from Tom, Huck, and Jim, even though their adventures didn’t actually happen in factual history.

Like a library, the Bible is a collection of many kinds of writing. Some kinds we still have today, such as poetic prayers like the Psalms, and others we don’t, like the kind of writing in the Book of Revelation. Many questions about the Bible can be cleared up if we know what kind of writing we’re dealing with when we read a certain book. Many editions of the Bible offer an introduction to each book; reading the introduction is often helpful.



...what is guaranteed to be true in the Bible is *the religious truth about salvation...*



Favorite
and Famous
Bible
Verses

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

(Psalm 23:1)

This is probably the most famous verse from the Old Testament, and the introduction to the most familiar psalm.

.....

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

(John 3:16a)

This is probably the most famous verse from the New Testament. It has been said that it sums up the entire Bible. You often see “JN 3:16” on banners at sporting events and signs along a highway.

.....

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

(John 14:6)

Jesus said this in answer to Thomas’ question that the apostles did not know the way to the place where Jesus was going.

.....

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

(Matthew 7:12)

The first part of this verse is often called *The Golden Rule*—but many people do not realize that Jesus spoke it!

All of this does not mean most of the Bible is too mysterious for average people to understand. For example, when Colossians 3:9 says, “Don’t lie to one another,” you don’t need a university full of Bible scholars to help you figure out what that means.

6 Tradition

Unlike many Christians (with whom we should not argue unpleasantly on this), Catholics do not believe that every kernel of God's message is necessarily contained in Scripture word for word. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to guide us as a community in understanding God's message. So, we believe that the experience of the Church and official Church teaching is likewise a source of revelation. A good example is the documents that came from the most recent Church council, which we usually call Vatican II. Like all of Tradition, they do not *change* anything in revelation and they don't *add* something brand new to it. They expand on and apply God's message to modern times.

It's somewhat like this. Let's say that an ancestor of yours set down some true principles and wise advice for the family to follow. Years later, and perhaps in very different circumstances than those in which that person lived, your family gets together, thinks anew about what he or she said, and talks about it. As a result, they understand better than ever what it means and how it applies to their particular situations. Tradition works like that, except that we're dealing with much more than some wise advice. We're dealing with God's revealed truth.

7 faith (and questions and doubt)

Even though faith seems to deal with the question, "What do you believe?" there's a step before the "what." That step is "who," and the "who" is God. Faith is not just saying, "Yeah, okay" when you read, hear, or recite the Profession of Faith at Mass. Faith is a response to an invitation from God.

Let's use an example from a very different level. Someone asks you to go out with him or her, or even to marry him or her. When you say yes, you're responding to a *person who wants a*

relationship with you. Do you know everything about the person? Of course not. Do you understand everything he or she does, and can you prove everything he or she says? Not likely. In spite of that, you say, “Yes. I will *be with* you.” Why? Because of who he or she is.

Your response to God and God’s invitation is like that. You’re not responding to a list of statements or even to one or more human beings. You’re responding to God. Along the way, other human beings usually play an introductory role through what they say or write or through the example they give. In fact, that’s the way God usually works. Faith itself is embracing a relationship with God.

A word about faith and mathematics: they’re not the same. They’re not even similar. You can take two pencils from your left hand and two from your right hand, put the pencils together in a pile, count the total, and *prove* that $2+2=4$. If you previously had doubts, you can look at the total and say, “Two plus two really *is* four! *Now* I get it!”

The Man Who Sort of Believed



If you wonder how strong (or how weak) your faith is—or if you *know* your faith is there, but not as strong as it should be—you have company. The Gospel of Mark, 9:14-29, recounts a totally honest response from a man who asked Jesus to cure his son—“*if* you are able to do anything.” Jesus pointedly reminded him of the need for faith. Verse 24 records the man’s gut-honest prayer: “I believe; help my unbelief.” That was a brief way of saying, “I do believe...well, kind of...not as much as I should, I know, but...it’s better than nothing, and I *want* to believe more strongly, but I need your help to do that.” It’s okay to pray a prayer like that if that’s where we are on faith. God prefers honesty over “correct” flowery words that don’t say what’s in our hearts.

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