

Introduction to Catholicism

A Complete Course



Author: Rev. James Socias
Editor-in-Chief: Jeffrey Cole



MIDWEST THEOLOGICAL FORUM

Woodridge, Illinois

INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLICISM

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CALLED TO HOLINESS



The Sermon on the Mount by Fra Angelico. Christ calls each of us to strive for perfection.
 “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5: 48)

Called to Be Perfect

Every Christian, regardless of his or her *state of life*, profession, or particular circumstances, is called to *holiness*, to the fullness of the Christian life, and to the perfection of charity. Jesus Christ himself exhorted us to seek *perfection*, the ultimate goal of our call to holiness: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”²

One might ask: Perfect? Is perfection possible for a human being? The idea of striving to be perfect goes against contemporary cultural norms, which constantly remind us that no one is perfect, perfectionism is unhealthy, we must not burden others by expecting them to be perfect, and we should accept ourselves for who we are.

Perfection is indeed a lofty goal, one that is impossible to achieve in this life. Nevertheless, Christ calls each of us to strive for perfection. In fact, God created us to share in his perfect and divine life, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* declares at its outset:

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heirs of his blessed life. (CCC 1)

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The Rich Young Man Went Away Sorrowful (detail) by Tisot.

To perfect ourselves in holiness means to imitate the example of Christ: to love, to show mercy, and to forgive others just as God loves us, is merciful to us, and forgives us.

In the Gospels, when the rich young man asked how he could attain eternal life, Christ told him to keep the Commandments. When the man persisted in his question, stating that he had obeyed the Commandments all his life, Christ invited him to take the next step: "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."³ The journey toward perfection is one not only of obedience but also of the interior life, and it requires nothing less than becoming a true follower of Christ by committing one's life completely to the service of God and neighbor.

The *Catechism* says this about Christ's invitation to the rich young man to "be perfect":

This reply does not do away with the first: following Jesus Christ involves keeping the Commandments. The Law has not been abolished, but rather man is invited to rediscover it in the person of his Master who is its perfect fulfillment. (CCC 2053)

To perfect ourselves in holiness, then, means to imitate fully the example of Christ.

Holiness, however, requires more than simple mimicry of Christ's attributes, more than mere obedience to the Commandments. It requires a true relationship with God. We are called not only to obey his will but also to know him personally and intimately.

It is impossible to keep the Lord's commandment by imitating the divine model from outside; there has to be a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness and the mercy and the love of our God. Only the Spirit by whom we live can make "ours" the same mind that was in Christ Jesus.⁵ (CCC 2842)

We will not be truly perfected until we enter the gates of Heaven. To become completely perfect, a person must fulfill the ultimate purpose for which he or she was created. Because every human person was created to share in God's divine life and a full sharing in that divine life is possible only in Heaven, our perfection will not be complete until then.

WHAT IS THE *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is an official summary of Church teaching published by the Vatican and promulgated by Pope Bl. John Paul II in 1992. A second, updated edition was published in 1997. The *Catechism* is an invaluable source for

understanding and explaining the doctrines of the Church and is useful both as a reference book and as a study guide. We will refer to it frequently in the course of this textbook, with frequent citations within and at the end of each chapter.

CALLED TO HOLINESS

WHAT WAS THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL?

The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (often called the “Second Vatican Council” or “Vatican II” for short) is the most recent of the twenty-one *Ecumenical Councils* held in the Church’s history. At an Ecumenical Council, which can only be convened by the Pope, the world’s bishops meet to discuss and make formal statements on matters of Church doctrine, practice, or discipline. Each Ecumenical Council takes its name from the city in which it is held, and the Second Vatican Council met in St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City.

At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops issued a number of documents that developed our understanding of the Church and initiated reforms in various areas, including worship. Some of these documents will be referred to in this text, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

WAS THERE A FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL?

Yes there was, back in 1869-1870. It was never officially adjourned, but rather was suspended by Pope Bl. Pius IX after the Italian army seized Rome, then part of the autonomous Papal States. The last Ecumenical Council before that was the Council of Trent (1545-1563).



Opening procession of the Second Vatican Council. About 2,860 of the world’s bishops attended some or all of the Second Vatican Council.

Called to Holiness

Perfection, nevertheless, remains the God-given goal for all those who have been made members of the Church through the waters of *Baptism*. The *Second Vatican Council* (1962-65) emphasized that goal in its document *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) when it reaffirmed what has popularly become known as the *universal call to holiness*:

The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples of every condition...The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God’s gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received. (LG 40)

Quoting from the Second Vatican Council documents, the *Catechism* notes how the Church, though herself holy, is filled with individual persons who are still seeking perfection:

“The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect.”⁶ In her members perfect holiness is something yet to be acquired: “Strengthened by so many