

## What do I *have* to accept to be a Catholic?

**D**ear Father Kerper: As I understand it, the Catholic Church has many beliefs that don't appear in the Apostles' Creed or the Bible. Does a Catholic have to accept these other beliefs in order to be a member of the Church? What is the bare minimum of Catholic belief? How do I know what is required and what is not?

To answer your question, I cite the words spoken by every adult received into the full communion of the Catholic Church: "I believe and profess all that the Catholic Church believes, teaches, and professes as being revealed by God."

This formula, which comes from the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, uses the word "all," not "most." In the case of Catholic faith, minimum and maximum are exactly the same.

To many people, of course, this insistence on "all" appears very unreasonable, even extreme. After all, we live in a "culture of choice," which promotes picking and choosing from a broad range of options. Rarely do we settle for a pre-arranged package, whether in choosing a new car, a college curriculum, or cable TV plan. Why can't we customize our faith?

Let's return to the Church's prescribed

formula. The crucial phrase is this: "*as being revealed by God.*"

Divine revelation — God's own self-disclosure to human beings — is *unitary*, not *fragmented*. In professing our faith, then, we assert belief in God, not primarily in a set of isolated propositions constructed by human beings, some true, some doubtful, some false. And when we profess belief "in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," we affirm that somehow divine revelation flows through the Church in an essentially trustworthy manner. Because all Church teachings have the same source — God — all have credibility. Hence, one cannot accept some and reject others.

This credibility, however, adheres *only* to truths that the Church proposes "*as being revealed by God.*" Not everything that the Church says falls into this category.

Here's an example. The Church teaches that God created all reality. This proposition, which even human reason can affirm as true, comes from God's self-disclosure. But the Church has no definitive teaching about the science of cosmic origins or the nature of the universe. Indeed, during certain historical eras some Church leaders espoused beliefs that were wrong scientifically. The Church now acknowledges that such matters exceeded the boundaries of divine revelation. Hence, faithful Catholics could hold conflicting opinions about such issues.

The Church also acknowledges that the truths of the Catholic faith, though all equally credible, can be ranked in order of importance. To put it another way, some truths are absolutely indispensable, like the oneness of God and the Trinity; others are very important, like the founding of the Church by Jesus Christ; and others are relatively minor, such as belief in guardian angels.

This "hierarchy of truths," however, does not permit Catholics to jettison any established teaching on the grounds that it is unimportant. Not at all. Rather, it recognizes that someone can be a full-fledged Catholic without knowing or

understanding every Church teaching. A seven-year-old girl, for example, is as much a Catholic as I am even though she probably has not heard of the Immaculate Conception, i.e. that Mary herself was born into this world without the stain of Original Sin. She does not reject it; she simply has not learned about it. This is not a matter of “picking and choosing” but of learning the faith step by step, beginning with the most important points and progressing to the others.

Now, let us look at how the Church determines which teachings pertain to divine revelation and which do not. Three criteria matter: antiquity, universality, and harmonious consistency.

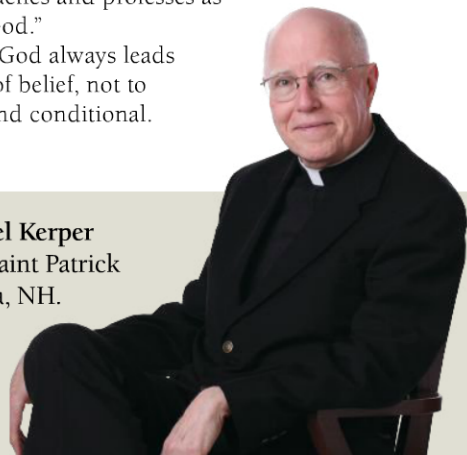
First, essential Catholic teachings are always *old* — or at least related to ancient teachings. Antiquity has much to do with *apostolicity*, which means that the teachings were known, believed, and taught by the Twelve Apostles, who received them from Christ. Here we mean the substance of the teaching, not necessarily the words. For example, belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is ancient; the term “transubstantiation” is much newer.

Second, universality — or catholicity — means that Catholics everywhere and in every time have believed the specific teaching, at least when it became evident. While one may find variations in terminology and degrees of emphasis, the core of the teaching remains the same. This helps explain the old saying, “In the Catholic Church, the dead vote.” In deciding whether a belief is genuine and essential, the Church always asks: What did earlier generations believe?

Third, harmonious consistency means that all essential beliefs are inter-related and supportive of one another because they have one common source: God, who reveals. Though doctrine certainly “unfolds” over time in terms of human comprehension, genuine development of Church teaching never rejects any prior teaching as wrong. However, this pertains to teachings proposed by the Church as revealed by God, not necessarily to the Church’s own application of these teachings, administrative matters, and so forth.

If we truly believe that God has revealed himself definitively in and through the person of Christ, and that Christ has entrusted the proclamation of divine revelation to the Church, then we can confidently — and joyfully — say: “I believe and profess all that the Catholic Church believes, teaches and professes as being revealed by God.”

Absolute trust in God always leads one to the fullness of belief, not to something partial and conditional.



■ **Father Michael Kerper** is the pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in Nashua, NH.

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