

Essential Christianity, And the Place of Catholicism in It

It may be helpful for those who are not familiar with Christianity or with Catholicism that I present a quick overview of the essential aspects of Christianity and of its expression in Catholicism, as I have come to understand both these subjects. So, first I will outline the essentials of Christianity, and then I will present the essentials of the Catholic way of living the Christian faith.

Essential Christianity

1. God is One. There is just one God, one Divinity. The primary characteristic of Divinity, as we understand it, is *existence*. That is, God *is* existence. God is not “a being”; God is “being” itself. Anything which exists, exists because God fills it with the existence which is God’s nature. Everything is filled with Divinity.
2. God is Awareness. The second fundamental characteristic of Divinity is *awareness*. Awareness, like existence, permeates all creation. We know this because we humans are filled with awareness (that is, consciousness). If we were not conscious, we would not know that we exist. But we, and all creation, participate in or share in the Divine Awareness, and so we are able to be conscious of ourselves, the world around us, and the Source of Awareness, that is, Divinity.
3. Therefore, Divinity is Conscious Being. Given this, we recognize that Divinity is the Source of All That Is. God is the Creator. Creation occurs in this way: God creates by willing objects to come into being in his awareness. That is, God chooses to become aware of a given object of creation, and in that moment of awareness, the object comes to exist. Thus, the third fundamental characteristic of God is will. God wills all creation to come into being in the Divine Awareness. In addition, the created objects remain in existence because God wills to continue to hold them in the Divine Awareness. Divinity continuously chooses to hold each creature in existence and is continuously aware of every creature that exists.
4. Divinity creates all this because of the Divine Love which emanates from the fullness of love, which is God, and, since God is love, the Divine Love expresses itself outwardly as the creatures that God creates. Divine Love, then, is the fourth fundamental characteristic of the nature of God. The universe is filled and permeated with Love, and all things tend by their nature toward the peace and freedom which result from living within love.
5. Motivated by Divine Love, God gives existence within the Divine Consciousness to all things. We, and all creation, exist by God’s willing it, within God’s loving heart.
6. Therefore, we do not have to strive to *find* God. We exist *within* God. Our only work, then, as seekers after God is to *recognize* where we are and always have been: within God’s loving heart. When we come to that recognition, we are free to live in the peace and joy of Divine Love.
7. Since it is Divine Love which moves God to create every creature and to hold everything in on-going existence, God has invested all things with a natural tendency toward living in love, with its attendant peace and joy. God intends that all things exhibit the love in which they are created. This is the Divine Plan for Creation: that every creature should live in loving, harmonious union

with God and with all other creatures forever (that is, in the on-going Eternal Present Moment which characterizes Divinity. We call this *eternity*.) The fulfillment of this Plan for Creation we call "Heaven" and "the Kingdom of God."

8. Just as God chooses to bring each creature into existence within God's loving heart, so each of us human beings is also able to choose to accept our place within God or not. We are able to choose to conform ourselves with the Divine Plan for Creation, or on the other hand, to serve ourselves selfishly, ignoring God's plan that we should extend love to others in accord with the Plan for Creation. When we ignore God, we *sin*.
9. God's Plan for Creation—the Divine plan for accomplishing the Kingdom of God, the joy of Heaven—is expressed in the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, in the Book of Exodus (and other places) in the Jewish Scriptures. Essentially, these commandments expect the devotees of God to love God with their whole hearts, as God loves them with his whole heart, and to act toward one another in society in a way that preserves the bond of peace and justice in the community.
10. When seekers after God behave toward God and toward one another in the way that God has given in the Decalogue, they enter the Kingdom of God. That is, they surrender mastery of their lives to God, their King. On the other hand, when people choose to ignore the Decalogue and to serve themselves selfishly, heedless of the needs of others, and denying others the respect and justice that these others deserve, the selfish ones assume mastery of their lives and live in the Kingdom of the Self. In that kingdom, there is no justice for others, and therefore no lasting peace or joy. These people live unhappily in sin. Moreover, they obstruct the fulfillment of the Divine Plan for Creation.
11. At the death of each person, the person is offered life with Jesus. Spontaneously and instantaneously, the person's heart utters the truth of himself, either Yes or No. Those who utter Yes join Jesus in the eternal life of the Kingdom of God. Those who utter No join those others who have also done so, and live eternally within themselves, in the crushing agony of God's love for them, pouring out on them, and they unwilling to return it. The offer is what is called *judgment*. Living in rejection of the offer is called *hell*.
12. The process of creation which takes place when God brings a creature into existence has two aspects. First, God wills that the creature be brought into existence. This is the act of bestowing *being* or *existence* on the creature. Simultaneously, God wills that the creature have its particular form, shape, characteristics, composition, and so on. This is the act of bestowing *form* on the creature.
13. The creature's existence derives directly from the nature of God, who is being in itself. However, the creature's form is unique to the creature and is different from God's form. For example, the creature's form may be in part material, while God is pure spirit. Therefore, the creature's form arises from God but is different from God. To describe this process, we use a metaphor. We say that God creates "by a word." That is, the compositional plan for the creature (the creature's form) arises in God's awareness in a way similar to the way words arise in our human minds. In us, words arise to express our individual thoughts. Therefore, they are *of us*; they are the expressions of our personal ideas and no one else's. At the same time, these words have a separate identity from us. For example, once we speak or write them, they assume a life of their own, and they enter the world as independently existing beings.

14. On that analogy, then, we say that the *Word of God* arises within God but is distinct in some way from God. This Word of God *is* the compositional plan for the creature which God brings into being. Moreover, this Word of God is the destiny of that creature in the Divine Plan for Creation, namely, to join in loving, harmonious union with God and with all other creatures in eternity. That is, this Word of God is the “hard-wired” tendency of each creature toward fulfilling the Divine Plan for Creation.
15. The Source of All Things, the Creator who brings everything into existence, we Christians call the **Father**. The Word of God which arises from God, shares the Divine Nature, but is distinct from the Father, is called the **Son**. The Father (the power of creation) and the Son (the plan for each creature and for all creation) are two distinct expressions or manifestations or *persons* of the One God. The Father and the Son share the one Divine nature (about which we humans know very little—basically just what is written here). Nonetheless, although each *person* of these two is wholly and fully Divine, each is a distinctive expression or characterization of the Divine nature. Since they are each Divine but are each distinct from the other, they can be—and are—in relationship with one another. They can—and do—know each other and love each other.
16. The Divine Love which arises within the heart of God and is the source of the comfort and peace and beauty of creation we call the **Holy Spirit** of God. The Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, shares in the Divine nature—the Holy Spirit *is* God—and is also a distinct expression of the Divine nature—a separate *person* of God. The Holy Spirit of Divine Love is truly the moving force in the universe which propels all creatures toward fulfillment of the Divine Plan for Creation. But primarily, the Holy Spirit of Divine Love *is* the love which the Father and the Son share with one another.
17. So, the One God comprises three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We say then that God is the *Triune God*. The word *triune* derives from two Latin words: *tri-*, meaning “three,” and *unus*, meaning “one.” To Christians, Divinity is “three in one.”
18. Despite the implantation of the tendency toward peace and love in the heart of each person, every person rejects or disregards that propelling force toward good in his or her heart at one time or another, and chooses selfishness, chooses to sin. And despite the gift of the Decalogue given to the descendants of Abraham, the gift of the direct expression of the Divine Plan for Creation, the Jews—like all of us—continued to choose to sin, both in ancient times and to this day.
19. And so, in order to advance the Divine Plan for Creation in spite of human sin, God created *himself* as a human being. The Son, the Word of God, “enfleshed” himself and entered time and space during the reign of Caesar Augustus as a human being—**Jesus of Nazareth**, a Jew born into Roman-occupied Palestine, then called Judea. Jesus was—and continues to be—a unique being: in Jesus, a complete human nature (“He was a man just like us in every way but sin”) is joined inseparably and forever with the complete Divine nature. Jesus was and is permanently the God-man, completely human, and completely Divine.
20. Jesus became a human being for three reasons. First, he wanted to make manifest the love which God has for all creation, and particularly, for every individual human being. He demonstrated this Divine Love in several ways. He worked acts of control over the nature of things which were beyond ordinary human ability. His followers testify to his works of power in the written documents which narrate the lived experience of Jesus’ disciples. They give witness that he healed many sick people, including restoring sight to people born blind, curing leprosy, and healing very

sick people at a distance. He restored dead people to life on at least three occasions. He fed the several thousand people in his audience to satisfaction by “multiplying” a few loaves of bread and a few dried fish. The written record says that he did this on two different occasions. He calmed a storm at sea simply by commanding the storm to cease. And the witnesses testify that he walked a distance of several miles on foot on the water of the (stormy) Sea of Galilee.

21. However, Jesus’ most significant demonstration of the love of God for human beings is that he restrained this power which he had demonstrated so often and allowed himself to be arrested for subversion against the political powers. Those powers condemned and executed Jesus in the typical Roman manner of the time, by crucifixion. That Jesus was thoroughly dead after his ordeal on the cross is attested in several accounts. -- This death is interpreted by the ancient witnesses as the fulfillment of the Divine institution of blood sacrifice to God for God’s forgiveness of human sin. In other words, God sacrificed himself as the price for the forgiveness of all sin, every sin committed by every human being in history, from beginning to end. God himself paid the ransom price to free all human beings from their sins. Because of the death of Jesus, all human sin is forgiven, as far as God is concerned. No grudges, no further penalties or punishment. Therefore, for any individual person to enter this state of Divine forgiveness, it is necessary to do nothing other than to humble oneself before the loving God and accept the forgiveness that he has always offered us.
22. Jesus died on a Friday—he was certified to be dead by a Roman centurion (= military captain) to the Roman governor—and was buried on the same day. On the following Sunday, Jesus appeared to several individual disciples and to several gatherings of disciples. In each appearance, Jesus showed himself to be alive in human flesh, and proved this in several ways, such as by eating food and retaining it within his body. The witnesses proclaimed that Jesus had “risen from the dead” under his own Divine power. He remained with his disciples in this resurrected state of life for an extended period of some months. During this time, he taught them that God loves all humans to such an extent that this resurrected state (the “eternal life” which is free from suffering and death) is the destiny of all human beings who surrender themselves to God and participate in the Kingdom of God. After this period of teaching, Jesus rose bodily into the sky and disappeared. Christians await the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to return again in heavenly glory to gather to himself all who seek God in loving surrender, completing the Divine Plan for Creation.
23. Jesus’ death and resurrection is held to be the ultimate expression of God’s love for us human beings. Jesus gave himself up to death for the forgiveness of the sins of each of us, and then he conquered death forever by rising from death into eternal life. He promised this same eternal life to all of us who will join him humbly in it.
24. Jesus’ second purpose for becoming a human being was to teach us as seekers after God how to find God and surrender ourselves to his leadership of our lives. Jesus condensed the Jewish law, including the Decalogue, into a single word: love. In the Christian understanding, this word does not mean romantic love, nor the love of friends for each other, nor the preference of one food over another, nor even the committed relationship of spouses. In Jesus’ meaning, the word *love* means the willingness to sacrifice yourself completely, even to death, for the well-being or the good of another person. This is what is called *agape* love (*ah-gah-PAY*). Jesus demonstrated *agape* love by his sacrificial death on a cross. *Agape* love, then, is “self-sacrificing love.”
25. This self-sacrificing love is at the core of Jesus’ teachings. It involves mercy, forgiveness, compassion, humility, gratitude, and free-giving (charity). With this type of love as the

foundation, Jesus condensed the law of God into two precepts: love God with your whole heart, and love others as you love yourself. This means that I completely surrender myself to the authority of God in my life, and that I exercise self-sacrificing love with the people around me, including the most repulsive and dislikable. When these two precepts are universally realized, the Divine Plan for Creation will be fulfilled.

26. Jesus' third reason for becoming a human being was to establish a **community** of his followers who would live out these two precepts of love, both for their own benefit and as a demonstration to the people around them of the power of mutual love, with its attendant peace and joy. This is the community that became known as the Christian community. The members of the Christian community knew that Jesus, although he had risen into the presence of the Father, was always with them because he had promised that he would remain with them. The members of the community also knew that they were living out the fulfillment of the Divine Plan for Creation. They were living lives of devotion to God and of self-sacrificing love and charitable acts toward the others in their community and toward people beyond the community. The outcome of this Christian way of life is joy and peace. The heart is at rest, in comfort with God; and life among the community members is lived in peaceful joy as each member looks out to satisfy, as fully as he can, the just needs of each of the other members.

The Essence of Catholicism

27. The Roman Catholic Church (familiarily called "The Church" for centuries) recognizes itself to be one of the two communities which developed directly from the ancient Christian community established by Jesus. (The other community is the group of Eastern Orthodox churches.) The Church asserts that in its spiritual practice, it preserves the authentic and unadulterated teachings of Jesus, and that it is the most complete existing manifestation of the ideal Christian community depicted in the early writings (particularly, the Acts of the Apostles).
 1. The ideal Christian community lives out the two precepts of love given to it by Jesus (love God; love one another). It does so not only in the day-to-day interactions of its members, but particularly, in its worship practices. The Church remembers that on the night before Jesus died, he had supper with his closest disciples. They shared the love of brothers for one another; they grieved Jesus' impending death; and they received from Jesus the gift of the "breaking of the bread." At that supper, Jesus offered them bread, saying, "Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body." And he took a cup of wine and said, "Take this cup and drink from it. This is the cup of my blood, which will be shed for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins." -- The Church sees in this sacred meal the loving union of the faithful, in the context of which Jesus gave his followers his own flesh and blood to eat and drink. After he gave it to them, the bread was no longer bread; it was the body of Jesus, soon to be offered on the cross. The wine was no longer wine; it was the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross to win the forgiveness of all sin. The faithful ate this sacred meal in thanksgiving to God for the loving sacrifice which Jesus made the next day on the cross on Calvary Hill.
 2. In this sacred meal, the Church sees the supreme embodiment of Jesus' two precepts of love. The followers of Jesus were gathered as a community of love; that is, they "loved one another." In the context of this brotherly love, Jesus gave them his body and blood, which they consumed in thanksgiving to God for his forgiveness of sin and for his loving action of living among them as

Jesus, their teacher and their way to eternal life. In this gratitude-filled worship, they lived out the precept to “love God with all your hearts.”

3. The celebration of this sacred meal continues in the Church as its fundamental expression of worship and as the source of spiritual sustenance and growth for the followers of Jesus. This celebration is known now as “the Mass,” or more properly, the “celebration of the Eucharist.” (The term *Eucharist* derives from the Greek word meaning “giving thanks.”)
4. The Church recognizes that the Eucharist is the single most powerful spiritual gift that Jesus gave to it. The Eucharist is truly and completely the Body and Blood of Jesus. Through it, God pours out on his devotees the sustaining power (the *grace*) to live out the two precepts of Jesus. So, this sacred gift of Jesus, looking like ordinary bread and wine, but in truth the living reality of Jesus, is not only a *sign* of God’s loving mercy toward us all, but it is also an *effective source* of that power to live lives of holiness. This sacred action which effectively does what it signifies—that is, this *symbolic* meal which actually *is* spiritual nourishment to those who consume it—the Church calls a *sacrament*. Sacraments are actual sources of God’s grace for those who partake of the sacraments.
5. The Church holds that Jesus, always present in the ancient Church as he is in today’s, gave the Church seven sacraments, that is, seven effective sources of God’s grace. These are: **baptism**—the rite of entry into the Christian community; **Eucharist**—the sustaining sacred meal of the real presence of Jesus; **confirmation**—the conclusion of the baptismal rite of entry, in which the mature Catholic accepts the responsibility to live out Jesus’ two precepts of love; **reconciliation**—the confession of one’s sins in repentance, and the formal forgiveness of those sins by God, in whose person a priest acts and speaks; **marriage**; **Holy Orders**—the rite of dedicating a person to the service of God and of the Church, as a deacon, a priest, or a bishop; **anointing of the sick**—an ancient rite which symbolizes and brings about the spiritual, and often the physical, healing of a sick or dying person.
6. The Church sees itself as the community of the followers of Jesus, who celebrate the sacraments which Jesus bestowed on the community, and who thereby live out the precepts of love which Jesus taught them. This community recognizes the on-going presence of Jesus in its midst—Jesus as the leader and head of the community, as the ultimate source of the grace which the members of the community receive and share, and as the teacher of the way to God in the eternal life. It sees itself, then, as a living organism, enlivened by the spiritual presence of Jesus. This community of the followers of Jesus, who lead the spiritual way of life which Jesus taught, is called the *Mystical Body of Christ*. The community is the embodiment of Jesus in the world at this moment. In its spiritual practice, this community is the direct descendant of that group of faithful followers who ate the sacred meal with Jesus on the night before he sacrificed himself for them.
7. The local Catholic communities—the local gatherings of the Mystical Body of Christ—are led by their bishops. The Church holds that Jesus appointed the twelve men he chose as his closest disciples to be the leaders of the community he founded, with Peter as its foundation (the “rock” on which the Church is built). These twelve men Jesus sent out as missionaries (“Apostles”) to the nations of the world, to bring to them the presence of Jesus in the Christian community dedicated to sacrificial love. These Apostles (and the bishops, or “overseers,” who succeeded them when they died) were empowered to teach the authentic teachings of Jesus and to lead the Christian community, as its branches grew up in the various nations, on the authentic way to God which Jesus taught the community. And so, still today, the bishops of the world hold that by the grace of God’s Holy Spirit, they collectively, under the leadership of the successor of the Apostle Peter,

that is, the current Bishop of Rome, the Pope, possess and teach the authentic teachings of Jesus in the areas of faith and of morality.

8. The bishops collectively in council, and particularly the Pope, issue from time to time teaching letters (or *encyclicals*). These documents are intended to define and clarify the authentic faith-teachings of Jesus. In addition, these documents apply the Christian principles of respect for the dignity of all persons, of justice, and of the priority of contributing to the common good, to the moral issues and problems which arise in daily life. Over the course of the last century and a half, the bishops have developed an extensive body of these teachings on Social Justice. These teachings are based on the application of “natural law” philosophy to the teachings of Jesus, and are held to be definitive declarations of Christian faith and morals.

The Institutional Church

9. We have been outlining the spiritual practice of the Catholic Church, the life of the Mystical Body of Christ. In this spiritual practice, the Mystical Body is pure and filled with the saving grace of Jesus. And it is directed single-mindedly to bringing about the fulfillment of the Divine Plan for Creation by living out Jesus’ two precepts of love.
10. This Mystical Body, however, is a spiritual entity, which is housed in, or manifested as, a worldly entity, a material entity existing in time and space. This temporal manifestation of the Mystical Body of Christ is the religious institution known as the Roman Catholic Church. The institutional Church is headquartered in the Vatican State, located in the city of Rome.
11. The Christian community has always had this dual expression of its existence. It is, on the one hand, a spiritual way of life, by which the members of the community discipline themselves to share *agape* love, and to practice Jesus’ way to eternal life. But this spiritual way of life manifests itself in the material world as the institutional Church, a time-and-space institution run by human beings, which can make—and has made—significant contributions to the well-being of millions of individuals and to the benefit of humanity as a whole, but which is also subject to all the corruption and sinfulness which human beings bring to any institution, no matter how well-intentioned the founders of those institutions were.
12. The Catholic Church, more than any other human institution, has made an immense contribution to the spiritual and social development of human society. In the course of the past fifteen hundred years, the Church has established and supported schools and universities in many nations; social welfare programs to assist the poor, the outcast, and the ignored; hospitals and medical care facilities in nations across the globe, rich and poor alike. Especially during its imperial period, the Church was the fertile soil which encouraged the development of the arts of music, painting and mosaics, architecture, and literature. In its ancient form, the Church produced and recorded the Christian Scriptures—the enduring record of the encounters of the various Christian communities with God. In its monasteries, it copied and preserved those scriptures for a thousand years. And it conducts to this day the most extensive missionary network of any religion—serving the people of all the nations, and offering them the Word of God.
13. On the other hand, the institutional Church was for much of its history (from the fourth century to the eighteenth) an aggressive political player on the world stage. From the seventh century to the seventeenth, it was an enormously powerful **empire**, which succeeded not so much by the power

of armies as by the spiritual power it claimed to possess: the power to prevent people from entering the eternal life, the power to manipulate hearts through sinner's guilt, and the power to define doctrine and to condemn heretics. In its time, the institutional Church has committed horrendous crimes against humanity, as well as wretched political and theological errors. It asserted political lordship over all of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. It oppressed and terrorized whole ethnic populations and peaceful societies. It violently suppressed valid reform movements. It was directly responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of innocent people, as when it engaged in the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years' War, the displacement of the medieval European Jews, and the suppression of the natives of the Americas, as well as its keeping silent about the 400-year enslavement of African native peoples, and about the ethnic cleansing of the European Jews during World War II. And it has flagrantly indulged in oppressive and immoral behaviors which its own teaching documents condemn and for which it has condemned its opponents.

14. Nonetheless, the institutional Catholic Church is the expression in the physical world of the splendid spirituality of the Mystical Body of Christ. Those of us who have remained Catholic through all of the infamy the institutional Church has brought on itself in our time, do so, as far as I can see, in the belief that the Divine Spirit of Love will eventually lead the institutional Church to conform itself with the humble glory of the Mystical Body of Christ which it contains, and sustains, and manifests to the world. Our hope is that the whole Church, temporal and spiritual, will be transformed by God's grace and by the love which its members live out in our lives, into the recognizable presence in the world of Jesus, the Son of God.