



A Simple Guide to the Catholic Faith

by

John Paul Kirkham

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Cover image; Stained glass window: St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague

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Introduction

Faith is a word that is used to describe a person's unshakeable belief in something without the need of proof. In Christianity, that faith is a complete trust in God, in all He does and in all that He promises. Faith in its true religious context is the response to the loving invitation of God, the gift of God that gives people the power, the ability to say "I Believe". Faith is a free gift from God that enables us to accept Him completely and to hand our lives in complete confidence and trust over to God and let His will be done in our lives. By being faithful to God we come to learn what we can expect from God in return for knowing and giving him our love; that God will be there as our helper and guide, that he will be with us always and of God's promise of mercy, salvation and eternal life. As we journey through life we can deepen our faith, our faith grows stronger as we begin to put our complete trust in God and that may mean having to change how we live our lives and how we think. An awareness of faith may come about over a long period of time or for some it may come in a quite sudden and dramatic way as was the conversion and new found faith that captured the heart of St. Paul on the road to Damascus.

Consider an invitation. We know what the word "invitation" means, but what does an invitation do or cause us to do. Sometimes we are happy and joyous especially if we receive an invitation to a wedding, party or if one is very fortunate, a holiday. But there are some invitations that can make us panicky or anxious such as those to go to a social function where we don't know anyone or for a medical appointment. But what an invitation does do is to ask us and make us respond; and when that invitation is a call from God, faith and a lifetime of ongoing conversion is our response.

Why do you think Jesus called "fishermen" to faith as his first followers?

Finding fish is a special art. So how about finding people! Fishing requires many facets: patience, skill, discernment, common sense, persistence and quietness and just like the early disciples we also will have some of these similar characteristics.

We may sometimes think that we are living in a faithless society and get disheartened but remember that throughout all history there have and always will be people of faith who will inspire others. These may be the more familiar names of the Old Testament: Moses, Noah, Job or from the Gospels, great saints such as Peter and Paul or John or later saints like Francis and Clare of Assisi. The last century has given us a wealth of holy people from Mother Teresa of Calcutta to Pope John Paul II. But stop for a moment and think closer to home. Who introduced you to the faith? That person may be your parent, grandparent, friend or church catechist or maybe you are still searching on your own.

The intention of this book is to help you to live the mystery by revealing the faith in a simple and uncomplicated way. It can be used for those enquiring about the catholic faith or those preparing a parish RCIA programme. For those who came to faith many years ago, these chapters may bring to life new or forgotten information or rekindle a spark that may lead you to inspire others. Remember life did not end at Easter for Jesus' Apostles, it was just the beginning of their new lifelong journey which took them to many places doing many things, just as our journey is ever moving on and we are still learning and showing what we believe in what we do and how we behave. It is very encouraging that God never leaves us and He is there if we need His help just as Moses found out when he questioned God on how he was to carry out all the things that God asked of him, God's reply to Moses was simply *"I shall be with you"*

John-Paul Kirkham

Jesus Christ

*"I am the way, the truth and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me."
St. John 14:6*

A Christian is a person who believes in and follows Jesus Christ and by doing this lives the faith of Jesus Christ and brings God's love to all.

The New Testament Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell of the life of Jesus and what he did and who he was and just as important who he still is. The Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke are referred to as synoptic Gospels meaning that all three follow a common or similar narrative. They tell us the same story from a slightly different angle or viewpoint. The Gospels were written by those who had either known Jesus personally or were his disciples or witnesses of his resurrection and ascension and so what he have is a very accurate and a first hand account.

St. Matthew was an Apostle and being Jewish wrote his Gospel in that context, so that the Jewish people could understand. St. Mark was the cousin of Barnabas who travelled with St. Paul and St. Luke was a physician and artist who also travelled extensively with St. Paul. St. John was an Apostle and the only one of the original twelve of those called by Jesus to die a natural death at a very old age on the Greek Isle of Patmos. St. John's Gospel is very different from the others, John it can be said was closest to Jesus, his best friend and was with Jesus at all the key moments in Jesus' life and death; he was the only apostle at the foot of the cross. His Gospel focuses on the teachings of Jesus and his seven great signs. John stresses the truth of the Gospel, the Divinity of Jesus and eternal life. And so it is that the Bible's New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John reveal to us exactly who Jesus Christ is, Jesus is Our Saviour, The Lord Our God.

The simple truths about Jesus Christ can be summarised as follows: Jesus Christ was both fully human and is fully divine. Jesus became like us, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, this is called the Incarnation when the Son of God, Jesus Christ assumed human nature in order to accomplish our salvation. Jesus showed his humanity by being tired and asleep in the boat on Lake Galilee and then wakes to calm the storm showing his divinity. Likewise Jesus could show human emotions, he wept and showed sorrow and compassion and as God he healed the sick and raised the dead.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ is God. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God.

Jesus taught us how to live, how to pray and how to forgive others. Jesus himself made the decision to die for us on the cross by obeying the will of God the Father and accepting the cup of suffering.

Jesus Christ was crucified and buried in a tomb.

Jesus Christ after three days in the tomb rose from the dead and later at Pentecost ascended into heaven.

Jesus Christ is alive today.

What does Jesus ask of us? *"To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and to *"Love your neighbour as you love yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18)

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What does Jesus promise us? No matter what we have done, if we are truly sorry Jesus Christ forgives our sins. But the greatest gift that Jesus gives us is the reward of eternal life in heaven to all those who believe in him and follow His ways *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me shall live, even though he dies"* (St. John 11:25).

What Christians believe is summarised in the following Nicene Creed of the Church:

I believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us men and our salvation
he came down from heaven:
and by the power of the Holy Spirit
was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son he is adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the Prophets.
I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

The Holy Trinity and The Holy Spirit

*Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
St. Matthew 28:19*

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We as an act of our faith believe that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one. This is one of the great mysteries of our faith and it is only through that faith that we are given the grace to believe and accept this.

We can all experience in many ways the world around us in the sights, the sounds and smells of creation. In the same way we can see or feel the presence of the Holy Trinity. God is not a lonely or solitary God, He is a community of persons. God the Father as the Creator of the universe and the world around us, God as the Son Jesus Christ who actually came and walked amongst us as our Saviour as the human image of the living God and God as the Holy Spirit who we can feel and who is with us here and now to inspire and enlighten, to lead, guide, help and comfort us.

These three distinct and unique persons of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) exist as one undivided Being who we call God. In his second letter to the Corinthians (13:13), St. Paul with his blessing shows the beauty of the Holy Trinity: *"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* In the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus high up on the mountain of Tabor and recorded in St.

Matthews Gospel (17:1-9), the Holy Trinity is clearly revealed as the catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: *"The whole Trinity appeared: the Father in the voice; the Son in the man; the Spirit in the shining cloud"* (C.C. 555).

Just as we are asked to *"Love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and all our strength"* the nature of God is revealed to us in three ways. God wants to be with us, to know us and to love us. God in the highest heavens as the Father became God with us in the person and flesh of the Son Jesus Christ and God lives within us as the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit

God created heaven and earth and the opening lines of the bible in Genesis tells how *"The Spirit of God was moving across the water"*. It is the Holy Spirit that is the power of God in creation and in our lives. In the New Testament we are shown clearly the three occasions when the Holy Spirit was central to the life of Jesus. Firstly: at the Annunciation (St. Luke 1:31-36) when Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Angel Gabriel told Mary: *"Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David; he will rule over the House of Jacob for ever and his reign will have no end."* Mary said to the angel, *"But how can this come about, since I am a virgin?"* *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you,"* the angel answered, *"and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow. And so the child will be holy and will be called Son of God"*.

Secondly: at the Baptism of Jesus (St. Luke 3:21-22). Jesus himself is empowered by the Holy Spirit and this marks the start of his public ministry.

"Now when all the people had been baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, Heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on

him in bodily shape like a dove. And a voice came from heaven; you are my son the beloved; my favour rests on you”.

Thirdly: between the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus when Jesus told us that he would send the Holy Spirit into the world: (St. John 16:7) *“It is for your own good that I am going because unless I go the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you”.* And it is John’s Gospel that tells of the Holy Spirit as coming from the Father and the Son (St. John: 15: 26). Jesus said he would send us the Holy Spirit to be another Paraclete (defender, consoler, helper) who will be with us and live in us thus making the Holy Spirit our spiritual power and guide.

St. Paul explained to the Romans in very brief but concise language the following about the Holy Spirit: *“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God”*(Romans 8:14). That the *“Love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit”* (Romans 5:5)and *“when we are weak the Holy Spirit comes to our aid”* (Romans 8: 26).

We are freely given the Holy Spirit when we are baptised. Later we make our own decision to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation when we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and this gives us the strength, the inner power to be strong, to become representatives or witnesses to Jesus Christ and the Church. Being Confirmed also gives us the courage to tell others about Christ and the Gospel, mirroring what happened after the descent of the Holy Spirit in The Acts of the Apostles (Ch. 2).

St. Paul deeply moved by the spirit wrote to the Galatians, (Ch. 5) listing the many fruits of the Holy Spirit, those of *charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, long suffering, mildness, faith, modesty, self control and chastity.*We are also given freely the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are called charisms were some people experience a deep and often dramatic release of the Holy Spirits power. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (Ch.12, 13, 14), we are told of the gifts of

wisdom, understanding, right judgement, courage, knowledge, reverence, the spirit of wonder and awe in the presence of God. Dramatic as some of these gifts may be released in others, each and every one of us can experience the Holy Spirits greatest gift of all, that of Love.

The Church

“And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my Church, and not even death will be able to overcome it.

St. Matthew 16:18

When asked many think of a building as being the church, but it is much more; and a true definition would be: “the Catholic Church is a community of Jesus Christ’s followers who share the same Sacraments and worship under the leadership of the Pope”. It is the people, the faithful followers of Jesus Christ who are the Church.

The Gospels, the Good News of Jesus Christ were written approximately thirty years after Jesus had completed his earthly ministry. The Gospel of St. Mark for example was written in Rome during this time. Incredibly in those thirty short years since Jesus Christ had ascended into heaven Christianity had by word of mouth only, spread to Italy and across the Middle East and throughout Asia. Nero had become the Roman Emperor during AD 54 -68 and he wanted to create his own city of Rome and so he burnt down the city in the hope of rebuilding it and renaming it Nero after himself. However this very destructive plan failed and he soon realised in the aftermath that this was a huge mistake and when things got too hot he blamed the Christians for starting the fires and that is when the beginnings of the age of Christian persecution started.

To avoid detection, arrest and certain execution, the Christian Church, the community of Christ's early followers went underground and the Sacrament of the Eucharist became a secret among all Christians. Small house churches were formed with small communities presided by local bishops. The Eucharistic gift of bread after consecration was wrapped carefully and taken away by the faithful for distribution to others or kept for using if one could not attend the underground Mass. Many of these house churches can still be found in Rome today in the crypts of later churches built over them and in those early days only the Bishop would celebrate Mass and priests were the bishop's assistants.

The persecutions lasted for many years up until the reign of Constantine who became the Roman Emperor in AD 306. Constantine was the Emperor of the Western Roman Empire and he knew that an empire split in two was a dangerous thing so he set out to conquer the Eastern Empire. The night before one of his famous battles that would take place on a bridge in Rome he had a vision of a cross in the sky and believed that this would enable his troops a great victory. He had all his army scratch the sign of the cross on their metal shields. They went into battle and won. When it was explained to him that this was a victory helped by the cross but more importantly what the cross meant, he very quickly in thanks introduced Christianity as the religion of Rome and the seat of Rome was founded and is still there today. Constantine's mother was St. Helena and did much to propagate her new Christian faith. Christianity became so popular and was by accepted by many, everyone wanted to convert including the previously wealthy pagan families. The Lateran Cathedral of St. John was built in Rome and named after the Lateran Family and it is still the official Basilica of the Pope to this day. The church community grew immensely and the Church buildings heightened in structure and size to accommodate this growth because there were now hundreds if not thousands of people publicly attending Masses.

The middle ages brought wars, famine and plagues, no country was immune and so the priest would celebrate the Mass facing the altar with his back to the congregation and with all gathered plead to God. However not all of this period was dark, as during the medieval times there was a great spiritual flowering throughout Europe especially in Italy and Spain with the foundation of the great religious orders of the Franciscans, Dominicans, Cistercians and many more. Whole towns and cities were built around these “new” monastic communities because people wanted to participate and practice their faith and this resulted in the construction of even larger Churches with long naves. The art and skill of book printing developed and books of prayers were introduced to the priest and the Latin Mass more commonly called the Tridentine Mass became the norm for exactly 400 years until as recently as the 1960s.

Pope John XXIII set in motion guided by the Holy Spirit “a wind of change” called the Second Vatican Council. This took place over four very long sessions from 1962 to 1965. The Council would introduce four Constitutions, nine Decrees and three Declarations and the discussions included the Church in itself and in relation to the modern world, renewal, the role of the laity and liturgical reform. Pope John XXIII died during the sessions and Pope Paul VI concluded the council.

The Central theme to the Second Vatican council was a universal call to holiness for the whole church in that – “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection in charity. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour. In this way, the holiness of the People of God

will grow into an abundant harvest of good”(Second Vatican Council - *Lumen Gentium* 40)

This wind of change also revised the liturgy of the Mass and for many the difference was the introduction of the words of the Mass in the local language whereas up until this point it had been in Latin. In keeping with the Council's aims this would lead the faithful in a more profound participation and understanding of the Church's liturgy: as "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with "the paschal sacraments," to be "one in holiness" (Second Vatican Council - *Sacrosanctum Concilium*)

The Laity furthermore were invited to be more actively involved in Church ministry as Lectors (Readers), Catechists and to help with the distribution of Holy Communion within the Mass and under direction of a Priest to take the Eucharist to the sick and housebound when required.

Jesus said that His church would be "*the light of the world*. Over two thousand years ago Jesus gave us the church, the Catholic Church and today the Church continues with an unbroken tradition. All other churches (known as ecclesial communities) are offshoots founded by human individuals that stemmed from the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

The Catholic Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic
The Church teaches the one set of beliefs (articles of faith) as those taught by Jesus Christ and the Apostles.
The Church is Holy, it is a source of holiness and through the Church we have the seven Sacraments that Jesus established.
The Church is Catholic (Universal); it is God's gift to all people.
Jesus told his apostles to go throughout the whole world and make

disciples of all nations (St. Matthew: 28: 19-20). The Catholic Church is the only church found in every country in the world.

The Church is Apostolic. Jesus appointed the apostles to be the first leaders of the church and their successors continued. The apostles as earthly leaders in their succession then appointed further bishops, priests and deacons. The apostles were the first bishops and since then there has been an unbroken line handing down the faith through scripture and oral tradition (the spoken word). The beliefs, articles of faith, passed down are many and this is what we believe today namely that we believe in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sins and of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. St. Paul in his first letter to Timothy (3:15) tells us about the *“Church of the living God”* and how the church is *“The pillar and support of the truth”*.

The Pope (Latin: *papa*; from Greek: *pappas*, a child's word for *father*) is the head of the Church and his official title is The Vicar of Christ. Let us go back those two thousand years to the first Vicar of Christ the one that Jesus himself appointed. Jesus gave St. Peter special authority. Peter was the foundation stone, the great rock. Peter alone was given the keys of the Kingdom and Peter's decisions would be binding as on earth and in heaven. In Jesus earthly absence Peter was given sole leadership. And on this great rock Peter, the church would be built. The Gospel of St. John (21:15-17) tells that Christ the Good Shepherd called Peter to look after the flock and St. Luke (22:31-32) that Jesus prayed that Peter's faith would not fail and told Peter to strengthen his brothers. The Acts of the Apostles show how St. Peter led the church in proclaiming the Gospel and making decisions (Acts: 15:7-12). St. Peter's Successors, the Vicars of Christ today are also known as the Bishops of Rome and the earliest Christian writings tell us that they continued to exercise Peter's ministry in the church. Today's Pope is the latest in an unbroken line of succession dating back to St. Peter the first Pope. The Pope resides in the Vatican in the heart of Rome, Italy, but in reality the Vatican is an independent state. The Basilica of St. Peter built over the actual tomb of Peter is the

largest Church building anywhere in the world. The Pope is assisted by a College of Cardinals who themselves are assisted by Archbishops and Bishops who are responsible for a Diocese. We then have Priests who look after a Church. A Parish Priest is responsible for his Parish and is obedient to his local Bishop. The Priest in turn may be helped by an Assistant Priest or Deacon and in some circumstances a Pastoral Assistant or Parish Religious Sister.

The Catholic Church has what is termed “The Magisterium of the Church” which simply means the teaching authority of the church, which lies with the Pope and the Bishop’s. This teaching is guided and protected by the Holy Spirit. The Church is the custodian of the Bible and faithfully and accurately proclaims its message, a task that God has empowered it to do as recorded by St. John (16:12-13) when Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to guide the Apostles in the truth.

So the Church today can be described as a body of people, a community coming together to worship and participating in liturgies and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The church is an apostolic foundation or institution that through its teachings guides and helps people. We physically experience Jesus Christ in the Church through the seven sacraments. The Church exists also to proclaim the Gospel by giving witness to the faith and the Church speaks out as Jesus did by promoting life, justice and peace. The Church will also speak out against all wrongdoing and looks after those who are suffering both from sickness and hunger. Some of the most encouraging words said by Jesus about himself and therefore about the Church are given to us at the end of St. Matthews Gospel “*And know that I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.*”

Prayer

There is no need to worry; but if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

St. Teresa of Avila born in 1515 who lived a life of prayer and wrote many spiritual works said *"For though we are always in the presence of God it seems to me that those who practice prayer are present in a special way, for they see that He is watching them"*. And St Therese of Lisieux left us her simple definition: *"Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God"*.

Jesus from very early in the Gospel of St. Matthew (6:5-14) teaches us how to pray. Jesus gave us the Lords Prayer that is so familiar to many.

"Our Father in heaven,
may your name be held holy,
your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us. And do not put us to the test, but save us from the evil one".

Jesus tells us also about how effective prayer can be. Jesus said: *"Ask and you will receive"* (St. Luke 11:9 -10) and *"I will do whatever you ask for in my name"* (St. John 14: 13-14). Jesus also taught that there is no need to use long and complicated words, as God knows our needs in our hearts even before we pray. Jesus prayed a lot often in solitude, in the desert, on a mountain and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus prayed before and at the most important events in his life, at his baptism, before choosing the apostles and before he was arrested.

Prayer is foremost our personal and intimate relationship with God; there are no set rules. In St. Matthew's Gospel (6:6) Jesus tells us to go to our rooms, close the door and pray to the father. Prayer is asking God for help, it is intercessory for our own needs and the needs of others and our prayers should be unselfish. Jesus says "*I will do whatever you ask for in my name, if you ask me anything in my name I will do it*" (St. John 4:13-14). So ask and receive but let it be God's will at all times. When we cry out we truly recognise God and we should pray even for our enemies, and for all those who have wronged us. Prayer is also giving praise to God and thanking him for all the benefits and blessings that we receive from him and in doing so we pay homage to the Lord. Finally, prayer is penitential in saying we are sorry and asking God's forgiveness.

As there are no set rules in how to pray, each individual finds a way that will suit them and the following is only a guide. We can pray by speaking directly to God vocally using a set form or standard prayers e.g. The Lord's Prayer or any other prayers that are known to us. When we find it difficult to pray the Holy Spirit will help us (Romans: 8: 26). Jesus heard people's prayers in words out loud, the leper, the good thief and Jairus all spoke out their prayers to Jesus and even shouting out loudly as did the blind man "*have mercy on me*". But prayer for many can be quite simply in the silence of their own hearts like the bearers of the paralytic man and the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years but reached out to touch Jesus in silence and were healed.

Reading the bible is another way of praying by getting into the habit of a daily reading to reflect on scripture, focussing on a single line or passage. This is a way that God speaks to us as well. A deeper form of silent prayer is called meditative and contemplative prayer: "*Be still and know that I am God*" (Psalm: 46:10), simply resting in the presence of God is prayer: "*When we pray, even if our lips remain closed, our heart can be open before God. God's voice makes itself understood - an inner voice, steeped in silence*" (Brother Roger of Taizé). Looking at a beautiful icon or painting or

view of nature, the sound of the sea or birdsong and also the use of candles or listening to sacred music are all ways of praying.

We can pray as individuals, as families, as a community in Church; we can pray when we need a weapon against evil in fact we can pray at any time, anywhere, even when travelling.

How does God respond to us or speak to us in prayer? It may be a voice in the heart or in the mind. Or the response may be in the answering of prayers by finding something that is lost or helping us out in some way. We can experience this response in many ways, perhaps it is a tingling sensation through the body or it may be just finding an inner peace or calm.

The Church has many other ways in which we can pray powerfully and effectively by ways of established and prescribed devotions such as meditating on or physically walking the Stations of the Cross. Many Churches offer a time of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament where one can come and pray before or just sit or kneel in silence before the real presence of Jesus Christ. There is also the Liturgy of Benediction that are prayers before the Blessed Sacrament on the altar and then the Benediction itself when the faithful are blessed by the real presence of Christ. Before a Mass a local Church may offer the opportunity to pray the Divine Office (the official prayers of the Church) in a group setting that may be Morning or Evening Prayer (Lauds or Vespers).

A novena (from the word meaning nine) is a prayer that is usually said over nine consecutive days. The novena originates from Jesus' apostles themselves when they prayed for nine days from the Ascension of Christ into heaven to the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down upon them. Novena prayers are offered to Jesus or to Jesus through the intercession of Mary, his mother or through one of the many thousands of saints of the Church.

Why do we venerate the saints or ask the saints to help us in prayer? Well, for many reasons. We see the greatness of God's grace manifested in their holy lives. The saints show us what human nature is capable of with the help of God's grace. When on earth they helped people and still continue to do add their prayers to ours. They do not take us a way from God but accompany us on our pilgrimage to God. Many people feel more inspired and stronger in their company. St. Therese of Lisieux said: *"I want to spend my time in heaven doing good on earth"*. St. Dominic said: *"Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life"* and St. Clare of Assisi shortly before she died gave us her blessing *"I give you all my Blessing while living"*, and *"confirm it to you after my death"*. The Catechism, the teaching of the Catholic Church affirms that the saints never stop interceding for us (CC 956). Of all Catholic prayers and devotions the most well known is the rosary which will be described in the following chapter on Mary.

For those just starting to pray or rediscovering prayer the following tips may prove helpful: Pray in a way that suits you. Start with just five minutes daily and then see where it leads you. Find a place and a time that is comfortable and convenient for you. Why not look back on the day and thank God for the blessings it contained and the people you met. Or simply pray: *"Come, Lord Jesus"* or *"My lord and my God"* or *"Jesus Christ Son of the living God have mercy on me"*. And remember saying sorry to God is one of the greatest forms of praise. Let distractions or noisy interruptions come and go as they are part of everyone's prayer life; when you become conscious of them, let yourself be drawn back gently and peacefully into the presence of God. Another method for persistent distractions is to talk to God about them, and then they are no longer distractions but part of your actual prayer.

Mary

The angel said to her, "Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour. Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High
St. Luke 1:30-32

From all the women in the world God chose Mary first and foremost to be the Mother of Jesus. The Gospels tell us that Mary is blessed amongst women. Mary cooperated through her own freewill and through her faith and obedience played out her part in the salvation of humankind by giving birth to the Saviour. Mary's official title "*Theotokos*" (she who has begotten God or Mother of God) was confirmed by the First Council of Ephesus in the year 431. So in recognising Mary as the Mother of God therefore too Mary is welcomed as Mother of the Church and all of its members.

Mary was completely united with her son from his birth to his death on the cross and his resurrection; Mary was there throughout. Jesus hanging on the Cross gave us his mother, he told John that from then on Mary would be his mother and Jesus told Mary that John would be her son. After Jesus' Ascension into heaven Mary stayed with her family the apostles and prayed and the Holy Spirit descended upon them as Jesus had promised.

Mary's story, her own personal journey is revealed to us in the most detail primarily in the Gospel of St. Luke starting with the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary with the news that she would conceive and be the Mother of Jesus. We know that Mary was an ordinary young girl when God's messenger came to her. There was no force used, the Angel Gabriel waited for Mary's reply and that response was her saying "*yes*" and it would be a yes that changed the world forever. St. Luke then continues with The Visitation that is the time when Mary, pregnant with the child Jesus would visit her cousin

Elizabeth who was also heavily pregnant and carrying John the Baptist. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were quite old and had been childless for many years. Elizabeth's womb was barren but an angel of God appeared to Zechariah and told him that God had answered his prayers. This act by Mary indicates more of her character, that even though pregnant herself, she gave up three months to look after, to help and serve her elderly cousin who was in much need of assistance. After the visit to Elizabeth we are given "*The Magnificat*" which is the famous Song of Mary, her own great proclamation about God, her praise to God composed by Mary and spoken by her own lips.

The New Testament Gospels tell us of Mary's giving birth to Jesus followed by their escape into Egypt to avoid the persecution and murder of the innocent male children in Herod's attempt to kill the new born child Jesus. And when they returned to Nazareth we are told of the early life of Jesus as a young boy to the age of about twelve. We read about Mary as any normal mother looking after and being concerned about her son especially when he went missing for three days and with Mary finally finding him in the Temple which Jesus declared was His Father's house. Mary appears again at the start of Jesus' ministry and at the end of Jesus' earthly life; at the Wedding at Cana, at the specific request of Mary interceding, Jesus performs his first miracle, turning the water into wine. Mary then retires into the background and re appears in the scripture texts at the foot of the cross on Calvary at the Crucifixion of her only son. From St. John's recorded words who was with Mary: "*Standing close to Jesus' cross were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, "He is your son". Then he said to the disciple, "she is your mother". From that time the disciple took her (Mary) to live in his home*".

From this point Mary is then mentioned in scripture one last time, praying with the apostles at the approach of the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came down upon them just as Jesus had

foretold. Sacred tradition (Church history) tells that Mary and St. John the Apostle travelled and settled in Ephesus – modern day Turkey and their ancient house can still be visited.

As with Mary's Divine Motherhood "*Theotokus*" the ecclesiastical authorities (The Church) has also confirmed as dogmas - religious doctrine and belief as being true that Mary as "The Immaculate Conception" was conceived without sin, that her virginity was perpetual and "The Assumption of The Most Blessed Virgin Mary", when the course of her earthly life was completed was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven where she already shares in the glory of her Sons Resurrection, anticipating the resurrection of all members of his body. These great Solemnities (Principal Holy Days) have been celebrated in the Church's liturgical calendar, that starts in Advent, from ancient times and their dates are now fixed: December 8th – The Immaculate Conception, January 1st – Mary Mother of God and August 15th – The Assumption of The Blessed Virgin Mary.

Mary's role today was beautifully affirmed in 1950 by Pope Pius XII in establishing her Queenship by stating that from the earliest ages of the Catholic Church a Christian people, whether in times of triumph or crisis have addressed prayers, hymns and veneration to the Queen of heaven. Mary therefore has been made Queen of Heaven and Earth by God, exalted above all the choirs of Angels and all the Saints. Standing at the right hand of her only begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ, she pleads strongly for us with a mother's prayers and what she seeks she finds, nor can she ask in vain; *"Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman robed with the sun, standing on the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars"*. (Apocalypse / Revelation 12:1)

There is a special devotion to Mary. The Church's basis for its devotion to the Blessed Virgin is recorded in scripture when Mary says *"All generations will call me Blessed"* (St. Luke 1: 48). It is not worship in any shape or form as worship and adoration are reserved only for God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the

Holy Spirit. Mary is not a goddess, she is though special, radiant and in heaven as our Eternal Mother. We can venerate images and icons of her as we can with all saints and these images are there to remind us of Mary and her place in our heart (CC 2132).

There are Marian prayers and of all Mary's prayers the "Hail Mary" is the most well known and used. The prayer is taken in the most part from the Gospel itself: *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen*

Mary gave to the world many of her own gifts. We have the special prayer of the rosary entrusted to St. Dominic in the early 13th Century that beautifully reveals the life of Christ by praying through a series of Gospel meditations. But it is Mary's participation in the salvation of humankind by accepting the offer to be the Mother of Jesus Christ that is the greatest of all Mary's gifts to us.

The Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation

"As soon as Jesus was baptised he came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, the beloved; my favour rests on him'"

St. Matthew 3:16-17

What is a Sacrament? A Sacrament is an outward sign (something we can see or feel) that is given freely to us by means of a special grace or gift from God.

A person can only get baptised once and that can be in any recognised Christian Church and this is the beginning of their lifelong union with God. Baptism forms the basis of Christian life and it is the doorway to the other sacraments and to Christ himself. Through baptism a person is freed from sin and becomes a member of Christ incorporated into the Church. Baptism means *"to immerse"*, or *"to plunge into water"* and since creation water has been the source and the symbol of life. God created the earth and the seas and the waters that teemed with life. Those same waters also washed away all the bad things in the world yet saved Noah in the great ark (the boat) that he built that was Gods salvation of his people. God parted the waters of the sea in the exodus thus saving his people by allowing them to escape from the chariots of the pharaoh. In St. John's Gospel at the wedding at Cana Jesus performed his very first miracle turning the water into wine. Later the wine would become Christ's Precious Blood instigated at the Last Supper in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

In the Old Testament's book of Genesis we are first introduced to sin. Through original sin we are born without grace in our souls. Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, they were tempted by the devil and fell into sin. Eve ate the fruit of knowledge from the tree and they were both cast out of their garden of paradise and in doing so they committed the very first sin on earth. Adam and Eve's own sons Cain and Abel, Cain would kill Abel committing the world's first murder, so through Adam and Eve we see how sin was brought into the world. There was however hope and the prophet Ezekiel (36:25-27) tells of how the Lord would cleanse sins with water and give the people a new spirit. *"We shall pour clean water over you and you will be cleansed. I shall cleanse you of all your defilement and of all your idols. I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a new heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you and make you keep my laws and sincerely respect my observances"*.

During the liturgy of the Easter Vigil Mass it is proclaimed that the fault of Adam was necessary so that God could send us His great Redeemer. And so it was that Jesus the Great Redeemer was sent by God to save people from their sins and offer us salvation. But first another great person would come among the people. John the Baptist appeared preaching out of the wilderness *"Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is close at hand"* (Matthew 3:2). Here was an invitation to a new life to be born again and John then baptised Jesus in the River Jordan. It was only after his baptism that Jesus began his public ministry. Jesus taught *"No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is first born of water and the Spirit"* (St. John 3:5). Through baptism one is born again not physically but spiritually. Those baptised share with Christ in His Life, His Death and His Resurrection. Later Jesus himself would command his disciples to go out to all nations baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Jesus affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation. Through baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and personal sin. St. Peter talking about forgiveness states directly: *"Repent and be baptised, everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:38). Later Peter goes on to tell us that it is baptism that saves us (1 Peter 3: 21).

Most often it is babies or young children who are brought to the font for baptism and by being baptised into the faith of the church therefore have an early entry into Christian life. Those baptised have Godparents or in the case of adult baptism, sponsors whose role is to look after the newly baptised spiritual needs. It is the Sacrament of Baptism that calls a person to be more holy and to be more sincere with God in what they do and the sacrament deepens their personal relationship with Christ.

The Sacrament of Confirmation

If Baptism is the beginning of a new life then the Sacrament of Confirmation is the strengthening of this new life in Christ. A person will chose a Confirmation name commonly that of a saint

or person from the bible. Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace, when the faithful are enriched with a special strength of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation allows us to become a true witness of Christ; enabling us to spread the word and defend the faith. This fullness of the Spirit, this outpouring is the promise of Jesus and is seen most dramatically at the Feast of Pentecost forty days after Easter and is described in the Acts of the Apostles *“When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, and they went down there, and prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, for as yet he had not come down on any of them: they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit”* (8:14-17). The Holy Spirit came down upon those gathered namely Mary and the Apostles. They were strengthened for their ministry and mission that lay ahead. From that point onwards those chosen, the apostles, imparted this gift of Confirmation by the act of the laying on of hands. Today it is a bishop or parish priest with permission from his bishop who celebrates the Sacrament of Confirmation and the candidates for Confirmation are anointed with oil called chrism. The name Christian means *“anointing”* and it was Christ himself who was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit after his baptism in the Jordan. Anointing then is a sign, a spiritual seal. In biblical symbolism oil is a sign of abundance and joy (Psalm 23:5). Oil is also a sign of healing (St. Luke 10:34).

The Council of Florence summed up the Sacrament of Confirmation in four points in the year 1493.

1. It unites us more firmly to Christ.
2. It increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us.
3. It renders our bond with the Church more perfectly.
4. It gives us that special strength of the Holy Spirit to defend the faith by word and action as a true witness of Christ, to confess the name of Jesus boldly and never to be ashamed of the cross.

The Church Catechism (CC.1319) also affirms that the Candidate for Confirmation must be prepared to assume the role of disciple

and witness to Christ within the Church community and outside in the secular world. In the Sacrament of Confirmation God has put his seal on the Candidate and placed his Spirit in their hearts, so from that point onwards that person now belongs to Christ completely.

The Sacrament of Marriage

Let all you do be done in love

1. Corinthians 14:16

The Sacrament of Marriage is a vocation, some people will remain single or may take vows and become religious brothers or sisters in a monastery or convent or for those so called take Holy Orders and enter the priesthood. Marriage is a choice and part of Gods free will that he has given us. God gave us his Son Jesus and it is the Lord who gave us the Sacrament of Marriage. The Holy Spirit gives us his greatest gifts, those of love, faith and in marriage that becomes faithfulness in love.

What is marriage? Is it just two people being together or is it something more? Marriage may even be the least understood sacrament because it is taken by many for granted or taken lightly in that marriage is just something people do or drift into, or do for the wrong reasons. You will hear of couples saying “let’s pool our resources to buy a bigger house or have two or more of cars”. It is not that having these material things is necessarily bad but they are completely the wrong reasons to get married for. A Christian marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, like God’s covenant with his people, and is a deep relationship that He (God) is a part of. As a married couple grow closer together over the years they will grow in personal holiness, and become closer to God.

What this Sacrament is about is love. God is love. Gods love of us and in marriage, Gods love in us. Many times when facilitating Church sessions on marriage I have asked different groups of

people to name three well known married couples. The answers are not very surprising as the list will always include celebrities, royalty and fictitious television soap characters or even cartoon couples. Very rarely does anyone name a married couple taken from scriptural texts.

Sacred Scripture is full of married couples but none more famous than Mary and Joseph whom we all can read about and be inspired by with their love of God and their love of Jesus and their own love and faithfulness. The early chapters of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke tell of their life together. Matthew (1:19) writes that Joseph was a man who always did what was right and Luke tells us in detail about Mary's life. The couple had to endure a great deal of suffering. The struggle to find a place to rest and give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, then to take flight into Egypt to avoid the slaughter of the infants under King Herod they became refugees and asylum seekers of their day. Their life together had to overcome these trials, sorrows and pain but all the time they were guided by God and the heavenly angels and by their faith. Through Mary and Joseph we can see all the virtues of obedience, trust and loyalty and the Holy Family are the image of peace and love.

When I ask those same groups to name three things associated with marriage, the answers flow more easily with the popular replies: "A wedding, faithfulness and love". A wedding: Marriage is part of the Church community and married couples need the support of the community in this *Faith – Full* relationship. Usually a wedding brings out a crowd with the guests and the Church community giving its approval and support and it was Jesus who chose a wedding (at Cana) to reveal his divinity for the first time in public by performing his very first miracle, changing the water into wine. A Catholic wedding normally takes place as a wedding Mass when the couple offer their own lives by uniting their new life to the offering of Christ for his church made present in the Eucharist and by receiving the Eucharist they form "One body in

Christ” and it is here that Jesus is experienced at the centre of the sacrament. The symbol in marriage is the blessing and exchanging of rings where the circle represents the circle of unbroken love for one another and God’s love for them. From this point onwards a married couple will share their faith and they will come to Mass together and share their prayers.

Faithfulness: St. Paul makes it known in no uncertain terms that *“Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:4-5).

Love: The following definitive text is the most well known, well loved and most widely used as a reading during the wedding Mass. *“Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes”* (1 Corinthians 13: 4-7). The Church calls marriage a sacrament because it is a union blessed by Christ himself. The couple give each other this sacrament to be a means of grace to the end of their lives and a husband and wife give the gift of love to each other. Marriage as a sacrament means that God helps each married couple to be faithful not only to each other but also to God and to their original wedding vows. Married Christians will recognize this sacrament as an ongoing source of strength. This sacrament is an obligation that requires a response and that response is the full consent by both parties to the marriage vows and fulfilling each other’s needs. It is a lifelong covenant (a commitment for life) until either partner dies. A marriage is indissoluble and in the Catholic Church divorce is not permitted. The Church teaches that unless the Church has declared a marriage null the remarriage of the divorced person while the previous partner is still alive

contravenes God plan and the law of God taught by Christ. Those who are in this situation are not to consider themselves as separated from the Church, but they cannot receive Holy Communion. There are certain circumstances however, in which the Church may declare a marriage null and void (an annulment). There may have been a lack of consent, an impediment or abuse and such cases are put before the local Diocesan Church Tribunal of Canon Lawyers and Judges that follows a well-defined process.

Marriage carries with it many responsibilities and it should not be taken lightly, that is why the Catholic Church advocates (advises) a marriage preparation course. Some couples after attending a marriage preparation course may decide that for whatever reasons that they are not compatible and that not to marry is for the better. Within the marriage a couple will be together through all of life's successes and failures, for better or for worse in sickness and in health, which are the faithful ideals of Christ and form part of our personal relationship with Jesus. The Holy Spirit plays a big part in this sacrament. We receive the Holy Spirit through the sacraments and in marriage the Holy Spirit is like a river that flows, ongoing; married people can stop at any time of need to draw strength from the Holy Spirit in their joined lives especially during those times when maybe forgiveness is needed or when there is a need to carry one another's or indeed ones own burdens. Marriage is also equality for both sexes and there are no divisions, man and woman are one in Christ, married people do not have authority over each other (Galatians 3:28). One of the supreme gifts of marriage is that it gives new life, procreation with the creation of a family with children. One of the main essential characteristics of marriage is the openness to the gift of children as the refusal of fertility turns married life away from its "supreme gift", the child (CC.1664). That is why the Catholic Church speaks out against what is morally unacceptable: abortion, contraception and sterilization. It is the Christian values of Christian parents that are passed on in teaching their children and in bringing them up in the faith of the church and it's the parents who will teach their

children how to pray. For this reason the family home is known as “the domestic church”. Even when there are no children granted by God in a marriage there is still a life full of meaning in human and Christian terms. By this we mean radiating Christian love or being fruitful in other ways by works of charity, hospitality, sacrifice or many other types of ministry within the church community.

No other relationship has the security of marriage and each person loves the other for who they are and not what they are and the relationship should be one of sharing and honesty. As a married couple grow older and perhaps more wrinkly and grey, they change, they grow together, through communication and having no secrets. There develops a kind of telepathy that does not always need words, it may be just be a simple understanding look or the turn or nod of the head. All love is divine and is described by St. John: “*God is love and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in them*” (1 John 4: 16).

The Sacrament of Holy Orders (The Priesthood)

Jesus went round visiting all the towns and villages. He taught in the synagogues, preached the Good News about the Kingdom, and healed people with every kind of disease and sickness. As he saw the crowds, his heart was filled with pity for them, because they were worried and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd. So he said to his disciples, “The harvest is large, but there are few workers to gather it in. Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers to gather in his harvest”.

St. Matthew 9: 35-38

We all have a vocation, a call from God through our baptism. God calls each and every one of us, maybe now today or tomorrow or some other time in the future. We are called to live a life of love. We are called to live as best we can and in whatever situation or walk of life we may find ourselves in. Every person has many

choices of ways to serve God and to serve or help their neighbours, sisters and brothers. God can even lead a person to a decision by using other people or placing an event in their lives. God calls each one of us to do something for him that possibly no one else can do. These gifts, talents that we have here in us are waiting to be put into good use for God. For some that vocation or call from God leads men from a variety of backgrounds to seek out God and follow God's way by taking Holy Orders and becoming a priest. It is the priesthood that makes Jesus visible as the head and centre of the church. A man is called by God to be a priest and God then sends that same priest to us very much in the same way that Jesus sent out his first apostles.

At his ordination the student priest is asked four questions to which he must be able to honestly answer "yes".

1. Are you resolved with the help of the Holy Spirit, to discharge, without fail, the office of Priesthood in the presbyterial order as a conscientious fellow worker with the Bishops caring for the Lord's flock?
2. Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us for the glory of God and the satisfaction of Christ's people?
3. Are you resolved to exercise the ministry of the word worthily and wisely by preaching the Gospel and explaining the Catholic faith?
4. Are you resolved to consecrate your life to God for the salvation of his people and to unite yourself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest, who offered himself for us to the Father as perfect sacrifice?

At the Ordination to the Diaconate (the first stage of consecrated Holy Orders) the Bishop will pray the following over the candidate: *"May he excel in every virtue: in love that is sincere, in*

concern for the sick and the poor, in assuming authority, in self discipline, and in holiness of life. May his conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate his purity of life. May he remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving to the world the witness of a pure conscience. May he in this life imitate your Son, who came not to be served but to serve”.

The Priest proclaims the Gospel, the Word of God and he celebrates the Sacraments of the Church. He celebrates the Eucharist as we gather around him as a community of Christ's followers at the altar. Jesus forgives us through the Priest during the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Jesus speaks to us through the Priest. Priests reach out to us by teaching God's word, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that is not their own wisdom but that of God. A Priest's first and foremost duty is stated in the Gospel of St. Mark (16:15), to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Church lists the four ways by which a Priest proclaims the word:

1. By their own honourable behaviour
2. By missionary preaching
3. By handing down or explaining the faith
4. In the light of Christ's teaching deal with modern issues and problems

There is a Church hierarchy of Priests. Recapping from the story of the Church; the Pope who is head of the Church and is also titled the Vicar of Christ stands before God as head of the priesthood on earth. Next in line are Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests and Deacons. A Priest may also be a member of a Religious Community or Order e.g. a Benedictine or Franciscan.

Priests pray throughout each day the Divine Office (the official prayer of the Church) each morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night and in doing so intercede for the whole world. A Priest gives up so much and is on call day and night visiting the sick and

housebound and administering the daily running of his parish. The Priest is there and presides throughout the whole cycle of human life: Baptism (birth) > Confirmation > Marriage > Anointing of the sick > Funeral (death of this earthly life). Because the priesthood is unique on many different levels, ordination only takes place after a long period of discernment and training of between four to six years either in England, Rome or Spain depending on the candidate and age of the seminarian for priesthood. The Church and scripture also tell us about what being a Priest is: *"The Sacrament of Holy Orders communicates a Sacred Power which is none other than that of Christ"* (CC 1551) and that *"a person is called to this Sacrament by God and has to humbly submit to the authority of the Church"*(CC 1578). St. Paul by his own description penned that *"People should think of us as Christ's servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God"* (1 Corinthians 4:1).

A question often raised and debated today is: Why does a priest agree to live a celibate life and not marry? The answer is that a priest *is* married, "married to the Church" and being single a priest can devote all his time to the salvation of others and to the mission of the Church, which is to build up the people of God. I was once giving a baptism preparation class to a ten-year-old child and her answer to a question posed to her about who is a priest, invoked the following *"A Priest is a man that is the head of your parish. He knows everything in the Catholic Religion (but he is still learning)"* but of all people it is the patron saint of parish priests, St. John Mary Vianney, the Cure of Ars who most adequately and eloquently sums up the role *"The Priesthood is the love of the Heart of Jesus"*.

Sin and Morality

*The just man's mouth utters wisdom
and his lips speak of what is right;
the law of his God is in his heart,*

his steps shall be saved from stumbling.

PSALM 36: 3-6. 30-31

The first thing that we all need to do is admit the truth, that we are sinners. *"If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"* (1 John 1:8). What is written in sacred scripture is true for all of us, and yes no matter how much we may think we are good, we are still all sinners.

There are very many sins but only two types of sin. There is *mortal sin* that is a grave and very serious matter, committed with our full knowledge and with our deliberate and full consent. Examples are murder, adultery, abortion and euthanasia. A mortal sin is also deliberately failing to attend Mass on a Sunday or a Holy day of obligation. The second type of sin is called *venial sin*, which is a less serious matter and is described as when one does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when one disobeys the moral law in a grave matter but without full knowledge or without complete consent. These are the kinds of sins that catch us out often and are impulsive or sins we find ourselves being drawn into time and time again and the list is endless. Examples could be an argument at home, in the street, at work, making up a story or telling a lie to get out of trouble or blaming someone else for something you did, driving over the speed limit, criticizing or judging another person, gossiping behind someone's back and how about the sin of keeping quiet or silent when someone asks about your beliefs and faith.

Given that all are sinners, God in the Old Testament Book of Exodus (Ch. 20), gave us a set of rules, in fact more than rules they are the Ten Commandments:

1. I am the Lord your God: you shall not have strange Gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember to keep holy the Lord's day

4. Honour your father and your mother
5. You shall not kill
6. You shall not commit adultery
7. You shall not steal
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour
9. You shall not covet your neighbours wife
10. You shall not covet your neighbours goods

These commandments cover all the big sins, the mortal sins and many groups of smaller venial sins. But notice that all of these Ten Commandments are in the negative sense in that they tell us what not to do. So to compliment these, Jesus appeared and gave us with his amazing Sermon on the Mount, a set of new guidelines on how to live and went even further by letting us know what the rewards would be for following his teachings. This great list is known as the Eight Beatitudes from the Latin word "*blessed*", referring to blessings in relation to finding true happiness. They are found in the Gospel of St. Matthew (Ch. 5).

1. Happy are the poor in spirit; the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
2. Happy are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.
3. Happy are the meek; for they shall inherit the land.
4. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice; for they shall be filled.
5. Happy are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.
6. Happy are the pure of heart; for they shall see God.
7. Happy are the peacemakers; for they shall be called children of God.
8. Happy are those who are persecuted; the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them.

In these beatitudes Jesus offers us a lifestyle different from the ways of the world. We ourselves can only make sense of these words if we have faith and believe in what Jesus taught us. Jesus Christ then is our guide. The Church as an Institution of Christ has

to take the moral viewpoint or high ground and will speak out about contemporary and controversial issues. Look at the headlines in the media, the church supports those who are poor, those who mourn, the Catholic Church supports justice and peace. The Church will support those who don't have a voice, the minority, refugees, asylum seekers and the persecuted and very importantly the unborn. The Church is pro-life and speaks out to support all life because a life is a human being from the first moment of conception in the womb. And so by doing this, the Church and those individuals who speak out are fulfilling the ideals of Christ.

Christian morality is based therefore quite simply on just two things: The Ten Commandments of God and the teachings and values of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. How can we then in the light of the above always do the correct thing? We need to think and to look carefully at what we do or will do. There will nearly always be a choice or various courses of action that we can take. Therefore we have to weigh up all the facts otherwise we will make the wrong choice through ignorance. So stop for a while to think about what the consequences of any decision will be. Think about what Jesus would have done and what Jesus taught. There is then the necessity to make that decision knowing that we will have to live with the responsibility and any consequences of the outcome.

Here are some very simple everyday situations that we may find ourselves in:

1. You are out shopping and you get undercharged by mistake, do you keep quiet and pocket the profit or do you give back the money?
2. You are involved in a conversation, the other person starts complaining about someone else and telling you about that person's faults with hearsay gossip. Are you drawn into the conversation and find yourself agreeing by nodding or saying "yes"? Silence also is a sign of approval or do you tell

the person who is complaining to stop and tell them out rightly so.

3. Your best friend confides in you a great secret but by doing so puts you in a position that makes you party to a sin or some kind of deception. Do you keep the secret and become part of the lie and conspiracy or do you speak out?
4. You make extra copies of a CD, DVD or music downloads which without the correct permissions granted is illegal, and you are breaking the law.

We can see just how easy it is to fall, and that we are faced daily with sometimes many moral decisions that we have to make. Is there any hope then for us as great sinners? Yes, we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession); but lets also remember the two commandments we have not mentioned the two that Jesus said were the greatest and most important of all: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and *“Love your neighbour as you love yourself”* (Leviticus 19:18). By striving to follow these we begin to move in the right direction.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession)

*Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:12-13*

Once we admit to ourselves the truth and accept that we have sinned help is close at hand because *“if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9). Our attitudes will not change overnight but we are complex human beings, with deep-rooted desires, of being self centred, selfish, acquiring possessions and searching for sensual fulfilment. It is a constant battle but within each of us dwells the Spirit of God to help us when we fall time

after time and God is there to help us to try to live a good life and to avoid the many daily temptations.

A Priest during the Sacrament of Reconciliation once said. "You must remember that reconciliation is one of the seven sacraments of Jesus and is no different from Holy Communion (the Eucharist) in so much as you come to Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and just as in Holy Communion, Jesus Christ forgives us and heals us" and this happens because we actually receive and experience Jesus Christ in this sacrament. So there is nothing to be afraid of. This grace of forgiveness and healing is a sign from God that the sinner is absolutely forgiven.

A sin is separation from God, any wilful thought, word, action or omission that is forbidden by the law of God and all sin is instigated by the devil. Re-visiting the two types of sin, *mortal* that is something done with our full consent and knowledge. This type of sin goes directly against the Law of God and *venial* which is our weakness in breaking every day laws (church law, civil law, moral law) intentionally or unintentionally. Whilst not as serious as mortal sins, without reconciliation venial sins can lead us to slide into darker areas that lead to mortal sin. Venial sins because they are sins of a worldly nature if not checked will ultimately lead us astray. Take for example: you avoid paying a certain tax (which by civil law is illegal) but you use that money to pay for a sick child's hospital operation, you begin to think that breaking the law is justifiable or you run a red traffic light in the middle of a desert and think who is there watching me?..... God is!

Defeating sin is not an easy process for anyone. Though we love God and want to please him, we are sinful people living in a world full of temptations. We will fall into sin, and fall into sin again, time after time but we should not let this depress us. We can repent, receive forgiveness and pray that with Jesus' help we will try to do better the next time. This process of sinning and repentance will continue throughout our earthly life, but we will

slowly, even if only very slowly, through God's grace begin to overcome certain areas in our lives that cause us to sin. There are things that help us, firstly our conscience, in most of us this is a safety valve and guides us to do what is right even when we have already done something wrong. Secondly, sorrow, saying sorry is often the hardest thing, but really meaning it and seeking forgiveness, this along with our conscience is our ever-open doorway to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That same priest quoted earlier also said: "that to have a delicate conscience is to possess a great gift". The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a process of recognition in that we are firstly sinners; secondly, know that only God can forgive sins, thirdly, that we want to accept God's gift of forgiveness and finally, that with a contrite heart we will endeavour to change our sinful ways no matter how hard the task may seem.

Many may have fears about going to Confession but the teaching of the Catholic Church states that *"There is no sin so great that God cannot forgive provided that the repentance is sincere and honest"* (CC 982). Look at the great Saints Peter and Paul two pillars of the Church, St Peter denied Christ three times and St. Paul before his conversion and forgiveness openly persecuted Christians and was at and approved of the murder of St. Stephen. And the Gospels are full of accounts of Jesus' forgiveness including the woman caught in the act of adultery, and Jesus forgiving those who were about to put him to death on the cross.

The question most often asked especially from those from different Christian backgrounds is "Why must I confess my sins to a Priest?" Jesus gave the apostles authority on earth to forgive sins. The Gospel of St. John (20:19-22) records the following lesson that Jesus taught his disciples:

Jesus came and stood among them.

He said to them, "Peace be with you", and showed them his hands and side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord, and he said to them again, "Peace be with you".

*"As the Father sent me,
so I am sending you".
After this he breathed on them and said:
"Receive the Holy Spirit.
For those whose sins you forgive,
they are forgiven*

The Priest therefore is the sign and instrument of Gods merciful Love for the sinner and is the designated servant of Gods forgiveness. A point often raised even by Catholics is "My sins are always the same each time I go to Confession". It is true, because we are always falling into sin, many of our sins especially the venial sins will be the same and repetitive. In answer to this Pope Benedict XVI had this to say. *"It is true our sins are always the same, but we clean our homes, our rooms at least once a week, even if the dirt is always the same; in order to live in cleanliness, in order to start again. Otherwise, the dirt might not be seen but it builds up"*. So then don't worry about confessing the same thing again, think of it in the same way as cleaning your home only this time you are cleansing your soul.

Before celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation we must first pray and examine our own conscience. We can get into the habit of doing this by each night before retiring, review our behaviour of the day just passed and praying to the Lord for help to conquer our faults and failings. When we do examine our conscience before going to confession we must not be obsessed or disheartened and constantly worrying that we are always sinning. God has a plan for us all and sometimes we find ourselves fighting against this plan in so much as we want to do things our own way in our own time to our own rules when deep down we know this is wrong. We need to hand over such decisions and that includes all our anxieties, fears and plans to God and let him guide us rather than putting up barriers. And we must not forget that each time we come to Mass we confess all the small wrongs we have done in the

Penitential Rite at the start of each Mass and with the Priest we ask for mercy.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is a one to one with God. It can be in a confessional box behind a screen or more and more today as a face-to-face talk with the Priest. After you have confessed your sins you listen to the priest's advice or counselling and then you will be given an act of penance to do. This may be to say a prayer or you may be asked to perform a good deed or act of charity. The act of penance is a sign of our sorrow and is part of the healing process. At the end of the celebration of the sacrament the priest through whom the channel of Christ's love flows will absolve you of your sins: *"... May God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"* and after accepting God's forgiveness we should then be filled with joy as we are cleansed and feel good again.

A Simple Guide to making a Confession

When you enter the confessional or visit a priest start by letting the priest know how long it has been since your last confession or for some it may be your first confession, if you are a new catholic let the priest know this and if you have not been to confession for years then let the know priest that as well.

Then confess your sin / sins or what is bothering your conscience and listen to the priest's advice. The priest may ask you to recite an "act of contrition", there are many formulas but simply saying "I am sorry for my sins and offending Jesus, Lord help me to conquer my faults and failings and I will try to do better next time" will suffice. After being given an act of penance to do (normally you will be asked to pray silently in the church afterwards) the priest will then absolve you using the words given earlier.

It is also good from time to time to reflect on the good things that we have done because we do far more good things than bad. Remember every time we forgive someone, every time we show compassion to a suffering person, every time we put others first,

every word spoken and action taken to promote a just world we are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist

(The Heart of the Mass)

For this is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the same night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and thanked God for it, and broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me.' In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me".

1 Corinthians: 11: 23-26

When we come to Mass we are not simply spectators, we are participants throughout. It is at the Mass where we gather together in the Church as a body of people united in Jesus Christ and it is within the Mass that we meet and receive the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist by partaking in His Body and Blood.

At the beginning of each Mass we confess to God that we are sinners in the Penitential Rite and ask God to show us his mercy. We then listen as the Word of the Lord is proclaimed to us in readings from the Bible and listen to the Priest's words of reflection and advice in his homily (sermon). We then profess our faith vocally and publicly by reciting the Creed and affirm what we believe. Prayers of Intercession follow when we pray for our own needs and the needs of others.

At the heart of the Mass is the Eucharist. Gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar. These will become "the bread of life" and "our spiritual drink". The priest prays over the gifts. The most important prayer of the whole Mass is said here. We thank God for everything we remember Jesus' life, death, resurrection and

ascension into heaven. We pray for the whole Church, those who are alive and those who are dead. Through God and the power of the Holy Spirit the bread and wine on the altar truly become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ gave us the Eucharist as the Sacrament of all Sacraments. The night before he died Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his apostles. The Gospel accounts of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke record the Passover meal of The Last Supper and the institution of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. At the meal, Jesus took some bread, broke it and said: *"This is my body, which will be given for you"* (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19). Later when the meal was ended Jesus took some wine and said: *"This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all – do this in memory of me"* (Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:2; Luke 22:20). During the Mass the Priest recites these very same words as the bread and wine is changed into Christ's Body and Blood on the altar. The Church calls this change *"Transubstantiation"* - by the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real and substantial manner: his Body and Blood, with his soul and divinity CCC 1413). It is one of the great mysteries of faith and it only through this faith that we are enabled to believe in something that reaches beyond our understanding and imagination.

The Mass continues with the Lord's prayer where we all pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us and we make the sign of peace with those next to us in the Church that reminds that we must make amends with those in our lives before receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. To be able to receive the Eucharist we must be in a worthy state, that is if we know that we have committed a seriously grave and mortal sin, we must go to a Catholic priest and celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation confessing our sins and receive absolution before receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion

When we receive Holy Communion we must do so in a very reverend manner. This is the time in partaking of the actual Body and Blood of Christ that we become totally united with Him. This time, being one with Jesus is so important that after receiving Holy Communion we should spend some minutes praying to him in the silence of our own hearts. We must remember that not only is the bread and wine transformed into Christ's Body and Blood, we as taking part in the Mass are transformed as well. We are forgiven, cleansed, enlightened, consoled, strengthened and healed by participating fully in the Mass. St. Augustine tells us that *"God can give no greater gift than the gift of Himself"* and says: *"That when we receive Jesus in the Eucharist we have all healing within us because we have received the Healer Himself"*. And Blessed John Paul II wrote that the Eucharist is *"a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death"*.

The Eucharist prepares us also for being ready for the Lords coming as we have been told *"As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lords death until he comes"* (1 Corinthians 11:26). Through this Sacrament, from the starting point here on earth we journey to the heavenly Kingdom. Jesus Christ called himself the bread of life and told us: *"Whoever eats this bread will live forever"* (St. John 6:51) and that is His promise to us, of eternal life.

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Any of you who is in trouble should pray; anyone in good spirits should sing a psalm. Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

St. James 5: 13-15

Sickness, dying and death are not the everyday topics of conversation that we feel comfortable with and for many these are

taboo subjects or terrifying words and what about the question that many people raise either publicly or think or worry about in silence: Why is there suffering in the world?

Suffering in this world only makes sense to those who follow and believe in Jesus Christ and is seen in the light of being a Christian. Nobody suffered more than Jesus, through his Passion, the agony, the condemnation, the torture of scourging, carrying the cross and finally the crucifixion. He did this for us. He died for our sins. Those who suffer in any way or form are following in Christ's footsteps, with their wounds, afflictions, diseases, pains and torments. By sharing in Christ's suffering we become heirs to the Glory of the eternal Kingdom. To share His suffering is to share His glory and *"what we suffer in this life can never be compared to the glory as yet un-revealed, which is waiting for us"* (Romans 8:17-18). St. Clare of Assisi writes about suffering, she suffered herself for thirty years, half her life: *"If you suffer with Him, you will reign with Him. If you weep with Him, you shall rejoice with Him. If you die with Him on the cross of pain, sorrow and suffering, you shall possess heavenly mansions in the splendour of the saints This is why you may forever in eternity share the glory of the heavenly kingdom and why you will live for ever and ever."* (St Clare of Assisi, Letter II).

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was instituted to strengthen those who are ill. By the anointing of the sick, the church places before God those who are suffering, so that Lord may raise them up and save them. Illness and suffering has always been in human terms the most serious thing that a person has to endure. In illness we often become powerless and need to rely on others and illness can give us a glimpse of death. Sickness and suffering can lead to despair; some may turn against or question God. Conversely it can make a person stronger, a sick person can re-evaluate what is important and not important in life and in many cases sickness can cause a person to seek out or return to God; in this way suffering can become a way to conversion and faith. In the Old Testament, Isaiah reveals that a time will come

when God will pardon every offence and heal every illness (Isaiah 33:24).

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was initiated by Jesus and is mentioned in the Gospels: *"So they set off to proclaim repentance; and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them"*. (St. Mark 6:13) And the detail of the rite is described by St. James (5:14-15) under the chapter heading. Much of Christ's ministry dealt with healing of one form or another, Jesus showed great compassion to the sick and that healing could be taken further in the forgiveness of sins therefore healing both a person's, body and soul.

Until recently this Sacrament was given almost exclusively to those on the point of death and was known as Extreme Unction or "The Last Rites". There were however severe drawbacks. When the priest arrived to give "The Last Rites", the sick person suddenly realised they were dying, if they did not know this already and this action became a frightening experience for some. And what if you sent for the priest and he was out or unavailable, then this caused even more grief and anguish for the patient and family. And so it was decided by the Second Vatican Council that the Sacrament of the Sick should be given to those who are seriously ill by anointing them on the forehead and hands with duly pressed blessed oil from olives or from other plants saying only once: *"Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up"*.

From this we can see that the anointing is not just for those on the point of death. Those who are seriously ill or have an on-going medical condition or are preparing for major surgery or the elderly are entitled to receive this sacrament. If the sick person recovers they can be anointed again if they become gravely ill. If during the same sickness the condition becomes worsens the sacrament may be repeated. Through this sacrament the gifts of the Holy Spirit

flow through those anointed and the result is that a person finds, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties, anxieties and fear that surround the condition or serious illness or old age. This gift of the Holy Spirit also strengthens against the temptation of the evil one, the temptation of anguish and depression in the face of great adversity or death. This power of the Holy Spirit is meant to lead the person to healing of the soul (spiritual health) but also to healing of the body if it is God's will and any sins committed will be forgiven. Priests will recall stories of those anointed on the point of death during the night and next morning be well and sitting up in bed enjoying their boiled egg for breakfast.

Only Bishops and Priests are Ministers of the Sacrament. And this rite should not be confused with anointing with the oil of gladness that often takes place in general healing services held within or outside of the Mass.

The Sacrament can take place in a hospital, at home, singly or with a group of sick people. It can also take place within a Mass. It is fitting to celebrate it with the Eucharist and if possible to precede it with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The Eucharist should always be the last Sacrament of the earthly journey, and this is called "*viaticum*" (Latin: meaning preparation for a journey) when it is a person's last sacrament before death as Jesus said; "*he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day*" (St. John 6:54) and this becomes that final part of the earthly journey, the bridge to eternal life in the heavenly kingdom.

Throughout life we will all experience many "small deaths"; maybe as a child our pet dies. As parents we see our children growing up and leaving home. We move in a stream of life's changes, through new jobs, a new house a new country and the experience of losing a relative, friend or loved one. As the years pass we will all experience emotional situations and we may come to witness the faith of those who are dying. Our comfort and encouragement lies in the sacraments and prayers of the priest

offered for the sick and it is this that helps not only the patient but also family members and friends to carry on.

With the Anointing of the Sick a person may be restored to good health now, or the healing may be a holy death in the Lord Jesus Christ who will give the good health of life everlasting. If the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist are the sacraments of Christian initiation, so too it can be said that Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum are the sacraments that prepare us for our heavenly homeland.

We now move onto what happens nextwhere one goes afterdeath Heaven, Hell or Purgatory (something that non Catholics may never have heard about) .

Every human being is created in the image of God and is both physical and spiritual in other words "Body and Soul". The Church teaches that body and soul are truly one nature united together and whilst our bodies are corruptible and decay our souls that are created by God alone and not by our parents are immortal (CC 362-366).

Death therefore brings to an end human life. The Bible - New Testament affirms that each person will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with what they have done, for example by good works and by their faith and there is a destiny of the soul which can be different for some and for others. Each person therefore receives their eternal retribution (punishment for wrongdoing and sin) in their immortal soul at the moment of death in a particular judgement, either by entrance to heaven immediately or through a period of purification in purgatory or by immediate and everlasting damnation (CC 1021-1022).

Christians and many non Christians are familiar with the notion and belief of heaven and hell. To be in heaven is to be with God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit and with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the saints, it is being in a state of supreme

happiness. It is beyond all our imagination, the sacred scriptures describe it in many ways: as a wedding feast, the Fathers house, the heavenly Jerusalem and paradise.

Hell on the other hand is the state of eternal separation from God. Jesus warns in the Gospel that those who shall be separated from him are those who choose to ignore the plight of the poor, the hungry, thirsty and also those who ignore the stranger, the sick and prisoners (Mt. 25:31-46). To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love and that includes those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe in God, then these willingly by their own free will exclude themselves from all communion with God and descend to hell where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire" (Mt 25:41 & CC 1033-1037).

God tells us that nothing unclean, loathsome or false can enter heaven (Rev 21:27). So if only the very good and holy go straight to heaven and the very bad deserve hell, then most people fall into a "somewhere in-between" category and this state is called purgatory. The word purgatory was originally a Latin adjective "cleansing". Those souls in purgatory are called Holy Souls. Holy Souls then are the souls of those who have died in a state of God's grace and friendship. They are assured of eternal salvation but after death because they are imperfect they need to undergo a period of purification that will allow them to gain the holiness needed to enter the joy of heaven (CC 1030).

Pope Benedict XVI in his (SpeSalviEncyclcal 44-48) describes purgatory as "the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves". Pope Benedict's encyclical also complements the famous Treatise on Purgatory by St. Catherine of Genoa (1447 – 1510) in which our saint describes *the peace and joy of the souls in purgatory* and that the greatest pain suffered by the holy souls is not a physical pain but the *pain of*

separation from God and that the loving flames are seen in the light of the divine fire of love remembering that God is all mercy with His arms always open and extended to receive us into His glory.

So those who believe and are open to God, but are still in some way imperfect (through their earthly sins) require purification and this is what the faith of the Church teaches in the doctrine of "Purgatory". So Purgatory is not a place in the true sense of the word but a condition of existence.

In Catholic teaching one of the great works of mercy is to "pray for the dead" which we do each time within the Mass and we can do so also privately and by offering Masses for the repose of a soul of a particular person.

People sometimes ask how can we know what happens after death, when no one has come back to tell us. Well someone did come back, Jesus Christ.

The Conclusion To Live the Mystery

*"I have come in order that you might have life — life in all its fullness.
St. John 10:10*

Our faith is the victory over the world. We believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. It is this faith in Jesus that helps us to overcome the world with its temptations and doubts. We have not seen yet we believe and we acknowledge that Christ is our Lord and our God (St. John 20:28-29).

800 years ago a young man called Francis Bernardone was searching for God and wanted to know what to do. Wandering amongst the hills and valleys of Umbria in Italy he took rest in the olive groves just outside the walls of the city of Assisi. Francis had

stumbled across the crumbling ruins of the ancient Church of San Damiano. On entering the empty sacred place he placed himself before the large crucifix still suspended from aloft and prayed for guidance and help in finding out he should do. He heard the voice of God: *"Go repair my Church which is falling into ruin"*. Initially he took this literally and rebuilt with his own hands the old and fallen down church. But he came to understand the words had a far more reaching meaning and what he needed to do was to rebuild the church by going out as a wandering preacher calling people to or back to following the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We too like St. Francis of Assisi are called by God to go forth and bear witness to our faith, to help build up God's Church here and now.

St. Paul offers his advice in how to live a life in the fullness of Christ by asking us to set our minds on things above and not on earthly things. We are asked to cloth ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are asked to forgive whatever grievances we have against one another and whatever we do in word or deed, do it all in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17).

Living the mystery leads us to understand what the meaning of life is or put another way, what we are here for and for anyone who professes to be a Christian the answer is: To love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul and all our strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) or to PRAISE GOD, to LOVE GOD and to SERVE GOD or put even more simply: TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Further reading and resources

All Scripture texts are taken from The Jerusalem Bible © 1966 by Darton, Longman & Todd.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Second Vatican Council Documents on- line

www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/

For those enquiring about the Catholic Faith, information is available from the Catholic Faith Centre, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1 1PL. Website: www.catholicfaith.org.uk

About the Book

This new resource is primarily for those who wish to know about the Catholic Faith either as an enquirer or for those who wish to rekindle the spark of their own faith. The book focuses on what makes the Catholic Church unique, namely Jesus Christ at its centre as the Lord and Saviour of humankind and the seven sacraments of the One, Holy, True, Catholic and Apostolic Church. It is written in a simple and uncomplicated way and can be used as an RCIA guide for sharing the faith either to groups or individually.

About the Author

John – Paul Kirkham is a writer and poet. His role as a parish catechist has allowed contact with many different people over the years from all walks of life in search of faith that developed into a journey, a lifelong commitment of new life in Jesus and the participation in the celebration of the sacraments of the Church.

A selection of John – Paul's books and writings include: "St. Clare of Assisi" (a biography), "Clare of Assisi – Her Life and Spirituality", "St. Gemma Galgani" (a biography), "The Holy Souls" (a book about the Holy Souls, Purgatory and a person's final destiny), "The Miraculous Infant of Prague" and an anthology of poetry entitled "In Violet"