

# FEATURES OF A CATHOLIC CHURCH

## A place of worship

A Catholic church is the place of worship where Catholics gather as a community to celebrate their faith. Most Catholics will attend a local parish church. A parish is the local Christian community around a church building. They are usually looked after by a priest, who leads the community and celebrates the sacraments. Christians call their church 'the house of God'. Many Christians believe that the community of believers (the Church) is more important than the church building, which is simply a meeting place for the Church.

## Inside a Catholic Church

The interior of Roman Catholic churches can vary from very plain and simple to fancy and ornate, but whatever the design, the whole church will be focused on the sanctuary. Sanctuary means 'holy place'. This is where the altar, lectern and tabernacle are. The sanctuary is the centre of public worship. These are features you would expect to find in a Catholic church:



## The Confessional

This is a small room or box-like structure in which the Sacrament of Reconciliation takes place. This is when Catholics confess their sins to a priest. Inside the confessional there is a screen so that the person confessing their sins (the penitent) can make their confession anonymously. The priest sits on one side while the penitent kneels in the other. When penitents confess their sins, the priest gives them a penance. A penance is something that penitents have to do, for example say a prayer. The priest then absolves them. They are given the assurance that by the power of God they have been forgiven their sins through the priest. By penance and absolution they are reconciled to God, which means that their relationship with God is restored. The fact that there is a room dedicated to it shows how important the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to Catholics.

## The Altar

A table, usually made out of stone. The main part of the Mass, the liturgy of the Eucharist, takes place at the altar. Mass is one of the most important sacraments for Catholics and during the liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest consecrates (blesses) bread and wine at the altar and then the congregation comes to the altar to receive them. The altar reminds Christians of the sacrifice and death of Jesus on the cross and that Jesus offers salvation and redemption from sin. The fact that the altar is also a table, reminds Catholics that they are sharing in a meal, in the same way Jesus shared a meal with his disciples at the Last Supper. On or nearby the altar are candles, representing the Christian belief that Jesus is the light of the world.

## The baptismal font

This is a big basin, sometimes made of stone, filled with holy water where baptisms are performed. Baptism is the sacrament by which a person becomes a Christian; it is the first sacrament to be received.

Fonts were traditionally positioned by the main door to the church to symbolise that people entered the Christian life through baptism. Now the font tends to be at the front so that all those present can easily see about it and when it takes place. Jesus himself was baptised by John the Baptist and baptism was one of the very earliest Christian practices, following Jesus's final command to:

**'go and make disciples of all nations... Baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'** Matthew 28: 19.

## The lectern

Near the altar is the lectern, or it is sometimes called an ambo, used for the Liturgy of the Word. The lectern is a book stand where the priest, deacon or reader stands to read to the congregation; they read from a lectionary, which is the book containing a collection of scripture readings for use on a given day. Catholics believe that at Mass there are spiritually nourished and fed by listening to the word of God.

## The crucifix

In Catholic churches there is always a crucifix – a cross with an image of the crucified Christ on it. It is usually on or near the altar. It serves as a reminder of the suffering and death of Jesus. Catholics believe that the death of Jesus was the price he paid for their salvation. Catholics, like all Christians, believe that Jesus died for them to pay for their sins and so that they could have eternal life.

## The Tabernacle

The tabernacle is a safe-like box in which the consecrated (blessed) hosts are kept. The hosts are put in the tabernacle after Mass so that communion can be taken to the sick and those who are unable to come to church. The tabernacle is also a focus for private prayer and devotion. Catholics will genuflect (go down on one knee) towards the tabernacle in honour of the presence of Jesus in the form of the blessed bread and wine. The tabernacle is often behind the altar, but in some modern churches it is sometimes placed in a side chapel so that people can pray in private. A sanctuary lamp (a small lamp showing that the Blessed Sacrament is present) is found nearby, which reminds Catholics of the presence of God in the tabernacle.

## Other features

- ✓ As people come into to the church they pass a **holy water container or stoup**. Catholics dip their fingers in the water and make the sign of the cross beginning on their head, down to their torso and then to their left and right shoulder. This reminds them of the Trinity, the death of Jesus and their own baptism. It also helps to focus their mind into a respectful attitude as they enter the church.
- ✓ Featuring importantly in a Roman Catholic church are the **Stations of the Cross**. These are usually pictures or carvings of each of the 14 stages of Christ's passion (trials, death and resurrection). They are especially used in Lent to focus worship on the death of Jesus.
- ✓ **Statues** are usually found around the church to help people pray. One of them will usually be of our Lady (Mary - Jesus' mother).
- ✓ In front of the statues there will probably be **votive candles**, which are small candles symbolising prayers. The statues are not worshipped in any way, they are just used to focus the mind and as aids to prayer.

## Knowledge Check

1. What is a parish?
2. What is the difference between Church/ church?
3. What is a confessional?
4. What takes place at the altar?
5. What command Jesus gave does baptism follow?
6. What is a lectern?
7. What is a tabernacle?
8. What other features are there inside a church and how are they used?

## Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

### CHALLENGE!

Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information. Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.

## Exam Question

- a) Explain the features and symbolism found within a Catholic church [8]
- b) Explain how the altar and font represent Catholic beliefs about Salvation [8]

## Summary

- A Catholic church is the place of worship where Catholics gather as a community to celebrate their faith
- The focal point of a Roman Catholic Church is the sanctuary. You will find the altar and lectern here. The altar is the stone table at which the liturgy of the Eucharist takes place
- The font is a wooden or stone basin, filled with holy water where baptism takes place
- Other features of the building are the confessional, the stoup and the tabernacle
- Stations of the Cross and statues are there as aids to prayer
- Some churches have towers or steeples which are symbolic of prayer rising up to God
- Traditionally, churches face towards the east and are built in a cruciform shape