

THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

This topic links with baptism

The Church is described as the body of Christ in both the New Testament and the Catechism. According to the Bible, when Jesus entered the world, **he took on a physical body that was 'prepared' for him** (Hebrews 10:5; Philippians 2:7). This is known as the incarnation; God became a human being.

While on earth in his physical body Jesus showed God's love in the things he said and did. He taught people how God wanted them to live and he cared for the sick and the infirm by curing them. Ultimately, he gave his life as a sacrifice so that all Christians could have a closer relationship with God. After he rose from the dead, Christians believe that he physically (bodily) ascended (went up) into heaven. This is known as the Ascension.

The teaching that the Church is the body of Christ means that Catholics believe that the work of Christ on earth did not end with the Ascension. They believe that **Jesus lives on through his followers, and in the Church**. In this way, it is believed that Christ continues his work in the world and shows the love of God through members of the Church. In this way, the Church functions as 'the body of Christ'. The Church is not a club or association to belong to; it isn't just a gathering of like-minded people. It continues the work that Jesus started off making the world holy. **The Church offers a way of continuing what Jesus started.**

So, according to Catholic teaching, all Christians continue the work of Jesus on earth. Christian people are now the physical body of Jesus as he is no longer physically present in the world. **When someone is baptised, Catholics believe that they are united with other Christians and with Christ and become part of this 'body'.**

Why is the Church as the body of Christ important for Catholics?

In the New Testament, the Church is described as 'the body of Christ' especially by St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 12:27). As Catholics consider themselves to be the physical form of Jesus on earth (the body of Christ), they must continue with his physical work, giving help and teaching. For Catholics, this means that Jesus is still active in the world. His work didn't end with his death, but it continues in those that follow and believe in him.

Following this teaching, individual Catholics can continue Jesus' work in different ways and yet be united. Each person, just like each part of a body, has a different function and is used for the good of the whole body. The Church remains a unity because its entire people are working together as the body of Christ.

It is for this reason that the Mass (or Eucharist) is so important for Catholics. It is central to their faith that the bread and wine which have been offered up in prayer have now become the body and blood of Christ. As they share these in communion, Catholics believe that they are given strength to be the followers of Christ in the world. The also reaffirms their unity and gives them a sense of identity.

Some Christians, for example Anglicans, believe that the bread and wine just symbolise Jesus' body and blood. However Catholics believe that Christ is fully present in the Eucharist. This is known as the Real Presence. This means that at Mass the bread and wine, while keeping the appearance of bread and wine, are actually transformed into the body, blood, soul and dignity of Christ.



"Outside the Church there is no salvation"

The phrase 'outside the Church there is no salvation' is a very old one and comes from the writings of early Christian thinkers. For example, it occurs in one of the letters of St Cyprian, a Catholic bishop in Africa in the third century. For St Cyprian, and many others since, this phrase has expressed *the belief that only Catholics will go to heaven*. This is the most straightforward reading of the meaning of this phrase which can still be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church today (CCC 845). But does the Church teach that anyone who is not a Catholic is going to hell? **The Church does not teach this**; but what it does teach needs to be looked at carefully.

So, what does the Church teach about salvation?

Firstly, the Church teaches that everyone is saved through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection – whether they know it or not. The way you can be most certain of receiving salvation is to be baptised and practising member of the Catholic Church. This is stated in the Catechism:

Jesus 'explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door', therefore, 'they could not be saved who, knowing the the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it' – (CCC 846, citing LG 16)

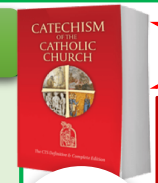
However, they also teach that the Church of Christ is wider than the Catholic Church. Catholics believe that the full way to get to God is through the Catholic faith. However, God is bigger than the Church, so people who are not Catholics can be saved by God's power.

Secondly, they also teach that people who have not heard the Gospel of Jesus but have lived good lives can be saved because it is not their fault that they are not Christians. They are sometimes referred to as 'anonymous Christians'. This is because Catholics believe these people are living good lives. So the Church also believes that people who are not Christians can also be saved:

'Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.' (LG 16 cited CCC 847).

The Catholic Church still believes that the most certain route to salvation is to be a baptised and practising member of the Catholic Church, but it does believe that other good people outside of the Church can be saved.

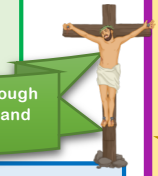
Everyone is saved through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection!



Baptism

God is bigger than the Church

Anonymous Christians



Summary

- The Church is the people of God
- The Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic
- Mary is a model of the Church as an example of discipleship, faith and charity
- The Church is known as 'the body of Christ' and 'people of God'
- There are multiple meanings of the phrase 'outside of the Church there is no salvation'.

Knowledge Check

1. How did Jesus show God's love?
2. What does it mean to say: 'the church is the body of Christ'?
3. Which Catholic saint in particular describes the Church as 'the body of Christ'?
4. Catholics believe that Christ is fully present in the Eucharist. What is this known as?
5. What do Anglican Christians believe about the bread and wine?
6. Which saint wrote in his letters that 'outside the Church there is no salvation'?
7. How can Christians be certain of receiving salvation?
8. How do Catholics believe non-Christians can be saved?

Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual) **CHALLENGE!** Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information.
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions) Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.
3. Create a poster/leaflet

Exam Question

C) Explain the significance in understanding the Church as the body of Christ [8]