



# Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction

*Gerald O'Collins*

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## **Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction** Gerald O'Collins

Despite a long history of external threats and internal strife, the Roman Catholic Church and the broader phenomenon of Catholicism remain a vast and valuable presence into the third millennium of world history. What are the origins of the Catholic Church? How has Catholicism changed and adapted to such vast and diverse cultural influences over the centuries? What great challenges does the Catholic Church now face in the twenty-first century, both within its own life and in its relation to others around the world? In this Very Short Introduction, Gerald O'Collins draws on the best current scholarship available to answer these questions and to present, in clear and accessible language, a fresh introduction to the largest and oldest institution in the world. O'Collins explains clearly and concisely where the Catholic Church comes from, what it believes and practices, the sacraments and the Church's moral teaching, and where it is heading. The book also includes a timeline of events in the history of Catholicism and useful suggestions for further reading.

## **Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction Details**

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## **Bojan Tunguz says**

Catholicism is a word that encompasses many distinct meanings: a religion, a church, a way of life, a geographical region perhaps. Catholicism is all of these things and much more - it is a Christian sect (to most of its members THE Christian sect) that strives to be all encompassing and universal, as its very name implies. And yet it is probably the form of Christianity that invites the most controversy. To the outsiders it can seem imposing and even threatening, and many groups implicitly or explicitly define their raison d'être as the opposition to Catholicism. The opposition is not limited to the outsiders, and there are many who call themselves Catholics who have serious issues and misgivings about certain aspects of Catholic teachings. And yet, for millions of people around the globe Catholicism remains a cornerstone of their lives and a source of great joy and fulfillment. It is often said that the Catholic Church is much vaster from the inside than it is from the outside. For all these vastly different points of view, be they opposing or promoting, it is useful to get themselves familiarized with what Catholicism really is. They owe it to themselves to understand this Catholicism better, and in achieving that goal I cannot think of a better first step than reading this slim yet informative book.

The book is written by Father Gerald O'Collins, S.J. research professor of theology at St. University College, Twickenham, and formerly the dean of the Faculty of Theology at Gregorian University in Rome. He is obviously a Catholic "insider," but that does not prevent him from making a book that is readable by and aimed at the general reader. The advantage of a Catholic theologian writing a book on Catholicism is that the reader is guaranteed to get a full picture of how Catholics understand themselves, their faith and their Church.

The book's chapters cover a handful of main themes - the history of Catholicism, Catholic Theology, the sacraments and church practices, the spiritual life, the moral and social teachings, the organization of the Catholic Church and the future of Catholicism. Each one of these topics could easily occupy vast number of volumes or even whole libraries full of books, and it is not always the easiest thing to exercise prudential judgment in choosing how much space to devote to each one of them. Many things will necessarily be omitted or just mentioned in passing. Overall, however, Father O'Collins does a remarkably good job of covering all the essential features of Catholicism.

The book is easy to read. It is written in an easy-going and legible style, but it is not condescending to the reader. It assumes a willing and interested reader who wants to learn about a new (or perhaps an old) subject.

Overall, this is a splendid book and another publishing success for the Oxford University Press. If you have any interest in Catholicism, this is a worthwhile volume to read. And just like the Catholicism itself, the appeal of this book is truly universal.

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## **Megan says**

Very dry in parts, but overall it was okay. The last chapter, which focuses on the church's future, was the most interesting.

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## Daniel Wright says

The author very much writes about his subject from within it; his Catholic credentials are flaunted with pride on the blurb. There is nothing wrong with this *per se*, but I couldn't help but be amused when the author occasionally behaved like a stereotypical traditional Catholic, slightly afraid of what the Church authorities might say if he puts too much toe across the official line. Consequently some parts inevitably came across as apologetic rather than descriptive, which could be slightly annoying to a Protestant like me. Still, no-one comes at any subject with an entirely open mind, especially when religion is involved, and there is still plenty of interesting content here, theological/historical/whateverical.

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## John Eliade says

I really like the VSI series because it tends to provide a comprehensive introduction (that's its purpose) to a topic. I have always found the VSI series to be quite helpful in that regard. For example, I knew nothing about Classics or the Roman Republic, and VSI gave me a stellar introduction to those concepts and histories. However, I find the Catholicism: VSI to be lacking for two main reasons:

1. It presumes a foreknowledge of Catholicism.

Now, I luckily DO have previous experience with Catholicism (coming from a mixed Polish, Italian, and Puerto Rican family, you better fucking believe I have some background at Catholic churches) but like most Catholics\* I knew very little of Vatican I, II, the various Councils throughout history, or some of the perceptions of doctrinal truth, or say what effects happenings in the Vatican have on local churches in Vietnam, Venezuela, and Hawai'i.

(\*I'm painting with a broad brush here, but I think it's safe to say the majority of followers of any religion have deep insights into the origins, nature, or internal workings of the faith's mechanics at large)

That said, if I knew nothing about Catholicism and needed a literal "Very Short Introduction" I would find myself questioning. In fact, I still know very little about Vatican I and II and the list above. I find myself currently asking, "Why is Catholicism?" Literally, why does it exist? I used to think I knew the answer to why Christianity exists, and while I can trace the history just fine (this book did a... fine job of relating Catholic history from the early Church to the modern era, but it felt sweeping, apologetic, a bit inaccurate, and quite frankly rushed, but then again, how do you summarize 2000 years of history in less than 100 pages?) I still find myself wondering.

Sure, Catholicism is about "coming to the light and salvation of Jesus Christ." But I grew up in a Protestant Church which focused on redeeming original sin. What I get from this book is that Catholicism is not nearly geared toward that, but more on creating a global society. But again, that's only my feeling based on what O'Collins said. He never actually comes out and says it. So if I have a foreknowledge of Catholicism, it leaves me with a whole lot more questions (such as, what exactly was Vatican I? That seems like a lot more important to modern Catholicism than the dozen or so pages about the Crusades). But if you don't have a foreknowledge of Catholicism, well, you might end the book as more confused than you started.

2. It's a bit tract-y.

Quote from the end of the book: "In the third millennium, the human family finds its future existence under threat. More than ever it needs the message of Christ who is the Light of the whole world. He is the full and final key to what human life is ultimately about, the one who brings life in abundance."

Um... ok.

"My dream is that, through a deep conversion to Jesus, more and more Catholics and other Christians may embody and convey his role in uniting human beings with God and with one another."

There's some redeeming qualities to that sentence in general (such as using the term "Catholics and other Christians" and not "people" and visions of peace are always good no matter what religion or philosophy\*) but I take a real issue with this being an introductory semi-academic book on Catholicism with this kind of language. I don't want to read an academic book about space telling me why I should send money to a space program, and I don't want an academic introduction to Islam to end with attempting to convert me. I wouldn't want the same from Damien Keown's *Buddhist Ethics: VSI*, and he doesn't. He certainly has a point to make, but it is an academic point about what style of ethics he believes Buddhism generally is, not on his personal spiritual beliefs and the future of mankind.

\*except Fascism

I have no problem with Catholicism. In fact, I have a lot of respect and appreciation for it now that I have a lot more questions to ask (see above). But I don't think this book was a Very Good Introduction to one of the world's largest religions.

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### **Kathleen O'Neal says**

A very good VSI that provides a thorough overview of important topics in Catholicism. A great starting place for anyone interested in learning about the faith.

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### **Benjamin Stahl says**

This is an excellent and well-written book, providing a concise (if somewhat limited) historic overview of the Catholic church through the ages, a basic summary of the Seven Sacraments and a balanced projection of Catholicism in the future.

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### **Lindsay Wilcox says**

I initially chose this book as a candidate for my book review column at Austin Catholic New Media. I wound up reviewing Catholicism for Dummies instead and was delighted to find that I'd posted it right in time for the new second edition of that title. Having now finished *Catholicism: A Very Short Introduction*, I am very glad I decided not to review it for ACNM, because I didn't like it.

O'Collins self-admittedly writes as "an insider," but he fails to make Catholicism accessible to most newcomers. His organization of topics begins with two chapters of Church history. If you're trying to reach people who just want the basic of Catholicism, laying out literally two thousand years of history is a very poor way to start. He continues on through chapters on theology, sacraments, and morality before concluding with predictions about the future of the Church.

In the final chapter, I was downright offended by his use of the term "Eucharistic ministers" (which is always wrong; they are "extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist" or of Holy Communion) and his suggestion that the Church must allow more\* married men to be ordained in order to survive. That last suggestion is offered with no theological or Scriptural support. Apparently a little bit of social commentary is enough to justify changing a centuries-old practice.

I wanted this to be a shorter intro book in comparison to Catholicism for Dummies, because not everyone is willing to even flip through 400 pages. I was sorely disappointed.

\*This is one of the biggest misconceptions of Catholicism. Priests can be married, but never after they're ordained. That's just currently the exception and not the norm.

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### **Kat says**

This book should have been called the history of Christianity with an emphasis on Catholicism. Half of the book was a history of early Christianity and the other half was information about Catholicism but it did not go into detail. This was not a good book. I know bits and pieces of stuff about Catholicism but I do not have an understanding. I know it is supposed to be a very short introduction but it was very hard to understand and did not give me a clear understanding of the basics of Catholicism; only a history of it.

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### **Simon says**

Insightful, well written, and inspiring.

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### **Libby says**

A diverse introduction to Catholicism - both the institution and the faith by a very well known Catholic academic. It's really short, so a good way to get a cross section of information about different aspects of Catholicism, from the history to the sacraments to the controversies.

However, I found that the writer put a lot of his own bias into the book, so it was hard to separate fact from opinion at times. I particularly noticed this in the faith and reason section, where apparently the only time the Catholic church has acted to silence reason was in the case of Galileo. I also found it frustrating that he didn't even touch on the current debate regarding stem cells research.

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### **Ashish Jaituni says**

Well written but the problem that arise with these oxford short introduction series is that one can't possibly write about everything important in such short books. Nevertheless, it is a good effort by the author.

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### **Jess says**

For a book that claims to be "a very short introduction" it falls far short. You should go in with a clear understanding of the Bible, the differences between Benedictine and Franciscan orders, and the life and papacy of John Paul II. After a brief 60 page summary of the entire history of the church, O'Collins then tries to explain modern Catholics life by focusing heavily on esoteric religious debates.

It would have been more effective to outline the sacraments (as he does), then guide the reader through a liturgical year. I can't really recommend this for a true beginner.

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### **Dan says**

Very dry and boring

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### **Vince Sheehan says**

What shines in this introduction is O'Collin's generosity to other Christians outside of the Catholic fold. He clearly has an ecumenical heart and it is heartening to read the commonalties between Catholicism and other denominations, (including my own) Anglicanism. Recommended.

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