



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **The Holy Catholic Church**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but other Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, by my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:13-18).*

Every time we celebrate communion here at Westminster we recite the Apostles' Creed, which says among other things, "I believe in the holy catholic church...." Sometimes people ask why we believe in the catholic church when we're not Roman Catholic. On the other hand, a great many in our congregation come from the Roman Catholic tradition, and lots of people wonder what exactly are the differences, and how much do they matter. Pope Francis's visit to America seems like a perfect time to talk about what it means to believe in and be part of the "holy catholic church."

A short answer to the question why we believe in the catholic church is that every true Christian is a catholic with a small "c." That's because the word "catholic" comes from a Greek phrase "*kata holon*," meaning "according to the whole" or "universal." "Catholic" with a small "c," then, simply means that we belong to the one universal Christian church, the body of all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Catholics with a capital "C" are those who come from the Roman Catholic tradition or a few other denominations with "Catholic" in their name.

You might ask, if there is only one catholic or universal church, why do we have so many denominations? That's a very good question. The chair of the religion department at Dickinson College, where I used to teach, liked to say that every denomination is an institutionalized insight. I like that. He himself is a priest in the Orthodox tradition, but his point is that every branch of Christianity emphasizes one or more parts of the faith in its theology or liturgy or organizational structure. That doesn't necessarily mean the other churches are wrong. It may just mean that a particular denomination places a high value on certain parts of the Christian tradition.

When Christians are at their best, they follow the formula I mentioned last Sunday: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." Of course people can have rather different views on what the essentials are. That's why we have an ecumenical movement dedicated to promoting understanding among the various branches of Christianity.

The word "fundamentalism," by the way, comes from an effort by some American Protestants a century ago to define what they thought were the fundamentals of the faith. In their view, you had to believe five or six particular things in order to be a true Christian; if you didn't believe those things, you weren't really a Christian. The question of what truly is fundamental to the faith is important, of course, but "fundamentalism" became a synonym for ideological hostility because fundamentalists often harshly condemned anyone who did not agree with them.

We welcome Christians from all denominations here at Westminster, and we invite people who aren't sure what they believe to explore questions of faith with us. If you join

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Westminster we ask you to profess just two things sincerely: first, that you have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; and second, that you will be a faithful member of this congregation through your prayers, presence, gifts, and service. That's all we ask, because if you're really committed to those two things you'll want to be a faithful follower of Jesus and grow in all sorts of ways as part of the body of Christ—that is, as part of the “holy catholic church.”

People from any Christian background, including the Roman Catholic Church, can be part of our congregation. Catholics are welcome to receive the Lord's Supper here because we believe the sacrament is for everyone who has been baptized and truly professes faith in Christ. The Roman Catholic Church has a different view because they believe that when the priest consecrates the elements in the Mass, they become quite literally the body and blood of Christ through a mystery called “transubstantiation.” We don't think it's necessary to believe in transubstantiation in order to believe that Christ is really present in and through the sacrament.

Our Presbyterian Church differs from the Roman Catholic Church in some other ways that are significant, but not so important that we don't see ourselves as part of the same holy catholic church. We call our clergy ministers or pastors rather than priests, for example, because we believe in the “priesthood of all believers”—the notion that all Christians can receive the grace of God directly in Christ without the mediation of a priest. Ministers can be married in Protestant churches, while they can't in the Roman Catholic Church, because the churches have somewhat different ideas about the minister's vocation. Catholics emphasize that an unmarried priest is freed from family obligations to focus on caring for the congregation, while Protestants tend

to believe that being married and having a family, for those who do, contributes to our understanding of marriage and family life and can be an aid to pastoral care.

The Roman Church venerates Mary more than we do, though of course we honor Mary as the mother of Jesus. The Catholics have bishops to oversee the church, as do Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Methodists, while we Presbyterians provide for the church's oversight through the office of elders—teaching elders like Tammy and me, and ruling elders elected by the congregation. We don't canonize certain Christians as "saints" in the way that the Roman Church does, though we're happy to refer to people as St. Francis or St. Teresa of Avila, for example, because that's how they've come to be known in the Christian tradition. The reason we don't canonize individuals is that the New Testament refers to all faithful members of the church as "saints," which means that all of us who claim to be Christians are to live a life worthy of our calling as part of the holy catholic church.

That's a brief summary of some of the differences between Roman Catholicism and our Presbyterian Church. Sometime we'll offer a class where we talk about the differences in greater detail. The point for the moment is that our differences may divide us into denominations, but they're not great enough to separate us from one another as fellow members of the body of Christ, and most Christian denominations acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of the most striking things about Pope Francis is his strong emphasis on unity, humility, and mercy in the way we treat one another—not only Christians of all denominations, but also people of other faiths and those of

no religious faith. Some of Francis's messages from his first year in the papacy were published under the title *The Church of Mercy*, because the Pope wants to emphasize that the gospel is about God's grace and mercy for all people; and because God is gracious and merciful to us, we must be gracious and merciful to everyone else.

It's been interesting to see how some people try to fit Francis into secular political categories like "liberal" and "conservative," while in fact those categories are largely irrelevant to the gospel. The truth is that Christianity has elements that comfort, and elements that challenge, both liberals and conservatives.

Christians need to care about the sanctity of life, for example, because life is a gift from God and all human beings are made in the image of God. Life is precious—at the beginning, and at the end, and through all the years in between. Life is never to be taken lightly or treated casually. Surely we can all agree on that, even if we have different views about some specific implications of the sanctity of life.

Christians need to care about justice, too—not only criminal justice but also social justice, treating all human beings according to the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule. When the Pope insists on a Christian commitment to justice, he's simply echoing the Bible itself. The Old Testament is full of God's commandments summarized by the prophet Micah: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" And Jesus challenges those who claim that religion is mostly a matter of rituals and private practices, when he says, among other things, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin,



and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

Biblical faith goes beyond justice, all the way to mercy and compassion. Jesus says in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats that the way we treat the hungry, the naked, the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner is the way we treat him, and that’s a sign of who may go to heaven and who may not. Christian love and charity may be more than justice, but they can never be less.

The Pope has also made a point of underscoring our responsibility for the stewardship of creation, as have so many Protestant denominations. That’s because the Bible tells us that we human beings were placed in this world and given dominion, or responsibility, to tend the earth and care for it.

A recent report from NASA, the people who put men on the moon and send back pictures from Pluto, says that sea levels are rising demonstrably as a result of rising temperatures, so that some of its own launch sites will be threatened soon, and cities like New York, Miami, and New Orleans may be seriously affected in coming decades, along with many millions of people who live near the oceans worldwide. Last October the Pentagon released a report called the “Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap,” saying that “Rising global temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, climbing sea levels, and more extreme weather events will intensify the challenges to global instability, hunger, poverty, and conflict.” When the Pope and the Pentagon agree that peace, poverty, and climate change are all related, we need to pay attention and take those concerns seriously. As the secretary of defense said in the introduction to the Pentagon report, “Politics or ideology must not get in

the way of sound planning.”

When people try to avoid these things by saying that the Pope or any other religious leader should “stick to religion,” they miss the fact that the sanctity of life, and matters of justice, and the stewardship of creation *are* all part of religion—at least the Christian religion rooted in the Bible. We need people of all faiths, and all nations, and all parties to work together, acknowledging the reality of the problems we face, and accepting our responsibility to address them faithfully out of our love for God and our fellow human beings.

I went to a program sponsored by the World Affairs Council at Duquesne University last week, where Bishop Zubik offered some introductory remarks and the former Canadian ambassador to the Vatican was the principal speaker, giving us her interpretation of Pope Francis’s mission and message. I was there with maybe 130 other people at this Catholic university, most of whom I suppose were Catholic with a capital “C,” but the overwhelming impression I had was that I was part of all this, too, and so are all of us here.

I’m a Presbyterian minister, of course, and I don’t agree with the Roman Catholic Church on a number of things, but the undeniable sense I had at the meeting last week was that we’re all in this together. We Christians are all part of the body of Christ, with the same responsibility to be faithful to God in every aspect of the way we live—as individuals, as a nation, and as a community of peoples around the world.

Surely that’s what God is calling all of us to do. It’s a great thing and a high calling to be part of God’s redeeming

work in this beautiful but fragile world, where God has placed us and made us to be faithful stewards, to the glory of God our Creator.



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