Mere Catholicism: Who’s in Communion with Rome?

“You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble.”

– James 2:19

C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* is a wonderful book that articulates the basics of Christianity. However, because Lewis was an Anglican paradoxically not trying to convince anyone to become an Anglican, stopping at mere Christianity can lead to a kind of relativism at odds with the fact that the Catholic Church is the One True Church that Jesus Christ founded. Our separated brothers and sisters in the Protestant and Orthodox traditions have more of the truth than do other religions, but working toward unification means recognizing how close or far from the Church a particular denomination is.

# What is a Christian?

It’s easy to define **Christians** as believers in Christ, but what does that mean?

Most historians, Christian or otherwise, recognize that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person.

Muslims believe in Jesus. They even believe in the virgin birth (though not that He is the Son of God; they believe God simply created Him in Mary’s womb without a father) and the Second Coming. But they consider Him a prophet. They don’t believe He was crucified, instead saying God took Jesus up to Heaven and put His likeness on someone else (probably Judas, but that’s merely a popular opinion), and that person was the one crucified. Although they call Him the Messiah, they don’t believe He came to save us from sin. And they certainly don’t believe He is God. The idea of God having a son is repugnant to them.

The LDS (Mormons) believe in Jesus. They say He is the eldest of God’s spirit-children, begotten by physical intercourse between our Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother on a planet orbiting the star Kolob, where we all lived as God’s spirit-children in the preexistence and took sides in a war between Jesus and Lucifer, also one of God’s spirit-children. His incarnation came about by physical intercourse between Heavenly Father and Mary. Because of their belief in eternal progression (infinite generations of gods as the literal children of other gods extending into past and future eternity), the LDS are **monolaters** (meaning they worship one god) rather than **monotheists**, and although they consider Jesus part of the Godhead, He is not God.

It is not enough to believe in the existence of Jesus to be a Christian. It is not even enough to believe that He was a good moral teacher, a prophet, or even the Son of God. A Christian is a follower and worshiper of Jesus. Because a Christian must also be a monotheist per the First Commandment, a Christian must be **Trinitarian**. Therefore, according to the **Catholic** Church, a Christian is a person who has received Trinitarian baptism.

There has been a movement to baptize “in the Name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” for the purpose of gender-neutral language. Such baptisms are invalid because they do not use the proper **form** of the sacrament, and they are also not very robust theology.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, Oneness Pentecostals, Quakers (formally the Religious Society of Friends), and Unitarians believe in Jesus, but like Muslims and Mormons, they do not believe in His divinity and do not have Trinitarian baptism. Although Mormons baptize using the same words that we do, they do not mean the same thing we do. Oneness Pentecostals baptize in the name of Jesus rather than in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Note that there are also Trinitarian Pentecostals). Quakers do not baptize; they have no sacraments at all.

# What do we mean by divinity?

Many of the earliest heresies were concerned with the nature of Jesus. Arianism, for example, holds that Jesus is the Son of God and in a sense divine; however, He was begotten at a certain point in time and is as a creature subordinate to God the Father. This is an ancient heresy, but it keeps resurfacing in different forms.

The Athanasian Creed is the most precise articulation of the Catholic Church’s understanding of the Trinity, including the Hypostatic Union of Christ’s human and divine natures, i.e., He is fully God and fully man.

The Nicene Creed, which we recite at Mass, is easier to follow: “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.”

# What does it mean to be in communion with Rome?

**In communion:** recognizing the authority of the pope and wanting to remain in union with all of the other religious bodies that also recognize his authority.

Since the **Orthodox** clergy have **Apostolic Succession** (they can trace their ordination back to the Apostles), they have **valid orders** and therefore valid sacraments—all seven of them. However, although Orthodox churches mostly share common theology, they tend to be bound by nationality and do not want to be in community with each other. We as Roman Catholics believe we can receive their sacraments and they ours, but if we go to Orthodox Divine Liturgy, they don’t want us there or to receive Communion.

**Protestants** have two valid sacraments: baptism and matrimony, the only two that do not require the priesthood. Anyone can baptize, and the celebrants of a marriage are the bride and groom; the priest merely acts as a witness. Note that this does not necessarily correspond to what Protestants believe about themselves. Not all **denominations** agree on what constitutes a sacrament or how many there are. Although all recognize baptism and Eucharist, we do not recognize their Eucharist because they do not have valid orders.

# Vocabulary

**Christian:** Believes Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the Messiah, and our Savior.

**Monolater:** One who practices monolatry, the worship of one god, possibly while believing in the existence of others, e.g. Mormons. Monotheists, by contrast, only believe in one god. This distinction can help us understand the Old Testament: being surrounded by pagans led some Israelites to believe YHWH was one of many existing gods, but the only one they were to worship.

**Trinitarian:** Believes that God is One, but three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost). All are God, but all are distinct—not three Gods and not different modes or aspects of God.

**Valid:** Of a sacrament, using the proper form (the words of the ritual) and matter (the celebrant and materials used for the sacrament). Example: In Baptism, the words of Trinitarian Baptism (“Name, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”) are spoken while the person (who has not been baptized before) is either immersed in water or has water poured on them.

**Licit:** The celebrant of the sacrament followed all aspects in the celebration of the sacrament as required.In a general sense, the Rubrics (red print) in the ritual book have been followed completely and exactly.

**Illicit:** Some variation in the celebration of the sacrament that is not permitted by the ritual books, but does not invalidate the sacrament, has occurred. A child who has reached the age of reason (typically, 7 years of age) should receive all of the sacraments of initiation at the same time. If a 7-year-old child were validly baptized by a priest or deacon, but First Communion and Confirmation were not celebrated, even though there was no good reason for not celebrating the other sacraments of initiation, this would be illicit.

**Form:** The prescribed gestures and words in the ritual book. In Baptism, these are the words of Trinitarian Baptism.

**Matter:** The materials required for a valid celebration of a sacrament.In Baptism, these are water and a person who has not been validly baptized before.

**Valid Orders:** Ordination, when properly celebrated (proper form and matter by a bishop who is a successor of the apostles. Catholics and Orthodox have Valid Orders. In most cases, so do “Old Catholics,” such as many in the SSPX.  The case for Anglicans is somewhat muddy: they don’t have valid orders on their own, but some have been reordained by “Old Catholics,” which, in theory, would make their orders valid, but illicit.

**Apostolic Succession:** Bishops are ordained by 3 other bishops with the approval of the pope. This means that each bishop can trace his episcopacy through an unbroken chain of bishops back to the Apostles. In reality, the records get a bit fuzzy beyond a certain point. Still, just because we don’t have the names of each bishop going all the way back does not mean the chain is broken.

**Church sui iurus:** from Latin “under its own law.” Commonly called rites, although this term is imprecise, a religious body that has a distinct liturgical and legal existence yet is in communion with the pope. The differences in practice may be significant, but each Church sui iurus has 7 valid sacraments that any member of any of the 24 Churches sui iurus would be welcome to receive. While a Church sui iurus has its distinct laws and its own hierarchy (bishops or eparchs, possibly even patriarchs), it recognizes the authority of the pope to approve its laws and leaders (possibly even setting the law and choosing the hierarchy).

**In communion:** Of a religious body, recognizing the authority of the pope and wanting to remain in union with all other religious bodies that also recognize his authority.

**Catholic:** 2 distinct but related meanings, and a third that can cause confusion:

1. Universal—usually denoted by the word being lowercase. This is how the word appears in the Creeds (e.g., Apostolic: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church…” Nicene: “I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church…”). In this sense, it is intended to mean “shared by all.”
2. In communion with the pope. When the word is capitalized, this should be the meaning.
3. Having the appearance and feeling of the practice of a body that is in communion with the pope, but which is not. Several schismatic groups have retained use of the word in their names, even though they are no longer in communion with the pope.

**Orthodox:** 2 distinct meanings:

Note: Orthodox is an adjective. The noun form is orthodoxy.

1. Right belief—usually denoted by the word being lowercase. Those who believe the Nicene Creed have an orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ.
2. A religious body that holds orthodox theology and valid sacraments but is not in communion with the pope. When the word is capitalized, this is the meaning. The distinction between a Church sui iurus and an Orthodox Church can be found in 2 things:
   1. Its understanding of papal authority.
   2. Its attitude towards Catholics of other Churches sui iurus receiving sacraments. While the Catholic Church holds that Catholics can validly receive the sacraments of the Orthodox, the Orthodox will not typically allow Catholics to receive them.

**Protestant:** A Christian who (or a Christian religious body which) has left orthodox belief in one or more matters. For most, rejecting the authority of the pope was a starting point, but most have gone far beyond this.  In most cases, Protestants have only 2 valid sacraments (baptism (in most cases) and marriage (even if they don't recognize or treat it as such). Some may feel that they have more, but the lack of valid Holy Orders for their clergy prevents this from being the case.

**Denomination:** A religious body that shares beliefs, traditions (even though they may bristle at the use of the word) and practice. Denominations can be tiny (possibly starting with as few as 2 members) to very large. Some denominations include Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, and Methodists.

**Schism:** A break in a body of believers. For Catholics, there are 3 major ones:

1. The Great Schism between the Orthodox and Catholics (1054).
2. The “Great Western” schism (1378-1417).
3. The Protestant schism (beginning with the Protestant Reformation in 1517). Schisms in Protestant bodies happen all the time (which is why there are so many denominations).

**Heresy:** Incorrect understanding and practice. The big heresies are usually rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus. Examples of key heresies include:

* Denying the divine nature of Jesus (Arianism, etc.)
* Denying the human nature of Jesus (Nestorianism, etc.)
* Denying the necessity of Jesus’s sacrifice for redemption (Pelagianism, etc.)
* Denying the Trinity (dualism, etc.)

**Apostasy:** Leaving the truth of orthodox belief about God. Typically an apostate has known and affirmed the truth of orthodox Christian belief, but then denies it.A Catholic who becomes Muslim is an apostate because Muslims do not believe Jesus is God.