

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

GOD

PART ONE • SECTION TWO OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

*by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith. Following are the titles in our series.

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PART I: WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE
(THEOLOGY)

SECTION 2: GOD

1. The priority of belief in God

“I believe in God”: this first affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed is also the most fundamental. The whole Creed speaks of God, and when it speaks of man and of the world it does so in relation to God. The other articles of the Creed all depend on the first, just as the remaining Commandments make the first [“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”] explicit. The other articles [of the Creed] help us to know God better as he revealed himself progressively to men” (C 199).

Scripture begins here too: “In the beginning, God” (Gn 1: 1) – because all reality begins here; and the Catholic Faith, and its Scriptures (its data), and its creeds (its summaries) all follow reality, and teach us to live in reality. That is the essence of sanity: living in reality. It is also the basis of sanctity, which is the ultimate end of faith.

The first and most basic requirement for living in reality is to believe in God. Faith in God comes first, because God comes first.

2. How can man know God?

We can know God in two ways: by reason and by faith; by our natural human minds and by God’s supernat-

ural divine revelation; by thinking and speaking about God, and by listening to God speak to us.

3. *The need for divine revelation*

Human reason alone is radically insufficient when it comes to knowing God. For: 1) we are finite, but God is infinite. We are closer to dogs than to God. A dog can know us more adequately than we can know God. 2) we are fallible. We make mistakes – often very serious ones. Only God and his revelation are infallible. 3) we are selfish, prone to sin, and addicted to false gods. Addicts do not think clearly.

But the knowledge of God is the most important knowledge of all, because God is our ultimate end, our destiny, our happiness. We must know our true end, and the true road to that end. Living without knowing God is like driving a car without seeing the road. Therefore we desperately need a better knowledge of God than our reason alone can provide.

4. *The knowledge of God by human reason*

Even without supernatural divine revelation, however, all men by nature know something about God. Scripture itself says so: “His eternal power and deity have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20).

- I) We know God *instinctively*. Children and “primitive” peoples never begin as atheists. Even atheists like Freud admit that religion is a universal, innate instinct (though they think it is an innate illusion).
- II) We also know God by *reasoning*, when we begin to think logically about the data we experience. We

experience both outer data, about the universe, and inner data, about ourselves. Both lead us to God.

a) Data about the universe:

- 1) We see *order* in nature. We could never design a machine as perfect as the universe. Its designer must be a very great intelligence.
- 2) Its maker must also be a very great power. For when we ask why the universe as a whole exists, we see that no part of it can make the whole of it. What is its cause? The very existence of the universe points to a Creator, a giver-of-existence.
- 3) Everything in the universe changes, moves. All motion requires a mover, and ultimately a “First Mover,” a beginning. If there is no First, there is no second, or third, or any other.
- 4) *Time* is finite. Time had a beginning: what modern physics calls the “Big Bang,” when all matter suddenly came into existence. Since nothing happens without an adequate cause, the “Big Bang” requires a “Big Banger.”

b) Data about ourselves:

- 5) Our minds can know *unchangeable* truths like “ $2+2=4$ ” and “injustice is evil,” and “Nothing can be and not be at the same time.” Where do we see these unchangeable truths? Everything in our world is changeable. Our minds themselves are changeable. Unchangeable truth is like a visitor from another world, another mind: an eternal Mind.

- 6) Our conscience experiences an *absolute moral obligation* to do good, not evil. Not even moral skeptics and relativists think it is morally good to disobey your own conscience deliberately. But an absolute moral obligation can come only from an absolute moral authority, not from any fallible, human authority. Conscience appears as God's inner prophet.
- 7) The experience of *beauty* often leads to God, more directly and intuitively than a process of argument. "There is the music of Mozart, therefore there must be God" – you either "just see" this or you don't.
- 8) Our *desire for joy*, for a joy we can never find in this world, even from other people, points to another world (Heaven) and another Person (God); for every natural, innate, and universal desire corresponds to a reality that can satisfy it. The reality of hunger shows the reality of food; the same is true of the hunger for God and Heaven.
- 9) If there is no God, there is no ultimate meaning to life. If we came ultimately from nothing and die ultimately into nothing, we *are* ultimately nothing. If we are made in the image of God, we are the King's kids. But we are only clever apes if we are made only in the image of King Kong.
- 10) If we are only accidentally-evolved slime, how could we have invented the idea of God?

Compare this one idea – a Being infinitely perfect, good, wise, powerful, holy, loving, just, and eternal – with all other ideas we have ever invented, and it tips the scales infinitely. No effect can be greater than its cause; our minds could no more have created God than blind chance could have created our minds.

- 11) Finally, “Pascal’s Wager” shows that faith in God is life’s best bet, and atheism is life’s stupidest one. For our only chance of winning eternal happiness is to believe, and our only chance of losing it is to disbelieve.

5. *The knowledge of God by divine revelation*

God has revealed much more of himself than human reason could ever discover, especially his love and his plan for the salvation of mankind. This revelation took place historically in three “Trinitarian” steps:

First, to Israel, his “chosen people”:

- a) by establishing his *covenant* with them (a “covenant” is a relationship between two parties that is freely entered into and binds both parties. Marriage is the most intimate human covenant, and a “horizontal” image of God’s “vertical” covenant of salvation with us);
- b) by giving them his *law* to live by, as part of the covenant;
- c) by giving them his *promise* of a Savior;
- d) by sending them *prophets*, his “mouthpieces”;

- e) by performing *miracles* (“signs and wonders”) for them;
- f) by inspiring infallible Scriptures;
- g) and by revealing to them the *reason* for his revelation: “God had only one reason to reveal himself to them, a single motive for choosing them from among all peoples as his special possession: his sheer gratuitous love³⁸” (C 218; see Dt 7:6-8).

Second, by the Incarnation. As Scripture is “the Word [revelation] of God” in a book, Christ is “the Word of God” in the flesh. He is the perfect and complete revelation of God (see Col 1:15-20). “Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father’s one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything, there will be no other word than this one” (C 65).

Third, when Christ ascended to Heaven, he left his Holy Spirit and his Body, the Church, to continue his work. The Church is the Mystical or invisible Body of Christ and the Holy Spirit is her soul (C 813). That is why Christ said, “What you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did to me” (Mt 25:40), and why he said to St. Paul, when Paul before his conversion was persecuting Christians, “Why do you persecute *me*?” (Acts 19:4). The Church is “the extension of the Incarnation;” that is why he said to his apostles, “he who hears you, hears me” (Lk 10:16).

God gave his Church the authority and infallibility that is fitting for God’s own instrument; anything less would have been unworthy of the honor of God and inadequate to the needs of fallen man. The Church (that is, the Apostles) wrote the New Testament; no effect can be

greater than its cause; therefore the authority of the New Testament rests on the authority of the Church.

6. *How adequately can we know God?*

“This alone is the true knowledge of God: to know that God is beyond knowing” (St. Thomas Aquinas).

Whatever can be known of God, even by the greatest theologian or the greatest mystic, is infinitely less than what God is.

God is “transcendent;” that is to say that God is *always more* – more than we can ever know or think or imagine. God transcends everything in our thoughts just as he transcends everything in our world. He is not some concept or feeling inside us, any more than he is some stone or star outside us.

Love grasps him better than knowledge; for love conforms itself to its object, while knowledge has to fit its object into itself, into the limitations of the knower. A child can understand only a tiny part of a parent, but can love the whole. Love can be more true to objective reality than knowledge can, in this sense: we can know others only as we can understand them, but we can love them as they are in themselves.

Thought cannot *comprehend* God, but love can *apprehend* God. Our minds cannot surround him and define him, but our wills can reach out to him and touch him. Even among ourselves, we can never fully understand each other, but we can fully love each other.

The ultimate goal of theology is to know God in this way, with the heart and will, not only with the mind: to

“know” him as a person loved, not just a concept known. If we know God thus, we will fall on our knees and adore. Our deepest eyes are in our knees.

7. *The nature of God*

God is infinite; therefore he cannot be defined. But this does not mean he has no nature. He is not a “whatever,” an “everything in general and nothing in particular.” He has a *character*. He is one thing and not another: righteous, not wicked or indifferent; wise, not foolish; merciful, not cruel. But each of his attributes is infinite (unlimited): he is infinitely righteous, infinitely wise, infinitely merciful, etc. He is *infinite*, but not *indefinite*. He is infinitely *himself*.

And we can get to know this character:

- a) better by faith than by reason; better by trusting his own revelation of himself than by trusting our own cleverness;
- b) better still by prayer, by real personal contact with him, both private and public, both spontaneous and liturgical;
- c) and best of all by loving him, doing his will and obeying his commandments, especially loving each other; “for he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, how can he love God, whom he has not seen?” (1 Jn 4:20)

We can know something of God’s nature, or character, from ourselves, from our deepest desires. God is our ultimate joy. God is the one whose presence will give us infinite and unimaginable ecstasy without boredom forever. What must God be, to do this? A sea of infinite beauty, a

light of infinite understanding, a heart of infinite love. And more, always more, infinitely more, “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived” (1 Cor 2:9).

8. *The attributes of God*

- 1) God is *one* (see Dt 6:4). This means a) that God is *unique*, that there is only one God; and b) that God is *simple*, not composed of parts. He is three Persons, not three parts. His Trinity does not lessen his unity. The unity of the Trinity which is freely willed through the mutual love of the three divine Persons is more of a unity, not less, than the mere arithmetical unity of any one Person.
- 2) God is *good*. This means a) that he is *perfect*, that he is “whatever it is better to be than not to be” (St. Anselm). It also means b) that he is *righteous*: just, holy, right, moral. The moral law he gave us reflects his own nature: “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lv 11:44). This is why the essential principles of morality for mankind are absolute and unchangeable: because they “go all the way up” into the nature of God, and we are made in the image of this God (Gn 1:27).
- 3) God is *both just and merciful*. With us it is usually either/or, but with God it is both/and. That is why the Father sent his Son to die in our place to save us from the just punishment for our sins: because God must be both just and merciful. On the Cross, Christ got the justice and we got the mercy.

- 4) “God is *love*” (1 Jn 4:8). Love (charity) is the highest meaning of “goodness” for any person. Self-giving love is what God essentially *is*; therefore self-giving love is what motivates everything God does: his creation, his redemption, and his providential care over our lives, including his allowing us to suffer evil (pain) for our own eventual greater good, and even his allowing us to commit evil (sin), out of respect for our free will. Neither the evil we suffer nor the evil we do refutes God’s goodness and love.
- 5) God is *omniscient*: all-knowing and all-wise. He numbers every hair (Mt 10:30).
- 6) God is *omnipotent* (all-powerful). He who created everything out of nothing can do anything. “With God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

If we consider these last three attributes together – all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful – we can see that it is necessarily true that, in the expression of the King James Version, “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). For there is no limit to his love and good-will to us, or to his wisdom in knowing what is truly best for us, or to his power to arrange every detail in our lives – indeed, every atom in the universe – as a means to that end.

9. *God’s transcendence and immanence*

God is *transcendent*. He is not part of our universe, like the pagan gods, who supposedly lived in the sky or in the earth. Nor is he part of our personalities, like the mod-

ern humanists' god, which is only all the good in man, or all the ideals posited by the human spirit. God is always more – more than all his creation and more than all created minds can conceive.

“Transcendent” means “more,” it does not mean “absent.” God is immanent (present) as well as transcendent; in fact, he is *omnipresent*. He is “higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self”¹⁵⁹ (C 300). When he created us, he did not then turn away from us like a parent abandoning his child; that is the God of eighteenth century “Enlightenment” Deism, not the God of the Bible.

Therefore, a fundamental exercise in sanctity and sanity (that is, living in reality) is what Brother Lawrence called “the practice of the presence of God.” For God is always present, right here, right now.

10. *God's name*

“God has a name; he is not an anonymous force” (C 203).

Man has given God many names, but once God spoke to man his own true name. Beyond all man-made names is the divinely-revealed name given to Moses, and through Moses to Israel, and through Israel to the world. That name is “I AM” (YAHWEH in Hebrew) – a name so sacred no Jew will pronounce it. For “I” is the absolutely unique name, proper to the speaker alone. Jesus was attacked and eventually executed for speaking it (Jn 8:58), for claiming to bear this name; that is, claiming to *be* God.

The name signifies:

- 1) God's *reality*: "I AM."
- 2) God's *oneness*: "I" is the name of only one.
- 3) God's *uniqueness*: God is not just one being among others, but The Absolute Being. He is not *a* being, a finite being; he is infinite, unlimited Being itself.
- 4) God's *personhood*: "I" signifies the self-consciousness only a person can have. This is what essentially distinguishes man, whom God made in his image, from the animals.
- 5) God's *eternity*: he is present ("AM"), not past or future. God's being is not, like ours, limited by time. Nothing of him is dead, like the past, or unborn, like the future. He is not "what once was but is no more," nor is he "what will be but is not yet." He is present to all times; all times are present to him.
- 6) God's *mystery*: he does not tell us who he is, but says simply "I AM WHO I AM." The Hebrew verb can also be translated. "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." The God of the Bible always surprises man, instead of fitting our little expectations. Like the Bible, the Church does not put God in a box for us, even a word-box or formula. She knows he does not sit still while we take his photograph. Like the Bible, the Church tells us 1) *what God is not*, by rejecting heresies and idols, and 2) *what God is like*, by using parables and analogies.

(Actually, even these parables and analogies do not tell us that God is like the things we can understand, but that

these things are a little like God. God is like nothing: “to whom can you compare me?” But everything is like God in some way, since he made it all.)

When the Church speaks of God, she does not claim to know or say what God is, to define his nature. Instead of *defining* him, she *presents* him, or rather introduces us to him as he presents himself above all in Christ. For “he who has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

11. God as Father

Of all the names for God that are human predications, the primary one is “Father.” Jesus always used this name, and we cannot improve on his theology! To claim to have corrected Christ, for instance by a more fashionably gender-inclusive and less “patriarchal” term than “Father,” is to claim far more than any prophet or saint ever claimed. As C. S. Lewis put it, “Christians believe that God himself has taught us how to speak of him.”

“By calling God ‘Father,’ the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority [for ‘authority’ means ‘author’s rights’]; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood,⁶² which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinc-

tion between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God” (C 239).

The name “God” can be used either for the Father, the first Person, or for the divine being, or substance, which is fully expressed in all three Persons of the Trinity. Thus Jesus is both “the Son of God” and “God.” He both addressed his Father as “God” and accepted Thomas’s worship of himself as “my Lord and my God” (Jn 20:28-29).

12. The reason for the doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the primary doctrine of Christianity in that it reveals the ultimate truth, the nature of ultimate reality, the nature of God. (It does not *define* God, but it truly *reveals* God.) Other mysteries of our Faith tell us what God has *done* in time (the Creation, the Incarnation, the Resurrection), but the Trinity tells us what God *is* in eternity.

Why do Christians believe the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is three Persons rather than only one? The doctrine sounds strange, even shocking, even after it is explained that it does not mean three Gods, or three parts to God.

We should not be surprised that the real God surprises us. Even created reality shocks our expectations – for instance, Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. In fact, the reason for the doctrine of the Trinity is similar to the reason for Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, or any other good scientific theory: it alone explains all the data. The science of theology arises in a way similar to any other science: from data and the need to understand the data. The Church gradual-

ly defined the doctrine of the Trinity in her first six ecumenical Councils to explain the data of her Scriptures. Theology has data different from those of other sciences, but it works by the same principle: the data control the theory, not vice versa.

The data for Christian theology are first of all Christ himself. On the one hand, he called God his Father, prayed to him, loved him, taught his teaching, and obeyed his will. On the other hand, he claimed to be one with, and equal to, the Father. And he also promised to send the Spirit. The Scriptural data from which the Church derives the doctrine of the Trinity are essentially:

- 1) that there is only one God (Dt 6:4);
- 2) that the Father is God (Jn 5:18);
- 3) that the Son is God (Jn 8:58); and
- 4) that the Holy Spirit is God (Mt 28:19).

The data are historical: God's progressive revelation of himself, first as the transcendent Creator "outside" us; then as the incarnate Savior "beside" us; then as the indwelling Spirit "inside" us. The reason for this progression, first Father (Old Testament), then Son (Gospels), then Spirit (Acts of the Apostles and the Church) is found in God's very being, which is love (1 Jn 4:18), and in the purpose and motive for God's self-revelation to man, which is love. For love's aim is always greater intimacy, deeper union with the beloved; so the stages of God's self-revelation are stages of increasing intimacy with man (from "outside" to "beside" to "inside").

As the *Catechism* explains it, "God's very being is love. By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the full-

ness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret:⁴⁵ God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (C 221).

13. Trinity and love

The reason God is a Trinity is because God is love. Love requires two-ness, in fact three-ness: the lover, the beloved, and the act, or relationship, of love between them. God is Trinity because God is love itself in its completeness.

The doctrine of the Trinity makes the most concrete and practical difference to our lives that can possibly be imagined. Because God is a Trinity, God is love. Because God is love, love is the supreme value. Because love is the supreme value, it is the meaning of our lives, for we are created in God’s image. The fact that God is a Trinity is the reason why love is the meaning of life, and the reason why nothing makes us as happy as love: because that is inscribed in our design. We are happy only when we stop trying to be what we were not designed to be. Cats are not happy living like dogs, and saints are not happy living like sinners.

The doctrine of the Trinity also tells us the nature of love. Love is altruistic, not egotistic. God is other-love because he has otherness within himself; he is more than one Person.

Pope John Paul II says: “God in his deepest mystery is not a solitude but a family, since he has in himself fatherhood, sonship, and the essence of the family, which is love.”

The doctrine of the Trinity means that the family is not a mere sociological or biological human fact, but “goes all the way up” into the nature of God.

The conventional division between the “liberal” emphasis on love and the “conservative” emphasis on dogma completely breaks down in the Trinity. For here it is the ultimate dogma (the Trinity) that is the real foundation for love as the ultimate value. One might almost say that God himself is both a “stick-in-the-mud conservative” (the Trinity is his unchangeable nature) and a “bleeding-heart liberal” (the Crucifixion revealed the deepest secret of his heart).

14. The Trinity and human reason

The doctrine of the Trinity *surpasses* human reason, but it does not *contradict* human reason.

Human reason could never have *discovered* this truth by itself, without divine revelation. And human reason cannot ever fully *comprehend* it. And human reason cannot *prove* it.

But reason cannot *disprove* it either. It is not logically self-contradictory. It says that God is one in nature and three in Persons, but it does not say that God is both one Person and three Persons, or one nature and three natures. That would be a meaningless self-contradiction.

“The divine persons do not share the one divinity among themselves [as triplets share humanity among themselves] but each of them is God whole and entire . . . ‘Each of the persons is that supreme reality, viz., the divine substance, essence or nature’⁸⁵” (C 253).

“[T]he Church confesses . . . ‘one God and Father from whom all things are, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things are, and one Holy Spirit in whom all things are’⁹⁸” (C 258).

15. *The alternatives to God*

God is the ultimate reality. What are the fundamental errors about ultimate reality? What are the alternatives to the true God?

(People who believe these errors, of course, may well be good and sincere people. But that fact cannot turn an error into a truth, any more than the faults of those who believe something true can turn that truth into a falsehood.)

First, one may be an *agnostic* and claim to *know or believe nothing about God* (“agnosticism” comes from *a* and *gnosis*, meaning “no knowledge” in Greek).

The essential problem with being an agnostic is death. Christianity is God’s marriage proposal to the soul; atheists answer “No,” Christians answer “Yes,” and agnostics answer “I don’t know.” But at death, “I don’t know” turns into “No.”

Second, one may be an *atheist* and believe in *no God at all* (theos means “God” in Greek).

Fewer than one percent of all men who have ever lived have been atheists. To be an atheist you must be an elitist and believe that there is nothing but a fantasy and an illusion at the very center of the lives of over ninety nine percent of all men and women in history. (By the way,

there have been extremely few women who were atheists until very recently.)

Third, one may be a *polytheist* and believe in *many gods*, like most ancient pagans (*poly* means “many” in Greek). Very few people today are polytheists.

Fourth, one may be a *pantheist* (*pan* means “all” in Greek) and believe that *God is everything and everything is God*, or a part of God, or an aspect of God.

Pantheism is the opposite error from atheism. While atheism denies any God separate from the universe, pantheism denies any universe separate from God. Atheism denies the Creator and Pantheism denies the Creation. Most forms of Hinduism and “New Age” religions are pantheistic.

Fifth, one may be a *deist*. Deism is another error that is the opposite of pantheism. Deism denies God’s immanence (presence), while pantheism denies God’s transcendence. Deism arose in the eighteenth century as an attempt to keep a God to create the universe, but to deny him any active role in it, especially miracles, which deists mistakenly thought were disproved by modern science.

Sixth, one may be a *theist*. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are theists. Theists believe in one God who is both immanent (omnipresent) and transcendent, the Creator of the universe and man.

Jews and Muslims (and Unitarians) are *Unitarian theists*: they believe this one God is only one Person.

Christians are *Trinitarian theists*: they believe this one God is “three Persons indeed, but one essence, substance or nature entirely simple [one]”¹⁸ (C 202).

The two most distinctive doctrines of Christianity, the two things all orthodox Christians believe and no one else does, are the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Incarnation means that one of the three divine Persons – the Son – became man, while remaining God; that Jesus is both human and divine. Thus the Incarnation and the Trinity fit together.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in the same God. God has the same attributes according to all three religions, because Christians and Muslims learned of this God from the same source: his revelation to the Jews, beginning with Abraham. The three theistic religions agree about 1) the oneness of God, and about 2) the nature of God, but disagree about 3) the Persons in God, because they disagree about Christ. Jews and Muslims do not believe the Trinity because they do not believe in the Incarnation; Christians believe the Trinity because they believe the Incarnation.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

³⁸ Cf. *Deut* 4:37; 7:8; 10:15.

¹⁵⁹ St. Augustine, *Conf* 3, 6, 11: PL 32, 688.

⁶² Cf. *Is* 66:13; *Ps* 131:2.

⁴⁵ Cf. *1 Cor* 2:7-16; *Eph* 3:9-12.

⁸⁵ Lateran Council IV (1215): DS 804.

⁹⁸ Council of Constantinople II: DS 421.

⁸ Lateran Council IV: DS 800.