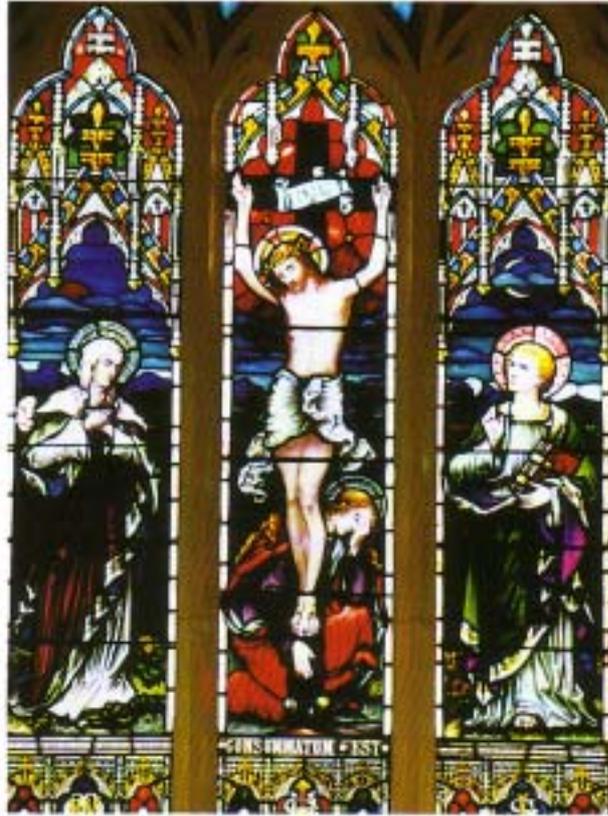


# The Catholic Message

*This is what we believe*



The greatest love story ever told...

In the beginning, there was God – an almighty, living being who, through a powerful act of love, created the world and all that is in it. As the crown of creation, God brought into existence human beings, a man and a woman, created in the image of their Maker and destined to freely know and love God, both in this life and in a new and greater life beyond their earthly existence.

However, a terrible tragedy occurred. At the beginnings of the human race, man and woman turned away from God in an act of selfish rebellion. Exactly how, why or when is something that remains hidden to us. The account of this tragedy is found in the bible as a simple yet dramatic story told in a highly figurative language. This is the story of Adam and Eve, the first parents of the human race, who allowed themselves to be tempted by the Evil One in the form of a serpent, and as a result 'fell' from their state of perfect happiness.

The result of this 'fall' (as it is often called) was that humanity could never quite get back on the right foot, and continued to suffer and aggravate the effects of its rejection of God. God, however, did not abandon us. While respecting our freedom to choose, our Creator never failed to offer us the blessings that were originally destined for the human race, even raising up a special people through whom these blessings could be communicated. These people were the Jews, or Israelites, called the Chosen people of God. It was through them that God was to gradually reveal deeper and deeper insights into the true meaning and purpose of human life. The religious reflections of the Jews over the centuries are recorded in the Old Testament. Recurring throughout these reflections is the image of God as a faithful lover, never giving up on his beloved, always calling his people back

## Approaching the Topic

Have you ever heard a man say, 'I have a wife and two kids'? Uttered in the non-committal tone of an Aussie male, his words can seem quite dry, even banal. Yet, quite possibly, if you got to know him better, you would discover that behind those simple words 'I have a wife...' is a powerful story of love, romance, commitment and self-sacrifice. Catholics, too, can make some rather dry remarks about their faith. 'I believe in God' is a phrase we rattle off on Sundays. Yet behind those simple words is an extraordinary story of a people who discovered that there was more to life than just existing; that in fact, they lived and breathed in the presence of a powerful and ever-living God whose greatest delight was in them. But let's start the story at the beginning...

to their true relationship with God, back to the life of love that brought them into existence. The Old Testament scriptures also speak of a Messiah, a Saviour who would one day reveal God in a climactic way. The people of Israel looked forward to this day, although when it finally came, it was not in a way which they had expected.

## Our God of surprises!

Popularly, the Saviour was expected to come as a mighty ruler or sword-brandishing warrior. Instead, he entered the world as a tiny baby. This baby was none other than Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Jesus, God took human flesh and came to live among us as a human being. His presence was first felt in the Spirit-filled womb of a young Jewish girl called Mary. It was to her that God's gift was first entrusted. Since Mary was a virgin, this act of God was all the more amazing. Clearly this was no ordinary child! Fortunately, Mary had a very understanding husband, Joseph, a man of great faith. Together they came to comprehend that the Spirit of God was drawing them into a great plan for salvation. As the child was born and grew to manhood, Mary and Joseph raised him to be a devout Jew, loving and caring for him as their child, yet knowing that their son's true father was his Father in heaven, and that the day would come when he would fulfil the mission which he had been sent to

**‘We make known to you him whom we have seen and heard, that you may be in fellowship with us, with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ. And we write this that you may have perfect joy.’**

*(1 John 1:4)*

accomplish.

For his part, Jesus understood that this mission was to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to bring the people of Israel to open their hearts to God in a fresh and more direct way. During his brief yet powerful three year ministry, he preached and gave witness to a profound message of love. His personhood revealed the boundless compassion of God and he forgave sins. He healed the sick and performed miracles. He spoke of a Kingdom of eternal peace in the life to come after death. Yet he startled his listeners by announcing that this Kingdom was already making its presence felt, right then and there, wherever people were willing to open their hearts. By his deeds and words it became clear, to those with the eyes to see and the ears to hear, that Jesus was one with God, that he was divine; that he was the Messiah foretold in the scripture, who would bring the world back to its rightful relationship with God.

The effect this man had on people's lives was astonishing. His followers, many of them the poor and the outcasts of society, experienced a newfound freedom and hope in his presence. Their lives changed. They held their heads high and replaced the fear and hatred in their hearts with forgiveness. Others, particularly those in authority, were threatened by Jesus. His teaching challenged the status quo. His critics looked for ways to undermine his credibility. Some would-be followers turned against him too. His message was too radical for them. By others he was simply misunderstood. As

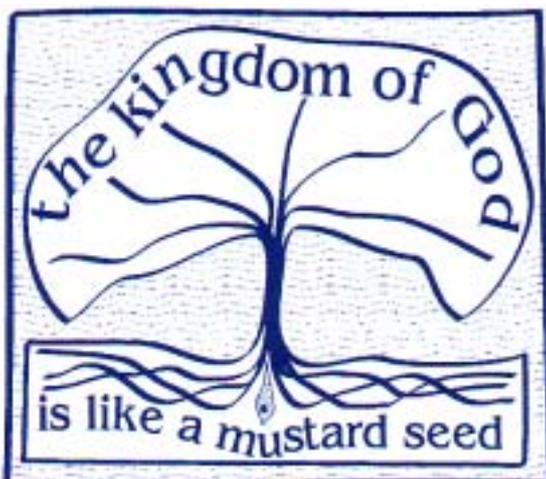
time went on, opposition arose against him. So much so that he was eventually betrayed and put to death by crucifixion.

## The end? Rather, a beginning.

In the wake of Jesus' death, his followers scattered. They were confused, angry and frightened that they too would be destroyed. But then an extraordinary thing happened. Jesus was raised from the dead! He appeared to his followers in a new, bodily way – alive in the Spirit of God. With these appearances came stirrings of hope. His disciples came to realise that the tragic events which had so devastated them were in fact part of a much bigger plan. Jesus' death on the cross had been an ultimate act of love; his life had been given for all humankind, and his resurrection had freed all people from the bondage of their sinful lives – even the bondage of death itself. The door to new life had been opened for anyone who was prepared to enter. This man was indeed the Son of God! By embracing Jesus Christ, humanity could be united with God forever.

This discovery of the risen Jesus filled his followers with joy. Even when he left them and ascended into heaven, they continued to feel his presence in their lives just as he had promised. They looked forward to the day when he would return to them, at the end of the world, bringing to completion the revolution of love which he had started and to which they were committed to continuing.

This presence of God in their lives also unleashed a new experience of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. In fact, they found themselves living life 'in



the Spirit', caring for each other as brothers and sisters, intimately bonded in their shared faith, seeking to make every moment a living testimony of God's love. To these early followers of Christ, "Christians" as they were soon called, the Kingdom of God was a tangible, day-to-day reality. It was not just something they looked forward to in the eternal life to come, it was already happening in their midst on earth! Now was indeed the hour of salvation spoken of in the scriptures! This reality was great news! (In fact, the word 'gospel' means 'good news'.) In response, they committed themselves to living a life worthy of such a gift. They turned away from sin. They focused on all that was good and life-giving. They met regularly to worship, to attend to

each other's needs, and to remember and retell the great events of Jesus' life. The community way of life which developed was the beginnings of the Christian Church, a Spirit-filled relationship between believers which showed the continuing presence of Jesus to the world.

## And the story goes on...

Boldly and excitedly the early Christians spoke about Jesus Christ to whoever would listen. They understood that the gift of new life they had received was a gift which God longed to share with all peoples of the world, and that

their little, though fast expanding, community had been commissioned to take this gift to others. Just as Israel had seen itself as a 'light to the nations' during an earlier phase of history, the early Church understood itself to be the 'New Israel', a people who witnessed to the fulfilment of God's promises; a people bonded, not through racial heritage, but through their union with Christ.

Thus began a new era in salvation history. Christianity burst out of the Jewish religious context within which it had developed and spread throughout the world. Over the centuries the Gospel message and the Christian community way of life has been spoken, written down and acted upon from generation to generation in many different cultures. This process continues right up to the present day. Wherever men and women open their hearts to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the seeds of the Gospel are sown and the Church starts to take root. In fact, the word 'catholic' means 'universal in extent'.

There are many more chapters which expand upon this love story between God and humanity. We hope that by telling the crux of the story, you will want to think and read further about this amazing unfolding episode in the history of the salvation of the world. In fact, perhaps you will begin to see that you too are somehow caught up in this great Story of God's love for us...

## The Church in relation to other world religions.

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Christians believe that, in Jesus, God's love has been revealed to the whole world in an unsurpassable way. Every human being of whatever race or culture is called to receive the message, gifts and promises of Christ. In fact, Christianity regards itself, not simply as one religion among many, but as ultimately the only path through which all men and women can discover the true meaning and purpose of their existence. Of course, the Church does not pretend to have perfectly actualised all that its faith proclaims. The full implications of God's gift of salvation are yet to be completely understood and grasped in practice. However, Christians believe that, ultimately, the Christian commitment is the only religion which offers a framework through which this is possible. Non-Christian religions, while produced by God's action in the world, are regarded as previous stages in sacred history, now superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ. Having said this, we must be sure to note that the Church recognises that there are many elements in these religions which resonate with Gospel values. Wherever goodness

and holiness is found in human-kind, the Church affirms this and, as appropriate, seeks to co-operate with such peoples.

The claim of Christianity that belief in Christ is God's desire for all peoples is a very bold one! One that is often misunderstood, even by Christians, as arrogance. But this is certainly not the spirit in which it is meant. Nor is it a claim that is made lightly out of some exaggerated enthusiasm. Rather, such a statement arises from the theological reflections of our faith community over the centuries, not to mention the daily experience of salvation which inspires such reflections. Indeed, we would be short-selling you if we tried to play down the significance of Jesus to the world. What we have received has been pure gift to us, an outpouring of God's grace rather than any achievement of our own. How can we possibly keep such a gift to ourselves? By its very nature, God's love always extends outwards, Thus the claim that the Christian message is the destiny of all arises from an outgoing movement of love rather than an inward 'empire-building' attitude of chalking up 'convert' statistics!



## Yes, Catholics are Christians!

The variety of Christian denominations in the world can sometimes create confusion about the relationship between Catholics and other believers. Some people even ask the question as to whether Catholics are Christians. Yes! Catholics are Christians. Yes! Catholics are Christians who share in the same baptism as their fellow Christians. Together we make up the one body of Christ. There is far more that unites us than divides us.

How, then, do Catholics differ from other Christian denominations? The Catholic Church holds that, historically, the Catholic community traces the origins of its life, teaching and mission directly to the original Christian communities which grew out of the relationship between Jesus and his apostles. This stands in contrast to other Christian Churches, who were once part of the original Christian

Church, but separated from the mainstream at various points in history. The reasons for this are many and varied and both sides must share responsibility for the rifts that ensued (see Leaflet 4). However, the simplest way of viewing the end-result is that some of our beliefs are now interpreted and practised differently by other Christian denominations.

## A big statement!

In the light of this situation, the Catholic Church believes that it alone has most completely preserved and faithfully handed down through the centuries the fullness of Christian truth and the means of salvation, according to the mind and teaching of the pastors of the first Christian communities. It is based on this argument that Catholics make the bold claim that the Church of Jesus Christ exists (or 'subsists') most fully in the Catholic Church.

## Don't get the wrong impression!

This does not mean, of course, that members of the Catholic Church perfectly live out the Christian message. Catholics readily admit that we are always in need of renewal and repentance. Nor does it mean that there is nothing we can learn from other Christian denominations. The Catholic Church recognises that there are many elements of Christian salvation which are found outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church. Since the true disposition of our hearts is ultimately known only to God, all whose lives are oriented towards the gifts of faith, hope and love, even though they are not Catholics (or even Christians), are in some sense members of Christ's body. Church teaching concerning visible structures must always be taken in the context of the wider 'invisible' spiritual realities at work, which no human hand can totally define or structure. A great modern

theologian, Karl Rahner, speaks often of 'anonymous Christians'.

## Unity – not an impossible dream

For a people who profess to be unified as the body of Christ, the existence of such obvious divisions is regarded as a great tragedy. While recognising the imperfections of the situation however, we refuse to abandon our call to unity. Like a husband and wife who are temporarily separated, but committed to restoring their relationship, Christians work towards the day when we will once again be fully united in mind and heart and worship. The work involved in this long and often painful process is called 'ecumenism'.



## Your Story

Concerning what you have read about the Gospel Story here:

What interests you?  
What puzzles you?  
What enthuses you?  
What frustrates you?  
What would you like to hear more about?

## Think About It

How have you heard the Gospel message of Jesus Christ proclaimed elsewhere during your life? Eg through a book, a movie, a conversation, a study course.

How has your awareness of Jesus developed over time?

Because it involves high ideals of love, hope and new life, the Gospel Story can be likened to a 'love story'.

Is there a 'love story' in your own life? Eg special moments, special people, dreams and ideals? Recall some of the highs and lows of this part of your life.

Why is it sometimes hard to believe in ideals like love, truth and hope?

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