

CATHOLICISM - Paths to Humanism

A Brief Overview of the History of Catholicism

Roman Catholicism traces its history to Jesus during the period of Roman occupation in the early 30s of the Common Era. Over a period of years after Jesus' life and death his followers spread out across the world to form a "universal" (Greek, *katholikos*) church with the bishop of Rome holding primacy. With the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 313 CE, Christianity became legal and eventually was recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

A substantial humanist legacy was available to the founders of the church, namely, the contemporary Hellenistic culture. However, the church was mainly influenced by the mystical beliefs of Plato and Aristotle rather than their humanistic ideals. For example, Saint Augustine (354-430 CE) had acquired a classical Hellenistic education before he committed his life's work to the Catholic Church and became its leading theologian.

Although the Eastern and Western branches of the Church had long been divided over theological, cultural, linguistic and ecclesiastical disputes, the separation was formalized in the Great Schism in 1054, thus creating the first large-scale division in Christendom.

A resurgent humanistic spirit of sorts was kindled in the 11th century by widespread rebellions against church abuses. People recognized the unethical nature or practices such as selling church offices, selling indulgences (to purchase tickets to Heaven and to shorten terms in Purgatory), and passing offices to their sons. During this period, many monasteries became centers of classical scholarship as they translated ancient Greek and Roman texts. These were the seeds of Catholic universities that would ultimately spread the elements of a humanistic education to a rapidly expanding middle class.

The period from the church's founding as the official religion of imperial Rome until the 1500s was essentially dark ages for humanism in Europe. This was because of the low levels of literary culture, the high intensity of authoritarian governance, and the exploitation by the church elite of the lower classes. An example of the exploitation and oppression was the Inquisition, a Roman Catholic church-based judicial system known for its barbarity.

In the 16th century, in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Church began a process of substantial reform known as the Counter Reformation. In subsequent centuries, Catholicism spread across the nations despite experiencing a reduction in its hold on European populations due to the growth of Protestantism and because of religious skepticism during and after the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment constituted a new challenge of the Church. Unlike the Protestant Reformation, which questioned certain Christian doctrines, the Enlightenment questioned Christianity as a whole, elevated human reason above divine revelation, and downgraded religious authorities such as the papacy.

As we entered the modern era, two sources of Catholic humanism were evident. The first was the Vatican itself as seen in the compassionate edicts of several popes. The second includes grass roots activists of lower level clergy and laity who sometimes risked sanctions for positions that the church rules as heresy. For example of the first is that in 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical (*Rerum Novarum*) on the condition of labor, which for the first time expressed a clearly humanistic concern in response to the labor abuses of the industrial revolution.

In 1931 Pope Pius XI, in an encyclical commemorating the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, reiterated its themes including the dignity of labor and the rights of workers to organize. Following this, several popes issued additional encyclicals emphasizing the church's commitments to the humanist principles of social justice, human rights, and the dignity of labor.

Catholic grassroots activism has been a principal proponent of humanist reforms relating to social justice. For example, "Call to Action: Catholics Working Together for Justice and Equality" is one of several modern progressive grassroots Catholic organizations. Its mission statement notes that "Call to Action educates, inspires and activates Catholics to act for justice and build inclusive communities through a lens of anti-racism and anti-oppression principles."

Today Roman Catholicism is a diverse worldwide religious tradition of some 1.1 billion members. The Catholic population in the United States is approximately 78.2 million people.

THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF CATHOLICISM

The two primary dimensions of Catholic principles are ecclesiastical and secular. The former, of course, relate to the strictly religious doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. The latter focus on the social teachings, many of which are inclined toward humanism. While some of the social goals are the same in Catholicism and humanism, the official motivations and inducements obviously differ. To please God is the accepted motivating factor in Catholicism; to serve humankind is the prevailing motivating factor in humanism.

Basic Catholic Ecclesiastical Doctrine

- God is a triune God, consisting of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
- Jesus is the Son of God sent to die for the sins of the world.
- In accepting Jesus and serving Him, believers are granted life eternal.
- Members must accept the church as having the fullness of revelation and, according to Roman Catholic catechism, is the only Christian body that is 'holy, universal and apostolic.'
- Apostolic succession is key in the faith and the pope and bishops have varying degrees of authority from God.

(<http://www.allaboutreligion.org/roman-catholic-doctrine-faq.htm>)

Catholicism's Secular Social Teachings

A great deal has been written about Catholic social teachings. Below are several illustrations

from which we have cited many of the key principles. We begin by looking at what has been described as the **overall themes** of Catholic social teachings:

- Life and Dignity of the Human Person. Since every human being has dignity, all should have access to “food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely.”
- Dignity of Work, the Rights of the Worker and Economic Justice. Deriving from the dignity of work, “workers have certain rights, including just wages which provide them the means to live life and care for their family, the right to gainful employment, freedom from unjust discrimination, and to join unions and to strike when it is necessary.”
- Rights and Responsibilities. The rights and means to properly develop life include sustenance needs and “social services, security in case of sickness, inability to work because of old age, or any other situation when, through no fault of their own, a person is deprived of the means to provide for themselves. These natural rights are inseparable from responsibilities and we all have the responsibility to respect those rights.”
- Preferential Option for the Poor. “The test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The Church’s option for the poor calls us to help those who are the most vulnerable, thereby strengthening the whole community, which is wounded when some of its members are marginalized and denied basic rights.”
- Solidarity. “Solidarity helps us see other people and nations as our neighbors. We are one human family and we must go beyond our differences. We are called to overcome barriers of race, religion, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and economic status and work for global peace and justice.”
- Stewardship of and Care for Creation. “... the goods of creation are intended for the common good of all human beings and we are responsible for caring for the earth, using the resources wisely, and preserving these resources for future generations.”

Source: Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. (<http://www.misacor-usa.org/index.php/jpic/cst>)

In addition, there are numerous lists of specific principles relating to these overall themes. We have selected one example and cited the essential ideas from it. We also note that there is redundancy in the illustrations which underscore their obvious importance in Catholic social teachings.

Ten Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

- (1) Respect for Human Dignity. “... every person is worthy of respect simply by virtue of being a human being. People do not lose the right to being treated with respect because of disability, poverty, age, lack of success or race, let alone gain the right to be treated with greater respect because of what they own or accomplish.”
- (2) Respect for Human Life. “The Catholic tradition sees the sacredness of human life as part of any moral vision for a just and good society.”
- (3) Association. “...we are our true selves when we relate well to others, not when we are isolated individuals.”

- (4) Participation. “People have a right, indeed a duty, to participate in shaping a more just and human society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.”
- (5) Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable. “The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion.”
- (6) Solidarity. “Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning that ‘loving our neighbor’ has global dimensions in an interdependent world.”
- (7) Stewardship. “We have a responsibility to care for the world’s goods as stewards and trustees, not primarily, let alone merely, as consumers.”
- (8) Subsidiarity. “Clearly determining the right amount of [governmental] help or support that is needed to accomplish a task or to meet an obligation.”
- (9) Human Equality. “We talk of it in terms of giving people a fair go.”
- (10) Common Good. “A community is genuinely healthy when all people, not only one or several segments, flourish.”

Source: Ten Principles of Catholic Social Teaching

(www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/assets/downloads/content/4103.pdf)

THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISM

There are numerous sources that present the key principles of humanism. We have drawn from several of them below.

From Humanism and Its Aspirations (2003): Humanist Manifesto III

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without supernaturalism, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.

- Knowledge of the world is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.
- Humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.
- Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.
- Life's fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals.
- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships.
- Working to benefit society maximizes individual happiness.

We work to uphold the equal enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties in an open, secular society and maintain it is a civic duty to participate in the democratic process and a planetary duty to protect nature's integrity, diversity, and beauty in a secure, sustainable manner.

Thus engaged in the flow of life, we aspire to this vision with the informed conviction that humanity has the ability to progress toward its highest ideals. The responsibility for our lives

and the kind of world in which we live is ours and ours alone.
(http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_III)

From the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 (International Humanist and Ethical Union)

-- Humanism is a lifstance aiming at the maximum possible fulfillment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. *Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.* (emphasis added) (<http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>)

From “What Is Humanism?” by Fred Edwords

Former AHA Executive Director and director of the United Coalition of Reason, Fred Edwords has written prolifically about the principles of humanism. In an essay on *What Is Humanism?* he concluded: “So, with modern humanism one finds a lifstance or worldview that is in tune with modern knowledge; is inspiring, socially conscious, and personally meaningful. It is not only the thinking person's outlook but that of the feeling person as well, for it has inspired the arts as much as it has the sciences; philanthropy as much as critique. And even in critique it is tolerant, defending the rights of all people to choose other ways, to speak and to write freely, to live their lives according to their own lights. So the choice is yours. Are you a humanist? You needn't answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ For it isn't an either-or proposition. Humanism is yours -- to adopt or to simply draw from. You may take a little or a lot, sip from the cup or drink it to the dregs. It's up to you.”

(http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/What_is_Humanism)

While many others have voiced the central principles of humanism, few have said it more eloquently than Helen Bennett in her poem “What Humanism Means to Me” in her book, *Humanism, What's That? A Book for Curious Kids* (Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2005).

Humanism means to me
I've got the opportunity
To realize that I am free
To take responsibility.

To me, it doesn't seem so odd
That many people pray to God
Whenever they are feeling low --
It's just the way they have to go.

But when I do not know the way
I do not feel the need to pray.
I use my brain to figure out
What the problem's all about.

I'm grateful that I have my eyes
To see the beauty of the skies,
I'm glad I have my ears to hear
The voices of my friends so dear.

But best of all, my brains the one
That figures out what must be done
To help me run a better race,
To make the world a better place.

For additional essays on Living the Humanist Life, Humanism and Traditional Religion and related issues, see: http://americanhumanist.org/Who_We_Are/About_Humanism

Comparisons and Contrasts: On Common Ground

Humanism, in a nutshell, “affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity.” In many ways, Catholicism and humanism are on common ground. The primary commonalities center on the inherent dignity of all people, rights and responsibilities, the common good, peace and social justice as well as valuing humanistic action.

There are, as we all know, several dissonant notes such as the official Catholic view which holds that certain reproductive rights actions such as contraception and abortion are considered sins against God. Many Catholics join humanists in differing from Catholic doctrine because we regard reproductive rights an essential part of human rights and individual autonomy. Avoiding childbirth when there isn't adequate support for the potential child is a morally responsible position.

Even Catholics that do hold to an anti-abortion viewpoint often do so in a moderate way. That needle is attempted to be threaded in a humanistic way in a in a paper called “The Right to Life.”

“Catholic social teaching about the right to life encompasses far more than just a pro-life stance on abortion. Catholics must advocate not only for an end to abortion but also to end the injustices that lead women to seek abortion -- lack of support or resources, violence against women, or workplace policies that punish pregnant women, among other things. If we are truly pro-life Catholics, we must also be advocates for the poor, disrespected, and disenfranchised around the world.” The Right to Life

(<https://www.dioslc.org/images/catholic%20social%20teaching/life%20and%20dignity%20of%20the%20human%20person/The%20Right%20to%20Life.pdf>)

This broader conception and interpretation of the “right to life” is more consistent with the humanist perspective of the right to live in “a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.” (Humanist Manifesto I)

Similarly to reproductive rights actions, Catholic doctrine describes LGBTQ behavior as a sin, but humanists believe that natural expression of one's sexuality in mutual consensual relationships is an essential part of healthy living. And despite the official word from the Church, many Catholics agree with humanists and support same-sex marriage and equal rights for all LGBTQ people.

Catholic Advocacy

There are a large number of Catholic groups in the United States and elsewhere that advocate for progressive, humanistic aims. A few examples illustrate the point.

Catholics for Choice

[Catholics for Choice](#) explain that they “strive to be an expression of Catholicism as it is lived by ordinary people. We are part of the great majority of the faithful in the Catholic church who disagrees with the dictates of the Vatican on matters related to sex, marriage, family life and motherhood. We are part of the great majority who believes that Catholic teachings on conscience mean that every individual must follow his or her own conscience -- and respect others' right to do the same. At Catholics for Choice, we believe that this is the world where the meaning of choice can truly be realized.”

They further maintain that change comes about through dialoging with others, exchanging information, and communicating one's ideas and values and, moreover, that change happens when one challenges established and unquestioned authority and people begin to explore new ideas and embrace new ways of thinking.

Catholics for Choice helps individuals and groups “to challenge the power of the Catholic hierarchy which uses every means at its disposal to punish and publicly shame Catholics who don't unquestioningly follow its edicts. The hierarchy also seeks to impose its narrow view of morality -- and dangerous positions on public health issues -- on Catholics and non-Catholics around the world.”

Among the many issues on which they focus are abortion and contraception, HIV and AIDS, sex and sexuality, new reproductive health technologies, and religion in public policy. They also provide what they view as an “effective counterpoint” to the powerful Catholic hierarchy “which presents itself as the sole moral arbiter on matters where sexuality and reproduction intersect with religion and faith.”

An interesting note is that Catholics for Choice and the American Humanist Association frequently find themselves lobbying together on issues of shared concern.

Call To Action

[Call To Action](#) is a leading organization that focuses on “challenging Catholics to act for justice and build inclusive communities.” Among their core beliefs are that “Faith communities have the responsibility to foster inclusivity and justice” and also that “Every individual has the right

to act according to an informed conscience and the responsibility to promote the equality and dignity of all people.”

Call To Action’s “Call for Reform” is the organization’s platform that includes these main points:

- We call for extensive consultation with the Catholic people in developing church teaching on human sexuality.
- We claim our responsibility as committed laity, religious and clergy to participate in the selection of our local bishops, a time-honored tradition in the church.
- We call for open dialogue, academic freedom, and due process.
- We call upon the church to become a model of financial openness on all levels, including the Vatican.
- We call for a fundamental change so that young people will see and hear God living in and through the church as a participatory community of believers who practice what they preach.

Call To Action drew its mission from the US Bishops’ 1976 Call To Action conference. The Call for Reform in the Catholic Church proclaimed by more than 20,000 signers outlined its goals for the Church. It began as a response to the challenge of the Second Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, for all members to “scrutinize the signs of the times....” The Council provided “a wake-up call for lay Catholics who had tended to defer initiatives entirely to the clergy.”

In 1971, Pope Paul VI emphasized that it is the laity who have the primary “Call To Action” to create a more just world. That year the international synod of the bishops issued a document that declared that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel.” And, further, that “The church recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes; hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of action, of the possessions, and of the lifestyle found within the church itself.”

Catholics United

[Catholics United](#) is “a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting the message of justice and the common good found at the heart of the Catholic Social Tradition.” They accomplish this mission through online advocacy and educational activities.

Catholics United began their online advocacy in the 2004 when a group of Catholic activists formed the Catholic Voting Project to promote the United States Catholic Bishops’ 2003 document “[Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility](#).” The mission of the Catholic Voting Project was to encourage a public dialog about faith and politics that went beyond the rhetoric of partisan interests by allowing Catholics to learn how their political views

matched up to those of the United States Catholic Bishops and the two major presidential candidates.

Following the public launch in the summer of 2004, thousands of Catholics from across the country visited the Catholic Voting Project web site. Their work attracted the attention of local, national, and international publications. The following year the members of the Catholic Voting Project incorporated formally as Catholics United.

Cultural Catholicism

Cultural Catholics have been described as those who identify with at least some Catholic teachings and traditions, likely because of upbringing, but are not necessarily active in the Catholic Church. Cultural Catholics may retain the Catholic identity because it's part of who they are. This may be because their family has heritage in a strongly Catholic country like Brazil, the Philippines, or Italy. It also could be that they appreciate the community that they experienced as part of attending Catholic services and events. Frequently, cultural Catholics continue to attend services on major holidays and participate in life celebrations as a consideration for family and friends.

Catholic Nontheism

An interesting and highly relevant footnote is the 2008 finding of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The study indicated that 29% of the Catholic population in the United States believe that "God is an Impersonal Force" and 1% do not hold a belief in God at all. This translates into approximately 22 million who hold a non-traditional belief in God and approximately 782,000 who deny its existence.

We are on the same page

When you compare the following quotations, you will see that, indeed, in many ways we are "on the same page."

The common good "means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about None of us can think we are exempt from concerns for the poor and for social justice."

-- Pope Francis

"Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of 'all of us,' made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it." -- Pope Benedict XVI

"(Solidarity) then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to

commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” -- Pope John Paul II

“The best way to fulfill one's obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one's means and the needs of others, and also to promote and help public and private organizations devoted to bettering the conditions of life.... Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.” --The Church in the Modern World

“When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed.” -- Mother Teresa

“People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.” -- Dorothy Day

“The (former) head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI, wants to end proliferating warfare by declaring a new age of humanism. The pope defined humanism as a moral and spiritual mission to create a culture of peace, to rededicate resources from military spending to solving global economic and environmental problems and to agree to universal disarmament. Personal development and the elimination of violence are essential components of this ‘new humanism’ as are compassion and a widespread commitment to solidarity in working for peace and social justice.”

-- Benna Crawford’s from her essay on *Humanism & the Roman Catholic Church* (<http://people.opposingviews.com/humanism-roman-catholic-church-4123.html>)

“We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.” Paul Kurtz, American Humanist Association’s 2008 Lifetime Achievement Awardee, *The Affirmation of Humanism: A Statement of Principles*

[By working to improve the world] “One thing is certain: you will find plenty of worthwhile things to do. You will not be bored, or lack fulfillment in your life. Most important of all, you will know that you have not lived and died for nothing, because you will have become part of the great tradition of those who have responded to the amount of pain and suffering in the universe by trying to make the world a better place.” -- Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live?: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest*

“We do want our fellow citizens to respect our deeply held conviction that the absence of an afterlife lends a greater, not a lesser, moral importance to our actions on earth.” -- Susan Jacoby, *The Blessings of Atheism*: New York Times, January 5, 2013.

“A community is democratic only when the humblest and weakest person can enjoy the highest civil, economic, and social rights that the biggest and most powerful possess.”

-- A. Philip Randolph, American Humanist Association's 1970 Humanist of the Year, *Why Should We March?* 1942.

“Our humanist community should be thinking more about demonstrating the fundamental truth that goodness requires neither God nor the belief in God by organizing together as a community to do good. Less money spent on billboards that just make us feel good about ourselves and more on soup kitchens and organized visits to the sick and dying.” -- Rebecca Goldstein, American Humanist Association's 2011 Humanist to the Year

“We are privileged to have the opportunity of contributing to the achievement of the goal of the abolition of war and its replacement by world law. I am confident that we shall succeed in this great task; that the world community will thereby be freed not only from the suffering caused by war but also through the better use of the earth's resources, of the discoveries of scientists, and of the efforts of mankind, from hunger, disease, illiteracy, and fear; and that we shall in the course of time be enabled to build a world characterized by economic, political, and social justice for all human beings and a culture worthy of man's intelligence.” -- Linus Pauling, American Humanist Association's 1961 Humanist of the Year

What Is the Next Step?

Humanism As The Next Step (The Humanist Press, Washington, DC, revised edition, 1998) by Lloyd and Mary Morain presents an overview of the history and principles of modern humanism and is highly recommended as your next reading. Also, dialogue with humanists in your community on core issues shared by both perspectives. Keep an open mind and look for additional commonalities. And if you harbor any doubts about the concept of divinity (as very many do according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life), the next step might be the same as Todd Stiefel explains in his moving essay “[Why I Am Not a Catholic and Why I Am a Humanist](#).” Or perhaps you wish to maintain your Catholic heritage and cultural identity and add a humanist identity to who you are. You make the rules.

You can, of course, follow the American Humanist Association on Facebook and Twitter, become a member of the AHA, and identify yourself as a humanist. You surely would not be the first to do so!

For additional information and for answers to any questions you might have about the humanist worldview or life-stance, please contact aha@americanhumanist.org.