

Growing in FAITH

Discovering **hope** and **joy** in the Catholic faith.

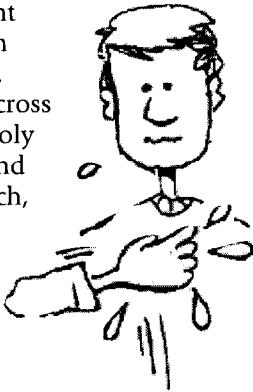
Special Edition

Why do Catholics do that?

Why do Catholics bless themselves before and after entering church?

Old Testament Jews washed with water before entering the Temple precincts. Building on a ritual familiar to the Jews, John the Baptist used water to represent repentance of sin and purification.

So when we cross ourselves with holy water entering and leaving the church, we recall that history. But we also refer to our Baptism when the priest used water to symbolize the washing away of our sins and to protect us from evil.



Why do Catholics make the Sign of the Cross?

Back in the second century when this practice began, it was common to honor a ruler with a gesture of respect. Whether bowing down on one knee or touching the forehead, such gestures were ritual ways to show humility before a person of great power.

The Sign of the Cross became one such devotion to the Holy Trinity, and acted as a sign of recognition between early Christians who were sometimes forced to worship in secret.

Now a prayer in itself, each time we make the Sign of the Cross we express respect for God and call down his blessings on ourselves.

Why do we believe that the Pope is head of the Church?

Jesus gave Peter his name, which means Rock, and declared that he will build his church on the Rock. Jesus also gave Peter "*the keys of the kingdom of Heaven*" (Matthew 16:19).

In Jesus' day, the person who held the keys to the kingdom represented the king, and acted with his authority. So he was signaling that Peter was given a special role of leadership.

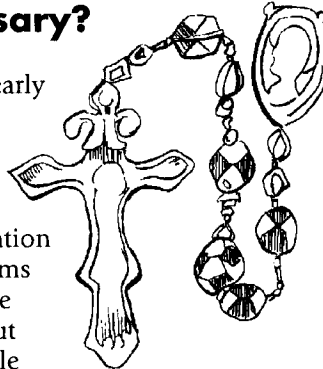
Catholics believe that the authority given to St. Peter did not end with his death but is passed to his successors who also become head of the Church.

Why do Catholics pray the Rosary?

In the early Church, monks led services with a Latin recitation of the Psalms called, "The Psalter." But most people couldn't read or write Latin, so the "Our Father" prayer was substituted so that people could easily pray together.

Tradition holds that St. Dominic combined the Our Father and Hail Mary prayers with meditations on the mysteries of our faith into the rosary we know today.

So the rosary makes it easy for us to pray together and to focus on Jesus' life and glory.



Why do we sometimes use incense in the Mass?

Today's incense is made from Frankincense, which is derived from the sap of desert trees. It has been prized in the Middle East for centuries, and became associated with Jesus since the Magi offered it as a gift (Matthew 2:10-11).

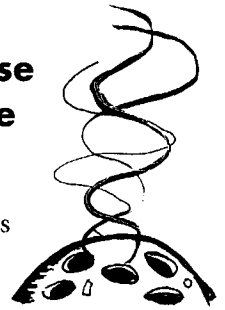
The sweet smell of incense is intended to please God and its smoke is like our prayers rising up to Heaven.

Incense can be used during Mass to show reverence for the altar, the Gospels, the bread and wine, the assembly, and the body of the deceased during a funeral.

Why do Catholics go to Confession?

Disobeying God damages our friendship with him, so we need his forgiveness to heal it. That's why Jesus initiated the Sacrament of Reconciliation (also called "Confession"). "*Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*" (Matthew 16:19). This brings us back to God.

In Confession, we admit what we did, say that we're sorry, and resolve never to do it again. Penance helps us make up for it. When the priest conveys Christ's forgiveness to us, our friendship is restored.



Why do we genuflect in church?

In medieval Europe, one demonstrated respect for a king or noble by going down on one knee.



Building on that tradition, we bend on the right knee to show reverence for the Lord in the Eucharist when it is on the altar, in the tabernacle, or in the monstrance. (We also genuflect

before the cross from Good Friday through the Easter vigil.)

Note: While the right knee is reserved for Jesus, we genuflect on the left knee before the pope, cardinals, or bishops.

Why do we get ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday?

To ancient Jews, wearing sackcloth and covering themselves or sitting in ashes showed repentance and humility, and acted as a penance. Thus, the early Church adopted the practice of wearing ashes at the start of Lent to show repentance, too.

But as he places the ashes on our foreheads, the priest says, "Remember you are dust and unto dust you will return," to remind us that our time on earth will pass away but our life in Heaven will last forever.

Why do Catholics give the Sign of Peace during Mass?

The first words Jesus said to his apostles after his Resurrection were, "Peace be with you" (John 20:21). After that their fear disappeared.

By offering each other the Sign of Peace at Mass, we share that peace with the entire Body of Christ.



Jesus also told us to reconcile with one another before approaching the altar of God (Matthew 5:23). Thus, the

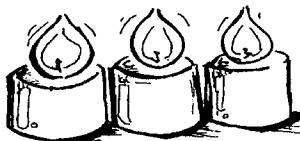
Sign of Peace is a gesture of Reconciliation with those around us before coming to the altar to receive Holy Communion.

Why do we say "Amen" at the end of some prayers?

In Hebrew, the word "Amen" shares the same root as the word "believe." This root also expresses trustworthiness and faithfulness.

When you read the gospels, you'll see that Jesus sometimes used the word "Amen" twice in a row to emphasize the trustworthiness of his teaching. He wanted his listeners to pay special attention.

So when we say "Amen" at the end of a prayer, we reinforce our faith in what we just said. We also express our confidence that God will hear our prayers.



Why do we light votive prayer candles in church?

A person can only pray for so long. Lighting a candle serves to prolong that prayer beyond our presence in the church. The candle remains behind and symbolizes the desire for the prayer to continue.

So when we light candles in prayer, our intentions remain present even when we are gone. Next time you pass a candle rack, help prolong others' prayers by offering one for the intentions of the people who lit them.

Why do priests wear different colored vestments throughout the year?

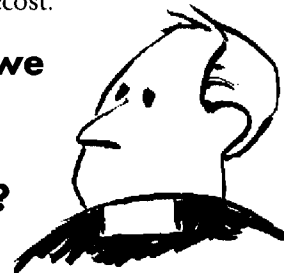
The colors of the vestments help bring to mind the sacred mysteries we celebrate throughout the liturgical year. Each color highlights a particular aspect of the season or a specific

mystery of the faith.

For example, white and gold symbolize rejoicing and purity of soul. They are worn during Christmas and Easter. Red calls to mind Christ's blood and is worn on Good Friday and to commemorate those saints who were martyred for our faith.

Red also signifies the burning fire of God's love. Thus red vestments are worn on Pentecost.

Why do we call our priests, "Father"?



According to *Our Sunday Visitor Catholic Encyclopedia*, those in the early Church who gave special vitality to the faith were called "Father." In fact, St. Paul said, "For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15-16).

The practice of addressing priests this way was brought to the U.S. in the 19th century by Irish immigrants who called their priests, "Father." Today this title reminds us that we are all united as family under Christ, his Gospel, his Church, and his representatives on earth.

Why do Catholics baptize babies?

"Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Baptism is the gateway to life in the Spirit, the Church, and the other Sacraments. So it makes sense that it be conveyed as early as possible.

While a child obviously can't consciously choose Baptism, her parents can choose for her. In so doing, they accept for her the priceless gift of becoming a child of God.

