

Factsheet on **Catholicism**

Radicalization and Polarization

Part of a Series of Factsheets on Religion Radicalization within the context of the EDUC8 Project.

Produced by the Centre for Teacher Education at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven.



Introduction

The Catholic message and the Catholic Church are addressed to everyone; **Catholic** (from the Greek word καθολικός) specifically means '**universal**'. Catholicism is the biggest denomination within Christianity with approximately 1.3 billion baptized members worldwide. The Catholic faith is based on the teachings and inspiration of **Jesus Christ**. Jesus was born in the first century of the Common Era in Palestine and was a unique person. He announced the **Kingdom of God**: a kingdom of love, not of power.

Today, Catholic believers live all over the world. Although the statistics continue to change over time, almost 18% of the world population are baptized Catholics (members of the Catholic Church). In Africa, 19.35% of the population is Catholic, in America 63.71%, in Asia 3.29%, in Europe 39.69%, and in Oceania 26.34%.

Structure

The **pope** (who is also the Bishop of Rome) is the head of the Catholic Church. He lives in Vatican City, the headquarters of the Catholic Church. Besides the pope, there are other leadership figures within the Church: **bishops, priests, and deacons**. The Catholic Church considers the pope to be the successor of Saint Peter, and the bishops as successors of the apostles of Jesus. Catholic believers who do not take up a formal leadership office in the Church are called '**lay people**', or the 'laity'. The laity are called to engage in society based on the Christian inspiration.



Figure 1. The pope is the head of the Catholic Church.

Everyday life

How is the Catholic faith and tradition present in the everyday life of Catholic believers? Different practices, rituals, and objects are important and define everyday life.

Firstly, the Catholic tradition has **seven sacraments** that mark important moments and transitions in the lives of believers. A sacrament is a ritual in the Catholic Church in which God and humankind meet. The seven sacraments are baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, marriage, holy orders, anointing of the sick, and the sacrament of penance/reconciliation.

Next to the seven sacraments, there are also other important customs and rituals in life, connected to a certain holiday with a special meaning for believers. These are different moments throughout the year when Catholics experience their faith together. The **liturgical year** can be divided into several periods and largely focuses on two major holidays: Easter, and Christmas. Easter is the symbol of hope and the future. The suffering, death, and **resurrection** of Jesus form the core of the Christian faith. Even in moments that interrupt life, believers can find strength in their faith together. The **belief in the afterlife** means that Catholics believe in a life after death. The deceased person will continue to exist in the afterlife, which is a gift from God.

Besides this, there are other topics that are important to Catholic believers. For example, think of the **Bible**, or the creed. Also, celebrations in church (masses), prayers (for example, the Lord's Prayer), the veneration of saints (like Mary), pilgrimage(s), and taking social action in the world play an important role in the everyday life of Catholic believers.



Figure 2. *The Last Supper* painted by Leonardo da Vinci, is one of the most famous paintings in the Western world. It represents the Last Supper of Jesus and his apostles, as told in the Gospels. Jesus asked his disciples to keep repeating this meal; that is why the ecclesial community has come together from the very beginning to celebrate the Eucharist.

The Catholic Church is facing several challenges nowadays. Below is a brief overview.

Processes of secularization and pluralization are challenging the Catholic tradition. **Secularization** refers to the disappearance of (the role of) religion from society. The evident presence of Catholicism in the daily life of individuals and groups is gradually becoming less observable and lived in many regions. Besides this, there is also the challenge of **pluralization**: the Catholic tradition is no longer self-evident in the lives, thoughts, and actions of groups and individuals. The Church must find its place and role in a plural world.

Besides the challenges of secularization and pluralization, there are other issues being discussed within the Catholic Church. The **role of women in the Church** is an example of this. Women can take on tasks within the Church, but they may not take place in ordained offices. There is also an increasing discussion on the Church's perspective on **homosexuality**: homosexual relationships and acts are not accepted by the Church. This is increasingly being questioned both within and outside of the Church.

Lastly, since the end of the 20th century, the Church has faced numerous allegations of **sexual abuse**. The Church is often blamed for not doing enough to support and protect the victims. This undermines the moral authority of the Catholic Church.

Polarization

Religion, polarization, radicalization, and violence are often linked together. How can we make young people look beyond different forms of polarization and radicalization? How is it possible to build resilience and resistance against polarization and radicalization in the Catholic faith and tradition?

The Catholic faith and religion are based on the teachings and inspiration of Jesus. Jesus lived in a polarized world and broke through the polarization of his time by touching the sick, visiting tax collectors, meeting sinners, and so on. Jesus forgives, even up to the cross.

How can we deal with the existing diversity in our society today? How can we encounter 'the other'? Concerning this question, Catholics can read the Bible story called *'The Syrophenician Woman's Faith'* (Mark 7:24-30). This Bible story can be understood as a reflection of the universal mission of Christianity. It offers the opportunity to reflect on the encounter and the attitude towards the 'other'. Mark 7:24-30 shows the story of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. To Jesus and his followers, the Syrophenician woman was a stranger, a 'pagan'. The woman has heard of Jesus and asks him to help her sick daughter. The conversation with the Syrophenician woman teaches Jesus that the Kingdom of God is not only for one closed group, but for everyone. **In God's Kingdom, Catholics, like Jesus, dare to expand their boundaries, listen to the needs of others and break through polarization.**

A literal reading of biblical texts can cause violence and intolerance. One single meaning is taken from the text and imposed on everyone. This is usually done by people who are in power. A literal reading risks using the Bible to, for example, legitimize apartheid, discriminate against women, harm nature, and so on. On the other hand, a **symbolic reading of the Bible and a symbolic handling of the faith** will lead to a tolerant attitude in this diverse society.

In a symbolic reading of Bible stories, both the context in which the story originated and the contemporary context in which the story is read, are important. This is also called '**recontextualization**'. In recontextualization, aspects of the Christian faith, such as biblical stories, are looked at from a contemporary perspective in which the interaction between text and context can lead to new interpretations. **A symbolic reading counters radicalization and polarization**; there is never one interpretation that can be imposed on everyone, and there is always room to look at things differently in the light of the Kingdom of God. A symbolic stance encourages Catholics to be open to diversity. It encourages Catholics to care for nature, animals, and every fellow human being.

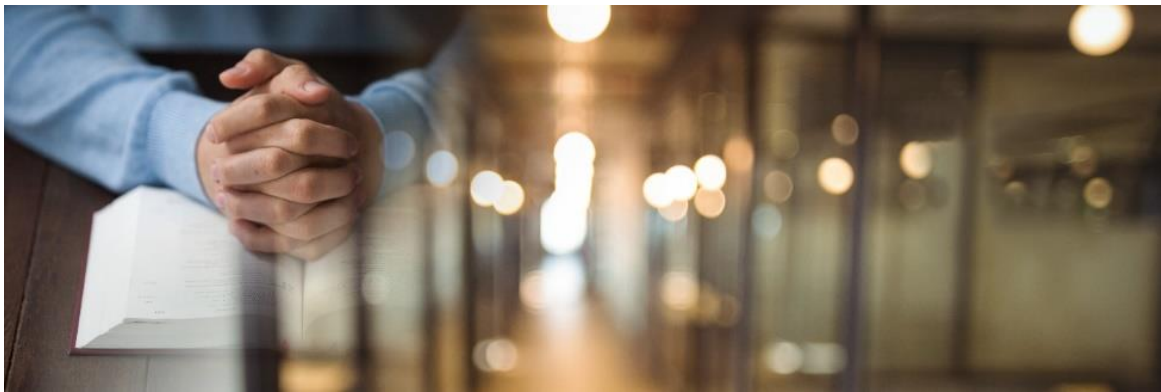


Figure 3. The Bible is the book of faith for Catholics; Catholic believers turn to God when praying.

Yet, the world is still facing challenges of inequality, injustice and poverty. The **social teaching** of the Church is committed to this. Social commitment is an important part of the Catholic faith. The social teaching of the Church has developed strongly over time: starting from charity, the Church's social teaching has, since Pope Leo XII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), grown into a well-founded vision of prosperity and well-being. Social doctrine does not only want to call for charity, but also tries to build a just structure in dialogue with the actual context.

Several **peace encyclicals**, such as *Pacem in Terris* by Pope John XXIII (1963) and *Fratelli Tutti* by Pope Francis (2020), call for building a peaceful and just world together. Many Christians and Christian organizations feel inspired by this and commit themselves to the welfare of others.

"Peace is an order that is founded on truth, built up on justice, nurtured and animated by charity, and brought into effect under the auspices of freedom."

Pacem in Terris, Pope John XXIII, 1963

"Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes."

Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis, 2020

Polarization has been present throughout the history of the Catholic Church, both inside and outside the faith community. Regarding conflicts, violence, war and peace, the Catholic Church has known a long tradition of the **just war theory**. This theory defines six conditions (depending on context, time, and place) for entering into armed conflict and for justifying the use of violence. These conditions are meant to avoid war and violence as much as possible. Within the Catholic Church, this theory had and still has, a great impact on thinking about war and peace.

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), there has been a growing call from members of the Catholic Church to shift from a 'just war' to a '**just peace**'. The absence of violence does not always equate to peace. During periods when war seems to be absent, 'peace' is sometimes based on the oppression and exploitation of civilians. We must work to build a just society where war, oppression, and exploitation are absent. 'Just peace' should be understood as a plea to focus more on a preventive approach to the root causes of armed conflict, on the one hand, and to shed light on the construction of an inclusive and just peace, on the other hand. Just peace is based on the evangelical message of non-violence.

"Terrorism does not come from religion. It uses religion as an excuse. Religion can never condone murder, terror or oppression."

Pope Francis, 2021

Cover: St. Peter's Square in Vatican City.

This factsheet was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police. The content of this fact sheet represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

Copyright © EDUC8 2021. All rights reserved.

