



The Roman Catholic Church

General Information

The Roman Catholic Church is the world's largest Christian denomination, representing more than half of all Christians and more than one-sixth of the world's population. Its beliefs are based on the Bible and on apostolic tradition. Final authority for the interpretation of beliefs rests in the Magisterium: the College of Bishops headed by the Pope (currently Pope Benedict XVI). The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium in matters of faith, protecting the Church from doctrinal error.

Number of members in the United States and Canada:

67.5 million

Number of members worldwide:

1.131 billion

Governing Body:

Spiritual authority over the Church rests in the Pope, who governs from Vatican City in Rome. The Pope is advised by the College of Bishops, who are considered to be successors of the original Apostles of Christ. Within the U.S., the highest governing body is the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, located in Washington, D.C.

Official Statements on Animals

Humanity is the pinnacle of creation: the only creature "that God has willed for its own sake" and the only one possessing an immortal soul (although there is a possibility that animals possess mortal souls—see "Contemporary References," below). Animals and all other creatures exist for the sake of humankind and may be used to serve human purposes.

"At the centre of the whole of creation, He placed us, human beings, with our inalienable human dignity. Although we share many features with the rest of the living beings, Almighty God went further with us and gave us an immortal soul, the source of self-awareness and freedom, endowments that make us in His image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-31; 2:7)."

—from Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, Monday 10 June 2002

"Of all visible creatures only man is 'able to know and love his creator'. He is 'the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake', and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity."

—from Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 6, 1:356

"God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure. Medical and scientific experimentation on animals is a morally acceptable practice if it remains within reasonable limits and contributes to caring for or saving human lives."

—from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Three, Section Two, Chapter Two, Article 7, 2:2417

Yet while humanity is the pinnacle of creation, God loves all creatures and has declared them all to be good.

"Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. For each one of the works of the 'six days' it is said: 'And God saw that it was good.' 'By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws.' Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness."

—from Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 5, 2:339

"The beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator and ought to inspire the respect and submission of man's intellect and will."

—from Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 5, 2:341

God created human beings to live in harmony with God, with each other, and with all creation. Sin disrupted this harmony, but Jesus' death and resurrection make it possible once again.

"The first man was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him, in a state that would be

surpassed only by the glory of the new creation in Christ."

—from Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 6, 4:374

"Christians believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ accomplished the work of reconciling humanity to the Father, who 'was pleased ... through (Christ) to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross' (Col 1:19-20). Creation was thus made new (cf. Rev 21:5). Once subjected to the bondage of sin and decay (cf. Rom 8:21), it has now received new life while 'we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Pt 3:13). Thus, the Father 'has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery ... which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, all things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph 1:9-10)."

—from Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: 1 January 1990: *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, 1:4

Since harmony with all creation is God's intent, human actions which disrupt this harmony are sinful and will be subject to God's final judgment.

"At the beginning of history, man and woman sinned by disobeying God and rejecting His design for creation. Among the results of this first sin was the destruction of the original harmony of creation. If we examine carefully the social and environmental crisis which the world community is facing, we must conclude that we are still betraying the mandate God has given us: to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom."

—from Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, Monday 10 June 2002

"The steward must render an account of his stewardship, and the divine Master will judge his actions."

—from International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, Chapter 3, 61.

"Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence."

—from Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: 1 January 1990: *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, 3:8

"I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue."

—from Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: 1 January 1990: *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*, 5:15

Because God intends creation to exist in harmony, human dominion has limitations. At all times, dominion must be exercised as a form of service and love, mirroring God's own service to and love for creation, including the animals within creation.

"In God's plan man and woman have the vocation of 'subduing' the earth as stewards of God. This sovereignty is not to be an arbitrary and destructive domination. God calls man and woman, made in the image of the Creator 'who loves everything that exists', to share in his providence toward other creatures; hence their responsibility for the world God has entrusted to them."

—from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article 1, Paragraph 6, 3:373

"God has not abandoned the world. It is His will that His design and our hope for it will be realized through our co-operation in restoring its original harmony. In our own time we are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programmes and initiatives. An awareness of the relationship between God and humankind brings a fuller sense of the importance of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, which is God's creation and which God entrusted to us to guard with wisdom and love (cf. Gen 1:28)."

—from *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, Monday 10 June 2002

"Employing royal imagery, it is said that human beings are called to rule in the sense of holding an ascendancy over the whole of visible creation, in the manner of a king. But the inner meaning of this kingship is, as Jesus reminds his disciples, one of service: only by willingly suffering as a sacrificial victim does Christ become the king of the universe, with the Cross as his throne."

—from *International Theological Commission, Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, Chapter 3, 59

"God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other."

—from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part One, Section Two, Chapter One, Article I, Paragraph 5, 2:340

"Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness. We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals....It is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly."

—from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Three, Section Two, Chapter Two, Article 7, 2:2416

"Animals are the creatures of God, and, according to the Scriptures, he surrounds them with his providential care (Mt 6:26). Human beings should accept them with gratitude and, even adopting a eucharistic attitude with regard to every element of creation, to give thanks to God for them. By their very existence the animals bless God and give him glory: "Bless the Lord, all you birds of the air. All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord" (Dn 3:80-81). In addition, the harmony which man must establish, or restore, in the whole of creation includes his relationship to the animals. When Christ comes in his glory, he will "recapitulate" the whole of creation in an eschatological and definitive moment of harmony."

—from International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, Chapter 3, 2:79

Contemporary References on Animals

During a general audience in January of 1990, Pope John Paul II stated that both “man” and “animal” are created from the “spirit or breath of God” and “under this aspect man...appears in solidarity with all living beings.” This statement was interpreted by some as a papal declaration that animals have souls. In 2002, the Pope partially clarified confusion about this issue by reiterated the long-standing Catholic doctrine that only human souls are “immortal” (a statement that leaves open the possibility that animals have mortal souls). Human immortality, however, does not bestow upon us the right to abuse animals, insisted Pope John Paul II, his successor, Benedixt XVI, and other Vatican representatives. Instead, God has given animals an intrinsic dignity and a divinely designated roll in creation which we must respect and safeguard.

“We read that, after having formed man from the dust of the ground, the Lord God ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being’ (Gen 2:7)...In man there is a breath or spirit similar to the breath or spirit of God. When the Book of Genesis speaks in chapter two of the creation of the animals (v. 19), it does not hint at such a close relationship with the breath of God ... Other texts, however, admit that the animals also have a vital breath or wind and that they received it from God. Under this aspect man, coming forth from the hands of God, appears in solidarity with all living beings.”

—from Pope John Paul II, *The Creative Action of the Divine Spirit*, General Audience, January 7, 1990

"Although we share many features with the rest of the living beings, Almighty God went further with us and gave us an immortal soul, the source of self-awareness and freedom, endowments that make us in His image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26-31; 2:7)."

—from *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I, Monday 10 June 2002

"Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God (cf. Ps 148:96)."

—from Message of his Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation, 1 January 1990, paragraph 16.

(When asked, "Are we allowed to make use of animals, and even to eat them?" Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger [now Pope Benedict XVI] replied), "That is a very serious question. At any rate, we can see that they are given into our care, that we cannot just do whatever we want with them. Animals, too, are God's creatures and even if they do not have the same direct relation to God that man has, they are creatures of his will, creatures we must respect as companions in creation (Man) should always maintain his respect for these creatures, but he knows at the same time that he is not forbidden to take food from them. Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible."

—from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 78-79.

"Catholic teaching about stewardship of creation leads us to question certain farming practices, such as the operation of massive confined animal feeding operations. We believe that these operations should be carefully regulated and monitored so that environmental risks are minimized and animals are treated as creatures of God."

—from United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *For I was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 31.

Historical References on Animals

Many Catholic saints have attempted to live in harmony with animals. St. Basil, for example, prayed for forgiveness for past sins against "our brothers the animals" and for a future in which humans achieve fellowship with "all living things."

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom thou hast given the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live, not for us alone, but for themselves and for thee, and that they have the sweetness of life.

—a prayer from St. Basil (c. 330 CE-c. 379 CE)

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For more information, visit The Humane Society of the United States Faith Outreach program at www.humanesociety.org/faith.