

Why is the Church important for Catholics?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Lauren Layfield. I'm a broadcaster and writer, and host for this series where we're going over the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE studies on Catholic Christianity.

And in this episode, we're exploring why the Church is important for Catholic Christians. And I'm here with teacher, author and broadcaster Bobby Seagull. Hi Bobby!

Bobby: Hi Lauren! Thank you for inviting me. I'm a Catholic, and my faith has always been part of how I see the world - from growing up serving at Mass to later reflecting more deeply on what the Church teaches, faith has always played a role in shaping how I think. I can't wait to get stuck in.

Lauren: Brilliant. Before we start, don't forget to grab a pen and paper or use the notes app on your phone for writing down key points as you're listening.

Bobby: And we'll finish off with a quick quiz.

Lauren: And don't forget there are loads of podcasts to help you with your GCSEs, just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds.

Bobby: Let's get started!

Lauren: Firstly, let's look at the role the Pope, and bishops, play within the Catholic Church.

Bobby: Ok. Think of the Catholic Church as a pyramid structure with the Pope at the top, followed by cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, and deacons as you go down the pyramid.

Lauren: Let's start at the top with the Pope. The Pope is technically a bishop too, right?

Bobby: Yes, and he lives in Vatican City in Rome. The word "Pope" comes from a Latin word meaning "father", and he is seen as a spiritual father to Catholic Christians.

Lauren: How did the role of the Pope come to be?

Bobby: Catholic Christianity teaches that the Pope holds the authority passed down from Saint Peter, who was believed to be the leader of Jesus' Apostles.

Let me read you this from the Book of Matthew chapter 16 verse 18 where Jesus is talking to Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

Bobby: This reading teaches the belief that this is the moment Peter was chosen as the first Pope by Jesus. All Popes are believed to be God's representatives on Earth.

Lauren: And this is why many Catholics accept his authority as the head of the Catholic Church?

Bobby: Correct. From today's current Pope, there has been an unbroken line of successors all the way back to Peter. That's known as apostolic succession.

Lauren: Apostolic - relates to apostles?

Bobby: Exactly.

Lauren: Now let's look at the role of cardinals.

Bobby: Cardinals, who were once referred to as 'Princes of the Church', are given special privileges, like being able to preach anywhere in the world.

Lauren: Do they work closely with the Pope?

Bobby: Yes - they have a special role in assisting, and sometimes representing, the Pope with important pastoral matters. And a very important part of this role is electing the next Pope when a Pope dies or retires.

Lauren: Cardinals are also archbishops, aren't they?

Bobby: That's right. Archbishops are senior-ranking bishops. Which leads us on to look at the role of Bishops.

Like the Pope, bishops are believed to stand in a line of succession from Jesus' Apostles. They have leadership and teaching responsibilities in the Catholic Church. It is their role to oversee a region of parishes and groups of local churches and to ordain priests.

Lauren: It sounds like priests are governed by bishops.

Bobby: Yes. Priests are spiritual leaders who support local communities, deliver God's message to members of the Church, and typically run their own church.

Lauren: Let's move on to deacons.

Bobby: Deacons assist priests and bishops in the liturgy, the structured worship of the Church, such as at Mass, baptising, and witnessing marriages. They also preach and care for those in need. Unlike priests, deacons may be married and can have jobs outside the Church alongside their ministry.

Lauren: Is it right that all priests begin as deacons?

Bobby: That's right. From deacons up, these are all 'ordained clergy'. Someone who is 'ordained' has the authority of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, to fulfil certain duties for the Catholic Christian community.

Below the clergy are lay people - ordinary, or non-ordained people who make up most of the Church and support its mission through worship, service, and daily life.

Lauren: Now we have an understanding of the role that the Pope, and bishops play within the Catholic Church, let's focus in on the Magisterium.

Bobby: The Magisterium is one of three sources of wisdom for Catholics, together with Scripture and Tradition.

The Magisterium is governed by the Pope, assisted by bishops, including cardinals and archbishops. This group helps guide Catholics in faithfully interpreting Scripture and Tradition. There are various forms and degrees of Magisterium.

Lauren: Let's break them down.

Bobby: Ordinary - which means explaining aspects of the faith to us.

Bobby: Conciliar - which means discussing major issues within the Church.

Bobby: And Pontifical.

Lauren: Pontifical meaning the Pope.

Bobby: That's right. When the Pope formally teaches on matters of faith and morals, this is considered infallible, meaning Catholic Christians believe God protects this teaching from error.

Lauren: So, it can't be questioned?

Bobby: That's right. This is quite rare and the Pope will take advice from bishops.

Lauren: Got it. For more detail on all of this just search 'Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies, Pope'.

Lauren: Let's look at the Church itself and what it represents to the Catholic Christian community.

Bobby: The Magisterium teaches what the Church is and the role it plays in Catholic life. One important image it uses is the Church as the 'Body of Christ,' an idea that comes from the teachings of St Paul the Apostle.

The second image it uses is the Church as 'people of God'.

Lauren: Let's start with the Church as 'Body of Christ'.

Bobby: Let me read you this from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 12 to 13:

"Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts.:

This is a way to help Catholics visualise how the Church, Jesus Christ and its members work together. The Body symbolises the Church because it's like a living thing.

Lauren: And that would make Jesus the 'head' of the Church?

Bobby: That's right. It's also a way of showing that, like a head without a body, one part of the Church cannot work without the other. Catholicism teaches the belief that the 'many parts' represent the unity and diversity of members of the Church.

Lauren: And what about the second description of the Catholic Church as 'People of God' - what does that mean?

Bobby: In simple terms, the Magisterium made it clear that God called upon people from all walks of life who are "faithful" and then made them one.

Lauren: This is when you hear people talking about the divine call from God?

Bobby: Absolutely. Some people may have been born and baptised into faith, like me, but for others, it may come later on in life.

Lauren: Ok - meaning this divine call can come at any time.

Bobby: Precisely.

Lauren: And what does it mean to become “people of God”.

Bobby: People of God have certain duties. For example, the Clergy are chosen to lead the Faithful. The Faithful are asked to “follow the commandments of God” and they have a duty towards their “fellow human beings”. They also have to be a “living witness” of God and spread His word around the world.

Lauren: It suggests a sense of vocation?

Bobby: That’s right or another word would be ‘a calling’. By spreading the Word of God, many Catholic Christians believe they are bringing a sense of hope and salvation to other people.

Lauren: What do you mean by salvation?

Bobby: Salvation is the belief that Catholics can be delivered from sin through faith in Jesus. Many of us believe He died for our sins.

Lauren: The ultimate sacrifice.

Bobby: That’s right. This reading from the Book of John chapter 3 verse 16 is really significant to many Catholic Christians as it sums up this idea:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believed in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Bobby: The word ‘perish’ here means ‘die’. This belief in salvation creates hope for a lot of Catholics as they believe they will be united with God in Heaven and live forever when they die.

Lauren: How does salvation fit in with the People of God’s mission?

Bobby: The word for sharing the message of salvation is evangelism. Evangelism also includes showing God's love through actions, service, and care for others, as well as sharing their faith.

Bobby: Are you ready for the quiz Lauren?

Lauren: Definitely! I'm ready. And don't forget you can always pause this podcast to grab a pen and paper or use your notes app to write your answers down!

Bobby: Ok three quick-fire-quiz questions, ready, Lauren?

Lauren: Let's go!

Bobby: What is apostolic succession?

Lauren: Apostolic succession means every Pope can be traced back to Jesus' apostles.

Bobby: Correct! What does Salvation mean?

Lauren: The belief that humans can be saved from sin through faith in Jesus.

Bobby: Correct! And finally, Lauren, which quote from the Book of Matthew chapter 16 verse 18 relates to the apostle Peter and Jesus?

Lauren: "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church."

Bobby: Three out of three! Brilliant!

Lauren: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Bobby: In the next episode we'll be talking about sacraments and their significance for Catholic Christians.

Lauren: And don't forget, you'll find a range of podcasts covering loads of GCSE subjects like English as well as Religious Studies. Just go to BBC Sounds and search for Bitesize GCSE. See you next time!