



Welcome to Module 2A - Catholic Identity and Christian Spirituality



Opening Prayer

Let us pause and call to mind
God's presence within and among us,
today and always.

Brief pause

God of mercy and infinite love,
we place ourselves before You.
Help us to be open to Your Word,
responsive to Your Spirit,
and alert to Your call.
May Your peace be with us.

We make this prayer through
Christ our Lord.

Amen.



Introduction

In this module, we will explore some of our Catholic traditions and how our Christian spirituality flows from our understanding of who we are and how we live our lives in relationship with God and others.

Our **objectives** for this module are:

- To understand the essential characteristics of our Catholic and Marist Identity.
- To determine how they shape and influence what we do as a Board.
- To develop a shared language and understanding of what it means to be a Catholic/Marist Board.

What is Catholic Identity and Christian Spirituality?

A good starting point is to acknowledge that we are a community of faith. We are a community of Christians who have chosen Catholicism as our particular home within God's family. We are a community made up of different people, united by a common belief and way of living.

As Catholics we are a body of people, a community, a family with a story, a history, a purpose who believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We share a common vision for life, seek to live in a spirit of love, not just a social club, not just a group of like-minded people or a spiritual fill-up station, but a life-long love relationship, alive in the Spirit of Christ, a people with a mission to proclaim Jesus to the world, share our life with others. (Catholic Australia)



The Catholic Church is a community of people who believe in the reality of God and shapes its life according to that belief.' (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p.1169)

At the foot of the cross (John 19:30), Jesus entrusted Mary to the apostle John and was drawn into a new community with the disciples. Jesus died for us, to give us a new life, a new beginning, a fresh start that signifies for each of us that we are called to create a new relationship with Jesus.

Our Catholic identity emerges from **our relationships with God and each other**. It is about experiencing a spiritual bond with all of humanity while growing our own relationship with God. Finding God in all things and in all people is a way of encountering God. We aim to be people and places of encounter and evangelisation. This is what Ronald Rolheiser, a theologian and author, calls giving God 'skin'.

"God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament. God's many faces are now everywhere, in flesh...so that our human eyes can see him. God in his many-faced face, has become accessible and visible...That is the why of the incarnation."

Ronald Rolheiser, The Holy Longing, New York: Random House, 1999, p.95

An important part of our Catholic identity is the celebration of the Eucharist. Catholics see the Eucharist as the physical re-enactment of Christ's Last Supper with His apostles, in which Christ is present with and in us through the elements of the bread and wine that we share. It's a reminder of God's love and the fact that God sent Jesus to show us how we should live on this earth. We are transformed by the Eucharist to become living expressions and revelations of Christ for the world.



Reflection

We all have different ways of figuring out what our faith means for our daily lives. Thinking about what you have read so far, how does your faith influence your outlook on life?



The Call to do Justice



The call to do justice is an integral part of relating to God and others. Jesus identifies his own presence with the poor and tells us that, ultimately, we will be judged on the basis of our giving or not giving food, water, clothing, shelter, and justice to the poor (Matthew 25: 31-46). Jesus makes it clear that there can be no real relationship with Him when the poor are neglected, and injustice abounds. Pope Francis employs the *see-judge-act* methodology, which grounds Catholic teaching and action in the world as it is, rather than the world as one imagines or wishes it to be.

In his message published 13 June 2020, Pope Francis wrote that, *“generosity that supports the weak, consoles the afflicted, relieves suffering and restores dignity to those stripped of it, is a condition for a fully human life.”* And that, *“time devoted to prayer can never become an alibi for neglecting our neighbour in need.”*

Thomas Groome, a Catholic educator, puts it this way, *“To ask, ‘What makes us catholic?’ - with a small c – really comes down to ‘Who is my neighbour?’ In other words, how open are our hearts, how wide our concerns, whom will we welcome and include? Catholicity invites us*

and our community of faith into solidarity with all humankind. At its best, catholicity means to welcome and love every 'other'." (Groome, p.241)

Father Anthony Gittins, a priest of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, reduces his blueprint for living as a Catholic to one simple point: *'Think from God's perspective, rather than a human one.'* When we interpret our Christian Story, we approach our traditions and scriptures as an unfolding story of the vital partnership between God and humanity where we encounter old and new wisdom for our time and place. This means asking what this faith means for now, what is it asking of us in the present.

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*Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which He
looks compassion on this world
Yours are the feet with which He
walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which He
blesses all the world.*

*Yours are the hands.
Yours are the feet.
Yours are the eyes.
You are His body.
Christ has no body now on earth but
yours.*

St. Teresa of Avila



Read the following scripture: (Matthew 25:40)

'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'



Flowing from our Catholic Identity

Flowing from our Catholic identity is our **Christian spirituality** which is **our way of seeing and being in the world**. Br Sean Sammon, who was a Superior General of the Marist Brothers, defines spirituality as, “what we do with our passion” (Sammon, p. 47). Our spirituality is that fire in our belly which compels us to BE people who bring good news to others.

Spirituality is not about serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality...[It] is more about whether or not we can sleep at night than about whether or not we go to church. (Rolheiser, p. 6-7).

It is also about **how we see God in our lives** and this is what fuels and sustains us...

“The incarnational nature of God means that God dwells within the realities of the world: in the squirming and crying, the snot, the struggles, the births and the deaths.” (Otto, p. 25)

And it is never something we do alone. God calls us to walk in discipleship, never alone.



Dimensions of Christian Spirituality 1

Call to Personal Holiness

There are three important dimensions of any Christian spirituality. Firstly, it is our **call to personal holiness**; in other words, our vocation.

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete Et Exsultate: The Call to Holiness*, suggests that, *We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.*

It also concerns our **search for meaning** in our lives through the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning, and purpose. Jesus Christ is the measure of all authentic forms of Christian life and we can raise our awareness of Him by being intentional with our lives. To help us with this, we draw upon an age-old contemplative practice of the Church, an Ignatian prayer of review, known as the *Examen* or Review of the Day. <https://maristbrothers.org.nz/spirituality/review-of-the-day/>

This form of prayer cultivates our ability to interpret our inner desires accurately, to judge wisely, and then to choose well in relation to different potential life directions and courses of action. This is the process of discernment.

The Examen has five movements which generally follow this pattern:

1. Ask God for light.
I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not merely my own.
2. Give thanks
The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it
3. Look over the day
I carefully look back over the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
4. Face your shortcomings
I face up to what is wrong in my life and in me.
5. Look forward to the day to come
I ask where I need God in the day to come.



Dimensions of Christian Spirituality 2

Community

Second, is the dimension of **community**. Our everyday attitude about community greatly affects how we live with others in the world. Community is a central theme of the Hebrew scriptures. God called Abraham and Sarah to become 'a great nation' in whom 'all peoples of the earth shall find blessing.' (Genesis 12:2-3). A very clear example of community is Jesus' hospitality. He welcomed all and sundry to eat with Him. Symbolically, this epitomised Jesus' deep respect and love for every person and the inclusive community he intended.



The Sermon on the Mount by Karoly Ferenczy (1896)

Spend a minute gazing at the painting then read the following commentary:

In this painting, titled *The Sermon on the Mount*, the figure of Christ is the obvious focal point even though He is not perfectly centered within the composition. Jesus is being depicted from the back. We do not see his face. He is placed within and beside the people, not speaking to them from above. The crowd is a cross-section of people. The figure in the foreground to the left, with one hand casually in the grass, mirrors Jesus.

He too is seen predominantly from the back suggesting that Jesus and the people of his community are at the same level. It is a beautiful painting and a moving scene. Unlike many other traditional religious paintings, we don't see any sacred attributes here; no halo and Jesus' upturned open hands signify gentleness and calm in a gesture of openness and welcome. Ferenczy is able to transfer the essence of the Sermon to a more familiar time and place, which saves Jesus from being trapped in history and reinforces His active and ongoing presence in the contemporary world.



Dimensions of Christian Spirituality 3

Mission

And thirdly, we were made for a **mission** – we are compelled to be people of good news. Jesus clearly understood His life mission on Earth. He said, “I must be about my Father’s business,” (Luke 2:49). Jesus’ mission is now our mission because we are the Body of Christ; we are the Church. We are the messengers of God’s love and purpose in the world. St Paul says our lives are worth nothing unless we live for doing the work assigned to us by Jesus (Acts 20:24).

We are dealing, first and foremost, with God’s mission which is realised in us and in the world. As Christians we extend Jesus’ mission by being a “living message” through the kind of people we are and how we act in the world (see 2 Corinthians 3:3). A key part of the Christian life is to share in God’s own mission to make a better world. In the language and culture of Catholicism, ‘mission’ equates to our faith community’s religious purpose - which is to be intentional in being at the service of God’s Kingdom. This includes in our personal lives, in communities, societies and cultures. An important question to continue to ask ourselves is ‘who is my neighbour?’ which calls us to a world consciousness.



Prayer

We invite you now to use a **Visio Divina**, or Holy Seeing, as a way to pray using an image.

Start with your eyes closed in a moment of stillness.

Take a few deep breaths.

Open your eyes and spend a full minute looking at the image.

Then respond to the questions below:

- *What caught your eye?*
- *What do you notice?*
- *Reflect on the structure: colour, lines, shadows, values, intensity.*
- *What is the mood of the painting? How do you react to it?*
- *Do you sense an invitation from God?*
- *Does anything else strike you?*



For Christians, the way to travel is the *way* of Jesus. Our journey's aim is to become more like Him.



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