

How to become Catholic

An extensive primer on the process, timing, requirements and life after initiation

Becoming Catholic normally begins with a conversation at a Catholic parish, followed by a period of learning, prayer and participation in parish life. If you have never been baptized, you prepare for Baptism, Confirmation and your first Holy Communion. If you are already validly baptized as a Christian, the Church recognizes that baptism and prepares you for reception into full communion. [1–4]

Allow months rather than days, and often about a year or longer for someone beginning without a Christian background. This is a planning expectation, not a universal deadline. Previous Christian formation, personal readiness, local diocesan requirements and marriage questions can change the timetable considerably.

Everyone may approach the Church and ask to learn. Receiving the sacraments requires the appropriate preparation and disposition; being interested and being ready are different stages. You do not need a flawless past, an academic qualification or complete understanding of every theological question.

This guide explains the ordinary adult journey in the Latin Catholic Church, the tradition followed by most Catholic parishes. Eastern Catholic Churches have their own liturgical and canonical arrangements. Local parish and diocesan instructions govern practical details. Church teaching and law are identified by numbered references; practical suggestions are offered to help readers act on them. Sources checked on 13 September 2026.

1 What becoming Catholic means

Catholic conversion is a response to God's grace: coming to believe in Jesus Christ, turning toward him and entering the sacramental life of his Church. Baptism brings a person into Christ and his Church; it is much more than registering with a religious organization. [3]

A Catholic life includes faith, worship, moral responsibility and belonging to a community. You are preparing to follow Christ at home and at work, in how you treat people, use money, approach sexuality, forgive and serve. The classes help you understand the life you are choosing; completing lessons is not the whole purpose.

An already baptized Christian brings a real Christian history. Reception into Catholic communion should acknowledge that history rather than imply that all previous prayer, faith and discipleship were meaningless. The term “candidate for reception” distinguishes this person from an unbaptized “catechumen.” [1]

You remain the same person, with your language, family relationships and cultural background. Becoming Catholic does not require adopting European customs or rejecting everything good in your upbringing. Where a particular religious practice conflicts with Catholic worship, discuss that practice specifically with the priest rather than assume that every family custom must disappear.

2 Find the path that fits your background

If you have never been baptized

This includes people from other religions, atheists, agnostics and people who grew up without religious practice. You enter a period of preparation for Christian initiation. An unbaptized person formally admitted to

this preparation is called a catechumen. The normal adult sequence is Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist. [2,4]

If you were baptized in another Christian community

Tell the parish where, when and how you were baptized. Bring a baptismal certificate if you have one. The Church investigates whether the baptism was valid; a denomination's name alone does not resolve every case. If a serious doubt remains after investigation, conditional baptism may be appropriate. A valid baptism is never repeated. [5]

Your preparation should take account of what you already know and practice. A lifelong Christian familiar with Scripture will not necessarily need the same formation as someone baptized in infancy who has never received Christian instruction. Reception normally includes a profession of Catholic faith, Confirmation if needed, and Eucharist; the priest also prepares you for sacramental confession. [1,6]

If you are Orthodox or belong to another Eastern Church

Ask for individual guidance at the beginning. Valid Baptism and Chrismation are respected and are not repeated. Reception and enrollment in an Eastern Catholic Church require particular care; attending a Latin parish does not by itself settle which Catholic Church you belong to. Ask the parish to consult the diocese or appropriate Eastern Catholic authority. [21]

If you were baptized Catholic but never practiced

Tell the priest, even if you have long regarded yourself as non-Catholic. You are already baptized Catholic. You may need formation, confession and any outstanding initiation sacraments, rather than reception as a non-Catholic Christian. A fully initiated Catholic returning after an absence normally returns through reconciliation and renewed practice. [1]

3 Your first practical steps

Contact a local Catholic parish and ask about adult initiation. You can simply say that you are interested in becoming Catholic and would like to speak with the priest or the person responsible for adult formation. You do not need to explain your entire life to the office receptionist.

The process is often called RCIA, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, or OCIA, the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults. Terminology varies by country and the liturgical edition in use. Ask for either name. The parish can explain its current arrangements.

At the first private meeting, explain your religious background, previous baptism, reasons for exploring Catholicism, family circumstances and practical needs. Mention every previous marriage involving either you or your present spouse, including civil marriages. Early disclosure can prevent an unexpected delay close to an intended reception date.

Bring available baptismal and marriage records. If relevant, tell the priest about divorce decrees, a former spouse's death or an existing Church tribunal decision. Do not postpone your first conversation simply because you cannot find everything. Ask what is actually needed and how missing records can be investigated.

Ask about session times, language, childcare, transport, disability access and arrangements for work travel. If one parish cannot accommodate a genuine difficulty, ask whether another parish or the diocese can help.

Online learning can supplement preparation, but videos alone do not establish that you have been received into the Church.

Start attending Mass. Arrive a little early, sit where you can follow others and tell an usher that you are new if you would like help. You may listen, pray and join responses you understand. During Communion, remain in your place and pray until the priest has explained when you may receive. The Church has limited exceptions for some non-Catholic Christians, but these are not a general permission for inquirers. [6]

4 What happens during preparation

Inquiry and initial discernment

This is time to ask whether you believe in God, who Jesus is and why the Catholic Church claims your trust. Bring difficult questions as well as practical ones. Attending an inquiry session does not oblige you to convert. Faith must be a free response. A partner, parent or parish team should not pressure you into making promises you do not believe. [8]

Keep a notebook with three kinds of questions: what you do not understand, what you currently disagree with, and what you fear conversion might change. These often need different conversations. A doctrinal explanation may answer the first; the third may require patient pastoral support.

The catechumenate

After the introductory period, an unbaptized person who is ready may enter the catechumenate through a liturgical rite of entrance or acceptance. Formation then combines instruction, prayer, worship and learning to live as a Christian. It is intended to develop faith and conversion within the parish community. [2]

Expect discussion of Scripture, the sacraments, the Creed, Christian morality and prayer. Parish life also provides opportunities to learn through service and relationships. Someone may accompany you as a sponsor. Ask how progress is reviewed, how missed sessions are handled and whom to approach privately.

Election and preparation before Baptism

When an unbaptized person is judged ready for initiation, the Rite of Election marks the next stage. Those preparing for Easter Baptism are called the elect. Lent brings more focused spiritual preparation, including the scrutinies, which are prayers for purification and strengthening. They are not public examinations or invitations to reveal personal sins to the congregation. [1]

Initiation and continued formation

At the initiation liturgy, ordinarily the Easter Vigil for adults in this path, the person professes faith and receives Baptism, Confirmation and first Eucharist. Water, anointing, a white garment and a lighted candle express aspects of the new life received. [4]

Formation continues afterward. “Mystagogy” means deepening your understanding of the mysteries you have celebrated. Ask what support continues after Easter and how you can become part of ordinary parish life. The sacramental celebration is a beginning with lasting consequences, not the end of learning. [1]

5 How long does it take

There is no single worldwide rule that every adult must complete exactly six, nine or twelve months. A parish's advertised course length is not a guarantee that every participant will be initiated on the same date. Ask what the local bishop requires and what preparation applies to your particular background.

For someone beginning without Christian formation, planning for roughly a year or more is sensible. Some people need substantially longer. Someone with extensive previous Christian formation may need a shorter, individualized preparation for reception. A Catholic returning to practice follows a different path again. Do not use another person's timetable as a judgment on your own sincerity. [1,2]

Ask the parish to explain whether a quoted duration includes the inquiry period and the formation after initiation. Also ask whether a missed annual intake actually requires waiting, or whether initial conversations and formation can begin sooner. Local schedules differ.

Reasons for additional time can include unresolved questions of faith, an uncertain baptismal history, a marriage investigation, irregular attendance, serious family pressure or a need to establish a stable pattern of Christian living. Delay should have an intelligible pastoral reason and an identifiable next step. It should not feel like an unexplained rejection.

Already baptized candidates need not automatically wait until Easter. Their reception can occur at another suitable time once they are ready, according to pastoral and diocesan arrangements. [1]

If someone is seriously ill or in danger of death, contact a priest or Catholic hospital chaplain immediately. The Church provides for urgent situations; an ordinary course calendar must not be treated as the only possible path. [5]

6 What you need to learn and believe

The aim is sufficient understanding for an honest commitment, followed by lifelong growth. You do not need to memorize the entire Catechism. Ask the parish to distinguish essential Catholic teaching from a catechist's personal opinion or a particular devotional preference.

The central subjects include the Trinity; Jesus Christ, true God and true man; his death and Resurrection; salvation through grace; Scripture and Tradition; the Church's teaching authority; the seven sacraments; Christian moral life; prayer; and the Christian hope of resurrection and eternal life. The Catechism's four-part structure—faith, sacraments, life in Christ and prayer—provides a useful map. [7]

The Eucharist deserves particular attention. Catholics believe that Christ is truly present, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, under the appearances of bread and wine. The Mass makes present sacramentally Christ's one sacrifice; it does not imply that he dies again. Discuss these claims directly if your previous community understood Communion differently. [9]

Questions about Mary, the saints, confession, the pope and purgatory are common. Ask for the actual Church teaching and its reasoning. For example, Catholic devotion to Mary does not make her divine, and asking saints to pray does not replace prayer to God. [7]

Difficulty understanding a teaching is not identical to a settled decision to reject it. Tell the priest whether your concern is intellectual uncertainty, emotional resistance, disagreement or fear about practical consequences. You should not be coached to make a profession of faith dishonestly. Faith includes understanding that continues to grow; it cannot be manufactured by pressure. [8]

7 Can everyone be admitted

The invitation to seek God is universal. Race, nationality, poverty, lack of education, old age or a shameful past are not reasons to regard a person as beyond Christ's call. The Church prepares people for a new life; it does not require that they have already lived it perfectly.

For an adult capable of personal decision, Baptism requires a manifested intention, sufficient instruction, preparation in Christian living and repentance. These requirements explain why immediate admission may sometimes be postponed. A refusal to believe or an intention to use Baptism only as a social formality requires further conversation. [5]

Honest moral struggle needs care. Repentance involves intending to turn away from sin; it does not involve a guarantee that you will never fall again. A person seeking help with addiction or a repeated failure should explain the situation openly. Do not assume that needing support means you must remain outside indefinitely.

Disability and mental health

Disability by itself must not become a barrier to Baptism. Preparation should be accessible and appropriate to the person's capacity. Someone unable to undertake ordinary academic instruction must not simply be assessed by the same classroom expectations. The relevant sacramental requirements and pastoral arrangements should be considered individually. [10]

Tell the parish what communication, mobility or learning support helps. A diagnosis alone does not establish someone's readiness or inability to consent. If illness temporarily makes free decision difficult, ask the priest to work with the person and appropriate supporters rather than make assumptions from a label.

Sexual orientation and gender questions

Same-sex attraction does not by itself exclude a person from Catholic faith. Catholic teaching calls everyone to chastity according to their state of life and requires respect for people experiencing same-sex attraction. Questions about conduct or a relationship need individual pastoral discussion. [11]

The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith stated in 2023 that transgender persons can receive Baptism under the same conditions as other believers, while also specifying attention to possible public scandal or confusion. This is neither a blanket exclusion nor an automatic approval of every situation. A respectful private conversation with the priest is the appropriate starting point. [12]

8 Marriage divorce and relationships

Being divorced does not automatically exclude you

Tell the priest whether you are divorced, whether you have entered another union and whether a previous spouse is living. Divorce by itself and divorce followed by a new union are different situations. Do not assume that an annulment is required simply because you have a divorce decree.

The Church takes previous marriages seriously, including marriages between non-Catholics and marriages outside a church building. A civil divorce does not by itself establish freedom to marry in the Church. Every relevant previous union must be reviewed before conclusions are drawn about a present or proposed marriage. [13]

What an annulment means

A declaration of nullity is a Church finding that a valid marriage did not come into existence, because something required for validity was absent at the beginning. It is not a declaration that the relationship never happened or that its children lack dignity. The priest can refer a case to the competent tribunal. [14]

Some cases involve questions of canonical form, others a full investigation, and some may involve a possible dissolution of a non-sacramental bond under Church law. The appropriate route depends on the facts. Do not assume that every case is an annulment, that success is guaranteed or that every case takes the same time. [13]

Your existing marriage may already be valid

Two non-Catholics in a valid marriage do not automatically need to marry again when one becomes Catholic. If a Catholic party married without required canonical form or dispensation, a different assessment may be needed. A priest may discuss convalidation where appropriate. Baptism does not simply erase existing marriage bonds. [13]

Your spouse does not have to convert because you do. Talk about worship, children and practical expectations without treating conversion as a means of forcing agreement. A Catholic can marry a non-Catholic under the relevant Church permissions or dispensations; conversion should never be a performance staged to secure a wedding. [14]

Cohabitation and other complicated situations

If you live with a partner outside a valid marriage, explain the circumstances early. Ask what changes and practical support are needed. Children, housing, finances and safety matter when working out a responsible course of action. Catholic sexual teaching places sexual relations within marriage; pastoral guidance should address both that teaching and the actual responsibilities involved. [11]

If a previous bond, a present union or another unresolved circumstance affects readiness for the sacraments, you can still seek instruction and pastoral care. Do not rely on a general article to decide whether your own marriage is valid or whether reception must be delayed.

9 Other obstacles and how to address them

Family opposition

Relatives may hear conversion as rejection of them. Explain your own convictions without attacking their religion. Allow time for questions. You can say that you intend to remain a loving family member even though your religious commitments are changing.

If disclosure may expose someone to violence, loss of housing or coercion, discuss the circumstances privately before arranging public ceremonies or photographs. Ask how personal information will be handled. Taking threats seriously is compatible with a free and sincere faith decision.

Religious status and local law

The Church's sacramental process and a person's civil religious status are separate matters. Where civil law affects religious conversion, marriage or family matters, obtain confidential advice from the diocese and a qualified local adviser before assuming that Baptism changes official records. This guide sets out no country-specific legal procedure, including for Malaysia.

Work commitments and lack of money

Ask for reasonable arrangements if shift work, offshore assignments, caregiving or disability affect attendance. Be specific about availability and propose a workable pattern. Keep in contact rather than disappear when work becomes busy.

Sacraments are not bought. If costs for books, retreats or transport create a problem, tell the parish and ask for help. Church law specifically protects people in poverty from being deprived of sacramental assistance because of that poverty. [5]

A discouraging parish experience

If your questions are dismissed or a delay is unexplained, request a private meeting with the parish priest. Ask what requirement remains unmet and how it can be addressed. If needed, contact the diocesan office responsible for initiation or catechesis. Seeking clarity is reasonable; concealing relevant facts from another parish is not a solution.

Fear of confession or public exposure

Ask the priest to explain confession before your first celebration. You do not need to share your personal sins with the class or your sponsor. Sacramental confession is protected by the seal; the priest may not betray what is confessed. Ordinary conversations with parish staff are not sacramental confession, so ask about confidentiality when sharing sensitive records. [15]

10 Baptism confession and your sponsor

If you are unbaptized, you do not make sacramental confession before Baptism. Baptism forgives original sin and all personal sins, together with the punishment due to sin. It does not remove every harmful habit or earthly consequence; responsibilities such as repairing harm can remain. After Baptism, confession becomes part of your Christian life. [16]

If you are already baptized, ask the priest to prepare you for confession in connection with reception. Explain that it will be your first Catholic confession. He can help you examine your life, identify what should be confessed and understand repentance, absolution and penance. [15]

A sponsor or godparent accompanies you in faith. Look for someone trustworthy who practices Catholicism, listens well and will stay in contact after the ceremony. You do not need to find a theological expert or a socially prominent person. If you know no Catholics, ask the parish to help identify someone suitable. [2]

For the formal role, the parish checks canonical eligibility, including Catholic initiation and a life consistent with the responsibility. A parent cannot be the baptismal sponsor. Do not assume that a beloved non-Catholic friend can serve as the sole Catholic godparent; ask what role is possible. [5]

11 Life after becoming Catholic

You are beginning a continuing relationship with Christ and the Church. Make a realistic plan before reception: which Mass you will attend, when you will pray, how you will continue learning and whom you can approach when difficulties arise.

Catholics are obliged to participate in Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, unless excused by a serious reason or dispensation. Illness, caregiving and genuine impossibility need sensible pastoral consideration. The applicable holy days and some penitential arrangements depend on local Church law. [17]

The Church's minimum precepts also concern confession, receiving Communion at least annually in the Easter season, prescribed fasting and abstinence, and supporting the Church according to one's ability. Annual confession concerns grave sins; regular confession is encouraged more broadly. These minimums are a foundation for Christian life, not its full measure. [18]

Before Communion, Catholics ordinarily observe a one-hour fast from food and drink, apart from water and medicine; the law provides exceptions for the elderly, sick and those caring for them. Someone conscious of grave sin ordinarily needs sacramental confession before receiving. Ask the priest about your circumstances rather than make guesses. [6]

Start with a modest daily pattern: a short Gospel passage, a few minutes of honest prayer and a brief review of the day. Find one manageable way to serve. Friendship in a parish often develops through repeated ordinary contact, not through one large event.

You may explore the Rosary, Eucharistic adoration and other devotions, but avoid taking on every practice at once. If enthusiasm settles into ordinary routine, that does not mean your conversion was false. Stay connected and seek help rather than judge faith only by strong feelings.

12 Questions people often hesitate to ask

Can I attend without promising to become Catholic

Yes. Be honest about your intentions. Inquiry is a place to explore; you may need more time, or decide not to proceed. Ask the parish which gatherings are for general inquiry and which rites express a definite commitment.

Must I change my name or choose a saint

A civil name change is not a normal requirement of becoming Catholic. Some parishes invite a baptismal or Confirmation saint's name. Ask about local practice and the meaning of the choice rather than assume that you must abandon your existing identity.

Can my children become Catholic too

Discuss each child's age, baptismal history and circumstances. Infants have a different preparation route, while unbaptized children who have reached the use of reason receive age-appropriate initiation. A parent's conversion does not automatically complete a child's sacramental initiation. [2,5]

What if I die before Baptism

The Catechism teaches that catechumens who die before Baptism can receive salvation through their explicit desire for it, repentance and charity. This is often called Baptism of desire. It expresses trust in God's mercy; it is not a reason to neglect Baptism when it is possible. [19]

Does becoming Catholic guarantee heaven

Catholic initiation is a real gift of grace and a call to perseverance, not a certificate that makes future choices irrelevant. Continue responding to God through faith, repentance and love. The Church also teaches that God's saving action is not limited to the visible boundaries that people can observe. [7,19]

What if I struggle or fall into sin afterward

Seek reconciliation and support. Baptism is not repeated. Christian life includes continuing conversion and receiving God's forgiveness. Do not let embarrassment turn one failure into months of isolation. Ask a priest

for help, particularly if guilt becomes obsessive or you cannot distinguish a temptation from a freely chosen act. [16,20]

13 A checklist for your first parish meeting

- Explain whether you were baptized and where.
- Describe what draws you toward the Catholic Church.
- Bring your main questions and any serious reservations.
- Disclose relevant present and previous marriages privately.
- Ask which initiation path applies to you and why.
- Ask about the timetable and how readiness is assessed.
- Explain work, language, disability or family constraints.
- Ask which documents are required and what to do if they are missing.
- Ask about a sponsor and preparation for confession where applicable.
- Confirm what happens next and whom to contact.

You do not need a polished account of your spiritual life to begin. A truthful conversation is enough for the first meeting. The next task is to learn, pray and discern with people who can accompany you personally.

Sources and further reading

CCC means Catechism of the Catholic Church. A canon is a numbered provision of Church law. These sources support the teaching summarized here; they do not replace a parish assessment of an individual case.

1. USCCB Christian Initiation of Adults

Stages, terminology, reception of baptized Christians and returning Catholics. US pastoral guidance; local implementation varies.

2. Catechism 1246 to 1255 Who can receive Baptism

Adult and infant Baptism, formation, developing faith and accompaniment.

3. Catechism 1213 The Sacrament of Baptism

The meaning of Baptism and incorporation into Christ and the Church.

4. Catechism 1229 to 1245 Celebration of Baptism

Christian initiation and the signs used in its celebration.

5. Code of Canon Law canons 834 to 878

Especially 848, 852, 865 to 869 and 872 to 874: poverty, adult preparation, urgent cases, baptismal investigation and sponsors.

6. Code of Canon Law canons 879 to 958

Confirmation and Eucharist, especially canons 883, 889, 916 and 919. See canon 844 in source 5 for non-Catholic sacramental exceptions.

7. Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church

An official question-and-answer introduction to Catholic belief, sacraments, morality and prayer.

8. Catechism 153 to 165 Characteristics of faith

Faith, understanding, freedom and perseverance.

9. Catechism 1356 to 1381 Eucharistic sacrifice and presence

The Mass as sacramental memorial and Christ's real presence.

10. USCCB Guidelines for sacraments with persons with disabilities

Revised edition 2017, especially paragraphs 11 to 14 on Baptism and adapted initiation. Disability itself is never a reason to defer Baptism.

11. Catechism 2337 to 2359 The vocation to chastity

Chastity, sexuality, respect for persons and same-sex attraction.

12. Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith Responses to Bishop Negri 2023

Admission of transgender persons to Baptism and related pastoral qualifications.

13. Code of Canon Law canons 998 to 1165

Marriage validity, prior bonds, canonical form, mixed marriage, dissolution in specified cases and convalidation. See especially 1060, 1085, 1108, 1124 to 1129, 1141 to 1150 and 1156 onward.

14. Catechism 1625 to 1637 Matrimonial consent

Consent, declarations of nullity and marriages involving different religious backgrounds.

15. Code of Canon Law canons 959 to 997

Confession, repentance and the sacramental seal, especially 960, 983, 987 and 988.

16. Catechism 1262 to 1274 The grace of Baptism

Forgiveness, continuing consequences of sin and Baptism's unrepeatable character.

17. Code of Canon Law canons 1244 to 1253

Sunday worship, holy days, impediments to attendance and penitential discipline.

18. Catechism 2041 to 2043 The precepts of the Church

Minimum duties of Catholic practice. Read with canons 920 and 989 for annual Communion and confession.

19. Catechism 1257 to 1261 The necessity of Baptism

Baptism of desire and the scope of God's saving mercy.

20. Catechism 1440 to 1449 Penance and reconciliation

God's forgiveness and reconciliation with the Church.

21. Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches canon 35

Official Latin text on the enrollment of baptized non-Catholics entering Catholic communion and the preservation of their own rite. Consult the competent Church authority for application.