

The Roman Catholic Church



Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Josef Ratzinger

The Catholic Church is the oldest institution in the western world. It can trace its history back almost 2000 years.

Today there are more than a billion Catholics in the world, spread across all five continents with particular concentrations in southern Europe, the United States, the Philippines and the countries of Central and South America. What binds this diverse group of people together is their faith in **Jesus Christ** and their obedience to the **papacy**.

Catholics believe that the **Pope**, based in Rome, is the successor to **Saint Peter** whom Christ appointed as the first head of His church. He therefore stands in what Catholicism calls the *apostolic succession*, an unbroken line back to Peter and has supreme authority. Popes can speak **infallibly** on matters of faith and morals but in practice do so rarely.

The Catholic Church in Britain

In Britain, Catholics suffered a long period of persecution following Henry VIII's break with the papacy in the 1530s and were sometimes regarded as servants of a foreign power - particularly in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, orchestrated by Catholic figures in the hope of restoring a co-believer to the throne.

By the start of the nineteenth century, however such 'anti-popery' prejudices started to die away and full civic rights were restored in 1829.

Today there are as many as five million Catholics - or 10 per cent of the population - but of these only about one million attend church regularly. Catholics are encouraged to attend weekly **mass** and are under an obligation during the Easter season to attend the sacraments of reconciliation (formerly known as confession) and holy communion.