

Home Study

Week of January 25, 2026

“Organized Religion”

ABOUT THIS WEEK

Our culture has a curious relationship with religion. It’s deep in the DNA of our country and an important part of the lives of countless individuals. At the same time, it’s viewed by many as the root of some of the worst evils, another human institution full of corruption and hypocrisy, or simply an obstacle to an authentic relationship with God. The truth is that religion is essential to our identity as human beings. This week, we’ll redeem the negative connotation sometimes associated with the word “religion” and help look to embrace it as a natural and beneficial aspect of our lives.

MAIN POINTS

1. Engaging in religious practices in a community has been an important part of human life across cultures and throughout history.
2. Although our faith is personal, it is not completely private. We bear witness to our faith through our public worship and commitment to religious practices.
3. Being part of a religious community enables us to benefit from the encouragement, support, teaching, and example of others. Our shared religious practices also strengthen our ties with God.

SCRIPTURE Matthew 18:20 | Acts 2:42, 46-47 | Hebrews 10:23-25

CATECHISM PARAGRAPHS 44 | 760 | 875 | 1140 | 2095 | 2105 | 2467

KEY TERMS

Community - A group of people who share attitudes, interests, and goals and feel a sense of fellowship with one another. Christian community is found within the context of the Church. (CCC 771, 805)

Faith - Both a gift from God and a human act by which the believer gives personal adherence to God, who invites his response, and freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed. (CCC 26, 142-143, 150)

Religion - A set of beliefs and practices followed by those committed to the service and worship of God. The first commandment requires us to believe in God, to worship and serve him, as the first duty of the virtue of religion. (CCC 2084, 2135)

GOAL

The goal of this week is to break the negative connotation sometimes associated with the word “religion” and help embrace religion as a natural and beneficial aspect of our lives.

Reading

Main Point 1: Engaging in religious practices in a community has been an important part of human life across cultures and throughout history.

Begin by making a list, without looking it up, of as many religions as you can think of.

- There are many different religions in the world. Though they differ in their beliefs and practices, they all testify to humanity’s innate sense of the supernatural and the need to respond to it.
- Religion is considered universal. It has been present in some way in every culture across time. It doesn’t matter what continent, time period, or culture you look at, religion is present in some capacity.
- We shouldn’t pass over this point too quickly. Some people claim that religion is a completely manmade construct invented to control people’s behavior or that it is a sort of self-delusion that helps us understand the world. However, the fact that it is present everywhere humans are present suggests that it is an essential part of who we are. (CCC 28)
- This fact alone doesn’t necessarily mean that any one religion is true, but it does point to an important reality about human beings: we are religious creatures. The Catechism states it like this:

CCC 44: “Man is by nature and vocation a religious being. Coming from God, going toward God, man lives a fully human life only if he freely lives by his bond with God.”
- There is something in our nature that leads us to believe in the supernatural. We have an innate sense of spiritual realities, a need to worship, and a desire for public demonstrations of our shared beliefs.
- Religion is a uniquely human phenomenon. No other creature on earth exhibits religious behavior. They don’t ask questions about the origins of the universe, the purpose of life, or their place in the cosmos. The capacity to ask these religious questions is part of what makes us human.
- Today, religion often has a negative connotation. Some people associate the word with oppression, abuse, ignorance, misogyny, and other disagreeable things, and often with

good reason. However, while it is true that religion can be abused, that does not mean that religion is inherently wrong or bad.

The Evils of Religion Religion has been at the root of many evils throughout history. People have used their religious beliefs as justification for immoral actions. Evils committed in the name of religion or by religious people are particularly abhorrent precisely because most religions, like Christianity, are supposed to help fix what is wrong about human beings. The message and the actions contradict one another, with the actions typically far outweighing the value of the message. For example, we preach about a loving God who died for us, yet we are willing to go to war with others for religious reasons. We exhort others to care for the needy, yet religious leaders abuse children and others who are vulnerable. Faced with these evils, it is understandable why some people have a harsh view of religion. As Catholics, we have to acknowledge the evils committed in the name of religion. At the same time, we also need to own the good done in the name of religion. It is typically less noteworthy and gets little attention, but the sacrifices offered by countless faithful who try to love their neighbors are a powerful testimony of the best parts of religion. Our Church is the most charitable organization in the world. The number of hospitals, schools, homeless shelters, pregnancy centers, soup kitchens, and other charitable activities organized by the Catholic Church is astounding. We should also look to the saints. While religious evils testify to some of the worst parts of human nature, the saints give witness to who we can be when we live from a place of communion and trust in God. Their charity, wisdom, selflessness, holiness, and impact are proofs of the good fruits of religion.

You will find corruption in every human institution, whether it's politics, school, religion, or anything else. The problem is not the institution; the problem is us. We are sinners, and any human institution will be affected by the reality that humans are sinners and have the capacity for evil. We shouldn't abandon religion because of the potential for it to be used for evil. If anything, we should embrace it, knowing that something is wrong with us and religion offers a remedy.

- Religion has played a fundamental role in human life for thousands of years. It provides much-needed structure and meaning to our lives. From ancient civilizations to the modern day, this relationship with the supernatural has shaped who we are and what we do.
- As Catholics, we believe that this universal desire for religion points to the reality that we come from God. As his creatures, we intuit a need to live in relationship with him. We respond to this religious impulse by seeking God and publicly living out our relationship with him.

Main Point 2: Although our faith is personal, it is not completely private. We bear witness to our faith through our public worship and commitment to religious practices.

Think about a professional sports game or concert. Think for a moment about the phenomena of sports games, concerts, and other similar gatherings. You can sit at home by yourself and watch any game or listen to music without anyone else around. What's the allure of attending these events?

- We are social creatures. Our experiences are enhanced when done with others who share a similar appreciation for what we care about. Being at a concert with a thousand other fans who know all the words and love the music is way different than listening to a song alone. Cheering for your team in a packed stadium of 90,000 people has a different feel and effect than watching the game in your home by yourself. Being part of a greater whole with shared values and shared intentions elevates our experience and satisfies a social need.
- The same is true for our relationship with God. One of the benefits of religion is that it provides a shared space for us to express our love and devotion to God. We gather in a community and collectively learn about and worship God together.
- Our faith is not meant to be just a private affair. Our relationship with God has both a private and public dimension. Being part of a religion bridges the gap between what we claim in private and what we live in public.
- When we gather together on Sunday, we give a common witness to the Catholic faith. We worship God as a community. Our presence at Mass is a message to the world that God is real, and we want to honor him with our lives.
- As disciples of Jesus, each of us has a duty to make the faith visible in the world. The way we live bears witness to the truth of the gospel and the presence of God. One of the ways we do this is through our commitment to religious practices. When we make the Sign of the Cross before blessing our food, attend Mass weekly, or hold our rosary as we quietly pray, we are bearing witness to our relationship with God and its importance in our lives. These simple acts are ways of evangelizing. (CCC 2467)
- We also ought to work so that the principles of our faith become manifest in the world around us. When you stand up for a classmate who is being bullied, refuse to participate in an immoral activity your friends are doing, or speak out against evils like abortion, you are letting your private beliefs have a public effect. (CCC 2105)

Main Point 3: Being part of a religious community enables us to benefit from the encouragement, support, teaching, and example of others. Our shared religious practices strengthen our ties with God.

The benefits of religious practice extend beyond merely the need to gather with shared goals and behaviors.

- Religion brings with it a sense of accountability. When I publicly and consistently attend a certain religious service, it implies that, in some sense, I adhere to the beliefs of that religion. This creates a sense of accountability to act in accordance with the tenets of that religion. I can lean on others to help me live out what we are all publicly professing.
- Beyond that, being in union with other believers of the same religion helps strengthen my own belief. I benefit from the support and example of others. This is why community is so important.
- If you've ever been part of a sports team, band, dance group, or other community working toward a common goal, you've probably experienced the motivating power of a community. When you're exhausted from practicing and don't want to keep going, knowing that others are working toward the same goals and putting in effort can give you new energy. You aren't just working for yourself. You're part of a greater whole, and the example of others who are putting in the effort helps you to do the same.
- This is also the case in our spiritual lives. When life gets busy, you encounter suffering and trials, or you are faced with doubts about your faith, it helps to have a community to fall back on. When you belong to a group, their witness, prayers, wisdom, and encouragement can help you weather the trials and difficulties of life and remain faithful even when it's hard.
- It's not uncommon to hear people say they are "spiritual but not religious." In other words, they believe in the supernatural and may even have some sort of personal relationship with the divine, but they don't adhere to any one religion.
- As harsh as it sounds, this phrase conceals the truth that your religion is actually just focused on yourself. Rather than commit to one religion, this mindset takes what the person likes from each religion to form something that works best for them. It is tailored to suit their preferences and desires rather than aimed at the truth God has revealed about himself through the Church.
- On the other hand, religion keeps us from following a self-fashioned relationship with God. When it's just us and God, God starts to reflect more of what we want him to be than what he actually is. Religion helps us adhere to beliefs and standards that we don't create. It breaks us out of our own individualistic view of the world, helps us see the greater whole, and causes us to place our trust in an authority greater than ourselves.

- This is a great benefit of our shared faith community. We learn from the experiences of people who have gone before and thought through the tough questions. We access the truth about who God is and who we are, and we are guarded by the wisdom of others when our own thinking is misguided. (CCC 875)
- Religion does not remove the personal aspect of faith. We are each called to have a personal relationship with God. He works and moves in our lives in a unique way. We engage in different kinds of prayer, follow different paths in life, serve in different capacities, but we all share the same home.
- When you're out hiking for a few days, it's common to have a base camp. It's the place from which all the other activities originate. You can go out on the trails, knowing you have a safe place to return, be refilled, and connect with others.

The Church is our base camp. It's the place we all congregate. It's where we're restocked, fed, and prepared for the many different missions we're sent on in life. It's where our personal faith flourishes in community. Without the base camp, it's easy to feel alone and lost in the woods.

- More than that, religion exists because it's God's idea and desire for us. From the dawn of human history, God has been calling people together in community to worship him. Throughout the Old Testament, he continued to work with and expand his chosen people through individuals like Abraham, Moses, and David. He invites us to worship him through the Church in communion with others. (Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:3-6, 2 Samuel 7:8-16)
- The virtue of religion is part of the cardinal virtue of justice, which seeks to give everyone what is due to them. God created us and continues to sustain the entire world. He is the source of everything good and all the blessings in our lives. For this reason, it is right and just that we show him honor and devotion both privately and publicly. The virtue of religion disposes us to do this. (CCC 2095)
- Religion reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves. When we look at the world, we intuit that we are not the beginning and end of the universe. Something greater exists. Religion is how we give expression to this conviction.
- Throughout history, God has been at work in the world. The human race has given expression to its inner quest for God through the various religions. Even with all of their faults, these religions testify to our need for God and our connection to the supernatural. "Saint Paul at the Areopagus"

St. Paul at the Areopagus from Acts 17:22-31. ***So Paul, standing in the middle of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.***

For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

-Acts 17:22-31

Saint Paul offers us an effective example of how to address people of other faith backgrounds. He acknowledges that God has been working in the lives of the Athenians. He affirms their religious beliefs, noting that they intuit something true about the universe even if they don't fully understand it. He then goes on to say that what they search for has been fully revealed in Jesus. He does not denigrate their religion; rather, he points to the greater reality for which they are searching. In the same way, in conversations with people from other religions, we should try to acknowledge the truth and authentic good they have found while simultaneously pointing to the fullness of truth revealed by Jesus. (CCC 843)

- As Catholics, we believe that there is ultimately one true religion. The God whom all religions are seeking came to the world as a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. The Church he established is the one true religion.

As Catholics, we believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven. There is no salvation outside of his name. If Jesus didn't come in the flesh, die for our sins, resurrect from the dead, and ascend into heaven, then there would be no hope for our own salvation, resurrection, and entrance into heaven. We can think of Jesus as a bridge that connects us to God. Apart from him, we have no access. This is why the Church proclaims that there is no salvation outside of Jesus. At the same time, the Church holds that anyone who honestly seeks God in the circumstances of their lives and, through no fault or negligence of their own, does not know Jesus or his Church, is still capable of being saved. Even so, this only happens through the merits won for them by Christ, though they may not explicitly call upon his

name. The Church also teaches that there are aspects of truth and goodness in other religions. For this reason, we should respect and uphold those elements of truth found in other religions and see them as preparations for receiving the gospel. However, that aspects of truth and goodness can be found in other religions is not an excuse not to share the gospel. Rather, it should spur us on to greater evangelization. By God's grace, we know Jesus Christ, who is the source of salvation and life for every human person. We should proclaim him boldly to the world as the answer to all of humanity's questions and the only source of ultimate fulfillment. (CCC 816, 843, 846-848, 2104)

- The Catholic Church is the guardian of the truth about God made known to humanity by Jesus Christ. It clarifies and corrects the truths that humanity as a whole expresses through religious practices.
- Through the Church, we come to know the truth about God and ourselves. Being united to the Church founded and sustained by Jesus enables us to live as members of his body, receive his grace, contribute to his mission, and worship God as members of his family.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "religion"?
2. Why do you think some people embrace religion and others don't?
3. What religious experiences have you had, or what religious events have you attended?
4. Is religion important to you? Is it important to your family? Why or why not?
5. List some benefits of religion.

OUR FATHER REFLECTION

One benefit of religion is a shared tradition of religious practices. Prayers, rites, and devotions are passed from one generation to the next and preserved throughout the centuries. For Christians, one of these treasured traditions is the "Our Father" prayer. Jesus himself taught this prayer to his disciples as an example of how to pray, and it has become one of the most well-known prayers in history.

In this prayer, Jesus shows his disciples the importance of recognizing their connection to one another. He didn't teach them — and by extension us — to say "my Father," but "our Father." Our relationship with God isn't just personal; it's lived in the context of the Church. In God, we are all united. Together as the Church, we make up God's family, and we are encouraged to be mindful of one another in our lives and in the way we pray.

Pray the "Our Father" together, pausing after each line for a short time of meditation.

Our Father

Who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name;

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil. Amen.