

Was Jesus Catholic?

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I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

One of the noted theologians whose writings I became aware of at university was an author by the name of Hans Kung. He is perhaps best known for his book, "On being a Christian". Hans is a Swiss Catholic Priest, theologian and author. Since 1995 he has been President of the Foundation for a Global Ethic. Interestingly, he is notable for his rejection of the doctrine of papal infallibility.

He also wrote a book entitled, "The Catholic Church: A Short History". I came across this book a few weeks ago in my local library and both the title and author immediately caught my eye.

A quick search of world Christian denomination numbers would seem to indicate that the Catholic Church has over 1.285 billion members. Protestants come in second with 920 million members and so the numbers rapidly decrease. It suddenly becomes very clear that the Catholic Church holds a loyal world-wide following.

This started me thinking...

So, Jesus of Nazareth grew up in a country that was occupied by the Roman Empire.

Jesus dies and the Christian Church slowly begins to grow under the auspices of the Roman government.

Eventually, Christianity is made the official Roman religion of choice.

Therefore, it follows that the Roman or Catholic Church is actually the closest formal institution to the life and ministry of the historical Jesus.

Does this, in effect, make Jesus Catholic?

This raised some interesting questions for me and I decided to unpack this idea with the help of Hans Kung's book on the Catholic Church.

Kung suggests that in fact, Jesus of Nazareth never really used the word “church”. There are no sayings of Jesus that specifically call for the founding of a church, instead Jesus often referred to the idea of the Kingdom of God.

Kung goes on to suggest quite strongly that Jesus did not intend to establish a separate organisation with its own constitution and offices, therefore it could be argued that in fact Jesus did not establish a church in His lifetime.

However, history teaches us that once Jesus died, a distinct religious community did come into being. The power of the resurrected Jesus drove the formation of the early church. Therefore, Kung suggests that although the formal church was not actually founded by Jesus, the new Jesus movement was simply a foundation based on the confession of faith of this Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ... this was how the early church took shape.

However, the question remains. Was Jesus Catholic? Some Catholics would believe that He was. This is a sensitive issue for some. There is no doubt that the Catholic Church has contributed a wealth of tradition, liturgy and knowledge down the ages. I, for one, enjoy and respect the Anglo-Catholic tradition. But would Jesus have been comfortable at a Papal Mass? Kung suggests that Jesus was not shy of conflict or standing up to tradition. Would Jesus today be comfortable with the Catholic tradition and theology?

These are some difficult questions to ask and I do not have the answers.

Kung continues by suggesting that the early church very much focussed on the concept of service, yet for many churches today, hierarchy is unfortunately emphasized. Have we in some ways lost the true essence of the early church to a global organisation that sometimes places institutional protocol and canons before the mission of Jesus?

There is no doubt that whilst Jesus of Nazareth lived and ministered under Roman rule, He was always His own person. Jesus had a revolutionary idea of a new love. He preached it, lived it and ultimately, died for it.

After this the first early Christian communities began to grow. It was only much later that the church began to be formalised. Kung argues that it is historically impossible to ensure and prove an exact apostolic succession as there were just so many early Christian communities after the death and resurrection of

Jesus. By around 110 AD, in Antioch, Bishop Ignatius structured the first order of the three offices that are familiar to us, namely bishop, presbyter and deacon. In those days, only the Bishop was actually allowed to preside over the Eucharist and so, finally, there was a clear separation between clergy and laity.

And so the church continued to grow...

In conclusion, it needs to be said that whilst Jesus was not a Catholic in the traditional sense, we, as a Christian Body owe a lot to the Catholic Tradition for the initial birth of the formalised church that all denominations, to a degree, have drawn upon. Even our Anglican Church can quite easily point to our Catholic heritage and roots. They cannot be denied. We are, in essence, all Catholics to a degree, for much of the liturgy, creeds and styles of worship passed down over the ages, started and developed in the Catholic Church.

We live in an exciting and diverse world. Similarly, the same applies to Christian worship. There are many different Christian denominations around the world that cater for different cultures and theologies. No one denomination is necessarily better than another. We worship where we feel comfortable and able to relate to the community and style of worship. In addition, it needs to be said that one of the many strengths of the Anglican Church, is the diversity of worship and styles all within the Anglican Communion. As Anglicans, we respect and acknowledge our Catholic heritage, but we also celebrate moving forward in a different style of worship and theology.

Moving forward, Kung suggests that in order for ANY Christian denomination to have a future, the following needs to be in place:

- 1) The modern church must not turn backwards; it can be rooted in Christian tradition, but must concentrate on present tasks.
- 2) The modern church must not be narrowly confessional but rather be ecumenically open to all.
- 3) The modern church must not be patriarchal.
- 4) The modern church must be tolerant and universal.

The bottom line is, no matter the denomination, our central act should always be a love for Jesus and one another.

This is ultimately what Jesus would have wanted from us.

Let us continue to be faithful to Him and one another, wherever we find ourselves worshipping.

Amen.