

# Have Catholics ever believed in reincarnation?



**Question:** A fellow Catholic maintains that at some time in the past the Catholic Church believed in reincarnation. Is this true?

– **Maria-Luisa Berry**, via email

**Answer:** As regards the matter of so-called reincarnation (the belief that we have had previous lives in other bodies, or will come back in other bodies or forms), the view is clearly excluded in Scripture and by Christian anthropology.

Scripture says, “it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment” (Heb 9:27). “Once” is pretty clear – there are no previous deaths or lives, nor shall we face death again. “Once” cannot mean many.

Further, Christian anthropology, rooted in the Scriptures, excludes the notion of reincarnation. This is not the place to set forth a full anthropology, but it is here sufficient to state that the soul is the form of the body and it does not pertain to the same soul to “form” different bodies. I am my body; it is not a mere appendage or container that can be shed or exchanged.

Finally, whenever someone claims the Catholic Church once taught something, a good follow-up request is, “Show it to me in writing.” Many make unsubstantiated claims, and the pressure should not be on to defend against something that never happened, but for them to demonstrate clearly the truth of their charge.

## Gospel writers

**Question:** It seems logical that many others besides Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote the life of Jesus. Why then were these four Gospels chosen to be the accepted ones, especially since Mark and Luke were not apostles? When and how was this determination made?

– **Robert McBride**, Cheswick, Pennsylvania

**Answer:** While there certainly are other reputed accounts of Jesus' life, and some of these have the names of apostles attached to them, (for example, Thomas and James), the evidence seems pretty clear that these Gospels were written long after the death of these apostles.

As for Mark and Luke not being apostles, yet having Gospels, St. Mark was likely the assistant to St. Peter, and so his Gospel is largely held to be St. Peter's account. As for St. Luke, he is very clear to state that he carefully analyzed eyewitness accounts in preparing his Gospel.

Which books ended up in the canon (a word that means "list") of sacred Scripture was a complex process that developed in the early years of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Even through the late fourth century there were some disagreements among believers as to which books belonged to the canon. The Book of Revelation and some of the epistles were disputed. Likewise some for inclusion in the canon proposed some other edifying writings from the early years, such as the Epistle of Pope St. Clement and the *Didache*, a first- or second-century book attributed to the Twelve Apostles.

The resolution of the final list or canon of sacred Scripture was largely resolved in a series of councils in the late fourth century: the Synod of Rome in 382, the Council of Hippo in 393, and the Council of Carthage in 397. These councils, in

consultation with Popes Damasus and Innocent, gave us the list of books in the canon of sacred Scripture that we have today in the Catholic Church. This canon was largely undisputed until the 16th century when Martin Luther removed a number of Old Testament Books and certain other Protestant denominations followed his unfortunate and unauthorized move.

The primary standards used by the council fathers and popes were liturgy and doctrine. Did a particular book have widespread use and acceptance in the liturgy of the Church? Did a particular book comport well with the faith and received doctrine of the Church? These standards, along with some particulars too numerous to mention here, produced the list that we have today of sacred Scripture. Surely, by faith, we know the Holy Spirit inspired this process as well.

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