

New Mexican Catholicism

Throughout *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio, a devout Catholic boy, contemplates life as a priest. While regularly praying, he begins his formal religious training in preparation for his first Communion. The Catholic faith, with its intricate doctrine and practices, plays an integral role in Antonio's story.

One of the largest and oldest institutions in the world, the Roman Catholic Church dates to Peter the Apostle in the first century AD. According to the gospels, Jesus entrusted Peter with the “keys of the kingdom” and gave him special authority to govern the Church. At the end of the fifteenth century, Pope Alexander VI issued a series of papal bulls, or letters, concerning the conversion of the people of the Americas from their native religions to Catholicism.

In what would later become Mexico and the southwestern United States, Spanish priests of the Franciscan Order established missions in the sixteenth century to spread the teachings of the Catholic Church to the indigenous peoples. While many of the native peoples converted, they maintained some of their ancient beliefs. Native practices would come to intermingle with Catholicism.

The Church grants special authority to the pope, his bishops, and their priests, since they belong to the legacy of Jesus's apostles. Catholicism is based on the belief in the Holy Trinity: the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith.

Catholics believe in Seven Sacraments, viewing them as signs of grace and gifts of God. The Sacraments parallel the phases of life: birth, adolescence, marriage, and preparation for death. In Catholicism they are Baptism, Reconciliation

(Confession), Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Anointing of the Sick. A young person is initiated into the Catholic Church through Baptism, usually in infancy, which absolves one of original sin. Children at age seven or eight participate in their first Communion, where they receive the Eucharist for the first time. In the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ are present in the forms of consecrated bread and wine, which Catholics eat and drink during Communion at Mass. In adolescence, a Catholic is “confirmed” by willfully accepting the Catholic faith and its traditions and rituals. As a young Catholic matures, it is important to demonstrate moral fortitude and commitment to Catholic ideals by doing good works. A strong faith means not only understanding the religious tenets of Catholicism but also acting to reflect those beliefs.

Antonio, as he learns more about his faith, questions what these tenets mean. He is further challenged by what appears to be supernatural—the Golden Carp, Ultima's owl, and Tenorio's daughters. Still, we see the Sacraments infused into *Bless Me, Ultima* when Antonio devotes himself to attending catechism and preparing for his first Communion.

Prior to receiving this sacrament he must take part in Reconciliation, where he confesses his sins, is absolved by the priest, and does penance. On several occasions in the novel Antonio becomes a surrogate priest, “absolving” the sins of Narciso and playing priest to the children in his class. He later participates in his first Communion, where he receives the Eucharist. Antonio's spiritual maturity is hastened both by the tragic events he witnesses and the supernatural elements to which he is exposed.