"Grüß Gott" in Austria

An introduction to a country with Christian roots
Cover: On most of the mountaintops there are crosses, so-called summit crosses, Foto: © Albin Niederstrasser
Grüß Gott

— this is how many people in Austria greet each other. Just like the greeting "Grüß Gott", there are many customs, characteristics and traditions in Austria that owe themselves to our Christian heritage. Please read this brochure to learn more. "Grüß Gott" and welcome to Austria – a country with Christian roots.

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Churches are in the center of most towns and villages.

»The tower, the ringing bells, the cross, the silence inside the church: wherever I find these things, it feels secure and like home to me.«

SISTER JOANNA JIMIN LEE
Vienna
4000 CHURCHES IN AUSTRIA

Stone Witnesses of Centuries of Christianity

When Christianity arose 2000 years ago, the first Christians met in their houses. Over the centuries, assembly rooms, church buildings, developed. They are diverse: big, small, grand, sober, ancient or modern.

Parishes are the smallest organizational units in Christian religious life. The Austrian Catholic church consists of 3000 parishes. In addition, there are more than 200 Protestant and Orthodox parishes and communities. Each parish has its own church; some of them have even more than just one.

All together there are more than 4000 churches in Austria. Most of the time, they are among the oldest and most beautiful buildings in a village and protected by federal monument conservation. For centuries, they have shaped townscapes. Even people not taking part in religious life consider the churches an integral part of their homeland and are eager to preserve and maintain them.

The tower ("steeple"), which serves mostly also to announce the time, is visible from far. Inside, the church bells strike the hours and call the faithful to pray in the mornings, at noon and in the evenings. They ring whenever there is a celebration in the church and when someone is buried. Around the church, especially in the countryside, there is usually a cemetery. People decorate the graves with flowers as a sign of hope for a life with God after death. Christians pray for their beloved departed ones there. Next to the church there is a house ("vicarage"), which is sometimes also the parish priest’s place of residence. In the vicarage, members of the parish gather after the church service or prepare for special celebrations and meetings. The vicarage furthermore comprises an office from where the parish is organized and where the parish priest offers regular consultation hours.

Austria also has very large churches. The church of a bishop ("cathedral") is normally especially grand. The churches of large monasteries ("abbeys") are among the most important buildings in Austria. Monasteries are places dedicated to prayer and the worship of God, as well as places of learning and culture. They are inhabited by religious orders who often run their schools, hospitals, libraries or run their own businesses, run by religious orders. Orders are communities of unmarried men or women who serve God and the people.
MOUNTAINTOPS AND MARKET PLACES

The Cross tells us that Death is not the end

On top of many steeplees, mountaintops, and in many public Austrian places you find crosses. The cross is the most important symbol for Christians, and many Christians wear crosses in the form of jewelry, or hang crosses on the walls of their rooms.

Why do they have crosses? Christians believe that God became human in Jesus Christ to help people find God in a new way. Jesus healed the sick, revived the dead and revealed God’s infinite mercy and love. Jesus’ opponents put him to death on the cross. The Bible tells us that Jesus did not condemn them, but asked God to forgive them and all the people. Love is stronger than hate, violence, suffering and death. The Bible tells us that Jesus’ followers, right after his death, experienced this: Jesus Christ had risen from and defeated death. So, for a Christian, the cross is no longer a symbol of humiliation and death, but is now the symbol of benediction, love and life. It serves to remind all Christians that the greatest form of love is love for your enemies. It is the only way of breaking the circle of hostility, hatred and violence. The resurrection of Jesus Christ gave his followers the courage to preach the Gospel all over the world.

Jesus Christ did not sacrifice others, but gave his own life. Christians are called upon to do the same – to "bear one’s cross" – to stand up for others, avoiding any form of violence. Therefore the Christian cross is the symbol of trusting in God who promises life after death.

The sign of the cross is commonplace in Christian life: with your right hand, you touch your forehead, your chest, and both shoulders to show the trusting dedication of your whole being – intellect, heart, will – to the sign of Jesus Christ. Christians make the sign of the cross at the beginning of their prayers and celebrations, when they enter a church or when they are blessed by a priest. It is a sign of faith and the shortest version of Christian prayer (some soccer players for example make the sign of the cross before shooting a penalty to ask God for good nerves). Non-Christians, however, are not expected to make the sign of the cross for reasons of politeness etc.

There are also other Christian signs all over Austria, e.g. statues of saints. Mostly made of stone, sometimes made of wood, they depict holy men and women (‘saints’) who are taken as examples for leading good and righteous lives. Christians believe that these holy people are already in heaven, in the presence of God, and are therefore important intercessors and often asked for help. The first people believed to be holy in this way were the martyrs: they remained true to their faith and abstained from violence, even when others threatened to take their lives.
»I always wear the cross to remind me of the constant presence of Jesus. He protects and accompanies me in my everyday life.«

CARDINAL CHRISTOPH SCHÖNBORN
Archbishop of Vienna

Chapels, crosses or statues of saints can be found in many public places and streets.

In the churches, all people are welcome, even if they just want to enjoy the beauty and silence inside.
INSIDE THE CHURCH

A Place of Celebration, Thanksgiving and Prayer

Churches are open to all people, even if there is no religious service at the time. At every entrance, there is a bowl full of water for the faithful to dip their fingertips in and make the sign of the cross in memory of their baptism, the beginning of their lives as Christians.

Every Sunday, the faithful meet to celebrate Holy Mass, to celebrate that Jesus died for them, and rose from the dead. This happens on Sundays, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead on a Sunday. Before he died, Jesus Christ shared bread and wine with his disciples and told them to celebrate like this in memory of him furthermore. This way, in every mass Christians share bread and wine, experience the presence of Jesus Christ and renew their commitment to charity and their willingness to keep the peace.

Next to the altar, there is a lectern (“ambo”). This is the place where people read from the Sacred Scriptures. During Holy Mass, the priest explains the meaning of God’s word for the lives of the faithful. People sing and pray for joy and for the glory of God. To support the singing, most churches have organs, some of these instruments being so big that they cover the whole back wall.

In Catholic churches you can find many illustrations of God. Christians believe in one God who reveals himself in three Persons: God Father, the origin of all things, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, who is the love of God. Most of the illustrations depict Jesus Christ, showing numerous scenes from his life on earth.

Many paintings, figurines and stained glass windows show scenes from the Sacred Scriptures or from the lives of saints. People especially venerate Mary, Jesus Christ’s mother. In many churches you can buy little candles and light them when you thank God or ask for something.

In churches, all people are welcome, even if they just want to enjoy the beauty and silence inside. To respect the dignity of this place, however, all men – also non-Christians – are expected to take off their hats and caps, and visitors should keep the silence and refrain from walking around during religious services – but you are still welcome to stay as a guest during a service.

If you choose to stay, you are not expected to perform the prayer postures like kneeling down or making the sign of the cross.
THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

The Bible tells of Men experiencing God

Over the centuries, people have passed on their experiences of God by telling others and writing them down. The Bible, the Sacred Scriptures of the Christians, is a collection of different texts. The first part ("Old Testament") tells us about the faith experiences of the Jewish people in the time before Jesus Christ was born. The second part ("New Testament") comprises what four authors wrote about the life of Jesus. These texts are called "Gospels", which means "good news". Furthermore, the New Testament consists of other texts dating from early Christian times.

The most important thing for Christians, however, is not a holy book, but the personal relationship with God. The example that Jesus Christ set with his life is always crucial when it comes to understanding the teachings and commandments communicated to us in the Bible.

The faithful are to cultivate a friendship with God. Fundamental to Christianity is the understanding that God seeks not man’s subjugation but man’s loving response. He seeks not submission, but reciprocated love. The faithful read different passages from these Sacred Scriptures at home or listen to them at the religious services.

In order to help people understand the Gospel and to pass it on from generation to generation, the Bible reports how Jesus of Nazareth chose 12 men, whom we call the Apostles. After their death, these first Apostles were succeeded by the bishops, an office which has evolved over the centuries. The most important bishop is the bishop of Rome, the Pope. He, together with all the other bishops, strives to ensure that the Catholic Church remains faithful to the Gospel.

A bishop usually leads a diocese, which is the community of all faithful people in a larger geographical area. The bishop is the authoritative teacher of doctrine and interpretation of the word of the Sacred Scriptures in his particular diocese. Each diocese consists of parishes. In Austria there are 10 Catholic dioceses. Apart from that, there are also some Orthodox, Protestant and Old Catholic bishops in Austria.

5.8 million Austrians are members of one of the Christian churches – this is 67 per cent of the population. The major part of them – 89 per cent – is Roman-Catholic.
The Bible has been translated into approximately 500 languages and is the world's top-selling book.

»Especially during hard times in my life, I often experienced that, when reading the Bible, God had spoken directly to me, comforted me or showed me the next step ahead.«

MARGARITA SEIWALD
medical doctor
»To me, church is community – a community of young and old, poor and rich, of all those participating in community life.«

MICHEL HARB
Priest
FROM BAPTISM TO DEATH

How Christianity shapes Human Life

Christians are members of the Christian Church because of their baptism. During this ceremony, water is poured upon the person who is baptized — normally an infant. This symbolizes and brings about a spiritual ‘re-birth’, a new life made possible by God’s actions in Christ. Those baptized as children will later on be instructed in religious life by their parents, Christian friends, their church communities and religious instruction at school.

However, also adults who were not baptised as infants, but who have come to believe in Jesus Christ later, ask for baptism. They prepare for their initiation for at least one year, in order to grow in knowledge of and friendship with Jesus Christ and to begin advance in the Christian life and virtues more and more. It is an important part of the process to form a personal relationship with God through prayer and the reading of the Sacred Scriptures, as well as taking part in the religious services of the community. Christians are called to follow the ideal example of Jesus Christ in leading their lives in kindness and in fidelity to his word. Nevertheless, reality shows that Christians do not live up to these ideals. God, however, is faithful to his people, no matter what somebody has done. His love never ends; therefore there is always a possibility to start from scratch. The Bible says that God forgives all debt to those who regret, and make an effort to rectify and try to lead better lives. This process begins in what Christians call ‘Confession’, where the Christian confesses his or her sins to God through a private dialogue with a priest. By means of the priest, God touches the regretting person and helps them to go forward again.

Christianity has many ways to express how God accompanies the daily life. The ways of celebrating Catholic feasts have formed Austrian culture and the lives of the faithful for centuries, from Baptism, to First Holy Communion, Confirmation, and Matrimony, where husband and wife make God a participant of their covenant of marriage – in sickness or health, until death.

Certain people experience that God has called them to dedicate their lives in a special way: as priests (Catholic priests remain unmarried like Jesus Christ in order to dedicate their lives to God alone), or as monks or nuns in religious orders. Also deacons dedicate their lives to God, but remain in their civil occupations and can be married. Priests, deacons, monks and nuns may also be recognized by their special clothes.
CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE

Equal Dignity of all Men and Charity as a Mission

The basic values of Christianity are love for God and love for your neighbors. Jesus Christ made it clear that the “neighbor” you have to love can be anybody – even somebody from another family, country, culture, or religion. Christians are commanded by Jesus Christ to love their enemies and pray for them. Jesus Christ especially showed solidarity with the poor and suffering. This means that Christians are obliged to help others actively, especially the marginalised, the lonely, the poor. In Christian Europe, many important institutions have developed from this commandment over time, for example, Christian religious communities founded the first major hospitals, houses for poor and hospices for dying people – thereby laying the basis for our social and healthcare systems. The first schools that taught not only the children of the rich, but also of the poor, were ecclesiastical schools.

“Caritas”, an organization of the Catholic church, and “Diakonie”, an organization of the Protestant church, are among Austria’s biggest organizations to help people in need. The Christian churches continue to work in the fields of Austrian education and healthcare. They do not only help Christians, but all people in need, because all men have equal dignity.

Christian Europe, too, has a regrettable history of religiously motivated violence and persecution. Nowadays, however, all Christian churches stand up to their true heritage: making peace instead of using violence, forgiving instead of taking revenge, giving others freedom instead of forcing them.

These values, especially the combination of personal freedom and respect for the dignity of all men, shape our nation and society. Everyone in Austria is free to choose his religion or change it – and Austria respects the right of all people to freely exercise their religion and to raise their children according to their faith. In this way, a friendly climate between the religions can be fostered.

Christianity considers civil law and religious commandments to be two distinct fields. In public life, the former has precedence over the latter. Therefore, the state of Austria even allows forms of cohabitation that are not in line with Christian values.

Having equal dignity, men and women are partners of equal value. So there is no marriage against the will of one of them. No man must exercise violence against a woman, which also includes his wife. Along the same line of thought, violence against children is illegal. Women have equal rights to men; in education, career choice or political engagement.
Loving your neighbors, in Latin "caritas", is an important assignment for every Christian man or woman.

A "Caritas" worker helps a toddler on the train platform.
FEASTS AND CUSTOMS

How Christianity structures the Year

Christian feasts have served as the foundation of Austrian culture for centuries. Many of them are rooted so deeply in Austrian tradition that many people celebrate them without even remembering the religious origin. Many Christian feasts are also public holidays in Austria, which means people do not work or go to school on these occasions.

In winter, on December 25th, Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, called ‘Christmas’. This celebration is of great importance for Christians because it marks the moment when, out of such great love for us, God became a human being. The Bible reports that Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Christians prepare for the feast over a period of four weeks, which is called Advent. In Austria, we begin our celebrations on the evening of December 24th, Christmas Eve. Apart from the Christmas tree (a decorated conifer) people have mangers with figurines of the newborn Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the adoring and marveling shepherds of Bethlehem.

Even many non-Christians celebrate Christmas in Austria, exchange presents, decorate Christmas trees and wish others a "Merry Christmas". Christmas is the occasion for celebrations in many enterprises and associations, with many non-Christians also taking part. A good example for the atmosphere of Christmas is the song “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” (“Silent Night, holy Night”), which was written in Austria 200 years ago and is now sung all over the world.

The Sacred Scriptures say that wise men (astrologers) from the East came to see the child and bring gifts. Therefore, after New Year’s Day, many children dress up and visit every house as carol singers, called “Sternsinger”, to collect money for people in need all over the world.

In spring Christians celebrate Easter – the most important Christian feast. Throughout the season of Easter, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. The more than six weeks of preparation time for the feast, called “Lent”, are a time of fasting and prayer for Christians who wish to undergo a purification. Christians handle this in a very individual way - in public life fasting does not play a prominent role.

Forty days after Easter Sunday, the faithful celebrate Ascension Day, the ascension of Jesus to heaven. However he did not leave his Disciples on their own, but sent them the Holy Spirit as a constant companion, which is celebrated 10 days after that at Pentecost.

Another ten days after Pentecost, Catholics celebrate Corpus Christi, which means ‘body of Christ’. They celebrate the real presence of Jesus Christ in the bread consecrated during holy Mass. The ‘Corpus Christi’ is afterwards carried through the streets to demonstrate that God is still with us today, is close to us, and blesses us.

Three Marian festivities are public Austrian holidays: the Solemnity of Mary, the holy Mother of God, on January 1, the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary on August 15 (the assumption of Mary into heaven
Christmas and Easter shape the year of the Christians and are accompanied by many customs.

in flesh in miraculous completion of her life on earth) and the Immaculate Conception on December 8 (we celebrate that Mary was chosen right at the beginning of her life to become Jesus’ mother).

On November 1st, All Saints’ Day, the Catholic Church remembers all saints, i.e. all people who lived holy lives and died in God’s friendship. One day later, on November 2nd, All Souls’ Day, we remember all those who have died. During these days (November 1st is a public holiday) many people visit the graves of their deceased relatives.

Very popular among Austrians are Saint Nicholas and Saint Martin of Tours. On December 6, children receive sweets in memory of the generosity of St. Nicholas. A folk custom is that Nicholas is accompanied by Krampus, an incarnate, monstrous depiction of evil in opposition to the good of St Nicholas.

Thanksgiving is a folkloric feast with religious processions and special decoration of the churches. The churches celebrate this feast on a Sunday in autumn, mostly at end of September/beginning of October. People thank God for the fruit of the earth and, especially in the cities, for the work of human hands.

The borderline between secular and religious customs is not always easy to draw. There are customs like hiding eggs at Easter time, Easter bonfires or the Christmas tree, which traditionally make up a part of Christian feasts, but many people are not aware of their Christian roots anymore. Austrian culture has had many influences apart from Christianity, continues to absorb new influences and keeps evolving. Most Austrians, however, appreciate the lifestyle, the customs, the feasts and celebrations that have emerged under the influence of Christianity over many centuries. Usually they are open to new developments, but people coming to Austria are expected to respect the Austrian culture, which is shaped by Christianity. It means home to them – and it might also be home to people from all over the world.
The Austrian Integration Fund
(Österreichischer Integrationsfonds – ÖIF)

About the ÖIF

The Austrian Integration fund (ÖIF) is a fund of the Federal Republic of Austria and a partner of the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs. With integration centers in Vienna, St. Pölten, Graz, Linz, Salzburg, Klagenfurt and Innsbruck, as well as mobile counseling programs in some towns, we support refugees and immigrants to start living in Austria.

The ÖIF focuses its activity on

- Recognized refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection
- People from a migrant background
- Institutions and organizations in integration, social affairs and education
- Austrian society

ÖIF Integration Centers

The ÖIF integration centers give counsel to refugees and immigrants in all important questions concerning their integration and accompanies them in taking their first steps in Austria. Make use of the opportunity to plan your first steps with one of our ÖIF counselors.

ÖIF counseling focuses on

- offered German classes and contacting certified teaching in Austria and abroad
- possibilities for obtaining ÖIF support
- information and application concerning value and orientation classes “Mein Leben in Österreich”
- recognition of educational and professional qualifications obtained abroad
- scholarships for students
- integration programs in your area
- questions concerning Austrian nationality
- important visits to the authorities

Integration Funding

ÖIF offers financial support for German classes according to the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. if you are on social benefits and do not receive any funding from other organizations.

Value and Orientation Class

For the purpose of integration it is vital that you know the rules of living together in Austria. Attending the value and orientation class “Mein Leben in Österreich” (My Life in Austria) supports you in learning that. You can apply for the next class in any ÖIF integration center.

www.integrationsfonds.at
www.integrationsfonds.at/foerderung

www.integrationsfonds.at/
oef-standorte

Counseling in Communities

ÖIF offers regional integration counseling in communities. You can check the counseling times and addresses as well as addresses of mobile programs at www.integrationsfonds.at

Standorte
ÖIF Integration Centers in Austria

Vienna (Wien)/Burgenland
Integrationszentrum Wien
Landstraßer Hauptstraße 26, 1030 Wien
T +43 1 7151051
M wien@integrationsfonds.at

Lower Austria (Niederösterreich)
Integrationszentrum Niederösterreich
Kugelgasse 8, 3100 St. Pölten
T +43 2742 26527-190
M niederosterreich@integrationsfonds.at

Styria (Steiermark)
Integrationszentrum Steiermark
Reitschulgasse 19, 8010 Graz
T +43 316 841720
M steiermark@integrationsfonds.at

Upper Austria (Oberösterreich)
Integrationszentrum Oberösterreich
Weingartshofstraße 25, 4020 Linz
T +43 732 787043
M oberosterreich@integrationsfonds.at

Salzburg
Integrationszentrum Salzburg
Ernest-Thun-Straße 6, 5020 Salzburg
T +43 662 876874
M salzburg@integrationsfonds.at

Tyrol (Tirol)/Vorarlberg
Integrationszentrum Tirol
Lieberstraße 3, 6020 Innsbruck
T +43 512 561771
M tirol@integrationsfonds.at

Carinthia (Kärnten)
Integrationszentrum Kärnten
10. Oktoberstraße 16, 9020 Klagenfurt
T +43 463 503781-100
M kaernten@integrationsfonds.at
CATHOLIC CHURCH CONTACTS

You can approach any priest in any church. Apart from that, there is a website for introduction to Christianity and every diocese has contact addresses.

Katholische Kirche Österreich
(Catholic Church Austria)
kontakt@katholisch.at
www.katholisch.at/willkommen

Erzdiözese Wien (Archdiocese of Vienna)
Pastoralamt (Office for Pastoral Care)
Stephansplatz 6, 1010 Wien
T +43 1 51552 3365
M willkommen@edw.or.at

Diözese St. Pölten (Diocese of St. Pölten)
Pastorale Dienste, Bereich Familie
(Office for Pastoral Care, Office for Families)
T +43 2742 3243342
M familie@kirche.at

Diözese Eisenstadt (Diocese of Eisenstadt)
Dom- und Stadtpfarre zum hl. Martin
(parish of the Cathedral and town, St. Martin)
Pfarrgasse 32, 7000 Eisenstadt
T +43 2682 62717
M dompfarre@martinus.at

Diözese Graz-Seckau (Diocese of Graz-Seckau)
Röm.-kath. Pfarre Graz-Dom
(Roman-Catholic parish of the Cathedral)
Burggasse 3, 8010 Graz
T +43 316 821683
M graz-dom@graz-seckau.at

Diözese Linz (Diocese of Linz)
Theologische Erwachsenenbildung
(Theological Adult Education)
Kapuzinerstraße 84, 4020 Linz
T +43 732/7610-3241
M theoleb@dioeseze-linz.at

Diözese Klagenfurt-Gurk

(Dioecese of Gurk-Klagenfurt)
Diözesanrat-Ausschuss "Kirche und Migration"
(Committee of the Diocesan Council "Church and Migration")
Tarviser Straße 30, 9020 Klagenfurt
T +43 463 5877-2390
M dioezesanrat@kath-kirche-kaernten.at

Erzdiözese Salzburg (Archdiocese of Salzburg)
Dompfarre Salzburg (parish of the Cathedral)
Kapitelplatz 7, Postfach 62, 5010 Salzburg
T +43 662 8047-7950
M dompfarre.salzburg@pfarrer.kirchen.net

Diözese Innsbruck (Diocese of Innsbruck)
Seelsorgeamt Innsbruck (Office for Pastoral Care)
Riedgasse 9, 6020 Innsbruck
T +43 512 2230 4101
M seelsorgeamt@diik.at

Diözese Feldkirch (Diocese of Feldkirch)
Caritas- und Flüchtlingsseelsorge
(Pastoral Care for Caritas and Refugees)
Wichnegasse 22, 6800 Feldkirch
T: +43 5522 - 200
M: caritasseelsorge.feldkirch@caritas.at
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