

## **Roman Catholic Beliefs**

### I. Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church claims 800 million members world-wide making it the largest Christian organization of any kind. As an organization it has been one of the most influential forces in the history of Western Civilization. It cannot be taken lightly. In the lieu of recent and significant changes in the RCC, and due to increased interest in the RCC among Evangelicals and Protestants, serious questions need to be asked. (See also CIM Outline #47 *Evangelicals and Catholics*.)

Are the lines of demarcation between Catholic and Protestant melting away? To what extent should evangelicals cooperate, fellowship, or worship with Catholic Christians? Are they biblically orthodox? Should evangelization of Catholics cease? Is the RCC the church founded by Jesus? To answer these questions one needs to understand RCC distinctives, i.e., its unique beliefs.

### II. The Roman Catholic Church as an Organization

- A. It is called *Roman* for two reasons: the Roman Bishop became the most powerful of the bishops, and because it has its headquarters there. About the 7th Century the bishop of Rome became known as the *Pope*.
- B. The ecclesiastical structure of the RCC is monolithic in that all power resides at the top. It is a vertical bureaucracy.
- C. The RCC is divided into two distinct groups, laity and clergy. One cannot adequately understand the workings of the RCC unless this distinction is understood.
- D. It claims to be the exclusive church of Jesus Christ. The word *catholic* means *universal*.
- E. In addition to being a religious and spiritual organization it is also a political entity. The Vatican is sovereign territory recognized by other sovereign nations. The Vatican exchanges ambassadors with most of the countries of the world. This is a holdover from the days of the Holy Roman Empire when the Popes wielded tremendous political power.

### III. Where Catholics are in Agreement with Evangelicals

- A. The Apostle's Creed: *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was Buried. He descended into Hell ("hades" meaning "the grave"). On the third day, He rose again from the Dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right Hand of God, the Father Almighty from whence He shall come to Judge the Quick (the living) and the Dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, life everlasting.* (It arose about 390 A.D. and was probably used at baptisms).
- B. This Apostle's Creed, though brief, affirms most of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith. It attests to a trinitarian view of the godhead, the deity of Christ, His virgin birth, the resurrection, the ascension, our Lord's second coming, the possibility of redemption, and life after death. Both Catholic and conservative Protestants affirm this creed with maybe one minor exception: when protestants say liturgically, *the holy catholic church*, they do not mean the RCC, but rather that the church, or the Body of Christ is universal (some refer to it as the invisible church).
- C. On the whole, Catholics and Evangelicals share the same Christian worldview, i.e. they both hold to a morality which is biblically based. Both agree substantially on social issues, e.g. sanctity of life and marriage. However, there is yet a great gulf between the RCC and Evangelicals on important doctrinal matters. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the great English expositor, made the comment with regard to RCC theology: *It is not so much a matter of the denial of the truth, but rather such an addition to the truth that eventually it becomes a departure from it.*

#### IV. Where Catholics disagree with sound Biblical Teaching

##### A. The Doctrine of Revelation

The subject of this important doctrine is how God reveals Himself and His will to men. The RCC affirms that God reveals Himself through the Bible and that it is fully inspired by God. This is good as far as it goes, but it is at this juncture that major disagreements emerge. The Reformers reaffirmed that you can have only one final authority, and that this was the 66 books of the Bible (*sola scriptura*). The RCC has added to the authority of Scripture in a number of ways:

1. The Apocrypha. It consists of 15 additional books which the RCCs add to the Bible. They are bound between the Old and the New Testaments and are considered part of the OT. Together they are about 80% the size of the NT. They were not considered part of the canon until the Council of Trent in 1546. Prior to this, several *infallible* popes declared them non-canonical (Gregory and Leo X). They were declared canonical largely because of the dispute about purgatory. The Catholic bishops thought they found support for this teaching in one of the Apocryphal books (II Maccabees 12:40-45). The NT quotes the OT approximately 260 times and alludes to it about 370 times and although the NT writers and Jesus undoubtedly knew of these books, they are never quoted or alluded to in the NT. The Apocrypha is full of historical inaccuracies, fantasies, and teachings contrary to Scripture.
  2. Tradition. The RCC classifies the tradition of the Church as *the Word of God*. Vatican II affirmed that Scripture and tradition *form one sacred deposit of the word of God*. When tradition is elevated to infallibility several problems arise: (1) The sheer volume of data becomes a major difficulty; just papal bulls alone comprise about 40 volumes. (2) Contradictions among the many traditions and the interpretation of traditions are too numerous to mention. Note: we are not saying that tradition is not helpful or useful in interpreting Scripture.
  3. The Pope. The RCC believes in apostolic succession, i.e. the Pope inherits the same authority as the Apostles. They believe that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* (from his chair of authority) that he speaks without error. This doctrine of papal infallibility arose rather recently in 1870 at the First Vatican Council. According to Scripture only those who had witnessed the resurrection had apostolic authority (See Acts 1:22; I Cor. 9:1)
  4. The Bishops, i.e. the Church. When they are in council they are seen as infallible interpreters of Scripture. Here truth is apparently the result of a majority vote. The edicts of the Council of Trent were not unanimous. Can we really look at church history and conclude that the church has always infallibly interpreted Scripture? (Ask Galileo!).
- B. The Doctrine of Redemption. It is our opinion that the most serious breach of orthodoxy in the RCC is its doctrine of redemption. In Galatians Paul argued that if anyone adds to the gospel of grace alone he should be condemned (Gal. 1:8). Strong words? Yes. It was the teaching of this Epistle that convinced Luther to go against the RCC. Salvation according to RCC teaching is an intricate system of works involving the sacramental system. *Grace* is seen as a

commodity or substance that can be gained by various means. It is never known when one accumulates enough grace to actually meet God's demands, therefore, a Catholic can never have full assurance of salvation. The process of accumulating *grace* even continues in purgatory. Mary is said to be *full of Grace*. Catholics, therefore, pray to Mary to receive Grace from her. Grace is not the disposition of a holy God toward sinners as a result of the work of Christ, but rather an asset that can be dispensed or infused in the sinner.

- C. The Veneration of Mary. Many protestants view the teachings of the RCC about Mary as being nothing short of cultic. Most of these false beliefs were only canonized by the RCC in 1943 as a result of the encyclical of Pius XII. The major protestant objections are:
1. Her perpetual virginity. They readily affirm the virgin birth of Jesus, however, they maintain that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life in apparent contradiction to the Scriptures. In three passages siblings are mentioned, indeed in Mark 6:3, four of Jesus's half-brothers are mentioned by name. Jude and James later wrote the Epistles named for them.
  2. Sinlessness. The RCC teaches that Mary is *full of grace* therefore free of original and actual sin. (Was she too born of a virgin?). In Luke 1:47 she jubilantly calls the coming Messiah her savior.
  3. Co-mediatrix and Co-redemptrix. This is perhaps the most blatant heretical departure since it ascribes deity to Mary despite RCC objections. The two words mean co-mediator, and co-redeemer. This is blasphemy to ascribe these divine works to a mortal. Catholics are encouraged to pray to Mary. *In order for Mary to hear the prayers of saints around the world would require attributes of deity.*
  4. The Assumption of Mary. The RCC believes Mary escaped death (because she had no sin) and was assumed into heaven where she now reigns with Christ. This is nowhere taught in Scripture.
- D. The Sacraments. One cannot understand Catholic theology or its complex view of redemption without understanding the sacraments for they are the heart of Catholic teaching. There are seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, penance, Holy Eucharist, marriage, anointing the sick, and holy orders. *The Sacraments are the means appointed by God for attainment of eternal salvation. Three of them are in the ordinary way of salvation so necessary that without their use salvation cannot be attained (i.e. baptism, penance, holy orders)* Ludwig Ott.

- E. Purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory was officially proclaimed as dogma in 1438, however, it has ancient origins. The problem is that its teaching is nowhere to be found in Scripture. It largely comes from the Apocrypha and from spiritism, i.e. apparitions who affirm it. It is a place of torment where all saints go to be finally purged of their sins. The length of one's stay in purgatory is dependent on several factors: (1) your good works on earth, and they are specific, such as saying the rosary, (2) the prayers of the living, (3) and indulgences paid on behalf of the suffering.
- F. The Priesthood. There is no NT authority for an order of human priests in the NT church. According to the teaching of the Epistle of Hebrews we have only one priest, Jesus Christ, our High Priest. In the RCC priests are highly respected and authoritarian figures. According to their own words salvation can come to no one except through the ministrations of the priest. This teaching is actually very ancient dating back to the 3rd Century (Cyprian). The priest in the RCC has the authority to mediate between God and man (in the confessional), forgive sins, and by pronouncement change the elements of communion into the actual Body and Blood of Christ. Note what the Council of Trent says about the priest: *The priest remits sins as God, and that which he calls his body at the altar is adored as God by himself and by the congregation....It is clear that their function is such that none greater can be conceived. Wherefore they are justly called not only angels, but also God, holding as they do among us the power and authority of the immortal God.* (Note: some churches: Anglican, Episcopal, and the Eastern churches call their ministers, priests, but their roles are more like the protestants.)
- G. The Church. Protestants emphasize that there are two aspects to the Church of Jesus Christ: the universal and local. The universal church consists of all believers of all time regardless of denomination or minor differences of belief; it is the mystical Body of Christ. The Local aspect is the visible congregation which meets together at a geographical location. In the RCC the stress lies mainly in the outward world-wide structure which it believes is the one true church and the one founded by Jesus Christ Himself. In short it sees the church more as an institution rather than a living organism.

## V. Conclusion

1. The RCC consistently denies the sufficiency and completeness of the atoning work of Christ and many other orthodox teachings.
2. Its final authority is ultimately church tradition rather than Scripture alone.

3. There are undoubtedly those who are genuinely saved in the Catholic church but it is in spite of the church and its teachings.
4. Those in the Catholic church who are genuinely trusting in Christ alone for their salvation should be encouraged to worship where the communion is Biblically administered and where the Scriptures are correctly expounded.
5. Believers need to pray for the Catholic church that the Holy Spirit will visit it with a genuine spirit of revival and reform.

Further Study:

Catholic perspective:

***CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.***

Hardon, John A. ***THE CATHOLIC CATECHISM.***

Johnson, Luke Timothy. ***THE CREED.***

Keating, Karl. ***CATHOLICISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM.***

Marthaler, Berard L. ***THE CREED.***

McBrien, Richard P. ***CATHOLICISM.***

Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal, and Schonborn, Christoph ***INTRODUCTION TO THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.***

Evangelical Critiques:

Ankerberg, John and Weldon, John ***PROTESTANTS & CATHOLICS: DO THEY NOW AGREE?.***

Ankerberg, John and Weldon, John. ***THE FACTS ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM.***

Armstrong, John. ed. ***ROMAN CATHOLICISM: EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS ANALYZE WHAT UNITES & WHAT DIVIDES US.***

MacKenzie, Ralph E. and Geisler, Norman L. ***CATHOLICS AND EVANGELICALS: AGREEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES.***