

# **CATHOLICISM**

## **Its History and Doctrines**

On March 29, 1994, a group of Evangelical Protestants offered the Roman Catholic Church a document in which they pledged brotherhood in Christ and cooperation in the work of Christ. In it they proclaimed:

We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ....All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ.  
Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ....

Through this lengthy [25 pages] and conciliatory gesture to Catholics, some Evangelical Christians sought to erase centuries of conflict between the two groups. For a number of years, people in the Evangelical community have been talking about saved Catholics and have been cooperating with Catholic people in various social crusades. The Charismatic community has gone even further, building a bridge into the Catholic community and sharing many spiritual activities as well.

If Catholicism offers salvation to mankind in the same way as Evangelical Protestantism (only a little differently), then what was the point of the Reformation? In the Sixteenth Century there was a great schism in the Roman Catholic Church, culminating from generations of persecution and execution of those who resisted the teachings of the Church. The result was the Protestant movement in which new churches were formed with doctrinal beliefs which dramatically contradicted those of Catholicism.

Was it all for nought? Was it a big mistake due to unfortunate misunderstandings? Or are there really significant differences between the teachings of the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches?

In evaluating the Doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, one very important principle must be kept in mind. One cannot understand Catholicism by talking to individual members of the Catholic Church. What any given member of the Church believes and what the Church officially teaches may be two very different things. So whatever an individual Catholic may happen to believe cannot be taken as an affirmation of actual Catholic Doctrine.

Another important factor is that Catholic Doctrine is so complex many of its tenants appear at times to contradict each other. It has the potential for causing confusion.

Many consider Catholicism to be the original form of Christianity and Protestantism simply a derivative. Catholicism, however, is not what Christ intended His Church to be. It is rather a profound departure from the original form of the Church.

### **The History of the Roman Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church evolved around two concepts. One is that the entire Church makes up the Body of Christ and is inseparably linked together. Thus the use of the word "catholic" which means "universal." The other is that the entire Church falls under the jurisdiction of a human being who represents Christ on earth. Thus the use of the word "Pope" for the person who fills that role.

The Roman Catholic Church identifies its beginning in the appointment of Peter as the first Pope. The first Vatican Council stated, "If anyone says that Christ the Lord did not constitute the Blessed Peter prince of all the Apostles and head of the whole church militant; or if he says that this primacy is one of mere honor and not of real jurisdiction received directly and immediately from our Lord Jesus, let him be anathema." The claim is that Christ himself appointed Peter to exercise jurisdiction over the whole Church and instructed him to appoint successors who would do the same throughout all generations. In addition, Peter is said to have fulfilled this jurisdiction from the Church in Rome as have all his successors.

Statements from Church leaders in the early centuries do not support this contention, however.

Ambrose of Milan (397 A.D.) He says the primacy of Peter is only a "primacy of confession, not of honor; of faith, not of rank," and places the apostle Paul on an equality with Peter.

Augustine (430 A.D.) "For the rock is not so named from Peter, but Peter from the rock, even as Christ is not so called after the Christian, but the Christian after Christ. For the reason why the Lord says, 'On this rock I will build my church' is that Peter had said, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.' On this rock, which thou hast confessed says he, I will build my church. For Christ was the rock upon which also Peter himself was built; for other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid which is Jesus Christ."

Eastern Bishops understood the primacy of Peter in the first place "simply as honorary... to whom that power was but first committed, which the Lord afterward conferred on all the apostles alike; and in the second place, they by no means favor an exclusive transfer of the prerogative to the bishop of Rome, but claim it also for the bishops of Antioch, where Peter, according to Galatians 2 sojourned a long time, and where, according to tradition, he was bishop, and appointed a successor."

In truth, the development of the office of Pope required much time and struggle. It was not automatically recognized from the time of Peter, and in some parts of Christianity, never was acknowledged. In the early centuries, prominent Bishops existed in such cities as Ephesus, Thessalonica, Corinth, Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch as well as Rome. And in the fourth and fifth centuries, an irreparable division occurred between the churches in the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire.

Apostolic succession was indeed an issue of the infant Church and earlier Roman Bishops did argue for their direct association with Peter. Not all agreed, however, and the true office of the papacy did not exist for many centuries in that no one exercised jurisdiction beyond the scope of their own local church, including the Bishops in Rome.

Leo the Great, Bishop of Rome from 440 to 461 A.D. was the first to successfully exercise papal authority beyond the borders of Italy, but certainly not over all Christendom. It is important to note, however that his authority was assumed and not given. He was a capable theologian and politician and as such was able by his own assertion to increase the influence and jurisdiction of the Roman Bishop's seat. After Leo, mediocre men sat in the office of the "Pope" for a century and a half and little expansion of influence was affected by them.

While Leo called himself Pope and aspired to the authority of a universal Bishop of the

Church, Gregory is better called the first real "Pope." He refused the title, but exercised jurisdiction over a wide geographical area. He was rivaled by the Patriarch of Constantinople and was only able to achieve a stalemate in preventing him or anyone else besides the Bishop of Rome from claiming the role of universal Bishop.

Gregory was a man of strong character, deep conviction, and capable administrative ability. He was also the beneficiary of a weakened political structure in the European arena. The western version of the Roman Empire had ceased to exist in 476, and Gaulic power had fragmented by the time Gregory became Bishop in Rome.

As a result, he was able not only to solidify the religious power of the papacy but the civil power as well, causing serious reverberation for a thousand years of European history. West of Constantinople and covering all of Europe but still falling short of universal jurisdiction, Roman Catholicism became Church and Government to the people. Popes crowned Kings, Monasteries became feudal fiefdoms and the individual lived every day of his life just as the Church said he should for fear of excommunication if he did otherwise.

What the Church had become in Roman Catholicism was far beyond what God intended it to be. God did indeed desire unity for the entire Body of Christ, but He intended it to be a spiritual unity, based upon a mutual submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit and not to a human being. Beyond the jurisdiction of the Apostles, which was eliminated with the death of those founders of the Church, the only scope of responsibility indicated by Scripture is in the context of the local church and not beyond. History records that this is precisely how things were in the early part of the Church's existence. In spite of this, the Roman Catholic Church has written its own version of history and continues to this day in its insistence that the Pope governs the Church on earth as a substitute for Christ and that his jurisdiction is universal.

### **The Doctrine of the Catholic Church**

The Doctrine of the Catholic Church is a complex maze. Because it is not based solely on the Word of God, but also on the evolution of man's imaginations, it is extremely difficult to confine to a few short pages. The following doctrines, however, are of primary importance to the definition of Roman Catholicism in distinction from Evangelical Christianity.

#### **Tradition And Scripture**

Catholic Doctrine teaches that the Bible nowhere implies it is the only source of faith. Thus, it claims that tradition is equal to Scripture.

Scripture, according to Catholicism is a tool of the Church. While a gift from God, it is nevertheless in the power of the Church to use Scripture in any way she sees fit. The Church maintains the sole privilege of declaring what the Scriptures mean and how they may be used.

The Catholic Church says that Tradition consists of the teachings of Christ and His Apostles which are not contained in Scripture. It goes far beyond these sources, however, and consists largely of decrees by Church Councils and supposedly infallible statements by the Popes. Traditions are considered to be equal in value to Scripture because they are believed to be a source of Divine revelation in the same way Scripture is.

As a result of this belief, Catholic Doctrine need not be proved from Scripture. As long as documentation for a belief can be found in the Traditions of the Church, Catholicism considers it to be valid.

### **Sin and Grace**

1. Catholic Doctrine teaches that sin is a problem, but not a simple one. In fact, compensating for sin consumes much of what Catholicism consists. It divides sin into two categories.

a. **Original sin** is one of the consequences inherited from Adam and Eve. Original sin sounds like a term which relates to the Protestant belief in the depravity of man. However, the Catholic belief says that while original sin deprives a person of seeing God and of sanctifying grace, it does not send anyone to Hell. In fact, because of its inherited nature and the absence of personal consent, original sin has little or no effect upon the human nature. In spite of inheriting the sin of Adam, human nature remains essentially good and able to do good.

b. **Personal sin** is much more serious than original sin. This kind of sin consists of the specific sins a person commits and has the potential to send a person directly to Hell. There are two kinds of personal sin, venial and mortal. Venial sins are not serious. They consist of things like stealing a small item or telling a little white lie. They are easily compensated for in the course of a person's religious experience. Mortal sins, however, cut a person off from God and from the grace that can save his soul. Whereas original sin merely causes the loss of sanctifying grace, personal mortal sins condemn the perpetrator to Hell. Knowing which sins are venial and which are mortal is sometimes difficult, though, because the determination is often left to the subjectivity of individual priests. A Catholic can never take anything for granted, therefore, and must confess all sin to be sure.

2. Catholic Doctrine teaches that grace is the solution for sin; but just as there are several kinds of sin, there are several sources for obtaining grace to overcome sin.

a. Original sin is the easiest to resolve. It is to this category of sin, and this category alone, that the redemptive work of Christ is applied in Catholic Doctrine. Christ's death and shed blood redeems man from original sin only, not from personal sin. However, even this redemption is hollow, because Catholicism emphatically asserts that faith alone in the work of Christ on the cross will not save anyone, even from the meager penalty of original sin. It is actually man's submission to baptism that saves a person. In fact, in Catholicism baptism is a more powerful force than the redemptive work of Christ, because baptism can save a person from personal sin, as well as original sin. Baptism (pouring water on the forehead in the shape of the cross) provides the grace to eliminate the penalty for original sin. Through baptism, the redemptive work of Christ is communicated to the individual who is restored to the sanctifying grace of God and all personal sins are forgiven, venial and mortal, so that if a person dies immediately after being baptized he will go directly to heaven. This is effective as long as the baptized person never commits another sin. Each personal sin committed after baptism causes a loss of grace. The individual is then responsible for retrieving that lost grace on his own.

b. Grace to compensate for personal sin must be obtained through a variety of means, all of which consist of things man must do for himself. Venial sins (the little ones) are somewhat inconsequential since they do not damage a person's standing before God. They may be compensated for through the general course of obtaining grace through the sacraments. Mortal sins (the big ones that can send a person to Hell) are the real problem. If mortal sin is not properly compensated for, a person

goes directly to Hell upon death. The Catholic Church has provided its adherents with many ways to obtain the grace needed to compensate for the personal sins they have committed.

1. The process begins with confession. At least once each year, a Catholic is obligated to confess to an authorized priest all the specific sins he can remember committing since his last confession. This is so essential because if a person dies having committed any unconfessed mortal sins, he goes directly to Hell and there is no hope for him. The priest has the power to absolve confessed sins. The absolution is insufficient, however, because the sinner is then obligated to do something himself to obtain the needed grace to compensate for his personal sins, either while he lives on earth or after he dies. The distinction is that the Priest forgives the sins, but the sinner must bear punishment for his sins, even though they are forgiven.
2. Penance is the activity, imposed by the authorized Priest, which the Catholic sinner may perform in order to obtain the grace which will compensate for his sin. It is supposed to be a visible form of repentance, showing that the sinner is sorry for his sin and wants to do better. Catholic doctrine teaches, however, that penance is actually a means of obtaining forgiveness and grace to live a better life. Penance, then, serves as the punishment an individual must bear for his own confessed and forgiven sin. It generally consists of a specified number of prayers but may also include alms or some other specific work. Penance is crucial because if enough penance is not performed for mortal sins, there will be consequences to pay after a person dies, even though all mortal sins were confessed and forgiven.
3. Other means of obtaining grace include Confirmation (by which a person receives the Holy Spirit), The Holy Eucharist (Communion), Extreme Unction (anointing the sick), Holy Orders (such as the offices of Bishop, Priest, etc.) and Matrimony (marriage). Along with Baptism and Penance, these are called sacraments. A sacrament is something man can do to obtain the grace of God. Catholicism teaches that grace is conferred through all seven sacraments and that this grace is absolutely necessary for salvation. Faith alone in the work of Christ is not enough. If a sufficient amount of grace is not obtained to compensate for sins committed, venial or mortal, the remaining penalty for personal sins will have to be worked off after a person dies.
4. If man fails to obtain all the grace he needs before he dies, Catholic Doctrine teaches that he must work off the rest of his punishment by suffering in Purgatory. The length of time a person spends in Purgatory varies according to the amount of punishment that has not been erased by the earning of grace. The Doctrine of Purgatory corresponds to the teaching that God's forgiveness does not eliminate the need for punishment. If a living person does not sufficiently punish himself through penance, then he must complete his punishment by suffering in Purgatory after he dies.
5. Indulgences is another way to obtain grace. Essentially, an indulgence is the release from punishment for sin in exchange for the payment of money to the Catholic Church. They are careful to say that the payment of money does not forgive sin, it only reduces the punishment for sin, continuing the distinction between these two things. Indulgences may be purchased for yourself while you are living or for dead loved ones in Purgatory. This is possible because of what is called the Treasury of the Church. Both the merits of Christ which exceeded what was needed for saving man from original sin and the merits of Mary and the Saints which exceeded their own needs were deposited into this treasury from which

the church may draw to grant indulgences to those who can pay money for them.

6. The veneration of Mary and the Saints is yet another means by which they hope to obtain favor with God. Catholicism teaches that by virtue of their achieving residency in Heaven, the Saints have the privilege of obtaining the audience of God and interceding for man. In doing so, Mary and the Saints may actually obtain divine grace for others.

### **Salvation and the Sacrifice of Christ**

Catholic Doctrine teaches that Christ's one sacrifice was not sufficient to pay for all sin. In the Mass, Christ is offered as a sacrifice over and over again.

The Holy Eucharist is the term the Catholic Church uses for Communion. It teaches that when the Priest, acting as Christ, says the words, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," the bread and wine actually turn into the real body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Technically, Catholicism insists that the Eucharist is only an extension of the suffering of Christ on the Cross into the present. But the effect of each Mass is to offer Christ again and again in sacrifice to God. The proof of this is that Catholics receive Christ into their lives, not by faith in what He did for them on the Cross, but by physically swallowing the actual body of Christ in the bread of communion. It is also proven in that it is not sufficient for them to receive Christ once, even through this physical manifestation, but He must be received as many times as possible in the hope that enough grace will be obtained to avoid all punishment for the sins that were supposedly forgiven when they were confessed to the Priest.

### **Rebuttal**

Scripture is the sole source of God's Word to man. By the end of the First Century, it was complete and all other means of communicating God's Revelation to mankind were done away with (I Corinthians 13:8-9; Colossians 1:25; II Timothy 3:16; Revelation 22:18-19). Tradition is emphatically denounced by Scripture as having any credibility in establishing true doctrine or directing the lives of God's people (Matthew 15:3-6; Colossians 2:8; I Peter 1:18).

In inheriting sin from Adam, every human being not only lost the ability to see God, but obtained a depraved human nature and was condemned to Hell (Romans 5:12; John 3:18-20; Romans 3:10-19).

Every person is born with a sin nature and there is no innate goodness in man (Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:11-12). One sin, regardless of its degree of seriousness, makes a man a sinner and lost (James 2:10).

The grace needed for salvation can be obtained only through faith in what Jesus Christ did for us. Jesus Christ paid for all sin, whether original or personal, whether venial or mortal, and He paid all that was required for sin. He left nothing undone in redeeming mankind, and God makes no distinction between guilt and punishment. Jesus bore all of it for all of us on the cross. It is left only for man to believe in Jesus Christ and to trust that what He did for us was enough (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; I John 2:2; Hebrews 9:14-15; Romans 10:9-13).

The Evangelical Christians who seek harmony with Catholics say that “we affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith.” Catholic doctrine agrees with this statement so far as it goes. Catholicism does teach that a person is saved by grace, but by grace the individual may obtain through a variety of means. Catholicism also teaches that a person is saved through faith in Christ -- but emphatically denies that a person can be saved through faith in Christ alone.

Many ask whether a person may be genuinely saved by faith in Christ alone and remain in the Catholic Church. The answer is simple. A person cannot be genuinely saved and continue to believe Catholic Doctrine because Catholic Doctrine categorically contradicts the truth of Scripture. And if you do not believe Catholic Doctrine, why would you want to remain in the Catholic Church. Christ clearly teaches His followers to mark them who do not follow the truth and have no fellowship with them.

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