

Roman Catholicism

By Tim Martin

Organizational structure: the Pope has full supremacy and jurisdiction over the universal church. Next, a Cardinal is a senior church official whose main function is to elect a new Pope, and acts as counsel to the Pope at his request. A Bishop oversees a territory called a Diocese which is normally composed of a number of churches (also called Parishes). In the United States, there are 195 dioceses. A Priest oversees the local Parish with the help of deacons, and the individual members are called parishioners or laity.

Unique Terms: deposit of faith, sacred deposit, Eucharist, Vicar of Christ

Membership: In the United States, there are 67.1 million Catholics which is 22% of the population.¹ In 2005, “there were 1.115 billion Catholics worldwide” (17.2% of the world population).²

Introduction

Most Protestants do not classify the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) as a “cult.” Martin Luther, the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation, initially viewed the RCC as the true expression of Christianity which had been corrupted by false doctrines and unbiblical practices over time. Today, the RCC is almost universally viewed as a form of Christianity due to its size and historical presence over the last two millennia. Protestants acknowledge this and recognize that they share many important beliefs with Catholics (such as the trinity, full deity and humanity of Jesus, eternal punishment, virgin birth). Nevertheless, there are severe theological differences that continue to separate it from the Protestant understanding of what constitutes biblical Christianity.

History

The RCC claims its origins begin with Christ establishing His church and appointing Peter as the first Pope. The Pope is God’s substitute for Christ on earth (Vicar of Christ). They believe this office has been perpetuated through a long line of unbroken successors from Peter to today. The RCC’s history is punctuated with two significant divisions. First, in 1054 the Orthodox Patriarch Cerularius was excommunicated from the RCC for not recognizing the primacy of the Pope. This event, often called “the Great Schism” provided the formal distinction between the RCC and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Second, a German monk named Martin Luther sought to stop some abuses in the RCC. In 1517, he nailed the famous “95 Thesis” on the castle door of Wittenberg, calling into question many aspects of doctrine and practice in the RCC. Though his original desire was to see the RCC reform, he ultimately was forced to break from the RCC in 1521 at the Diet of Worms. Therein, he was ordered to recant his teaching before Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor). He refused, and the Protestant Reformation began.

Today, the RCC is multi-faceted in that there are many different subgroups and movements within the church. Thus, while officially the RCC is monolithic, in practice that is not the case. For example, the RCC has been influenced by liberation theology, especially in parts of South America. In Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere, attempts have been made to blend Catholicism with Spiritism, creating a type of Catholicism with overt occult elements. In addition, since the 1960s there has been a small but significant element of charismatic Catholics who have been influenced by the larger charismatic movement. A small percentage of Catholics are doctrinally somewhat evangelical, and others, such as the defrocked Dominican priest Matthew Fox, embrace elements of New Age spirituality.

Many of these subgroups are recognized by the RCC as truly Catholic, and remain in communion with the Church. A great number of Catholics however, are Catholic in name only, practicing a syncretistic and superstitious form of religion ascribing magical powers to statues and crucifixes while attending mass to attract good luck or to ward off pangs of guilt. These practices, though well intentioned, are not representative of Catholicism as a whole or the authorized teachings of the RCC. This diversity has led many Protestants and Catholics to have a clouded or distorted view of Catholic dogma, and to misrepresent or misunderstand its official teachings.

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Doctrine

Authority: According to the RCC, God created two modes of transmitting revelation: scripture and tradition. These together are called the “deposit of faith” or “sacred deposit.” RCC scripture contains the same 66 books of the Old and New Testaments used by Protestants, along with the inclusion of nine additional books considered by Protestants as apocryphal.³ Tradition is the means by which God communicated His gospel through “...the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received — whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

The job of supplying true interpretation of the sacred deposit has been given to the teaching office of the church, the magisterium. The magisterium consists of the bishops “in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome”⁵ (a.k.a. the Pope). According to the First Vatican Council, the Pope can speak “*ex cathedra*,” meaning, his teaching is infallible when he “defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church.”⁶ His unique authority, however, is not limited to speaking *ex cathedra*. The Second Vatican Council further clarified that “loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*...”⁷

Salvation/Sacraments: According to the RCC, salvation is obtained through “faith, baptism and the observance of the commandments.”⁸ To help people in this endeavor, God has supplied seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony). Sacraments are physical signs that symbolize spiritual truth. They are not, however, merely symbolic. They produce a spiritual reality that corresponds to salvation and grace. For example, when one receives the sacrament of baptism, the physical sign of water pouring over an individual is symbolic of death, purification, regeneration and renewal. The grace conferred in this sign is the forgiveness of sin (Adam’s and personal sin), creation of a new creature and “incorporation” into the Church.⁹

The physical signs in the Eucharist’s symbolize Jesus’ body and blood, nourishment and the creation. The spiritual reality is the transformation of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Jesus (although veiled to the human eye). This is called transubstantiation. Partaking of the Eucharist unites the person to Jesus which brings many benefits: renews and increases the grace given at baptism, forgives venial sins,¹⁰ preserves from grave sins, strengthens the bond with Christ and reinforces the unity of the church.¹¹

Though the above explains that the Eucharist brings about forgiveness of sin, it is not effective without the cooperation of the individual. For example, to increase charity in one’s life (a virtue required for salvation¹²), a person is instructed to “frequently partake of the sacraments, chiefly the Eucharist, and take part in the liturgy; he must constantly apply himself to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service and the practice of all virtues.”¹³

Though a person must practice all virtues along with partaking the sacraments to be saved, the RCC maintains that it is the grace of Christ that saves. Though they would claim agreement with evangelicals that salvation is by grace alone through Christ alone, it is by no means through faith alone. Vatican II explained that if a people “fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged.”¹⁴

Some people will follow the above prescription enough to merit eternal life, and die without being “entirely free from venial faults, or hav[ing] not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.”¹⁵ They will be sent to a temporary place of penalty called purgatory. Only people destined for eternal life in God’s kingdom will enter purgatory. The existence of purgatory itself is temporary, and will be gone by the last judgment. Several competing conjectures by RCC theologians concerning purgatory exist with little given as dogma. It will most likely be a place of fiery torment where people will not be able to sin.

Mary: The RCC places a great deal of emphasis on Mary, Jesus’ mother. They teach that she was born without the effects of original sin (called the Immaculate Conception).¹⁶ This means that Mary did not have a sin nature derived from Adam. Moreover, “...Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.”¹⁷ Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. At the end of her life, she was “taken up body and soul into heavenly glory...and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things...”¹⁸ Presently, Mary is the spiritual mother to everyone that Jesus came to save.¹⁹ As humanity’s spiritual mother, Mary intercedes by bringing the gifts of salvation. “Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.”²⁰

Ecumenism: Ecumenism is the coming together of various religions to gain mutual understanding for the purpose of unity and joint cooperation. In 1994, many Roman Catholic and Evangelical leaders wrote a document as a response to ecumenical dialogue called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” The purpose of this ecumenical dialogue did not result out of a desire for harmony itself, but to enhance the global missionary effort through joint cooperation.

For many well meaning individual Catholics and Evangelicals, such conversations are the ultimate goal: to help further the name of Jesus throughout the earth. It is not, however, the ultimate goal given by the official teaching of the RCC. Pope John Paul II explained that “The ultimate goal of the ecumenical movement is to re-establish full visible unity among all the baptized.”²¹

“Full visible unity” is a reference to the partaking of the Eucharist. John Paul II explains that “visible unity...which is manifested in a real and concrete way, so that the Churches may truly become a sign of that full communion in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church which will be expressed in the common celebration of the Eucharist.”²² In other words, the unity desired is that Protestants and Orthodox people join the RCC under the headship of the Pope. One of the Vatican II documents also reveals this as the intended outcome of ecumenical dialogues:

The results will be that, little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of the one and only Church, which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.²³

Why must Protestants and Orthodox join the RCC to achieve unity?

For it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God.²⁴

Christian Response

The RCC is correct that the grace of salvation is a gift from God based on Christ’s atonement. But, it fails to present the true gospel because it teaches that God’s grace must be merited through individual works of righteousness and repentance, (“we can merit for ourselves ... all the graces needed to attain eternal life”²⁵). Salvation, however, comes only by faith. Jesus makes this clear in the “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6:32-58. Consider the following chart:

| Do this: | Receive eternal life: |
|--|---|
| 35 I am the bread of life; <u>he who comes to Me</u> | <u>will not hunger...</u> |
| ... <u>he who believes in Me</u> | <u>will never thirst.</u> |
| 40 [he] who <u>beholds the Son</u> and <u>believes in Him</u> .. | <u>will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up</u> |
| 47 <u>he who believes</u> | <u>has eternal life.</u> |
| 50 <u>This is the bread</u> which comes down out of heaven, so <u>that one may eat of it</u> | <u>and not die.</u> |
| 51 if anyone <u>eats of this bread</u> , | <u>he will live forever</u> |
| 53 unless you <u>eat the flesh of the Son of Man</u> and <u>drink His blood</u> , | <u>you have no life in yourselves.</u> |
| 54 <u>He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood</u> | <u>has eternal life, and I will raise him up</u> |
| 57 <u>he who eats Me</u> , | <u>he also will live because of Me.</u> |
| 58 <u>he who eats this bread</u> | <u>will live forever.</u> |

The phrases used by Jesus in column two are all references to eternal life. “Shall not hunger/thirst,” “not die,” “live forever” are descriptive of this same idea. To receive eternal life, one must exhibit the requirements of column one. Evangelicals will normally understand that “coming to Christ,” “believing in Him,” and “beholding the Son” are the same idea (belief) being expressed in similar terms. Hence, a person who believes in Jesus, has eternal life. When Jesus says, “I am the bread of life,” and that you must eat His flesh and drink His blood for eternal life (6:35), He was using a figure of speech called “metaphor,” and did not mean literal eating.²⁶ Augustine explained that if this were literal, then it would “enjoin wickedness or wrongdoing, and so it is figurative.”²⁷ Jesus’ use of metaphor reveals that the belief required for eternal life is not mere knowledge, but a deeper sense of coming to Him as the only means of what can sustain us spiritually.

Most Catholics will likely see the parallels in column one differently. To them, the requirement for eternal life in this passage is eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus in the Eucharist. This viewpoint, however, is foreign to the text. For instance, when Jesus claimed to be the bread in verse 35, he said that the person coming to Him would not hunger again. If Jesus was referring to the literal eating of the Eucharist, then what did He mean by saying that one would not hunger again after eating it? Obviously, the RCC views the “hunger” as spiritual, not physical. But, how is the change from literal eating to spiritual hunger justified? And, if a person will not spiritually hunger again, then why would a Catholic eat the Eucharist over and over? The Greek text is very clear about this point. The words “not” and “never” are translated from two negative particles “**ou mh**.” “**Ou mh** is the most decisive way of negating something in the future.”²⁸ Hence, the idea of someone hungering or thirsting again in the future is unthinkable in the mind of Jesus.

The RCC also fails to take into account Jesus’ other words. When Jesus said, “he who believes...has eternal life” (6:47) he was speaking in present tense. This means that the person believing in Him would possess eternal life upon belief. Thus, eternal life is a present reality for the believer. Secondly, the word “eternal” indicates that “life” will continue forever. Some Catholics may think that they are in a state of grace periodically, but loose it when they fall into sin (venial or mortal). But, grace spoken of here is the gift of *eternal* life. If “life” is “eternal,” then it is unbroken and cannot be lost. If it were lost, then the person never had it to begin with. For example, say a man falls off a cliff, and he thinks he is eternally falling. After he stops falling, he cannot say that he eternally fell, and then stopped. Instead, he momentarily fell, and then stopped. If he truly eternally fell, then he would still be falling, and would never stop. Even if the cessation of falling was because he grabbed a branch, he cannot say that he eternally fell if he stopped falling. The same is true with eternal life. If God promises eternal life to a person, that person will have it forever. If eternal life was lost, then the person never had it, and God did not keep His promise.

A person does not gain eternal life through baptism, eating communion, participating in church, or any other good activity. The pre-condition to having eternal life according to Jesus is belief. As clarified earlier, belief is not the mere acknowledgment of Jesus. The demons do this much, and it causes them to shudder (James 2:19). The belief that Jesus spoke of will result in the forgiveness of sin. All judgment against sin, past, present, and future, is removed because of the sacrifice on the cross, and is applied to a person based on belief alone. Jesus said “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24).

Notes

- 1 *The Official Catholic Directory 2008*, P.J. Kenedy & Sons, New Providence, NJ, 2006 as cited in *The Catholic Church in the United States At A Glance*, The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/comm/statisti.shtml> (accessed December 2, 2008).
- 2 “Number of Catholics and Priests Rises,” *Zenit*, February 12, 2007. <http://www.zenit.org/article-18894?l=english> (accessed Dec. 7, 2007).
- 3 Eight of these nine apocryphal books were found in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). These apocryphal books (called “deuterocanonical” by the RCC), were not officially recognized by the RCC as inspired until the Council of Florence in 1442, then sanctioned into the canon at the Council of Trent in 1546.
- 4 *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P. ed. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing company, Inc. 1975), 753.
- 5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1997), para. 85.
- 6 “Vatican Council I,” session 4 para. 9, *Eternal Word Television Network*, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/v1.htm#6> (accessed December 7, 2007).
- 7 *Vatican Council II*, 379.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 378.
- 9 *Catechism*, para. 1262-1267.
- 10 The RCC divides personal sin into two categories – “venial sin,” that “does not destroy charity, the principle of union with God, nor deprive the soul of sanctifying grace,” and much more serious “mortal sin,” which “averts us from our true last end.” See, “Sin,” *The Original Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1907), online edition <http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Sin> (accessed Nov. 28, 2008).
- 11 *Catechism*, para. 1392, 1416.
- 12 *Vatican Council II*, 366.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 400.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 366.
- 15 “Purgatory,” *The Original Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=Purgatory> (accessed December 1, 2008).
- 16 The Immaculate Conception was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX on December 1, 1854.
- 17 *Catechism*, para. 493. Mary’s sinlessness was endorsed by the Council of Trent, Session VI, Canon 23.
- 18 *Vatican Council II*, 417-418.
- 19 *Catechism*, para. 501.
- 20 *Vatican Council II*, 419.
- 21 Pope John Paul II, “Ut unum sint,” *The Holy See*, May 25, 1995, http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0221/_PP.PP.HTM (accessed Dec.7, 2007).
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Vatican Council II*, 457.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 456.
- 25 *Catechism*, para. 2027.
- 26 A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unrelated items or concepts that have a common connection. In this case, bread sustains life and satisfies hunger. Jesus uses this metaphor to demonstrate how He will sustain life and satisfy spiritual hunger for those who believe in Him.
- 27 Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, R. P. H. Green trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80. Augustine also made many statements that sound as if he believed these verses to be literal. However, in these instances, he was using the language of liturgy, not theology. In *On Christian Teaching*, he is explaining how you should understand what the scripture is teaching. Hence, a proper understanding of Augustine is to interpret his liturgical language in light of his statement in *On Christian Teaching*.
- 28 Walter Baur, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979) 517.



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