



# Roman Catholicism

## **Introduction**

## **Point of Origin**

## **Key Points in History**

## **Key Points of Belief**

## **Practices**

## **Catholic Tradition Versus Scripture**

## **Weak Points of Catholicism**

## **Review Questions**

## **References**

Introduction: Catholic priests discovered the New World with Columbus in 1492. The Roman Catholic Church was a part of the fabric of United States history before there was a United States. Catholic signatures are on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In 1977 the Catholic Church was listed as the largest denomination in the U.S. with nearly 50 million members in over 18,000 churches. Over three million children are educated in Catholic schools at the pre-college level and another 442,000 students attend one of the 241 Catholic colleges or universities in America. Catholics operate 730 hospitals which are responsible for providing one out of every three hospital beds in the U. S. World wide, there are over 633 million Catholics in 217 countries (all statistics from Mead, 1980, pp. 223–230).

What is the foundation of it all? How does Catholicism relate to New Testament Christianity? What are the most important issues I need to raise with my Catholic friends? In light of the vast influence of Catholicism in the world around us, these are questions that should burn in the heart of every Christian.

## < Point of Origin >

The term "catholic" means "universal". It was first used to describe the nature of the true church by Ignatius in about 110 A. D. However, it was much later that "catholic" began to be used as an official name of the denomination centered in Rome. (Latourette, 1953, p. 130). The Roman Catholic Church grew out of the heresies which were predicted in the New Testament (I Timothy 4:1–5; 2 Peter 2; Galatians 1; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–7; Acts 20:28–30). Many of the false notions later embraced by Catholicism, were actually combated by Jesus and His apostles.

Reliance on "tradition" and the development of the hierarchy of bishops as successors to the apostles stand out as the two main features of the Catholic Church

from which all of its other unique teachings arose. Ironically, these two features were probably developed in order to help in the fight against other false teachings.

The early church was indeed confronted with formidable popular heresies. The Montanists, for example, believed that prophecies and spiritual gifts were still active in the church, and that Christ would soon return to earth for a thousand year reign (Latourette, 1953, pp. 123-131). Another heretical movement known as Gnosticism "became so widespread that by the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. most of the intellectual Christian congregations throughout the Roman Empire were to some degree infected by it" (ISBE, vol. 4, p. 484). Coupled with the Gnostic threat, "the appearance in Rome about the year 140 of. . . Marcion forced the church to revise her entire attitude toward Scripture and faith and to reorganize her external structure" (Dolan, 1968, p. 13). Similar to the Gnostics, Marcion believed that spirit is good and matter is bad; thus, Jesus was not really a material, physical man but only appeared to be man. Marcion apparently published his own list of books which he thought should comprise the New Testament; Marcion's list only included part of the gospel of Luke and 10 of Paul's epistles. "This restricted collection, together with the Gnostics' use of their own gospels and apocalypses bearing apostolic names, challenged the church" to prove the authenticity of its own teachings and scripture (Dowley, 1977, p. 105).

So, in order to combat these false teachings and the spurious gospels and epistles that accompanied them, the early church leaders felt a need for a base of authority. The identity of true scripture had to be established. "In determining the authenticity of sacred writings, the principles of ecclesiastical tradition and apostolic succession were invoked." "This development guaranteed the place of tradition as an essential part of Catholic faith and theology" (Dolan, 1968, p. 13). In other words, one of the reasons the New Testament books were said to be authoritative was that they were the books the church had traditionally accepted. When church leaders began to think this way, the door was opened for them to accept any belief or practice on the basis of church tradition. Along the same lines, second century church leaders like Irenaeus (circa 175 A. D.) said that their teachings were authentic because "the apostles had appointed as successors bishops to whom they had committed the churches...these bishops had been followed by others in unbroken line who were also guardians and guarantors of the apostolic teaching." (Latourette, 1953, p. 131). Thus, if the bishops said it was so, it had to be so.

While there can be little doubt that early church leaders merely intended to defend

the truth against the false teachers of their day, the end result of the arguments they made set the stage of history for the full development of the Roman Catholic Church as we now know it. Through the centuries, if the bishops decreed it or tradition established it, the Catholic church has accepted it.

### < Important Points in History >

Many Roman Catholic beliefs came from a slow process of drifting over time. Often, new developments came about when long running controversies within the church came to a head; attempts to settle such issues were nearly always based on tradition as determined by agreement between a majority of bishops. Still other changes were brought about through the influence of government. Some of the most important developments are as follows:

1. Constantine and the Nicene Council. Up until the time of Emperor Constantine, Christians had continued to suffer severe persecutions periodically within the Roman Empire. This all changed in 312 A.D. when, after the battle of Milvian bridge, Constantine declared himself in favor of the God of the Christians. By 324 A.D., not only was Christianity tolerated throughout the empire, but Constantine could speak of it as being the state religion (Dolan, 1968, p. 27).

In 325 A. D. Constantine called together the first general (or ecumenical) council of bishops to meet at Nicea. The bishops were to settle questions of the divinity of Christ relative to God the Father. Before this, bishops had occasionally met in regional councils or synods to discuss church problems. But the Nicene Council established a new pattern for determining official church policy which would be followed ever afterward. The council adopted a statement of belief, known as the Nicene Creed. Although long disputed, the idea was that men must give assent to the Nicene Creed or be branded as heretics. The Council also agreed upon a unified method of fixing the date of Easter. An unsuccessful attempt was made to reach an agreement enforcing celibacy upon priests and bishops (Dolan, 1968, p. 29). Interestingly, the Bishop of Rome did not attend the Nicene Council due to ill health. This, and the fact that the council was convened by Constantine, not the Roman Bishop, demonstrates that the Bishop did not yet possess the status or power of the modern Pope.

2. The Rise of the Papacy. Not long after the death of the apostles, bishops had begun to elevate themselves, one above the other, in the local churches. "In 341 the Council of Antioch ordered that in each province the bishop in the chief city , or

metropolis, should have precedence over the other bishops" in that district or diocese (Latourette, 1953, p. 185). These ruling bishops were called metropolitans or archbishops. The archbishops in the most prominent cities of the empire were in positions of special prestige, so that eventually there were "five great patriarchates" in the cities of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. While each of these influenced the others, they also maintained a certain independence from one another. However, by the end of the sixth century political forces had reduced the importance of three of the patriarchates so that Rome and Constantinople began to be in open conflict over which of the two could lay claim to universal rule (Dolan, p. 64, 1968). While Roman Bishops such as Innocent I (412–417 A.D.) and Leo I (440–461 A.D.) had asserted that they had first position in the church, it was Gregory I (the Great) who first demonstrated the power and administrative skill to back up the claim from 590–604 A.D. Following closely on his heels, Boniface III took to himself the title of "universal" bishop in 606. Many consider this to be the true beginning of the Roman Catholic Church as we know it today.

3. Augustine, original sin and infant baptism. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430 A.D., greatly influenced both the church of his day, and the Protestant reformation which came a thousand years afterward. In short, Augustine popularized the idea that man is born totally depraved because he inherits Adam's original sin. To Augustine, salvation is totally an act of God in which man has no part -- God elects and predestinates whomever He wills and saves them by His irresistible grace. Not all of this teaching became part of Roman Catholicism, but the doctrine of original sin did.

Infant baptism had been opposed in the early church and did not come into wide practice until well into the fifth century. "There is no doubt that Augustine's teaching on original sin brought about (the) change in this attitude." (Dolan, 1968, p. 38). It is interesting to note, however, that Augustine himself was not baptized until the age of 33.

### < Fundamental Distinctive Points of Catholic Belief >

1. God's Revelation: Tradition and the Bible as interpreted by the Church. In a book authorized by Catholic Cardinals entitled Catholic Belief, Joseph Bruno wrote, "The Bible and divine Tradition contain the Word of God . . . and are both full of revealed truths, still, of the two, Tradition is to us more clear and safe" (1884, p. 45). The reason for this, according to Catholics, is that the Bible requires interpretation.

Correct interpretation is found only in the Catholic Church whose leaders claim to be the lawful successors of the Apostles.

2. Infallibility of the Church and the Pope. The Catholic Bishops in union with the Bishop of Rome possess infallibility within the church, and the Roman Pontiff alone is infallible in the areas of faith and morals when he teaches "ex cathedra," that is "from the Chair" of Peter (Vatican I, 1870). "Infallibility" as the Catholics use it to refer to the Pope, means that he is protected by God "from wrongly interpreting the word of God and from teaching error." (Bruno, 1884, p. 70).

3. The nature of Sin. Catholics believe there are two kinds of sin: original and actual. The Council of Trent had decreed that Adam transmitted "to all the human race . . . sin which is the death of the soul" (Brantl, 1962, p. 60). In addition to this, humans add to their guilt by committing actual sins which are either mortal or venial. Mortal sins are "big" or "deadly" sins which constitute a serious violation of the law of God and a loss of His friendship and grace. Venial sins are little offenses which do not cause one to forfeit the friendship of God. "No number, indeed, of venial sins can reach the malice and guilt of a mortal sin" (Bruno, 1884, p. 85). Mortal sins kill the soul; venial sins merely wound.

4. Purgatory and punishment of sin. Purgatory is a place of temporary punishment in the next world where those who die "in grace" go to pay the punishment due for their sins before they enter heaven (Olbricht, 1972, p. 18). Catholics believe that every sin must receive a just temporal punishment. Part of the punishment for sin is paid in works of penance, which will be discussed later. The Catholic Church also believes it possesses the treasure of the sacrificial works and blood of Christ and martyred saints which it can use as it wishes to pay for the punishment of sins. This belief led to the sale of "indulgences" for the "direct remission of the punishments of purgatory" (Dolan, 1968, p. 88). [Note: Many famous Catholic cathedrals and buildings were erected with the proceeds from these sales].

5. Mary. Since the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., the title "Mother of God" has been officially applied to "the Blessed Virgin Mary" (Bruno, 1884, p. 207). Mary is regarded as the most highly favored of all creatures. She is addressed in The Hail Mary as follows:

Hail Mary (Ave Maria), full of Grace. The Lord is with Thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of the womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother

of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen

The Catholic Church holds Mary to be "Mediatrice of All Graces," "Co-redemptrix of man" and the "Queen of Heaven" (Brantl, 1962, p. 77). In 1864, Pope Pius IX declared ex cathedra that when Mary was conceived she was "preserved free from all stain of original sin" (this is called "The Immaculate Conception"). Pope Pius XII decreed in 1950 that "the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory" (Brantl, 1962, p. 78). Thus, Mary is believed to have remained a perpetual virgin until her life on earth came to an end by her Miraculous Assumption.

### Basic Catholic Practices

The most fundamental religious practices within the Catholic Church itself center around participation in the seven "sacraments" and "Mass." Sacraments are formal sacred religious acts which symbolize spiritual realities. A sacrament both causes and outwardly signifies an "inward grace." For instance, the sacrament of baptism both brings about and demonstrates that the stain of original sin is washed away.

1. Baptism. Catholics practice pouring as Baptism. It is administered to infants to cleanse them of original sin and make them part of the Church. A confession of faith is required when grown for infant baptism to be effective. Similarly, profession of belief in the necessary articles of faith and sorrow for sin is required of adults before they receive baptism.
2. Confirmation. As early as age seven, Catholics are to receive Confirmation. This once-in-a-lifetime sacrament is accomplished by prayer and the laying on of the Bishop's hands so that those who have been baptized may receive the Holy Ghost and be stronger soldiers of Christ.
3. Holy Eucharist or Communion and the Sacrifice of the Mass. When the Catholic priest consecrates the bread and wine of the Lord's supper, Catholics believe the entire substance of the bread and wine is changed into the body and blood of Christ. This teaching is called "Transubstantiation." This is taken so solemnly that, in Mass, "only the bread is given to the people, lest by drinking the wine they spill a drop and profane the blood of Jesus." (Olbricht, 1972, p. 17). Thus, the Mass is more than an assembly of worship; it entails a commemorative re-offering of the sacrifice Christ by the Catholic priest. It has been referred to as "the unbloody renewal of the Sacrifice of

Christ" (Olbricht, 1972, p. 17). According to Bruno, "the chief purpose of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is to apply practically to our souls" the merits and graces of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary (1884, p. 102).

4. Penance or reconciliation. This sacrament is designed to secure forgiveness for sins committed after baptism. The sinner is expected to show grief or contrition for his sin, confess it to a priest, and then do works of satisfaction prescribed by the priest. Satisfaction involves righting the wrong or paying the price for the sin that has been committed. These conditions must be met for one to receive absolution from the priest and forgiveness from God. The priest, as a minister of Christ, has the power to "retain" or "remit" sins. "In short, the Priest in the tribunal of penance is a judge" (Bruno, 1884, p. 92).

Even after sin is remitted through penance, Catholics engage in works of penance such as prayers, fastings and alms in order to pay their "debt of temporal punishment." As Bruno said, we must do "what we can to punish ourselves for the offenses and outrages we have offered to God." (1884, p. 192). Giving up pleasurable activities during "Lent" is a common practice among many Catholics for this reason.

5. Holy Orders. This is the sacrament by which bishops, priests, and other ministers are ordained and receive authority to perform their duties. Catholics believe that a special priesthood is required to administer the sacraments, and that the bishops, as successors to the apostles, have the right to ordain whomever they see fit.

6. Extreme Unction is a rite performed by the priest on the seriously ill. It involves prayer and anointing the sick with oil. It is supposed to make one better prepared to face death, but also to purify one's soul and bring health to the body.

7. Marriage. When performed as a sacrament, marriage gives husbands and wives special grace to fulfill their God given roles.

## Cross-points

As has already been established, the Roman Catholic Church holds that Tradition is a more clear and safe guide than the Bible. In fact, tradition as established by the Church or the Pope is said to be infallible. Catholics will not admit that there are any real contradictions between their Tradition and Scripture. They always offer some quibble or rationalization to explain away any apparent contradictions. But let us

compare Catholic Tradition and Dogma with plain statements of Scripture and allow the two to speak for themselves.

### Catholic Tradition

1. Obligation to obey a revelation. "When either the Roman Pontiff or the body of bishops together with him defines a judgment, they pronounce it in accord with revelation itself. All are obliged to maintain and be ruled by this revelation, which, as written or preserved by tradition, is transmitted in its entirety..." (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution: 25).

2. Fathers. "Let priests sincerely look upon the bishop as their father, and reverently obey him." Priests themselves are "as fathers in Christ" (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution: 28).

3. Head of the Church. "In virtue of his office, that is, as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church." "Together with its head, the Roman Pontiff, and never without this head, the episcopal order is the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church" (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution: 22)

4. Mary. "Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix and Mediatrix. These, however are to be so understood that they neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and

### The Bible

1. Obligation to obey revelation. "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:8). "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." (Matthew 15:9).

2. Fathers. "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven." (Matthew 23:9).

3. Head of the Church. "He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." (Colossians 1:18). "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body..." (Ephesians 1:22-23a).

4. Mary. "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus." (I Timothy 2:5). "...we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." (I John 2:1b). "I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, 'See that you do not do

efficacy of Christ the one Mediator." (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution: 62). The Second Vatican Council charged "that practices and exercises of devotion toward her (Mary) be treasured" (Dogmatic Constitution: 67). Pope Pius XII officially decreed that "the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory" (Brantl, 1962, p. 78).

5. Purgatory. There is an intermediate state or place called Purgatory where the dead go to suffer punishment until they can be purified to enter heaven (Council of Trent).

6. Veneration of Images. "Those decrees issued in earlier times regarding the veneration of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints, (should) be religiously observed." (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution: 67).

7. Celibacy of Priests and Bishops. "...celibacy was at first recommended to priests. Then, in the Latin Church, it was imposed by law on all who were to be promoted to sacred orders. This legislation . . . this most holy Synod again approves and confirms." (Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests: 16).

8. Baptism. Anyone "can administer Baptism, by pouring common water on the head of the child or grown-up person..." An infant who has been baptized, when grown, must "believe and profess to

that...Worship God." (Revelation 22:8b-9). Joseph "did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son." (Matthew 1:25).

5. Purgatory. Abraham said to the rich man in torment, "There is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us." (Luke 16:26).

6. Veneration of Images. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (I John 5:21). "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." (I Corinthians 10:14).

7. Celibacy of Priests and Bishops. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons . . . forbidding to marry . . ." (I Timothy 4:1-3). "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife . . ." (I Timothy 3:2).

8. Baptism. "And the eunuch said, 'See here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?' Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And

believe in the articles of Faith." (Catholic Belief, pp. 82–83)

both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him." (Acts 8:36b–38).

### < Weak Points of Catholicism >

1. The Fallibility of the Pope and the Church. The Roman Catholic Church has done many wrong things throughout history. Abuses in the sale of indulgences and the Inquisition are two famous instances of such. Besides this, the Papacy has reversed itself on several doctrines over the centuries. Charging interest on money lent and eating meat on Friday are examples of things which were once said to be grievous sins but are no longer considered to be sin at all. When different Popes declare completely opposite things to be true, it proves that at least one of them is fallible.
2. Catholic Doctrine Contradicts the Bible. This fact was amply demonstrated in the Cross–points section. It is understandable for the religions of Judaism, Islam and Hinduism to contradict the New Testament Scriptures which they reject. The glaring inconsistency in Catholicism is that it denies the teaching of the very Scriptures which it claims are a revelation from God.
3. Catholic Successors to the Apostles do not perform the signs of Apostles. If the bishops of Catholicism have inherited the authority of the apostles, why don't they have the power the apostles showed to back up their claim of authority?

### Review Questions on Catholicism

1. Name two false religious movements combated by the church in the second century A.D. and briefly describe each of them.
2. What two doctrines did church leaders invent in the second century A. D. to help in the fight against false teachers?
3. What was the Nicene Council and why is it important?
4. Which Pope first took for himself the title of "Universal Bishop" and when did this occur?
5. What teaching was made popular by Augustine? To what practice did this teaching lead?

6. According to Catholics, why can't common people interpret the scripture? How does this belief contradict Ephesians 3:3–5?
7. What do Catholics mean when they say the Pope is "infallible"?
8. How does Luke 16:26 contradict the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory?
9. According to Luke 11:27–28, who is more blessed than Mary?
10. Rather than confess sins to a priest, to whom should we confess our sins? (cf. James 5:16).
11. What are the seven Catholic sacraments?
12. In your opinion, what is the most significant contradiction between Catholicism and the New Testament? Why?
13. In your opinion, what is Catholicism's biggest weakness? Why?

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