

Roman Catholicism

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Introduction

I was born and raised in a country that is sadly divided over labels of “Protestant” and “Catholic”, and where people from two communities are deeply suspicious about one another and have prejudices based more on hearsay, distorted (or at best one-sided) versions of history and ignorance than on genuine understanding of what people from the “other side” really believe and think. It is not the author’s intention in ANY WAY to contribute to this kind of thinking. This article is intended as a serious discussion of Church history and doctrine. It does not claim to represent what individual people raised within the Roman Catholic belief system believe or think, or even to survey majority opinion among Catholics. The intention is to show how the official teaching of the Roman Catholic system differs from the teaching of the Bible on some core issues and to allow the reader to conclude for themselves what implications this has for their belief. I realise that many people who are raised in Roman Catholicism (at least in my native Northern Ireland) do not appreciate the label “Roman Catholic”, preferring the term “Catholic”. This term, however, is not exclusive to Roman Catholicism (most Christians will claim to be part of the “catholic” church, the only difference being how this is understood), and so the author has used the term “Roman Catholic” consistently throughout this document. It is hoped that this usage will not cause any offence to the reader.

This study, moreover, is not a defence of Protestantism, either historic or present. Every system of belief has weaknesses and none has a monopoly on truth. I do not find the label “Protestant” helpful (especially living in the Northern Irish context) and I am particularly eager to distance myself from any perceived political implications of taking variance with Roman Catholicism. It is my belief that rejection of Roman Catholicism does not lead inevitably to acceptance of a particular political stance and that it must never lead to a prejudicial attitude towards Roman Catholic people, as this would be entirely inconsistent with biblical Christian faith. I prefer to consider myself a Christian – a believer in, and follower of, Jesus Christ who is trusting in His atoning death alone for my salvation and who seeks to live in submission and obedience to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, motivated by gratitude for the salvation I have freely received. I believe that the historic linking of religion and politics in Ireland (and elsewhere) has been harmful to the Christian faith and that bigotry is completely abhorrent and opposed to a Christ-like attitude. My debate is not with Roman Catholics but with the Roman Catholic belief system.

The issues this article discusses are, however, pertinent to the historic debates between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Perhaps the key question as we begin this study is one of authority. I am convinced that Scripture and Scripture alone (meaning the 66 books that comprise the Old and New Testaments of the Bible) is the authority for belief and behaviour for those who are Christians. Roman Catholicism adds to Scripture two additional sources of authority:

- a) *The traditions of the Church* – the “Roman Catholic Church” sees itself as the one true Church. The word “catholic” means “universal” – the claim is that this is the true church of Jesus Christ. Other churches (whether Eastern Orthodox, Protestant or independent) have broken away from the one catholic church and are therefore in error. The Roman Catholic system traces its historical roots to the apostle Peter (seen as the first bishop of Rome and therefore first “pope”) and believes itself to be in a continuous line of apostolic authority from him. The traditions of the Church have been shaped by the Spirit of God so that fully developed Roman Catholic doctrine and practice is a purer and more complete expression of the Christian faith than that held by first century believers.
- b) *The leadership of the Church* – the magisterium (“teaching authority”) of the Church consists of the bishops of the Church collectively under the leadership of the Pope. The bishops have authority to decide the correct interpretation of Scripture and to rule on disputed matters. The bishop of Rome (Pope), as the direct successor of Peter, has special authority over the bishops and can speak in his authority as the earthly head of the Church (the representative, or “vicar”, of Christ) to make definitive decisions about disputed matters.

I am convinced that both of these additions are wrong and dangerous. There is indeed only one true, catholic Church, but only God knows the true membership of this body of true believers in Jesus Christ. People are made part of the Church when they are converted and added to it by the agency of the Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:22; I Corinthians 12:13; I Peter 2:4-5). In this sense the true Church is a spiritual reality that cannot be seen in the form of an institution on earth. The unity of the Church is to be demonstrated by love for, and partnership with, all those who share a

common faith in Christ as Saviour (see Ephesians 4:1-6). The Church is intended to grow into greater unity and maturity by the teaching of God's word (Ephesians 4:7-16). As a Christian believer I celebrate my unity with all true believers in Christ, whatever tradition they grew up in and whatever additional labels they take to themselves. I recognise the fragmentation of the Protestant churches as a contradiction to God's purpose for His people, especially where this leads to a competitive spirit. Secondary labels and denominational loyalties must be held loosely, while commitment to Christ, the gospel and the Scriptures must be held firmly. The unity of the church is meant to function in this "informal" spiritual way rather than to be expressed through control and centralised administration. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit lives in every true believer so that the individual's body can be described as His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19) as can the local church (Ephesians 2:21-22). The church, indwelt and empowered by the Spirit, is the body of Christ – His living presence in the world – and He is its only head (Colossians 1:18). The apostles laid the foundation for the Church (Ephesians 2:20) in their teaching which was based on Christ's teaching, inspired by the Spirit and recorded in the New Testament. Their authority has been passed on to us in the form of Scripture rather than in the authority of the leadership of the Church. The Spirit of God guided the apostles into all truth (John 16:12-15) so that they recorded the complete and authoritative faith. This truth has been entrusted to all believers together (Jude 3). Scripture is authoritative to show our failings and guide us into truth in both beliefs and actions (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Traditions may or may not be helpful, but they are not authoritative and should always be subject to the authority of Scripture. Church leaders may or may not be correct in their teaching, but they have no authority other than their faithful presentation of Scriptural truth and their teaching must always be tested against Scripture. Where either tradition or church leaders vary from Scripture they must be rejected and Scripture accepted.

I am convinced that official Roman Catholic doctrine varies in many places from Scripture. This has come about because of historical developments that brought wrong ideas from culture, the Old Testament and other religions into the Church. My desire, above all, is to be faithful to Scripture in presenting the truth of the gospel and to encourage others to read it and see for themselves. The issue is not one of becoming "Protestant" or ceasing to be "Catholic" but of discovering what is true from God's inspired Word and building our faith and lives on the solid foundation of truth. It may be that some who have taken the label "Roman Catholic" will read this paper and recognise in it their own belief. If so, I rejoice and call you brother or sister. Others may read and wonder why the things they have seen and heard seem so different from Scripture. To you I say, keep reading Scripture and ask God to reveal Himself to you. Follow Him and seek to be obedient to what His word says, not to my words or those of any other human being.

A Brief History of the Development of Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church originated from a linking of leadership in the Church with secular leadership. Because the centre of secular power was in Rome (in the time of the Roman Empire), Rome also became the centre of the organised Church. This process took many generations, and led eventually to increasing compromise of the Church's teaching and a moving away from Biblical truth. The organisation of Church government was modelled on secular government, with the Pope mirroring the Emperor (eventually the Pope became an important ruler in his own right, with armies fighting on his behalf). The timeline below details some of the most significant developments in the Roman Catholic belief system since 313. For a more detailed list of dates of development of false beliefs and practices see below.

- 313 Emperor Constantine, who himself "converted" to Christianity in 312 (although the sincerity of his faith is difficult to determine), made Christianity a recognised religion of the Roman Empire
- 395 Christianity became the only official state religion of the Roman Empire. During the 4th and 5th Centuries there was a great increase in hierarchy in church government, an increasing emphasis on worship using liturgy and more stress on the importance of the sacraments (especially baptism) in the process of salvation, which was increasingly believed to be mediated through the church.
- 440 Leo the Great became Bishop of Rome. He was the first to make extensive use of Matthew 16:19, claiming that it speaks of the authority of the Pope handed down from Peter, the "first Pope". He also obtained legal backing for the special status of the Bishopric of Rome from the Emperor Valentinian III. He had significant influence in public life, which was demonstrated when he persuaded Attila the Hun to turn back from Rome in 452 and minimised the damage caused by the Vandals when they captured the city in 455. He was the first person who could properly be described as "Pope".
- 590 Gregory the Great became Pope. By his time the Roman Empire had collapsed and the effective leadership of society in Western Europe was provided by the Christian clergy. He emphasised the Pope's claim to universal jurisdiction over Christendom, strongly advocated an allegorical (figurative) interpretation of the Bible, stressed the cult of saints and relics, and enhanced the position of ascetic orders of monks in the church. He spoke about the "Christian Commonwealth" in which the Pope and the clergy were responsible for ordering society.
- 1215 The Fourth Lateran Council called by Pope Innocent III proclaimed the idea that there are seven sacraments which are "means of grace" (channels through which people receive God's grace) to be the orthodox teaching of the Church. This system of theology was later developed further by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the foremost Roman Catholic theologian of the Middle Ages. Innocent also represented the high point of papal power in the secular realm, as he dominated the kings of Europe. He rejected as heretics the Waldensians, members of a movement which had begun as a reform group within the Church, but which eventually rejected the established Church. Their beliefs included the need to preach the Bible in the local dialect instead of Latin and a rejection of the priesthood as an intermediary between lay people and God. They disputed most of the Catholic sacraments, followed their own form of baptism (possibly by immersion), and rejected prayer to saints, prayer for the dead, purgatory, and Catholic feast days. Although it is difficult to be sure of all their beliefs (since most sources are written by representatives of Roman Catholicism), this movement appears to have been a reaction by true believers against the increasingly unbiblical beliefs of the Church. In the following years the Church persecuted the Waldensians severely. The Church, meanwhile, became increasingly concerned with ritual and political influence.
- 1517 Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk who had been challenged in his beliefs by his own reading of Scripture, nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg cathedral in Germany hoping to stimulate a debate about various teachings of the Church. This represented the beginning of the Reformation, which led eventually to the re-defining of Western Christianity (the Eastern Orthodox Church had already parted ways with the

- Western Church in 1054) as either Roman Catholic (those who recognised the Pope's oversight of the Church) and Protestant (those who protested against the Council of Trent), although the original intention of Luther and most of the reformers was to reform the Church from the inside, leading it back to the Biblical truth. Luther and the other reformers pointed to the authority of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) in deciding belief. They made the teaching of the Bible central to Christian worship and made the Bible available to the common person in their own native language. This differed from the position of the Roman Catholic Church, which restricted access to the Bible to the Latin language and the reading of the clergy. Luther refused to withdraw his protests when requested by Pope Leo IX and the German Holy Roman Emperor and was therefore excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521.
- 1545 Pope Paul III called the Council of Trent in response to the teachings of the reformers. This Council, which met over the next 18 years, confirmed Catholic doctrine including transubstantiation, the seven sacraments, the concept of justification by faith **and** works, the celibacy of the priesthood, the existence of purgatory, and the supreme authority of the Pope. The period that followed was one of Reformation and Counter-Reformation (including the Inquisition and the increasing influence of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, an order dedicated to the eradication of Protestantism, which was founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1540).
- 1846 Pius IX became Pope. He was the longest serving Pope in history (dying in 1878). His reign was significant because in 1854 he proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (in 1950 Pius XII defined and enforced the doctrine of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven), and in 1869 he called the first Vatican Council. This Council declared papal infallibility when speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith or morality. This Council finally declared the pope's absolute authority over the Church and maintained his right to authority over all secular rulers.
- 1962 Pope Paul XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (commonly known as "Vatican 2"). This Council made certain reforms to Catholic practice, including allowing Mass and other sacraments to be celebrated in local languages instead of only in Latin, and allowing Catholic laypeople to have easier access to the Bible (although the Church remains the final authority in interpreting it). However, it did not change any of the core doctrines of the Church. Catholics were encouraged to be involved in Ecumenical activities with other Christians but to remain true to the teachings of the Church.

Core Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Catechism is an official document of the Church presenting Catholic doctrine in response to a series of questions. The quotations from it included below represent the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, although many Catholics may not agree with some of these doctrines.

THE ONLY TRUE CHURCH

The Roman Catholic Church claims to be the only true Christian Church. In fact, the word “catholic” means universal (world-wide). The Catechism says: *"This is the sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic."* This claim is based on the declaration of Christ to Peter in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His church on the foundation of Peter's declaration of faith. The Church believes that Jesus was saying that He would build His church on the foundation of the apostolic succession. Therefore, only churches that are in communion with and recognise the oversight of the Bishop of Rome (the Pope), the successor of Peter, can claim to be part of the true apostolic Church. Salvation can only be received through the Church.

THE POPE

The Pope is believed to be the successor of Peter in his position as “Bishop of Rome” (leader of the church in Rome). This means that the apostolic authority was passed on from Peter via many successors to the current day Pope. The Pope, when he speaks in his position as “Vicar of Christ” (Christ's representative on earth) is infallible – that means he cannot be wrong, and his authority must be accepted by all Catholics. The Catholic Catechism says that: *"the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."* It also says that: *"The Roman Pontiff... enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful - who confirms his brethren in the faith - he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals... This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself."*

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH AND SCRIPTURE

Because of the authority invested in the Church and its leadership, the tradition of the Church and the decisions of the hierarchy of the Church are equal to Scripture in authority. In fact, the Catechism teaches that the Bible can only be correctly interpreted by the Church's leadership: *"The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him."* The Roman Catholic Bible also includes extra books called the Apocrypha.

THE PRIESTHOOD

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that its priests are mediators between the laity (ordinary people) and God. They are responsible for administering the grace of God through the sacraments. The Roman Catholic priesthood is a denial of the Biblical truth that all believers are priests, approaching God directly through the only mediator, our one High Priest, Christ (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 4:16; 8:11; 1 Peter 2:5).

SALVATION THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

The Roman Catholic system of salvation is very different from biblical teaching. The Church teaches that faith is not enough for salvation, but that God's grace is received through the Church and its sacraments. The Catechism says: *"The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation."* There are seven sacraments, which are the means by which people can receive God's grace:

1. **Baptism** – the Church “baptises” infants by sprinkling water on their forehead. It teaches that baptism deals with original sin, and makes the infant “saved” until they reach the age of responsibility, which is the age when they know what sin is. At this stage they commit their first “mortal sin” (see below) and fall from the position of grace. The Catholic catechism says: *"Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant Baptism. The Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of*

becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth." This view of baptism is found nowhere in Scripture, which presents it as a physical symbol of the spiritual reality of being buried and raised to new life with Christ (Romans 6:1-10). Baptism for believers is an outward expression of what God has already done in our lives by His Spirit. Salvation is possible without baptism but baptism is expected as a step of obedience for the believer in publically identifying with Christ as Saviour and Lord (Acts 2:38).

2. **Confirmation** – this is the process by which children who have attained the age of responsibility take their first communion and become full members of the Church. It is found nowhere in the Bible.
3. **Eucharist** – this is another word for Communion or the “Mass”. The Church teaches that Christ is literally present in the bread and wine and that these elements actually become the body and blood of Christ when they are consecrated by the priest. The Catholic catechism says: *“by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.”* Because of this belief, the Church teaches that each time the Mass is performed Christ is sacrificed afresh. This contradicts the teaching of Scripture, which speaks of Christ’s death as one sacrifice for sins forever (Hebrews 10:12). The work of Christ is finished, and it is through faith in this accomplishment of Christ for us in a historic act that we can be saved, not because He is sacrificed now for us. The bread and wine of communion merely represent the body and blood of Christ. Again it is a physical representation of a spiritual reality. As we take them we eat spiritually of His body and blood – expressing our complete dependence on His work for us to be saved.
4. **Penance** – Catholics are required to confess their sins regularly to a priest, who will offer them absolution (forgiveness of the sins they have confessed) and will then give them certain tasks to perform as penance. These acts are a sign of repentance, and pay back for the sins that have been committed. They normally include saying certain prayers, in particular the “Our Father” (the Lord’s Prayer) and the “Hail Mary”. The Catholic catechism says: *“One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience.”* Again it says: *“Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’”* Although it is true that Scripture requires true repentance from us and that repentance will lead to a change in our behaviour, it is wrong to suggest that we can receive absolution through a priest (it is from God alone that we can receive it) and it is simply untrue to think that righteous actions can “expiate” our sins. Good deeds cannot cancel out bad deeds. Only the death of Christ in our place can pay the price for our sin and wipe out the record of it so that we are justified (declared not guilty) by God (Romans 3:23-26). Good deeds are intended to be a response of gratitude for what God has done for us, not an attempt to pay for wrong that we have done. They are essential since faith without them is dead (James 2:26), but they come as a result of the salvation we already have by God’s grace received through faith (see Ephesians 2:8-10).
5. **Anointing of the Sick** – Catholic priests anoint the sick with oil. In the case of dying people this is one of three parts of the “Last Rites” (or “Extreme Unction”), which also includes the Eucharist and confession. The Last Rites ensure that the person is in the state of grace at the time of their death. They are found nowhere in Scripture. James 5:14-15 is sometimes claimed to refer to the practice, but it is a general call for the elders of the church to anoint sick people with oil and pray for them. If they have sinned they will be forgiven, but this is not about ensuring their eternal salvation before they die but restoring them to spiritual and physical health.
6. **Holy Orders** – the Church encourages people to take Holy Orders, which are a special vow consecrating them to a life of service to the Church. This includes orders of monks and nuns as well as the priesthood. All people taking Holy Orders are normally expected to be celibate. The idea of a people remaining single to devote themselves to God’s service is found in 1 Corinthians 7, but nowhere is it implied that this should be enforced or a requirement for certain types of service or that it is in any way a way to earn God’s favour.
7. **Matrimony** – marriage is seen as another means of grace.

So, it is obvious that Roman Catholics cannot ever be sure of their salvation, since it is always possible for them to fall from the “state of grace”. In fact, the Church teaches that it is a sin (the sin of presumption) to believe that you can be sure of going to Heaven when you die. Presumption means either believing that a person can earn salvation without any help from God or that it can be received without any merit on the person’s behalf. The Catechism says: *“There are two kinds of presumption. Either man presumes upon his own capacities, (hoping to be able to save himself without help from on high), or he presumes upon God’s almighty power or his mercy (hoping to obtain his forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit.”* The Biblical position is that we are incapable of doing anything to “merit” salvation and that we need more than “help” from God – salvation is entirely His work from beginning to end. Underlying the Roman Catholic view of salvation is a wrong understanding of grace. Scripture depicts grace as God’s completely undeserved love and favour towards us that is not dependent on anything we have done to earn it. God’s grace is responsible for His action to send Christ to save us and Christ has introduced us into the position of God’s grace. We now stand firm in the grace of God (Romans 5:1-2 – see also v6-8). Grace cannot be merited (or earned) and there is no way in which we can fall from the position of grace. We did not enter it by our merit and we cannot stay in it by our efforts. We were saved by grace through faith and we are now being transformed so that we can do the works God has prepared us for (Ephesians 2:8-10). Grace teaches us to do what is right but it is ours because Christ paid the redemption price for us in His death (Titus 2:11-14). The believer has security in Christ (see Romans 8:28-39) and from this position of security we live out the reality of our faith. This confidence is not presumption – we do not boast (“rejoice”) in our own efforts or worth (that would indeed be a sin) but in God and His plan for us (Romans 5:2,11). We can confidently look forward to sharing in God’s glory only because of what Christ has accomplished for us.

SIN

The Roman Catholic Church’s view of sin is unbiblical. It divides sin into two types: venial and mortal. The Catholic catechism says: *“One commits venial sin when, in a less serious matter, he does not observe the standard prescribed by the moral law, or when he disobeys the moral law in a grave manner, but without full knowledge or without complete consent,”* and *“Mortal sin... results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell...”* In other words, venial sins are less serious because they do not cause one to fall from the state of grace as mortal sins do. Notice that Roman Catholicism teaches that a person who has been saved can fall from this position by committing a mortal sin. Mortal sins can only be forgiven by receiving God’s grace through the sacraments of the Church.

PURGATORY AND LIMBO

The Bible teaches that there are only two possible destinies for those who have died. The Catholic Church adds a third possible destination after death, called Purgatory, and many Catholics also believe in a fourth place called Limbo. Limbo is not officially accepted by the Church, but was introduced as an explanation of the destiny of unbaptised babies who die (since many people struggle to accept that these babies could go to Hell). The belief is that since these babies have not received God’s grace through baptism they cannot be admitted to Heaven. Therefore, Limbo is a place of eternal happiness but lower than Heaven. Other Catholics believe that these babies will go to Heaven, but to a lower level of blessing than those who have been baptised. Purgatory, on the other hand, is an official doctrine of the Church. The Church Catechism says: *“All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven,”* and *“The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect...”* The idea is that those who die outside of the state of grace (with mortal sins unconfessed) go to hell, while only those who are very holy (saints) can go directly to heaven. Purgatory is therefore the destiny of most Catholics, who die in the state of grace but not purified. The doctrine of Purgatory is completely unbiblical, and is the basis of the Roman Catholic practice of praying for those who have died. The belief is that the prayers of those who are still alive, as well as the sacrament of Eucharist performed on their behalf and certain actions prescribed by the Church (known as “indulgences”) can shorten the person’s time in Purgatory. All of this adds to the belief that salvation is based on works. The Bible is clear that judgement follows death (Hebrews 9:27) and the Bible’s description of judgement includes only two destinies. Although Christians commonly call these heaven and hell, the Scriptures refer

to a new earth and a lake of fire (see Revelation 20:11-21:5). Those who have believed in Christ and justified by God will be made like Christ when He returns. While we wait for Him we purify ourselves because of this hope, but whatever part of that process is incomplete will be finished perfectly and instantly by God when Christ returns (I John 3:2-3).

SAINTS

The Catholic catechism says: *"By canonizing some of the faithful, i.e., by solemnly proclaiming that they practiced heroic virtue and lived in fidelity to God's grace, the Church recognizes the power of the Spirit of holiness within her and sustains the hope of believers by proposing the saints to them as models and intercessors."* The idea of saints as super-holy Christians is not found in the New Testament, which consistently describes all believers as saints, not because of their own virtue but because of God's work in setting them apart for Himself. Since Roman Catholicism claims that the saints are "intercessors" it teaches that people can pray to the saints. The catechism says: *"The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives... They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world."* Of course, this idea of praying to anyone other than God is unbiblical. The belief in many saints has led to the idea of different saints having responsibility for different countries, professions or groups of people ("patron saints") or having power to help people in specific situations (e.g. Saint Jude is the saint of lost causes). The only people who can intercede for us before God are the Holy Spirit and Christ (Romans 8:27,34). If Christ and the Spirit are interceding for us why would we need dead believers to intercede? Other living believers can pray for us, but this is on the basis of Christ's intercession not in their own power.

MARY

The Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary is among the most blatantly unbiblical teachings of the Church. There are several false teachings about her:

1. *Mary was sinless.* She was conceived in an "immaculate conception", without original sin, and so was in the state of grace from birth. The Catholic catechism says: *"By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long."* Again it says: *"Espousing the divine will for salvation whole-heartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son..."* And again: *"Mary is the most excellent fruit of redemption (SC 103): from the first instant of her conception, she was totally preserved from the stain of original sin and she remained pure from all personal sin throughout her life."* This completely ignores the fact that Mary herself prayed to God as her "Saviour" (Luke 1:47 – a person without sin does not need a Saviour) and that the Bible never once suggests that she was sinless.
2. *Mary is "co-mediator"* with Christ. In other words, she shares with Him in the work of bringing us salvation, and her sufferings when watching her son suffering are redemptive just as his are. The Catholic catechism says: *"Taken up to heaven she (Mary) did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation..."* and *"Being obedient she (Mary) became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race."* This is completely unbiblical, as the Bible presents Christ as the only Saviour – the "one mediator" between man and God (I Timothy 2:5).
3. *Mary remained a virgin throughout her whole life.* The Catholic catechism says: *"Mary remained a virgin in conceiving her Son, a virgin in giving birth to him, a virgin in carrying him, a virgin in nursing him at her breast, always a virgin."* However, the Bible disagrees, saying clearly that although she was a virgin when Christ was conceived Mary had a number of children after Jesus in the normal way (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3). This view seems to stem from a confusion of sexual intercourse as somehow impure or sinful, which stems from Greek philosophy rather than biblical truth.
4. *Mary can lead us to Christ after death.* For this reason we should pray to Mary. The Catholic catechism says: *"By asking Mary to pray for us, we acknowledge ourselves to be poor sinners and we address ourselves to the 'Mother of Mercy,' the All-Holy One... May she welcome us as our mother at the hour of our passing to lead us to her son, Jesus, in paradise."* This idea of praying to Mary so that she will put in a "good word" with her son has more to do with pagan religions and their concept of a mother goddess than with biblical Christianity.

5. *Mary's body was taken to Heaven in sinless condition soon after her death.* This doctrine, which is again totally absent from Scripture, is called the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and was declared as formal Roman Catholic doctrine by the pope in 1950.
6. *Mary is Queen over all things.* The Catholic catechism says: "*Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things.*" This is completely unbiblical. In Scripture it is clear that Christ holds the position of sovereignty over all things (Colossians 1:15-18), and there is no mention of Him sharing this position with Mary.

Timeline of Introduction of Unbiblical Beliefs

The timeline below gives approximate dates when false Catholic beliefs and practices were adopted by the established Church:

- 300 Prayers for the dead; making the sign of the cross
- 320 Use of wax candles
- 375 Veneration of angels and dead saints; use of images in worship
- 394 The Mass as a daily celebration
- 431 Beginning of the exaltation of Mary (the Council of Ephesus described her as “Mother of God”)
- 500 Priests began to dress differently from lay people
- 526 Extreme Unction (the “last rites”)
- 593 The doctrine of Purgatory established by Gregory I
- 600 Latin language used in prayer and worship, imposed by Gregory I; prayers directed to Mary and dead saints around this time
- 607 Title of Pope as universal bishop given to Boniface III by Emperor Phocas
- 709 Kissing the Pope’s foot began with Pope Constantine
- 750 Temporal power (i.e. power over earthly rulers) of Popes conferred by Pippin, king of the Franks
- 786 Worship of the cross, images and relics authorised
- 850 Holy water, mixed with a pinch of salt and blessed by a priest
- 890 Worship of St Joseph
- 927 College of cardinals established
- 965 Baptism of bells instituted by Pope John XIII
- 995 Canonisation of dead saints, first by Pope John XV
- 998 Fasting on Fridays and during Lent
- C 11th The Mass developed gradually as a sacrifice and attendance was made obligatory
- 1079 Celibacy of the priesthood decreed by Pope Gregory VII
- 1090 The Rosary, mechanical praying with beads, invented by Peter the Hermit
- 1184 The Inquisition instituted by the Council of Verona
- 1190 Sale of indulgences
- 1215 Transubstantiation proclaimed by Pope Innocent III; auricular confession of sins to a priest instead of to God instituted in Lateran Council
- 1220 Adoration of the wafer (Host) decreed by Pope Honorius III
- 1229 Bible forbidden to lay people, placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books* by the Council of Valencia
- 1414 The cup forbidden to the people at the Mass by Council of Constance
- 1439 Purgatory proclaimed as a dogma and the doctrine of the Seven Sacraments confirmed by Council of Florence
- 1508 The Ave Maria (part of the latter half was completed 50 years later and approved by Pope Sixtus V towards the end of the C16th)

- 1534 Jesuit order founded by Ignatius Loyola
- 1545 Tradition declared of equal authority with Bible by Council of Trent
- 1546 Apocryphal books added to Bible by Council of Trent
- 1560 Creed of Pope Pius IV imposed as official creed of the Church
- 1854 Immaculate conception of Virgin Mary proclaimed by Pope Pius IX
- 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* proclaimed by Pope Pius IX and ratified by First Vatican Council. This condemned freedom of religion, conscience, speech, press and scientific discoveries which are disapproved by the Church and asserted the Pope's temporal authority over secular rulers.
- 1870 Infallibility of the Pope in matters of faith and morals proclaimed by Vatican Council
- 1930 Public schools condemned by Pope Pius XI
- 1950 Assumption of the Virgin Mary (bodily ascension into heaven shortly after her death) proclaimed by Pope Pius XII

Other Points of Interest

- Roman Catholicism is the world's largest Christian grouping, with over 1 billion adherents worldwide. Roman Catholics are declining slowly as a percentage of the world's population (from a peak of 18% around 1960 to an expected 15% in 2025), largely because of growth of evangelical Christians in Africa and Latin America, often at the expense of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Although Vatican 2 signalled significant changes in the style of Roman Catholic worship (most notably permission was granted to celebrate the Mass in languages other than Latin) and a greater acceptance of other belief systems, the core teaching of the Roman Catholic Church has not changed and its system of leadership remains highly centralised and hierarchical.
- The Roman Catholic Church speaks of bringing all Christian churches together, which may sound positive, but by this it means unity under its own authority. It views the fragmentation of Christians into many different churches and groups as a sin, and seeks to bring all Christians together again under its authority. In the past the Church sought to do this by force (in the period known as the "Counter-Reformation" which included the "Inquisition", a bloody time when many Christians were tortured and murdered because they refused to accept the Roman Catholic Church as the only true Church). In more recent times the focus has been on peaceful efforts towards unity. The Roman Catholic Church speaks about working together, but still claims to be the only true Church and will not recognise Communion celebrated by anyone other than a Roman Catholic priest.
- Many people inside the Roman Catholic Church are undoubtedly genuine Christians. It is possible for someone to be in this setting but to have a genuine saving faith in Christ and a real love for Him. However, anyone who recognises how unbiblical the Catholic belief system is should read Scripture and seek God's guidance about how to respond. I believe that many who do this will feel compelled to leave it. No Christian tradition or local church is free from all error, but we should not identify with a system whose core beliefs on such fundamental matters (and especially whose system of salvation) is so far from biblical truth.
- Catholicism used to hold kings and governments under its authority. In the 20th Century the power of the Church to influence governments declined dramatically. This was due to a mixture of growing secularisation and the shaking of confidence in the Church resulting from scandals involving priests. Many individuals, especially in Ireland, have come to doubt the monolithic authority of the Church. Some people hope that this shift may lead the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to reconsider its teachings.
- The Roman Catholic Church has accepted the theory of "theistic evolution". They claim that God created life through the process of evolution.
- The Roman Catholic Church rejects all forms of artificial contraception, and is strongly conservative on moral issues such as abortion and homosexual activity. In some of these areas evangelicals may well be able to work together with Roman Catholics to influence society and government (the exception being barrier forms of contraception, which most evangelicals see as morally acceptable).

Conclusion

It is impossible in a study of this nature to cover all areas of Roman Catholic doctrine. Much more could be written, but it is hoped that this selection has been sufficient to show that official Roman Catholic teaching is far removed from biblical teaching. In some cases this is due to wrong extrapolations from Scripture (for example, James 5:13-16 being used as a basis for confession to the priest and extreme unction), in others it is due to ideas being introduced from pagan religions (for example, the beliefs about Mary appear to reflect ideas from other religious systems), in others it stems from confusion of the relationship between Church and State and modelling Church patterns after secular patterns (especially evident in the system of Church government), and in still others it stems from a wrong carrying over of Old Testament ideas without fully appreciating the difference that the death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit and the New Covenant made (this is behind the concept of the sacrifice of the Mass and the role of the priesthood).

These wrong beliefs developed over many centuries, as the timeline above illustrates, but these gradual changes led eventually to a position where it could be said that the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is now thoroughly unbiblical and that that system of belief is leading people away from God's truth rather than towards it. At heart there is a deficient view of salvation that has become a system of works righteousness. While not denying that the cross of Christ has saving power, it needs to be supplemented by taking communion, confession to a priest, the penitential actions of the faithful, the prayers of the saints and Mary etc. The confidence is not in Christ alone, but in Christ plus ... This is such a serious matter that it cannot be ignored or viewed as a slight difference in emphasis. Roman Catholic theology is not Christian theology if the test of the orthodoxy of a theological system is its degree of agreement with Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church claims to stand between God and human beings, with the ability to mediate God's salvation to people through its structures, priesthood, and sacraments, but the reality is that it stands between people and God as a barrier to their confidence in Christ alone as Saviour and to their understanding of the truth that can set them free and bring them into the confident assurance of God's salvation.

Some Roman Catholics are genuinely trusting in Christ alone to save but lack assurance because it has been dismissed as presumption. I hope that through reading of Scripture and the work of the Spirit these people might come to a position of assurance and so live in the joy of God's grace. Others are actually trusting in their own efforts to save them, a belief the Roman Catholic Church does little to challenge or even actively encourages. My hope is that these people will realise that they are incapable of doing anything at all to add to the work of Christ and that they may place their confidence solely in Him to save them. Still others are disillusioned with a highly institutionalised system that seems remote and authoritative, and, although remaining nominally Catholic, they are rejecting the Church in their thousands. It is my prayer that in so doing they realise that it is not Christ (or true Christianity) they are rejecting, but a distorted system that has obscured their view of Him.

Sources and Recommended Reading

The materials in this study are based on the following sources, which are recommended for further reading on the subject:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1995* – the official guide to Catholic doctrine. Can be found on the official Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm.
- *Operation World* by Jason Mandryk – a fantastic resource on world religions and guide to praying for every country of the world.
- *Roman Catholicism* by Loraine Boettner – now out of print, but available second hand and still a useful resource.
- *History of Christianity (Lion handbooks)* – a good overview of the history of Christian belief. This will help you understand how Roman Catholic beliefs developed over long periods of history.