

## **Nature of the Roman Catholic Church** As They Perceive It

By Larry E. Miller

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Perhaps you have noticed some “changes” in the Roman Catholic Church. Since Vatican II (1962-65) you may have noticed that most Roman Catholics feel free to eat meat on Friday, their mass is usually not conducted in Latin, it is no longer a mortal sin to attend a Protestant Church and other “surprises.” You may have experienced conversation with a Roman Catholic neighbor or friend and found yourself surprised at similarity in language and understanding.

You may have also noted more “agreements” with them, particularly as we engage in the culture wars in the United States. Roman Catholics and evangelicals are often “lumped together” by the mainstream media as dangerous. This is often because we do agree on many moral issues such as abortion, capital punishment, traditional view of family and marriage, and homosexuality. Timothy George called this an “ecumenism of the trenches.”<sup>1</sup>

But also as you observe, perhaps by attending a Roman Catholic funeral or wedding, there are apparent “differences”—they often bow before a statue of Mary during the wedding ceremony, they plead for God’s mercy on the deceased at a funeral, or they may exhort the faithful to pray for the deceased so as to reduce time in purgatory.

As you observe the American, and even perhaps the worldwide, scene, you may wonder what the deeper levels of theological agreement and disagreement may be. Are most Roman Catholics my “brothers and sisters in Christ?” Do they really believe in salvation by faith alone or faith plus works? Have they changed their view of papal infallibility? Surely they do not really believe the wafer becomes the body of Christ and the wine the real blood of Christ, do they? Do they really believe the Roman Catholic Church is the only way of salvation? Are the differences in their church and my church or the evangelical church down the street mere window dressing or different ways of expressing our common Christian faith? Or are the differences rooted in core, substantive, real differences on foundational issues such as authority, the nature of the church, the means of salvation and the nature of the Cross work of Christ?

In the book [Is the Reformation Over?](#) Mark Noll and Carol Nystrom review eight different post Vatican II dialogues between Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic

Church. They concluded that after these dialogues spanning over thirty years “The most serious differences were rooted in ecclesiology, contrasting versions of what the church is and how it functions.”<sup>2</sup> In my review of this book (see article in the July/August 2006 issue of *Voice*) I included a number of grave concerns about the implications and directions of the book. However, I agree with the authors that the Roman Catholic Church is different from what most evangelicals understand the biblical meaning of church and this ecclesiastical difference is at the core of what separates Protestants and Roman Catholics.

In this brief article some of the most important characteristics of the Roman Catholic Church, as they describe them, are included. Council of Trent, Vatican II and post Vatican II sources are used.<sup>3</sup> The Roman Catholic Church is not monolithic in that all the people, not even all the priests, agree completely regarding some of the following areas. I present the official dogma of the hierarchical church and, based on my studies and years of ministry experience in a predominant Roman Catholic culture, it is this hierarchical official dogma that most impacts and influences the life of Catholic lay people at the parish level.

### Authority in the Roman Catholic Church

Their perceived authority rests on three pillars. First is their view of apostolic succession. The official Roman Catholic dogma declares emphatically that the apostolic authority to govern the church belongs to the Pope and bishops.

That divine mission, entrusted by Christ to the apostles, will last until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20), since the gospel which was to be handed down by them is for all time the source of life for the Church. For this reason the apostles took care to appoint successors in this hierarchically structured society . . . .

Therefore, this sacred synod (Vatican II) teaches that by divine institution bishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the Church, and that he who hears them, hears Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Though there has been effort in Vatican I and Vatican II, as well during dialogue with various Protestant groups, to clarify or “tone down” papal infallibility or supremacy, the view of the Church is clear.

Just as, by the Lord’s will, St. Peter and the other apostles constituted one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman Pontiff as the successor of Peter, and the bishops as the successors of the apostles are joined together . . . . For 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. And he can exercise this power freely.<sup>5</sup>

According to this understanding, “the power of binding and loosing,” which was given to Peter (Mt. 16:19), was granted also to the college of apostles, joined with their head (Mt.

18:18; 28:16-20).<sup>6</sup> Do you want forgiveness? Go to the Roman Church. Do you want truth? Go to the Roman bishops or Pope.

If one wants to look for the “real power” of the Roman Catholic Church it may be found in the concept of apostolic succession. It gives the Pope and bishops ultimate and almost total authority within the Church in all matters.

The second pillar of their authority is their view of Scripture and Tradition. The definitive text, approved by a near unanimous vote, became the “Dogmatic Constitution in Divine Revelation” in the Vatican II documents. It states,

Consequently it is not from Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore, both sacred tradition and sacred scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence . . . . Sacred tradition and sacred scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church.<sup>7</sup>

So to this day the official Roman Catholic position is that Tradition is authoritative alongside, if not above, Scripture. As an example,

. . . when the dogma of Mary’s assumption was declared in 1950, the absence of any reference to it in scripture was acknowledged. But, it was added, “. . . we know Mary’s ascension into heaven through tradition.”<sup>8</sup>

The third pillar of their authority rests in the arena of hermeneutics. The official position of the Roman Catholic Church is that its “approved” teachers are those with the ultimate authority in interpreting the Scriptures. “The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church.”<sup>9</sup> The teaching office is the magisterium which includes “all who proclaim the word with authority in the Church. It generally refers to the Pope and the bishops.”<sup>10</sup>

So whatever the official Church says the Scripture means is what it is supposed to mean to the Catholic lay person. If the people accept this aspect of dogma, it provides the Roman Catholic Church overwhelming control of the people. And many of them do. As an example, my wife was dialoguing with a Roman Catholic acquaintance. She asked him if he read the Bible and it seemed to say something different than his priest, which would he believe. He quickly responded, “my priest.” She then asked, “What if he is wrong and it is an issue of salvation.” His response was “well, in that case he would go to hell and not me.”

### Role of the Church in Salvation

Two issues should be sufficient to illustrate the strategic and life destiny determining difference in their understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and what we as conservative evangelicals might understand the Bible to teach.

The first is the sacrament of baptism. Baptism by water into the Catholic Church, normally by a bishop or a priest,<sup>11</sup> makes one a Christian.<sup>12</sup> It removes original sin<sup>13</sup> and starts one on the way toward heaven. So fundamentally one can become a Christian only through water baptism by an ordained Catholic priest or of necessity some one else.

This is why in the pre-Vatican II days Protestants were considered condemned and headed to hell.<sup>14</sup> In the post-Vatican II era we are considered “separated brethren,”<sup>15</sup> and perhaps may get to heaven through some sort of “baptism by desire.”<sup>16</sup> This remains a bit mysterious to me.

However, according to their core thinking this salvation comes only through the Roman Catholic Church and initially only through water baptism.

The second is the overall sacramental nature of the Church. The Catholic Church is a sacramental church. They observe seven of them—baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony.<sup>17</sup> A quick look at the Eucharist will be sufficient to give us a “flavor” of their view of the church and sacraments.

Normally only Roman Catholic priests ordained by the authority of the Pope are permitted to conduct the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>18</sup> The priest can pronounce the words that call God into action and He (God) converts the bread to the body and the wine to the blood of Christ.<sup>19</sup> As this, and other sacraments are experienced, grace and righteousness flow into the soul of the recipient, independent of their level of faith. Speaking of the sacraments in general we note the following statements from Catechism of the Catholic Church, “This is the meaning of the Church’s affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opera operato* (literally: ‘by the very fact of the actions being performed’), i.e., by the virtue of the saving work of Christ, . . . It follows that the ‘sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God.’ . . . The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*.”<sup>20</sup>

### Christ and the Church Are One

Repeatedly those who study the similarities and differences between Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church conclude that the most basic difference is in the way each looks at the church. The Roman Catholic system sees everything through the lens of the Church. One will find language in their 1994 Catechism about the nature of the Church

with which we would agree. However, their views of ecclesiology take them far beyond what most evangelicals would understand from biblical teaching.

The following material is taken from *Is The Reformation Over?* by Noll and Nystrom as they review *The Catholic Catechism*. From this author's viewpoint, it provides a good summary of the implications of this extreme view of Christ and the Church as one.

This basic confession ("Christ and his church are one") explains why Catholics can offer salvation through baptism into the church. It is why the pope (as the vicar of Christ) can speak without error in matters of faith and morals. It is why Ignatius, who died in 110, could say that only priests in connection to a bishop, in connection with the pope (as Roman Catholics would understand in their reconstructed history), can offer valid sacraments. It is why Protestants may not share a Catholic Eucharist. To do so would acknowledge the authority of the pope as representing Christ through his church. It is why a church marriage is unbreakable. It is why Cyprian, who died in 258, could say "No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother." It is why Mary is called the Mother of the church; she is the mother of Christ. It is why the church can interpret the keys given to Peter as authority to forgive sins. It is why the church is self-correcting (the whole body cannot error in matters of belief). It is why the word of the church is higher than individual conscience and reason. [A friend recently related this story to me. He asked a friend of his if he was looking at the green grass in front of his Catholic Church and the priest told him the grass was blue, what color would the grass be. The friend replied, "the grass would be blue."] . . . . It is why Catholics view the Protestant Reformation as such a drastic mistake—a splintering of the church is an attack on Christ himself.

If Christ and his church are one, then a great deal of Catholic doctrine simply follows naturally. In a word, ecclesiology represents the typical difference between evangelicals and Catholics.<sup>21</sup>

And I would add that for the Catholic Church it appears that ecclesiology replaces biblical soteriology.

Furthermore, for those of us who take the Bible as our final authority, it is valid to ask the same question that Michael Horton asked, "Is the Catholic Church an acceptable Christian communion? Is it authentically Christian?"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy George, "Catholics and Evangelicals in the Trenches," *Christianity Today*, May 16, 1994, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Noll and Carol Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over?*, 2005, 113.

<sup>3</sup>Using the Walter Abbott and Joseph Gallagher English translations of the Vatican II documents, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 1966 and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Liguori MO: Liguori Publications, 1994.

<sup>4</sup>Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 117. Also, the 1994 The Catechism of The Catholic Church, 26, indicates this is the ongoing Roman Catholic Church position.

<sup>8</sup>G.C. Berkouwer, The Second Council and the New Catholicism, 1954, 108.

<sup>9</sup>Abbott, The Documents of Vatican II, 118.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>The Documents of Vatican II, 146, 149, 152. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, page 317, par. 1120 and 352, par. 1256.

<sup>12</sup>The Catechism, 342, par. 1213, 1215; 346, par. 1227; 350, par. 1250; 352, par. 1257; 354, par. 1266, 1267.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. 114, par. 405; 350, par. 1250; 353, par. 1263.

<sup>14</sup>Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, trans. H. J. Schroeder, 1941, 197-98. Note canon 24. “If anyone shall say that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but no cause of its increase—anathema sit. (197-98) It is impossible to miss the intent and mood of this statement and others. And the fathers of the Council knew full well what they were doing. “On June 21 Marcello Cervine (afterwards Pope Marcellus II) reminded them that no preceding council had dealt fully with this doctrine and that Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith only was at the root of most of his errors on the sacraments, the power of the keys, indulgences and purgatory. . . , when in October a vote was taken on the question whether justification is inherent or imputed, the latter was rejected by a vote of 32 to 5. In other words, the Council opted for a transformationist view of justification. (204-05)

<sup>15</sup>The Documents of Vatican II, 342. John H. Armstrong, “The Evangelical Moment?” in Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides Us and Unites Us, ed. John H. Armstrong, 1994, 302.

<sup>16</sup>The Catechism, 353, par. 1260.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 341, par. 1210.

<sup>18</sup>The Documents, 146, 149, 152. The Catechism, 317, par. 1120; 352, par. 1256.

<sup>19</sup>The Catechism, 394, par. 1411; 384, par. 1375.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 319, par. 1128, 1129.

<sup>21</sup>Noll and Nystrom, 146-47.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Horton in *Christianity Today*, July 18, 1944, in article entitled, “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue”