

Explaining Your Faith to Catholic Friends

PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES ON CATHOLIC PRACTICES

“Let us rejoice then and give thanks
that we have become not only
Christians, but Christ himself. Marvel
and rejoice: we have become Christ.”
—Catechism of the Catholic Church
(paragraph 795)

“God is not the author of confusion.”
—The Bible (1 Cor 14:33)

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INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet presents some very brief observations on various Catholic practices and beliefs, as viewed from a Protestant perspective. It is not intended, obviously, to be an exhaustive treatment of any of the issues, but simply to provide an insight into the Protestant opinion.

OVERVIEW

In the Protestant Reformation, when battles were raging over these differences, and lives were lost over them, both sides were very clear on what the issues were. The key difference related to *Sola Scriptura*: Was Scripture the sole rule for religious matters, or was the tradition and teaching authority of the church also authoritative?

Protestants argued that while Scripture cannot be broken, tradition and church teaching is too often flawed. They claimed that the apostolic office ended with the original apostles, and that, in fact, even the earliest church fathers did not speak in unity, that is, in a *catholic* way. For example:

- Paul probably died before 70AD, and even that early, heresy was creeping into the church. He had to combat one form of it with the letter to the Galatians.
- Paul even had to correct Peter in his understanding of the gospel message.
- Jude wrote that we needed to contend for the faith.
- At the close of the first century, in John's letters to the seven churches, six of them were criticized.

Men's ideas, no matter how close to the time of Christ, are men's ideas, and flawed. Doctrines built on traditions are likely to be a product of the times, and not carry the timeless quality that the written Word does. For example, Scripture says marriage is holy and the marriage bed undefiled, but during the early church period, the general belief remained that women were inferior to men, and that sexual activity was less than holy. As a result of that kind of thinking, the following doctrines emerged in the tradition-based churches:

- Mary, being sinless, must have always been a virgin
- Priests should be celibate to better model holiness
- Sex should remain open to the transmission of life

AUTHORITY

The Holy, Catholic Church. To claim that the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is the one true church as founded by Christ simply doesn't square with history. Most of today's RCC practices were unknown in the early centuries. To be *catholic* means to believe what was held true by the whole church at all times. Unfortunately, there are not many truly *catholic* teachings. As the RCC began to develop its doctrines there were always those who disagreed. For example, after disagreeing for centuries, the Eastern church

eventually broke away from the Western (or Roman) church, and both sides claimed historic support for their separate traditions.

Sacred Tradition. Jesus blasted the Pharisees who made their traditions more important than Scripture. Over the years, Scripture has remained the same, but traditions have changed, and often contradicted each other. Many church traditions contradict clear Scriptural principles. Scripture gives severe warnings against adding to it. God never changes and neither does his Word.

The Written Scriptures. The Catechism of the RCC states that the written Scriptures cannot stand alone, without sacred tradition and the teaching authority of the church. We believe the Scriptures indeed stand alone. They say about themselves that they are forever settled in heaven, that the law is perfect, and that not even the smallest mark of punctuation will ever fail.

The Apocrypha. Certain books and chapters were added to the Old Testament by the RCC in the wake of the Reformation. It was a clear attempt to give biblical support to RCC practices which the Protestant movement had challenged, such as the passage in Maccabees where prayers were offered for the dead. This *second canon* as the RCC calls the books, broke the centuries-old tradition held by the Orthodox and Jewish religions. Protestants consider the added writings as part of the literary genre of non-inspired writing—the apocrypha.

Teaching Authority of the Church. Catholic people may read the Bible but they are not allowed to interpret it for themselves. Scripture says we have no need that any man should teach us. Throughout Scripture, the message is to all people, who are told to read and study the word. Timothy learned the Scriptures as a child. The Bereans were commended for checking what they heard against the Bible.

Apostolic Succession. We believe that the RCC has built immensely complex theological and hierarchical structures based on one possible interpretation of Christ's word's "upon this rock." Scripture never suggests this concept and never identified a successor to Peter.

The Pope. Scripture says that *Christ* is the head of the church. The term *pope* was not used exclusively for the bishop of Rome till at least 500AD, and some bishops of Rome after this time declined the title.

Papal Infallibility. This doctrine was declared in 1870 by a highly divided council. The many papal teachings that have contradicted other teachings, as well as Scripture, makes this doctrine very suspect. We believe Scripture alone is infallible and as such is the sole and sufficient source of authority.

SALVATION

Venial & Mortal Sin. Scripture does not categorize sins this way. Even the RCC cannot give clear distinctions. Christ compared anger to murder and lust to adultery. James says to break one law is to be guilty of all. The definition of *venial* is "easy to forgive," yet the Bible says the penalty for sin is death.

Temporal Punishment for Sin. When God forgives our sins, Scripture says he removes them as far as the East is from the West, he remembers them no more, and he sees us as faultless. The RCC doctrine that God forgives sin, but we still have to suffer for them has no basis in Scripture. Christ's suffering and excruciatingly painful death has infinite value in God's sight. The book of Hebrews clearly states that no more offering for sin is needed.

Cooperating with Grace. Scripture says we are dead in our trespasses and sins, and that it is only the Spirit who gives life. To believe we cooperate with God's grace to merit salvation for ourselves is to deny 3 great themes of Scripture: that God alone is to receive glory; that grace is not merited; and that we are not to boast.

The Church's Role. Because the RCC teaches that the sacraments are necessary for salvation, clearly one must be related to the church to receive them. But Scripture states over and over again that we are saved through Jesus and his blood; we are never told that we are saved through the church.

Baptism. We do not believe that baptism washes away sin. In the Bible, baptism always follows belief. It is an outward sign of an inward reality.

Keeping the Law. The New Testament clearly teaches that we are not saved by keeping the law, in fact, now that Christ has come the law has served its purpose. Repeatedly, Scripture says God justifies those that do *not* work. The whole point of the book of Galatians is that if you believe keeping the law is necessary for salvation then your faith in Christ is nullified.

Confession & Penance. Scripture teaches that our sin is against God; that only God (not a priest) can forgive sin; and that we are to confess directly to him. In Acts 8, Peter, no less, tells Simon that he should confess to God. There is only one mediator between us and God and that is Christ. Some RCC theologians have now admitted that the system of penances that has developed in the RCC over the years is the result of a mistranslation of the word *Repent* that was given as *Do penance*.

Purgatory. Scripture says that for the believer to die is to be with Christ. The rapture as described in I Thess. 4 contradicts the doctrine of purgatory. Many times the Bible says believers are saved from wrath. The RCC interpretation that "he himself will be saved, so as by fire" means purgatory cannot legitimately be inferred.

Faith Without Works is Dead. When James writes that faith without works is dead, he is addressing the question of how other people can tell if one has true faith in Christ. That is, the justification he is speaking

of is the vindication in other people's minds, not justification before God. Christ used the same word when he said *Wisdom is justified of her children*; in other words, the only way another person can tell if one is wise is by what that person does. God can see inside a person and know if he has true faith or wisdom, but we can't.

Sin of Presumption. We disagree with the RCC doctrine that to be certain of our salvation is a sin of presumption. Scripture clearly teaches us that we can know this. Since it is the Spirit who makes us alive, and it does not involve cooperation on our part, the Scripture makes it very clear that Christ will never lose us out of his hand, that we'll never be separated from the love of God. The Bible says no good gift will he withhold from us, and certainty of our salvation is one of those good gifts—one that affects our whole attitude toward God.

THE MASS

The Eucharist. We do not believe the Eucharist is one and the same as Christ's death on the cross, or that it is a redemptive work. The book of Hebrews (especially chapters 7-10) clearly states that Christ's sacrifice is a once for all event, and does not need repeating. In fact, acts that need repeating demonstrate their ineffectiveness. God says without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

Christ the Victim. We believe Christ is a *victor* over sin and death, and not a perpetual victim. In fact, he never was a victim; he *voluntarily* laid down his life.

Transubstantiation. Supposedly, a few words by the priest cause the bread and wine to become Christ's body, without changing its appearance. For a man to create God is a greater miracle than God creating man. Scripture never asks us to believe what is apparently false.

Body & Blood of Christ. The RCC teaches that Christ's words at the last supper were literal, that we are to eat Christ's physical body and drink his actual blood. We believe Christ's word were figurative. In the same passage, (John 6) he talks about coming to him and believing in him, which has the same result as the eating and drinking (eternal life). When he said *Drink this cup* he was obviously being figurative, since cups are solid, not liquid, and cannot be drunk. Later (John 6:63), he even says his words are spirit, and that the flesh profits nothing. Furthermore, Scripture forbids cannibalism.

Adoration of the Host. We believe that the 2nd Commandment still reflects God's heart, and he forbids us to bow to any created thing.

WORSHIP

The Liturgy. RCC teaching is that the sacraments are effective *ex opere operato*. That is, when the priest follows the proper form, saying the prescribed words, God is satisfied with the results. So, for example, if it turns out that the priest who baptized your child later

proves to be a heretic, the baptism is still valid. We believe that the Bible severely warns against honoring God with our lips while our hearts are far from him. We believe it is not the process followed that is important but the heart attitude before God.

Images & Statues. RCC teaching is that once Christ became a man, and we now know what he looked like, the 2nd Commandment is no longer binding. We see no indication of that in Scripture. We think the principle stands that God cannot be likened to created things, and that images and statues are not to be bowed down to.

PRAYER

Prayer Traditions. The Catechism says it is not enough to know what the Scriptures reveal about prayer, and that it is more than a spontaneous outpouring of interior impulse (paragraph 2650). Yet, Scripture says it is sufficient to thoroughly furnish us unto all good works. And it includes many, many examples of people crying out to God and God hearing them.

The Rosary. The practice of saying repeated prayers has no biblical support. Christ said we are not heard by the quantity of our words. When he gave his beautiful example of the Lord's Prayer, he probably did it in less than 20 seconds. Scripture forbids any practices that smack of superstition, as if God needs to be placated.

The Saints. Scripture tells us to come boldly before God's throne, because Christ is the mediator. In fact, Christ is the *only* mediator. He is our advocate and does not need anyone's help. Christ tells us to pray to the Father. We are forbidden to contact the dead. The RCC interpretation of the *great cloud of witnesses* does not support praying to the saints. Scripture says that all believers are saints.

Praying for the Dead. Only the single passage in the apocryphal book of Macabbees would lend credence to releasing the dead from their sins through prayer. Other passages clearly state that we stand before God on our own; are judged for our own deeds; and individually trust either in Christ's righteousness alone or in our own merits.

Storehouse of Merit. The RCC teaches that the church has a storehouse of merit that it can draw on to reduce the time one may need to spend in purgatory. These merits are those earned by the sufferings and good works of Christ, Mary and the other saints. Scripture teaches that the death of Christ fully paid our sin debt and the righteousness of Christ is sufficient for God to see us as spotless in Christ.

MARY

Mother of God. We believe that Mary was blessed of God, and was divinely chosen to give birth to the human body of Jesus Christ. As such, she was the mother of Jesus, but God is the only self-existent one, without parentage. Mary is a created being, not eternal and this title is deceiving.

The Sinlessness of Mary. The RCC teaches that in order to be the mother of God, Mary needed to be

sinless. We believe that Mary brought about only Jesus' human nature though the divine intervention of the Spirit. We do not believe Mary was sinless; Scripture says all mankind inherited Adam sin's nature, and that only God is holy. Mary voiced her need of a Savior. A major theme of the New Testament is the righteousness of Christ and its satisfaction of God's anger—where are the similar themes regarding Mary's righteousness?

Immaculate Conception. The RCC teaches that when Mary was conceived in *her* mother's womb, that conception was immaculate, and hence she was without sin. There is no biblical basis for this. The Scripture makes Christ's virgin birth a very clear and important teaching. We believe its silence on Mary's conception by two sinful human beings is clear that it could not have been *immaculate*.

Assumption of Mary. The RCC reasons, that because Mary was sinless, she could not have died a normal death. Hence, she must have been taken to heaven directly like Elijah. Since we do not agree that Mary was sinless, we believe the assumption doctrine is unnecessary, in addition to being extra-biblical.

Mother of All Grace. Mary is sometimes presented by the RCC as the female face of God, the merciful one, whereas Christ is the (stern) judge. She has been called the mediatrix of all grace. None of these ideas have any biblical basis. God says he will not share his glory with another. A major theme of the Bible is that God is a God of mercy and grace, which he offers freely to those who seek him.

The Cause of Salvation. Paragraph 494 of the RCC Catechism says due to her obedience, Mary "became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race." Despite denying it in the end, the Vatican recently considered whether Mary should be elevated to the position of co-redemptrix with Christ. Scripture says there is only 1 mediator, and that it is Christ.

Veneration of Mary. Some in the RCC are careful to point out that they only *venerate* Mary, and that their *worship* is reserved solely for God. They say they are only doing what Christ did who obeyed the Commandment perfectly to honor his parents. With that logic, they should venerate Joseph with the same devotion. The RCC says that Scripture teaches that all generations will call her blessed. Yet, Christ said even more blessed than Mary are those who will believe in him. Another time, when Mary was outside the door, he did not exalt her and usher her in.

Ever-Virgin Mary. Scripture clearly says Jesus had siblings, born of Mary. The RCC claims this was a *different* Mary, and that the mother of Jesus remained a virgin her whole life. We find no basis for twisting Scripture in this way, despite some confusion on Calvin's part in this matter.

Praying to Mary. We believe praying to Mary and thanking her for answered prayers is taking away from God the glory that he jealously demands for himself alone. Besides, we cannot have a better advocate than we already have in Jesus.