

Roman Catholicism  
*Will the True Church please stand up?*

There are over 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, approximately 18% of the world's population. The 62 million Roman Catholics in the United States constitute 22% of our country's population. These statistics are based on baptisms, usually conferred on infants, and do not necessarily imply active participation in the church's life or full assent to its beliefs. Nevertheless, Catholicism is the largest of the predominant "Christian" religions (Protestant and Eastern Orthodox being the other two) and has its roots in the Early Church mentioned in Acts.

### **The Early Church**

The Early Christian Church began with a simple command from our risen Lord to the disciples (*Acts 1:8*) and the miraculous baptism of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2*)! The first time the term "Christian" was used was in Antioch (*Acts 11:26*) The task and mission of the "church" was to win the lost and love one another. (*Ephesians 4:2-5*) By the end of the second century the church at Rome had grown to be both influential and well-known. (*Romans 1:8*) Because of Rome's political and economic power, the Christian church at Rome grew even more powerful by the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Church at Rome**

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Emperor Constantine (306-337AD) declared Christianity the "official" religion of the Roman Empire and gave incredible power to the church leaders, especially the ones in the capital city of Rome. In the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Leo, the Bishop of the Church at Rome, commanded that everyone should obey him as the rightful leader ("rock") of the church and Christ's substitute ("keys to the kingdom") here on earth as handed down by Christ through St. Peter. (see *Matthew 16:17-19*)

The eastern part of the church began to rebel against this unlimited authority and in 1054 refused to accept the authority of the Pope (*Latin for bishop*) Leo IX. As the western church in Rome grew it began to add doctrines that were not in the Bible.

### **Martin Luther – The Protestant Movement**

In 1517, Martin Luther, a devout monk, searched the Scriptures and found *Ephesians 2:8-9* and *Romans 1:17*. Salvation was through faith and not the Church! Leading a Reformation and protests against the Catholic (*Latin/Greek for universal*) Church, Martin Luther separated from the church. The "protestors" and their new branch of Christianity were labeled Protestant.

### **So What's the Difference (what they believe)?**

1. **God** – God is the Creator, Almighty, and Heavenly Father. The Catholic Church also believes in the Trinity.
2. **Jesus Christ** – Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, crucified. It is in regard to the role of Mary where many differences are noted.
  - 2a. **Mary** – According to Pope Benedict XV, Mary 1) is the Mother of God, 2) retained her virginity throughout her life, 3) she was conceived without sin and lived a sinless life (See *Romans 3:23*, 4) she was taken body and soul to heaven and never died (Assumption), 5) she is a co-redemtrix with Christ and 6) and a Mediatrix between God and man (See *I Timothy 2:5*).

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**2b. The Pope** – The Pope (as the church’s interpretation of *Matthew 16*) is the Vicar of Christ here on earth. He is the ruler of the visible church on earth and in that role he is infallible. He has the power and authority to speak *ex cathedra* (from the chair) on all matters of faith and morals and Scriptural interpretation. (See *Colossians 1:15-20, I Timothy 2:5*).

- 3. Man and Sin** – The Catholic Church believes in original sin (Adam) and actual sin (willful disobedience to God). However, actual sin can be divided into 2 categories – mortal and venial.

Mortal – can only be forgiven by a priest. They include the 10 commandment-type sins (murder, stealing, adultery, etc.) plus missing Mass, getting really drunk, reading non-Catholic books about religion.

Venial – less serious sins. Lies, gossip, a little drunk, gluttony. Can be forgiven by repentance.

*(The First Communion Catechism and Catechism for Adults)*

- 4. Salvation** – Salvation is obtained by faith and good works (see *Ephesians 2:8-9*) and obeying the doctrines of the Catholic Church. Faith is only the beginning. The believer must work throughout his life in hope of attaining salvation and heaven. The Seven Sacraments set forth in the *Practical Catholic Dictionary* and the *Catechism* take care of the spiritual needs of man.

They are:

1. *Baptism* – absolutely essential.
2. *Confirmation* – adolescent ceremony that prepares the person for the Holy Spirit.
3. *Holy Eucharist/Holy Communion* – The Catholic Church believes that this is the most important of the sacraments. It believes that Jesus Christ is actually “crucified” each time and the bread and wine are actually turned into Christ’s body and blood. (See *Hebrews 9:24-28*)
4. *Reconciliation/Confession* – Mortal sins committed after baptism are forgiven through the priest. Sins are confessed (See *I John 1:9*) to the priest (See *I Timothy 2:5*) and a penance is assigned. These may take the form of indulgences – saying the Rosary (prayers said and kept track of on a string of beads) or Stations of the Cross (saying prayers at 7 places in the church). Other indulgences include trips to shrines like Fatima in Portugal.
5. *Anointing of the sick (Extreme unction, last rites)* – this is thought to take away the mortal and venial sins of a person at the point of death.
6. *Holy Orders* – This sacrament/ceremony places a spiritual “mark” on the soul of the priest that can never be blotted out.
7. *Matrimony* – Marriage is considered a sacrament. The Catholic Church opposes divorce. However, marriages can be “annulled” if not made with proper consent.

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5. **Heaven and hell** – The Catholic Church believes in a heaven and a hell. It also teaches that there exists a temporal punishment place called purgatory. Over the years, the Catholic Church has seemingly made heaven more accessible and hell not so much. (See *Matthew 7:13*)
  
6. **The Bible** – The Catholic bible contains the books of the canonized Scriptures plus other books (Apocrypha). However, the Catholic Church does not recognize the holy Scriptures as the only basis for the believer and the Pope is the final, authoritative interpreter of the Bible.

**Conclusion** – The Catholic Church, as it evolved into a corporate religion, is a prime example of absolute power corrupting absolutely. Over the years, it has added its own doctrines, sacraments, ceremonies and rituals to biblical teachings and truths, and has bestowed upon itself the final authority over the spiritual life of an individual. The Catholic “believer” can never really be certain if he/she has satisfied all the requirements to attain salvation and heaven as set forth by the church. Of course, if he/she *has committed their life to Jesus Christ and believes that He is the only source of justification and forgiveness of sins*, the Catholic believer can be confident in his/her salvation. (*John 3:16, Romans 5:18, Acts 2:21, John 5:24*)

**More Info:**

The Roman Catholic Church also fosters devotional practices, both public and private, including Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament (a ceremony of homage to Christ in the Eucharist), the ROSARY, novenas (nine days of prayer for some special intention), pilgrimages to shrines, and veneration of saints’ relics or statues. The devotional importance attached to the SAINTS (especially the Virgin Mary) distinguishes Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy from the churches of the Reformation. In the last two centuries the Roman Catholic Church has taught, as official doctrine, that Mary from her conception was kept free of original sin (the IMMACULATE CONCEPTION) and, at the completion of her life, was taken up body and soul into heaven (the ASSUMPTION). Catholics are also encouraged to practice private prayer through meditation, contemplation, or spiritual reading. Such prayer is sometimes done in a retreat house with the assistance of a director. (Grolier Encyclopedia)