



4 | 5 Things about the Roman Catholic



Some of the more noticeable traits in this group. See Section II.

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. - Colossians 2:8

Like previous groups mentioned Roman Catholics can be nominal and secular or they can be knowledgeable and committed. While both need to be understood differently, all genuine Catholics believe that Christ has provided the means for us to realize our salvation through exclusive obedience to the Catholic sacraments and that salvation by faith through the grace of Christ alone is *anathema*. For our purposes, we are focusing on the seriously committed Roman Catholic in this overview.

1.) Where We Find the Catholic

The Roman Catholic is the fourth most likely person we will meet on the street. Other Catholic brethren, found in various Orthodox churches, are not as visible locally, but remain present in our culture. Roman Catholics, in general, present themselves as warm and loving (especially since Vatican II) and share a love for Christ, a love for life, a commitment to strong morals and strong family values with evangelicals. For these reasons, evangelicals are tempted to see them as truly saved in spite of their church's dogma. These expressions vary from country to country and certainly from history when our non-Catholic forefathers readily agreed with Jim Lincoln, "Rome when in minority is as gentle as a lamb, when in equality is as clever as a fox, and when in the majority is as fierce as a tiger."

2.) How the Catholic Sees Himself.

The Roman Catholic Church is the composite of its history, and no one can understand Catholicism who will not take the time to view that history. Based on history, Roman Catholics believe that they represent Christ's kingdom on earth and that the reigning pope is His temporal vicar. Three historic

influences have effected the evolution of Rome over the centuries.

a. The rise of the bishopric. Well intended early churches in a given region would group themselves under a single bishop in order to protect themselves from false teachings (a practice not taught in the Bible). Later, these bishops themselves came under the head of a single bishop who was, even later, called the pope. Catholics believe they can trace their papal lineage back to Peter and their claim that Christ has built His church upon Peter (a Catholic interpretation of Matthew 16:18). Non Catholics, on the other hand, believe this doctrine of *apostolic succession* is not substantiated, either in the Bible or in history.

As Catholicism moved forward the church rested upon its *ecclesiastical traditions* as the authority through which the Bible was to be interpreted. The Catholic Church *openly declares the Bible alone is not a sufficient rule of faith*. When dissenters challenge this point, Rome cites our trust in the canon as a typical defense. How do we know the canon is inspired? Rome argues the Catholic church determined that it was, thus elevating the authority of tradition¹. Non Catholics contend that church councils merely affirmed what believers already held and that the Holy Spirit, not men, has guaranteed and protected the validity of our Bible books down through history.

b. The infusion of barbarians. The end of Roman persecution and efforts to accommodate the infusion of great hordes of barbarians

TRADITION is implemented as the final authority over Bible interpretation.

Early TRADITION then became infused with the pagan (creation-based) worship practices of the barbarians.

into the “church” not only changed the barbarians, it changed the church. To accommodate the mass migrations and conversions of the barbarians, Catholic leaders retrofitted many of the pagan practices of the barbarians with Christian meaning. Saturnalia (retrofitted as a Christmas celebration), the veneration of statues, and a host of other practices were imported into the church and were validated later under the banner of tradition. Thus *traditions*, built upon “the piety of the people,” became an avenue through which change could come about in the church which is not beneath saying it has never changed. The church insists that it has authority to bind and loose certain practices but that this does not constitute doctrinal change.²

c. The influence of Philosophy. The infusion of Greek thinking into Catholic thought also changed Catholic tradition. At this point it is very important to understand two key thinkers who have shaped Catholic thought.

1. Perhaps the most influential early Catholic was Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354 -430). Augustine (a Neoplatonist) was converted out of a profligate life. He was highly analytic, but the mystical and allegorical influences of his philosophy are also visible in his prolific writings as a church leader. Most significantly, Augustine moved from a more traditional form of literal interpretation of the Bible toward an allegorical system. This system (reflected in his *City of God*) cemented the Catholic view that the Church is the inheritor of Israel’s

Through Augustine, earlier tendencies (allegorical interpretation and sacramental worship) became stronger TRADITIONS.

promises and the rightful temporal ruler of the world. Theologically, Augustine further supported the growing belief that salvation could come only through the mother church and its priests in the dispensation of the sacraments. He also taught that Mary was sinless³.

2. Perhaps the second most important figure in Catholic thinking was Thomas of Aquino (1225-1274) one of the most prolific of all Catholic writers. Thomistic philosophy infused the assumptions (premises) of Aristotle and the subsequent extension of his views (western science and math) into Catholic thinking. The Church has embraced Aquinas to the point where its pope has openly declared all of the church to be Thomistic. In the briefest of summaries, Thomistic thought argues for a constant in the creation based on the unchanging nature of God. This Greek first principle, (in contrast with the changing creation which the Bible exhibits) allowed the Catholic church to put science on the *same authoritative level as theology*. By imposing Augustine's allegorical interpretation and Thomas' natural law on Genesis one, for example, the Catholic church embraces theistic evolution.

3.) The New Catholic is Becoming the Old Catholic

Many older and younger Catholics have differing world views because of the extensive changes the Vatican II church council brought about. Prior to Vatican II (1962-1965), the mood and tenor of the church remained very much under the influence of the earlier

Catholic TRADITION has now become infused with Greek thought and places western science on an equal plane with the Bible.

Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the First Vatican Council (1868-1869). The Council of Trent was both dogmatic and antagonistic to non Catholics as a result of the Reformation. That council provided a long list of anathemas which made it indelibly clear that any who disagreed with Rome were eternally doomed⁴.

Vatican II squared up with the realistic fact that the Catholic Church was in a slide. It had lost its vitality. While Vatican II affirmed the dictates of Trent, it set about to re-image a kinder, gentler church which labeled protestants as *disaffected brethren*, allowed for the Mass to be presented in the language of the peoples, and set a whole new relational or ecumenical tone in the Church and the world⁵.

These external changes imposed by Vatican II confused many Catholics and non Catholics alike. The dogma of Trent remained, but the ecumenicism of Vatican II seemed mutually exclusive. Disaffected Catholics left the church while others returned. The question remained, could the church warm its dialogue, extend its reach to the disaffected (including divorced people, anti-celibates, and homosexuals), and woo evangelicals, all the while without changing dogma?

4.) The Catholic Veneration of Mary.

While non Catholics have not always given Mary her due honor, most of this neglect has been the result of over-reacting to the disproportionate stress they see Catholics placing on Mary. It cannot

be denied that this grassroots fascination with Mary has occupied Catholic attention and Mary more than at any point in history. Mary's hands are openly depicted in Catholic art as being the instruments through which Christ's blood flows. While there have been scores of Marian apparitions (with various levels of official bishop approval) it is certain that Mary has called for her own veneration, declared that salvation is through her, and that she will be the instrument to bring about world peace. Catholics now believe Mary was conceived sinless, remained without sin, and was assumed into heaven. A majority of Catholics have elevated Mary to the position of Co-Redemptrix, though there has been no papal declaration to that end⁶.

The place of Marian adoration in Catholic history has been present for centuries, and is believed by many Catholics to supply a feminine side to Catholicism. Some Catholics, for example, see the Father as having a fearful or angry face, Christ as having a serious and sober face, while Mary has a tender, beckoning, smiling face. Non Catholics are quick to point out that love, tenderness, and compassion, are not uniquely feminine traits, and all are true of our deeply relational God. Femininity in religion has always related back to ancient pagan and gnostic practices.

Clearly, it is impossible to give a full treatment of Catholicism in a short study. Nevertheless, one does not have to be an expert on Catholicism to help Catholics understand the biblical issues.

5.) What the Catholic Needs to Hear

(The following represents some starting points for discussion. Please read the article: Section II: 5 Tools for Talking With Roman Catholics for more in-depth biblical responses.)

1. Catholics need to hear that if the Bible is God's inspired Word, all subsequent traditions must be subject to it *first*. The onus is on the Catholic to show why his traditions supersede what the Bible says. Catholics need to hear what the Bible says, directly and succinctly.
2. Catholics need to understand that, in the end, there are only two views. Either one must add his own efforts to the work of Christ, or one must rely on the work of Christ alone. This should be the central talking point with all Catholics. More than anything in this world, Catholics need to know that the work has been *done* for them, and that there is nothing they can contribute to their salvation (Romans 4:1-8)
3. Catholics need to know that the Bible teaches we can have absolute assurance of eternal life. (John 3:14-17; 1 John 5:11-13,
4. Catholics need to know that the deep love of Christ which He showers upon the believer in a personal and intimate way, far exceeds the love that any human, even Mary, can offer (Romans 8:33-38).

¹ <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/whats-your-authority>

² Catholics argue: “There are many examples of this authority to bind and loose in the arena of Church discipline.” <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/whats-your-authority>.

³ See the Augustine supplement.

⁴ See the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent. (See supplement or search for web link)

⁵ Though it goes beyond the intent of this paper, this teacher avers that Vatican II was really *a return to ancient Catholic roots* and the willingness to infuse pagan (creation-based) worship back into its worship regimen in an effort to revitalize it. The mystical side of the church had suffered too much under the influence of Greek materialistic thought, and a move was now in order to return the church to more creation-based thinking (as reflected in the Catholic work, [The Cloud of Unknowing](#)). In the Catholic mindset, because we are all part of the same universe, we are all mystically connected at some level, and are all “brethren” at some level. Catholic ecumenism has always been based on Catholic pluralism (a mix of Creator based and creation based worship). Catholicism has not one, but two first principles and has been argued by some to be essential panentheism.

⁶ The contemporary view of Mary as co-redeemer is an outgrowth of the early teaching that she was the New Eve, a virgin, just as the Catholic Church teaches Eve was a virgin in the garden, though married. See James White’s [Mary, Another Redeemer?](#) for a full discussion.

A side note: When purchasing study materials, keep in mind that, like non Catholics, Catholics tend to give poor reviews of books which disagree with their system. We would expect nothing less and welcome legitimate criticism as no author is perfect. Even so, the works recommended in this series are considered to be both trustworthy and reliable and are valuable tools for extending open minded discussion between Catholics and non Catholics.