

Roman Catholicism

North American Denominations

Name:	Roman Catholic Church
Current Pope:	John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla, installed Oct. 22, 1978)
Membership in North America:	74,517,041
World Headquarters:	Vatican City

History

Secular historians date the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution (with centralization and papal authority) to the fifth and sixth centuries. The authority of the pope reached its height in the thirteenth century with Innocent III, who claimed the title “Vicar of Christ.”

Doctrine

God

Catholics affirm the triune nature of the one God. God is one. God has revealed Himself as three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], paragraph no. 253). Catholics do not consider Mary part of the Trinity.

Catholics teach that God is good, loving, and truthful. God is all-powerful and all-knowing. God is the Creator of all things. God both transcends and sustains the universe.

Response: Protestants and Catholics affirm the same beliefs about God’s nature.

Jesus

Catholics affirm Jesus as the second Person of the holy Trinity, as well as His full deity and full humanity (CCC, no. 464). Catholics regard Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hopes (CCC, no. 436).

Catholics believe Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died on a Roman cross, was buried, and was resurrected from the dead. He returned to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Response: Protestants and Catholics affirm the same beliefs about Jesus’ nature, death, burial, and resurrection.

Authority

Catholics accept three sources of authority: the Bible, Tradition, and the teaching ministry (Magisterium) of the Church.

Bible: Catholics affirm the 66 books of the Protestant Bible, plus several apocryphal books that most Protestants consider spurious.

Catholics are encouraged to read the Bible. The teaching of the Catholic Church “forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’” (CCC, no. 133).

Tradition: Tradition refers to teachings of the apostles that Catholics believe have been preserved in the Church apart from the Bible. “This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it” (CCC, no. 78). Catholics view Tradition as an authority equal to the Bible (CCC, no. 82).

Teaching Ministry of the Church (Magisterium): Catholics believe that their bishops (in communion with the pope) have been given the task of authentically interpreting both the Bible and Tradition. This task “has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone” (CCC, no. 85). According to the CCC, “The faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms” (CCC, no. 87).

The teaching ministry of the Church (Magisterium) is also considered equal in authority to the Bible and Tradition. According to Catholicism, the Bible, sacred Tradition, and the teaching authority of the Church “are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others” (CCC, no. 95).

Response: Catholics are correct to encourage people to read the Bible (2 Tim. 3:15-17). However, the Apocrypha should be rejected. These additions are uninspired and spurious. The Jews of Palestine never accepted the inspiration of these books. Also, Jesus never quoted the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha defends dishonesty and deceit (Tobit 5:4-13; Judith 9:10,13) and teaches that salvation depends on deeds of virtue (Tobit 4:10-11; 12:9; Ecclesiasticus 3:30).

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit enables people to understand God's Word (Ps. 119:99-105,130; Luke 24:44-45; John 16:13; 17:17; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). All religious teaching must be evaluated by comparing it with the Bible. The Bereans used the Scriptures to verify the truthfulness of the apostle Paul's teaching (Acts 17:11).

Moses and John warned of the danger of adding to or subtracting from Scripture (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19). Jesus warned about the possibility of tradition perverting the intent of God's Word (Matt. 15:2-3,6; Mark 7:8-9,13). Paul informed the Colossians of the danger of being led astray by following "the tradition of men" (Col. 2:8). Peter reminded his readers that they had been redeemed from "vain conversation received by tradition" (1 Pet. 1:18). Neither the Tradition nor teaching authority (Magisterium) of the Catholic Church has an authority equal to the Scriptures. The Bible is the sole authority for matters of faith and practice.

Mary

Catholics believe that Mary "was totally preserved from the stain of original sin and she remained pure from all personal sin throughout her life" (CCC, no. 508). Catholics teach that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. They also believe that at the end of her life she "was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things" (CCC, no. 966). Catholics refer to Mary as "the Holy Mother of God" (CCC, no. 975). They view her as a co-mediator of God's grace and as a collaborator with the salvation of Jesus her son (CCC, nos. 510, 969, 973). According to Pope Paul VI, "The Church's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is intrinsic to Christian worship" (CCC, no. 971).

Response: Mary should be honored as a godly woman who was faithful to God. The Scriptures teach the virgin conception and birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:20-25). Unlike Catholic dogma, the Bible does not teach that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life (Ps. 69:8; Matt. 12:46; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; John 7:3). Nor does the Bible indicate that Mary was conceived without original sin or that she was bodily ascended into heaven (Luke 1:47). The Bible does not refer to Mary as the Holy Mother of God. The offering of adoration and prayers to Mary (and to other saints) is both unscriptural and wrong (Dan. 3:16-18; Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).

Sin

The CCC defines sin as "an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law" (CCC, no. 1871). Catholics distinguish between two types of sin. The two types of sin are mortal and venial (CCC, no. 1854). Mortal sin destroys the sanctifying grace of God within the individual and necessitates forgiveness through a sacrament of reconciliation (CCC, no. 1856). It causes exclusion from heaven and results in "the eternal death of hell" (CCC, no. 1861). Catholics classify a sin as mortal when it meets the following conditions: the sin is serious or "grave" (murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, etc.), is committed with "full knowledge and complete consent" (CCC, nos. 1857-59). A venial sin is a sin that either is not serious or grave, or does not involve full knowledge or complete consent (CCC, no. 1862). Unlike mortal sin, venial sin does not destroy the saving grace of God in the individual. "Venial sin does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness" (CCC, no. 1863).

Response: The Bible does not teach the dual concept of mortal and venial sins. Apart from the saving grace of God, even the least serious sin will send a person to hell (Rom. 3:23; 6:23; Jas. 2:10). The Scripture also indicates that even the most serious sin is incapable of destroying the saving grace of God in the believer. This is why the true believer in Christ cannot lose salvation (John 10:27-29).

Sacraments

There are seven sacraments in the Catholic Church: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, holy orders, and matrimony. "The seven sacraments are the signs and instruments by which the Holy Spirit spreads the grace of Christ the head throughout the Church which is his Body" (CCC, no. 774). Catholics believe that the sacraments actually "confer the grace that they signify" (CCC, no. 1127) and that their ordained priesthood "guarantees that it really is Christ who acts in the sacraments" (CCC, no. 1120). For believers, the sacraments of the Catholic Church "are necessary for salvation" (CCC, no. 1129).

Baptism: "The faithful are born anew by Baptism" (CCC, no. 1212). "Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ" (CCC, no. 1213). Catholics baptize their children shortly after birth. "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" (CCC, no. 1250). Catholics teach that "Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament" (CCC, no. 1257). "By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin" (CCC, no. 1263).

Confirmation: Confirmation completes baptismal grace by increasing the gifts and strengths of the Holy Spirit in the recipient (CCC, no. 1303). It is usually done by the bishop when a child reaches “the age of discretion” (CCC, no. 1307).

Eucharist (Mass): “The Eucharist [or communion] is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’” (CCC, no. 1324). Catholics maintain that the miracle of transubstantiation takes place during the Eucharist. In this sacrament, they believe that there occurs “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” (CCC, no. 1376). By receiving the Eucharist, Catholics believe they are receiving Christ.

Penance (Confession): Penance is the sacrament of reconciliation. In the sacrament, the sinner confesses all mortal sins to a priest. The priest imposes acts of penance and offers forgiveness of sin. “Indeed bishops and priests, by virtue of the sacrament of Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins” (CCC, no. 1461). According to Catholics, this sacrament reconciles one with God (CCC, no. 1468) and obtains “forgiveness of sins committed after Baptism” (CCC, no. 1486).

Anointing of the Sick (formerly known as Extreme Unction): Only priests and bishops can give this sacrament, using oil blessed by the bishop (CCC, no. 1530). The sacrament may be given when a Catholic is in danger of death because of illness or old age (CCC, no. 1527).

Holy Orders: Catholics believe this sacrament confers sacred power for service (CCC, no. 1592). There are three degrees of Holy Order. The highest is that of bishop, then priest (presbyter), and then deacon. “Without the bishop, presbyters, and deacons, one cannot speak of the Church” (CCC, no. 1593). Women may not receive this ordination (CCC, no. 1577). The pope is the bishop of Rome. Catholics believe that he has “full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church” (CCC, no. 882).

Matrimony: Catholics believe the sacrament of matrimony “gives spouses the grace to love each other with the love with which Christ has loved his Church” (CCC, no. 1661). Remarriage by a divorced Catholic while the lawful spouse is alive is not allowed (CCC, no. 1665). The Catholic Church, however, frequently grants annulments in which remarriage is allowed.

Response: The Bible does not teach a sacramental theology. What counts with God is genuine love, not ritual (Gal. 5:6). God does not use sacraments to convey grace to humanity. This is why Paul can write that baptism is not part of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17). There is only one mediator between God and humanity and that mediator is the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). Since Jesus is easily approachable, there is no need for any mediator between humanity and Jesus (Matt. 11:28-30).

Guidelines for Witnessing to Catholics:

- Remember that salvation does not depend on church membership, but comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8-9).
- Pray and trust in the Holy Spirit to use the gospel message to reach the hearts and minds of those who are lost.
- Share a testimony of your personal faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Your testimony of what Jesus has accomplished in your life can have a great impact on them. Keep your testimony short. Avoid using terms that are unfamiliar to Catholics, such as: “walked the aisle,” “got saved,” and “born again.”
- Share the assurance of salvation that God’s grace gives you. Make sure that you communicate that your assurance is derived from trusting Jesus and not from your good works or your ability to remain faithful (1 John 5:13).
- Give them a New Testament. Catholics are now encouraged to read the Bible. Point out texts that explain salvation. (Rom. 3:23, 5:8, 6:23, 10:9, 13; John 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9.)
- Avoid getting bogged down with secondary issues that are not central to salvation.
- Keep the gospel presentation Christ-centered.

Quotes were taken from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
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