

Roman Catholicism

Introduction

It is not easy to give a brief account of modern Roman Catholicism as the situation in the Roman Catholic (RC) church today is very complicated. These notes will inevitably be too simple, but I hope they will be helpful in giving a general picture of the RC church. As is the case in all religions and nominations, the personal views of RC's on any individual matter may differ considerably.

Many Protestants would like to have a simple view of the RC church and therefore be able to regard all RC's as either fellow believers, or not as Christians at all in the true sense. Such simplistic views are however not adequate and we must face the fact that there is no one answer to the question of whether Catholics are saved or not. I feel that we must steer a middle line, judging by Scripture, not by prejudice. While there may be much wrong in the doctrine of the RC church, we must also accept that God has worked His salvation in the lives of many individual RC's.

In this article the assumption is made that most of the students we meet who call themselves Catholic are likely to have a nominal faith. This is also true of most who call themselves Protestant. They may not go to church at all, and even if they do, they may receive very little truly biblical teaching. We know that it is not the label "Catholic" or "Protestant" or whatever that saves, but God's grace in Christ received by faith.

Historical background

As the early church was born in the Roman Empire, it is not surprising that the local church at Rome became very influential. Gradually it assumed a role of authority over other churches and eventually this authority was focussed in one man, the Bishop of Rome, who came to be known as the Pope.

When Christianity became the respectable religion after the conversion of Constantine, elements of pagan religion were absorbed into the church. As the Roman Empire declined the eastern and western churches became isolated from each other and Rome had no challenge to its authority in the west. The church began to grow rich and powerful and gradually departed from the truth Of the gospel.

Corruption increased as the church became a more and more complex organisation with political and economic aspirations along with spiritual ones. Thomas Aquinas (1225- 74) helped to codify RC belief and his works are still studied by those training for the priesthood.

There was still much theological debate on many issues however until the Reformation forced the RC church to make a clear statement of its official doctrine in the Council of Trent (1545-63). The doctrines then enunciated were largely a reaction against the Protestant belief. Between the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) the RC church became more entrenched in its views and further emphasised the authority of the Pope. Many of the doctrines relating to Mary, while commonly held before, were only declared to be the official teaching of the church during this period.

The last decades have seen much change however. Vatican II did not change the doctrine of the church but did change its outlook. It opened the door to more liberal interpretations of doctrine and to the ecumenical movement which Rome had previously opposed. Our present age is one characterised by the rejection of authority so that a large number of Catholics have begun to think for themselves and question or even deny the authority of the Pope. RC's have also been encouraged to read and study the Bible more and in many countries this has led to a new value being placed upon it. At present there is a great deal of variety and confusion, a situation in which Rome is attempting, to some extent, to exert her authority again.

Teaching

Where does the ultimate earthly authority lie?

The RC church regards the Bible as the Word of God, but considers that church tradition holds an equal place. Moreover the church retains the right to interpret the Bible, and the individual RC, although now encouraged to read it, is obliged to follow the official interpretation even if he feels it to be unsound. As previously stated however many RC's are beginning to think for themselves a lot more, and some have come to a living faith in Christ through their studies. It is sad however that the liberal approach to the Bible is now gaining ground within the RC church and that some RC's dismiss much of it as myth in the same way that many liberal Protestants do. It is important to note that RC Bibles contain certain apocryphal books in the Old Testament whose teachings are not completely in accordance with the rest of the Bible.

Inside the church there is a hierarchical structure with ultimate authority residing in the Pope regarded as the Vicar (representative) of Christ. When he makes official pronouncements (ex cathedra) he is regarded as being infallible on matters of faith and morals. There is a movement within the church to stress the role of the body of Bishops rather than one man but this will meet with much resistance in Rome. Many British Catholics respect the Pope as a holy leader yet would be unwilling to regard him as infallible.

What about salvation?

The RC church officially teaches "salvation by grace", but by this it means something very different from the original Bible message. It regards grace as having been given to the church which then has the power to decide on what conditions this grace may be available to the individual. Thus the church imposes works such as attending the sacraments, good works, prayer and Bible reading as means by which the individual can receive grace. This in practice amounts to salvation by works and many RC catechisms teach this quite openly. RC's often object to the expression "saved by faith" in that they think we mean that you can simply believe to get to heaven and go on sinning regardless. They prefer the phrase "saved by faith, hope and charity" and by charity they mean good works.

The sacraments are an important part of the RC concept of salvation. They are seen as far more than symbols. When performed by a legitimate RC priest they are considered to effect a change in the individual. Baptism is seen as essential to salvation. It is equated with being born again, and hence it is seen as the moment of entry into the Christian life rather than a public act to testify to this. RC's believe that Baptism removes Original Sin that we inherit from our parents and that unless a baby has been baptised it cannot enter heaven.

Now RC's will generally accept that Protestant Baptism is sufficient for salvation since the Protestant is regarded as basically Christian but unable to see the superiority of the RC rite. Unbaptised people can be saved if they would have been baptised if they had had the opportunity (Baptism of desire) or if they have died as a martyr. There is a growing tendency towards universalism in the RC church today.

After baptism the sacrament of Confession is regarded as the means by which one's sins are forgiven. Sins are divided into two categories. The more serious sins, which are generally premeditated, are moral sins that condemn a person to hell unless they are forgiven through confession. Other sins are venial sins that do not exclude the person from heaven but should nevertheless be confessed. The priest acts as the representative of Christ, pronouncing Christ's forgiveness when he is satisfied that the individual has confessed his sins and is repentant. He may give the person some penance, usually consisting of saying a number of set prayers.

Confession gives forgiveness for sins but not purification from them, so RC's expect that so long as they do not the in a state of mortal sin, they will spend a time in a place called Purgatory to be cleansed and made fit for heaven. The prayers of people still alive are regarded as valuable for shortening a soul's stay in purgatory.

The other sacraments are seen as vital in supplying grace to the individual. In Holy Communion he receives Jesus Christ bodily and is therefore strengthened. Conf1m1ation is the means by which he

receives the Holy Spirit and Marriage and the Holy Orders are seen as granting the grace necessary for the married life or priesthood respectively. The Sacrament of the Sick (Extreme Unction) was formally regarded as preparing a person to the, but has more recently been seen in the context of healing.

The RC has no assurance of salvation since a mortal sin may at any time exclude him from heaven, but most RC's today, at least in Britain, would share the popular belief that everyone will eventually get to heaven.

What is the significance of the Mass?

RC's believe that their Communion Service of Mass represents a repetition or continuation of the Sacrifice of Calvary to ensure its efficacy for today. The bread and wine are considered to be physically changed into the body and blood of Jesus (transubstantiation). The priest acts in Christ's place in offering the Sacrifice on behalf of the church. An increasing number of RC's are however finding it hard to believe in transubstantiation today and prefer to regard Christ as being spiritually rather than "really" present.

How do Mary and the Saints fit in?

The RC regards exemplary RC's as "saints". In addition to a remarkable life, a person must be seen to have answered prayers after their death before they are canonised as a saint. They are paid special respect, and prayers are addressed to them to enlist them to support the RC's cause. As they are regarded as being in the presence of God they are considered to be of great value to the individual in getting his prayers answered. Certain saints have become traditionally associated with certain types of miracle. Mary is given special treatment. She is referred to as the "Mother of God" and the "Queen of Heaven" and is thought to be very influential in Heaven. She is considered to have been born free of original sin (Immaculate Conception) and to have lived a sinless life. She is said to have remained a virgin all her life and her body is said to have been assumed into heaven on her death.

Many of these ideas are clearly unbiblical and at variance with the historical facts. Mary is not officially worshipped and most RC's do know the difference between their worship of God and the veneration of Mary. There are moves to ascribe an even greater role in man's salvation to Mary but not all RC's are happy about this.

There is a great amount of difference in the attitude of individual RC's to Mary and the saints. Some only regard them as examples to follow and consider prayer to them as mere superstition while to others their entire religious experience is centred around the saints, with God seeming distant and far off. In some countries cults of saints have become mixed with pagan beliefs and practice.

Divisions and movements in the church

As already stressed there is a great amount of variety within modern Roman Catholicism. Many are RC in name only having come from an RC background yet having lapsed in their practice and having given little thought to what they do or do not believe. Many others go to church out of a sense of duty hoping that it will ensure them a place in heaven, yet again do not think about their faith. There are various trends within the RC church however, and an RC may be drawn towards one or more of them. Not all are very strong in Britain, which tends to have a moderate, fairly liberal and ecumenical strand of Roman Catholicism.

Traditionalists

RC's who do not like the changes of the last 30 years. Some want the Latin mass back (followers of Archbishop Le Fevre took this to the extreme of being excommunicated). Some tend to love ritual, mystery and tradition. They often have fairly right wing political views (such as Opus Dei) and want the Pope to exert his authority, but only along traditional lines. They are usually very anti-ecumenical regarding Protestants as blasphemous heretics.

Modernists

The opposite to the traditionalists in many ways. They want a modern church that presents a faith "credible to modern man". They are very influenced by liberal Protestant theology and tend to be very pro-ecumenical. Many reject the authority both of the Pope and of the Bible. There have been moves to silence many of their leaders, as in the case of Hans Kung.

Liberation Theology

A movement that has largely arisen amongst Latin American RC's. They are offended at the injustice and poverty and are rebelling against an image of the church siding with the rich and powerful. They equate the gospel to a greater extent with Marxist ideology and see social change rather than spiritual change as their primary goal.

The Ecumenical Movement

RC's who desire to join with other Christians. The official policy is that other churches must recognise the supremacy of the Pope as a condition for union. but many RC's would take the attitude that it does not matter what a person believes and that everyone should be able to worship together. Some however are seeking real dialogue and trying to sort out the problems that divide the churches (eg. the AROC talks).

The influence of Eastern thought

Much of Western religious thinking has been influenced over the last 30 years by interest in eastern thought. This is evident in the rise of many cults, yet has affected main line churches as well. Many RC's are attracted to Buddhist philosophy and try to combine this with their faith. This has happened in many monasteries and convents. In the Far East this fusion between RC thought and Buddhism has been developing since the late Middle Ages. Many RC's are involved with Yoga which has religious as well as physical aspects.

Overemphasis on the Saints

There are cults within the RC church where the saints virtually take the place of God. In some countries (e.g. the Philippines and Latin America) RC belief has been fused with animism (spirit worship) and the old pagan beliefs have been simply dressed up in a Christian form. Many strange practices can develop and statues can be claimed to have miraculous attributes. This is often referred to as "Folk Catholicism" (nothing to do with Folk music and Folk Masses!), and is the religion of the masses, though not so much of the better educated.

The Charismatic Movement

This is a very complex phenomenon. Initially this appears to have been linked to a rediscovery of the Bible and to have had many evangelical tendencies, yet it has been largely taken over by Rome and is now a tool to re-assert traditional belief. There are however RC charismatics who still accept evangelical beliefs and reject much of RC belief but it is beginning to be more difficult for these to continue within the movement without compromise to their new found faith.

There is no simple answer to the question of whether RC charismatics are Christians. It is not spiritual gifts that provide the proof. Paul reminds us to *"Examine everything carefully". 1 Thess 5 :21*

"Evangelicals"

Both inside and outside the charismatic movement, there are those who have come to put the Bible in first place in their quest for truth. Bible study groups are increasing in RC circles. Some are finding real faith in Christ through their studies and are trying to share this within their church. Others have not yet found faith but are very open to learning from the Bible. They often seek fellowship with evangelical Protestants, some even attending an evangelical church on one service each Sunday for the teaching. Even some priests have had their outlook changed by studying the Bible and try to change what happens in their church as far as the authorities allow. Some priests and bishops are remarkably tolerant to RC evangelicals considering that they should be free to believe what they like and even to share that with others.

It is not possible to fit any RC (or any person at all!) neatly into a category. He may be influenced by

several trends and be rather confused in his thinking. A visit to the Catholic Truth Society Bookshop in London reveals the breadth of modern Roman Catholicism. They stock books from 1 VP and other evangelical publishers alongside books devoted to Mary, to left or right wing politics or to Buddhist thought. This diversity may disappear if the more traditional elements in Rome get their way, but the general trend towards pluralism seems to have the upper hand.

Witnessing to nominal Roman Catholics (and any nominal "Christian")

Remember RC's are ordinary people, sometimes very sincere and devout in their faith. Their lives may put us to shame at times.

Start on the common ground that we share. We have a belief in the same God and share a common Bible. Build up confidence with the person you are talking to.

Try to avoid controversy. Arguments can be won but they do not often lead to conversions. Attacking a person's belief puts them on the defensive and makes them less open to what we have to say. If a person simply wants controversy we are probably wasting our time. If controversial issues arise and the person is genuinely interested in our views, try tactfully and sympathetically to explain what and why you believe or admit that you don't know much about the subject if that is the case.

Don't mock or condemn an RC's beliefs. We should show respect for them as people and politely disagree where we have to, but we should never laugh at what someone else genuinely believes however strange or repulsive we might find it.

Don't tell the RC what he believes, ask him. Never accuse an RC of worshipping Mary or the saints if he says he does not. As a RC I knew the difference.

Point out that all sin leads to death, that we can never do enough to earn our way back to God, and that sacraments (baptism, mass, etc) in themselves do not save. Only God saves (see g & h).

Emphasise the Cross. Most RC's never really understand it. ("Jesus died for us" is RC truth, but for many to step to "Jesus died for me" is one they have never thought of.) Speak of the certainty of forgiveness and salvation that come through the cross.

Explain what repentance means. It is not "cheap grace" by which we just say sorry to God and everything is all right. It means we recognise that our whole direction has been wrong and see our need to "think again". We ask God to turn us around that we might go in a new direction.

Use your testimony to show how you have found peace and assurance. Share how much the Bible means to you.

Avoid clichés. Explain everything in ordinary language. He may not understand you otherwise, and he may see a different meaning in some religious words or phrases (e.g. grace, faith, receiving Jesus, being born again, receiving the Holy Spirit, receiving forgiveness). [Do you know how these may be understood?]

Pray. We can only be a witness. It is God's Holy Spirit who convicts people of sin and brings them to faith in Jesus.

Other issues

A Helpful Bible Passage

Acts 10:1-48. Cornelius was sincere but not saved. God sent Peter as an answer to Cornelius' prayer. Perhaps we may be an answer to an RC's prayer.

Should we encourage an RC to change his denomination?

This is a very controversial question. We must understand that Roman Catholicism is seen and felt as a family and social affair and not just a matter of personal faith. It may even be a part of your national identity. The church means much more to most RC's than it does to Protestants. We treat the church too lightly and so find it easy to move from church to church as the fancy takes us.

If a Catholic reaches the point of seeing that the teachings of his church are so wrong that he wants to change then we should encourage him to find a suitable evangelical fellowship near his home, and preferably make sure that this link is made. But many RC's are not ready to change. Some have come to faith by Bible reading without the influence of evangelicals. They have never considered leaving their church but hope to share what they have found within it. They may have even received encouragement to do so.

If an RC does not indicate his willingness to change then I do not believe we should put pressure on. We should help him to grow in the truth as he studies the Bible and prays, perhaps linking him to a Bible study group, youth group or Christian Union, whilst he remains attending his own church. He may after a while feel led to leave his church as he sees the differences but he may feel that God wants him to stay as a witness to lead others to Christ from within the church. We need to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide him.

Protestant churches are often not as attractive as we would like to think. After all they are divided into hundreds of denominations and seem to squabble amongst each other so much. Many are totally dead spiritually or have departed much further from Biblical truth than the RC church has. Family may also feel greatly offended if a member leaves the church and this can put a lot of pressure on a young person.

"What's the difference between Catholics and Protestants?"

It is very likely that you will be asked this question (from Catholic or non-Catholic). Think about how you might answer this question, which is honest, makes sense and might lead to opportunities to explain the gospel. See "answering questions."

*Taken from the Cambridge International
Outreach (CIO) training manual 2004*

Suggested Reading: H. Carson "Dawn or Twilight" (IVP)