**Evangelizing Roman Catholics**

Catholics constitute 17% of the total world’s population. In 2000, it was estimated there were 1.8 billion professing Christians in the world, but that over 1 billion of them were Roman Catholic.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Half of them live in North and South America, then Europe, Africa, and Asia. The largest population of Roman Catholics live in Latin America, with Brazil being the world’s most populous Roman Catholic country. What is telling is that Baptism rates remain high in countries of Roman Catholic heritage, but practice rates vary.[[2]](#endnote-2)

It can be difficult to talk about Roman Catholicism as a separate religion. The Roman Catholic Church uses many of the same words we do, including grace, faith, atonement, justification, and more. They read the Bible, believe it is God’s Word, and preach that Jesus is the Son of God who died for sin. The Roman Catholic Church affirms and teaches many true things, and I think it is safe to say that many people have even come to a saving faith in Christ through teaching they heard at Roman Catholic Churches.

So why do we assert that the Catholic Church is not a true Christian Church? Why do we say that it is, in fact, a separate, false religion?

We hold these things because, when examined closely, it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church teaches a different Gospel than the Bible does.

Roman Catholics say and believe that salvation is through Christ, but not solely through faith in Christ alone. Grace is dispensed through people (priests, saints), and objects (Sacraments) and there is no required response of repentance and faith on the part of the recipient.

While Roman Catholics and Protestants sometimes sound the same, as you dig deeper you will see different understandings of basic questions. And some of the biggest differences are not the most obvious ones. There are many “hot topics” that people are excited to debate about – saints, indulgences, purgatory, the pope. But these are not the heart of the gospel, and it is precisely when we get to the heart of the gospel that some major differences really emerge between Roman Catholicism and Biblical Christianity. Our goal should be to help our Roman Catholic friends and family understand these differences. I pray that as we study the key doctrines of Roman Catholicism you will be better equipped to do this, and more clearly see this for yourself.

Today we’re going to focus closely on Roman Catholic doctrine and where we think it strays from the Bible’s teaching. It’s worth doing this because it is not immediately obvious why we would need to evangelize Roman Catholics. They say they believe in Jesus and the Trinity and our need to repent and believe. But when we examine these statements more carefully, it becomes clear that the Roman Catholic Church, in its official teachings, means something very different than what we understand the Bible means. For that reason, it is best to approach conversations with practicing Roman Catholics as a conversation with someone who doesn’t understand the Gospel the way the Bible presents it, and therefore someone who needs to hear the good news of Jesus.

We’re going to look at two broad categories of doctrine and how Roman Catholic beliefs differ from Biblical Christianity.

First, we’ll look at the doctrine of the Word of God.

Second, we’ll look at the doctrine of salvation.

**I. Why do you think that is true? What’s your authority?**

The teachings of the Roman Catholic Church flow logically from the way they view authority. When you start to ask questions around the issue of authority, things become clear. Ray Galea “Bible alone leads to Christ alone… Bible plus some other means of revelations leads to Christ plus some other means of salvation.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Bible has authority, but it is **not** sufficient and can only be rightly interpreted by the clergy. The Roman Catholic Church puts itself over God’s word and believes that the Church created God’s word – i.e., the Church determined what is Canonical – rather than that God’s Word creates His Church.

The Roman Catholic Church interprets **Matt 16:19** as such “The power of the keys designates authority and governs the house of God, which is the Church… the power to bind and loose connotes the authority to absolve sins, to pronounce doctrinal judgments and to make disciplinary decisions in the Church.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

In other words, Roman Catholics have an unbiblical doctrine of the Word. Roman Catholics challenge Protestants with the question, “How do you know you are reading your Bible correctly? People interpret the Bible differently, how do you know your way is right?”

“The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church… this means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Over time, Roman Catholics have kept a record of their interpretations of Scripture, compiled them together, and made them into a separate and equally authoritative source of doctrine. The Roman Catholic Church believes that revelation is not found in Scripture alone but also “in the unwritten traditions, which have been received by the apostles.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Tradition (capital t) is the body of unwritten knowledge given by Christ to the Apostles and handed down to and through the Bishops. It is the living presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This argument flows from the belief that the synoptic gospels were constructed from stories and memories that the first Christians passed down. Thus, it was the Church that put together the first gospels, and while these are written down, there are other teachings that came from the same source that were not explicitly written down. You must refer to Tradition to have an authentic interpretation of the Bible.

“The Church… does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from holy Scripture alone. Both Tradition and Scripture must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

“Tradition, Scripture, and the Magesterium (teaching body of the Catholic Church) are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. They all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Ex: 1854 declared that Mary was born without original sin, and never sinned – Immaculate Conception. They don’t quote Scripture to prove this (besides loosely Luke 1:28), but because it’s a tradition of the Church. And since the bishops are the ones who can interpret scripture, if you are convinced by scripture that a tradition is contrary to its teachings, you are interpreting Scripture wrong.

**Any questions?**

**II. How are you made right with God? What will you do with your sin***?*

Because the Roman Catholic church believes the Bible is only one authority of equal weight with the tradition of church teaching, it has strayed into heresy on other doctrines. We will talk specifically about how we are saved, the largest and most important area of disagreement between Roman Catholicism and Biblical Christianity.

Sin: Roman Catholics differentiate between mortal and venial sins, **1 John 5:16-17**, some sins lead to death, others do not, or **1 Cor 3:8-15**, venial sins are symbolized by wood, hay, and stubble. Mortal sin is the true nature of sin – an act that transgresses the divine law and severs one from God. Venial sin does not destroy our union with God and is reparable – it merits temporal punishment, but not eternal. “Human nature has not been totally corrupted, it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it. Baptism erases original sin and turns a man back toward God.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Grace: If you were to look up “grace” in a Roman Catholic dictionary you would find multiple entries – what kind of grace are you talking about? It’s complex. It’s not only favor from God, but also assistance God gives to help us earn his favor. The grace given through baptism cannot be merited, but the grace he gives through the rest of life can be: “we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Salvation happens when man cooperates with God, therefore this free gift of grace can be merited. This also reveals what the church teaches about mankind – that yes we sin, but part of what God called “very good” in the garden is still retained so that we can reach out to God: “They who by sin had been cut off from God, may be disposed through His quickening and helping grace to convert themselves to their own justification by freely assenting to and cooperating with that grace.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Grace comes through a process of cooperating with God. The process to Heaven is following the path of obligatory ritual – this free gift is given or taken away based on performance. This process is masked behind the term “grace.”

Justification: The 16th Century Council of Trent famously rejected salvation by faith alone. It said “If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification… let him be anathema.[[12]](#endnote-12) The Roman Catholic church has not abandoned this view. A 20th Century Roman Catholic encyclopedia said that “justification is the work of God alone, presupposing, however on the part of the adult the process of justification and the cooperation of his free will with God’s preventing and helping grace.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Dualism in understanding is rooted in seeing justification as a process rather than a declaration. God gives righteousness over time as we participate in the Sacraments and doing good works.

Sacraments: According to the Roman Catholic Church, one of the works we do to earn salvation is to participate in the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, communion (called the Eucharist), penance, marriage, taking of holy orders, and the final rites before death. Performing these deeds—even if you are an infant being baptized—earns God’s favor. According to the Roman Catholic Catechism, “The sacraments act ex opera operato (literally: “by the work worked” or by the very fact of the action’s being performed, thus the sacraments give grace by the very fact that they are done, not dependent upon the recipient, but the recipient gets grace because the sacrament is being done).”[[14]](#endnote-14) “The Roman Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Baptism of an infant removes original sin and justifies the person as a child of God. Confirmation is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit where the person is now responsible for their faith.

Confession/reconciliation enables the forgiving of mortal sin. The Eucharist (communion) atones for sin and imparts the grace of Christ to the recipient. The grace for marriage and ordination/holy orders is channeled through the rite, and the anointing of the sick or extreme unction.

Forgiveness: A Roman Catholic must confess to a priest, be truly sorry, and do penance (prayer, good deed, self-sacrifice). You can also do penance on behalf of another, and even on behalf of someone who has died to work for their forgiveness. Justification is a process to make someone ready for heaven and that process can continue after they die.

Purgatory: Since you have to participate in earning your salvation, and most people aren’t good enough to enter heaven when they die, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that people who aren’t bad enough to enter hell go to an in-between place where they can continue to work to earn their way to heaven. Purgatory is “A place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God’s grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.” [[16]](#endnote-16) Purgatory is only necessary if you believe Jesus’ death is not enough to cleanse you perfectly.

Mary: Finally, because we have to earn God’s favor, most of us aren’t worthy of God. In fact, because we are sinners, we need holier people to intercede between us and God. (This, of course, is Jesus’ role, but for Roman Catholics we need another mediate between us and Jesus!). This is where Mary and the saints come in. For Catholics, “saints” are extra-super holy people; they are super-Christians. (In the Bible, “saint” means “Christian.”) We should seek to have saints intercede for us in heaven to help us earn his favor. Preeminently, this means Mary, the highest of all saints.

This has led to a large emphasis in Catholicism on Mary, coupled with a lot of extra-biblical and unbiblical teaching about her. For example, Catholics believe:

- Mediatrix: In agreeing to give birth to Christ, the Roman Catholic Church says that Mary cooperated with Jesus Christ in redemption, thus co-redemptrix or mediatrix. Mary will put in a good word for me with Jesus and since he is a good son he will do whatever she asks (wedding at Canna). “As no man goes to the Father but by the Son, so no one goes to Christ except through his mother.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Just as an earthly child will go through Mom to get to Dad, so we pray and ask Mary to speak to Jesus for us. Complete misunderstanding of God as Father, at the same time saying Christ is not sufficient and God is not merciful. ‘Death through Eve, life through Mary.’

- Mother of the Church: Spiritual mom to all Christians. Jesus is hard to relate to, and God is angry, but Mary, Mary I can relate to and she understands me, she’s a mother who will eventually cave in to what I’m asking.

- Perpetual virginity: remained a virgin her whole life, Jesus was her only son. When Scripture says “brothers” it means cousins.

- Immaculate conception: Mary was conceived without sin. God prepared her to be Jesus’ mother by freeing her from original sin.

- Assumption into Heaven: In 1950 Pope Pius XII declared that Mary “having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” (g 92).

- Without sin: “Mary benefitted first of all and uniquely from Christ’s victory over sin: she was preserved from all stain of original sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

In summary, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that “Mary shares Christ’s sinless purity, his obedience to the Father’s will, his redemptive work, his resurrected body, and his mediation and heavenly intercession… there is no place where Mary as the representative of humanity does not lay claim to Christ’s uniqueness.”[[19]](#endnote-19) This dogma was asserted in 1854 by Pope Pius IX.

**Any questions??**

**III. Evangelism strategies**

Today, there are a wide variety of understandings and convictions amongst Roman Catholics: Older women who cover their heads before entering a Church building, liberals fighting for the ordination of female priests, conservatives who want the Mass to return to Latin, charismatics who speak in tongues and wish the Church would fully embrace the gifts of the Holy Spirit, liberation theologians who believe the gospel is about corporate social sin and that salvation is found in alleviating poverty and pursuing political freedom. There are priests who run guns for freedom fighters in South America, others who withhold communion from women who have had abortions, some who perform gay marriage ceremonies, and others who are helping people understand the Bible better. All that to say that the spectrum is broad and the understanding is varied. Don’t assume to know and understand exactly where they are – which again makes asking questions so important.

Evangelizing Roman Catholics is difficult. First, Roman Catholics believe they already understand what Christianity is and therefore don’t need to hear the good news. Second, many Roman Catholics do not know or understand what the Roman Catholic Church’s official teaching actually is or how it differs from the Bible. Third, there are many, many different kinds of Roman Catholics. When you talk with your Roman Catholic friends and family, try to get a sense for what category they fit into:

1. **Practicing, believing Roman Catholics**. These Roman Catholics understand official Roman Catholic dogma, believe it, and practice it. The best strategy with them is to know your Bible well and engage them in loving discussion about what the Bible actually says.

For this kind of Roman Catholic, here are a few pointers for discussing the Bible and how it differs from the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching.

On the sufficiency of Scripture, note that Scripture itself claims it is sufficient. If, therefore, Roman Catholic tradition claims to be equal with Scripture, it contradicts Scripture, which claims it has no equal. If you have two authorities that contradict each other, you have no coherent system of belief.

* “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are *able to instruct you for salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus,” (2 Timothy 3:15). Paul here tells Timothy that Scripture is all he needs to be instructed for salvation.
* The next verses (3:16-17) are well known; it is the passage in which Paul says that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable…” But note how he ends this passage: “that the man of God may be *complete, equipped for every good work*.” The man of God does not need additional sources of instruction or authority to be *fully* equipped.
* James says “*Of his own will* *he brought us forth by the word of truth*, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures,” (1:18) and Peter says “you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through the living and abiding word of God*.” Both, like Paul, indicate that God’s word is sufficient for salvation. We do not need tradition or a hierarchy of priests to mediate our salvation.

On salvation, you may want to emphasize that the Roman Catholic Church often seems to combine justification and sanctification. While the Bible indicates that human effort must be part of the latter, it plays no part in the former. There are literally dozens of passages on this, but perhaps the most straightforward is:

* “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast,” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

We can agree that we must work hard to grow in holiness. Paul writes that we must “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” (Philippians 2:11). Roman Catholics may use this verse to justify their view of justification. But we know that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture, and since the rest of Scripture is clear that we do not earn our justification, we understand this verse to be referring to sanctification.

**2. Non-practicing Catholics**, or those unaware of the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings. These Catholics treat Roman Catholicism like an identity more than a religion; it is a community to which they belong more than a faith they must practice.

What we’ve discussed previously is what the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches from the Vatican. Most Roman Catholics you meet on the street don’t believe all of these things, and a lot of them have never even heard of these things. Most mainline Roman Catholics embrace the reforming spirit of Vatican II while holding fast to traditional Roman Catholic beliefs, and quietly ignoring Roman Catholic teachings that don’t match their lifestyle or reasoning. Most would say they believe in the Bible but think most of the Old Testament is children’s stories or a myth at best. Beliefs are shaped by your family.

Most Roman Catholics you meet will not understand the intricacies of the dogma and doctrine of Roman Catholicism. We are on the outside analyzing the teachings and holding them up to Scripture and seeing them for what they are. But when you are in it, you are not necessarily objectively declaring theology – sometimes you are doing what the person next to you is doing and not consciously making a decision about what you believe about Christ. I never saw that praying the rosary meant that I was saying Christ is not sufficient. In fact I would have said Christ is sufficient and that’s what makes the Rosary effective. What I was saying was “this is all I have ever known and it is comfortable and safe.” So be gentle and humble. You could be tearing apart the comfort and security of someone’s entire life. And praise God and may that be the case so they will see their need of Jesus and that He alone is sufficient to be their comfort and security and bear the weight of their lives, but be gentle. This will not be easy.

Roman Catholicism is not so much about what you believe as who you belong to – for many, it’s about identity and association more than it is doctrine or conviction. It says something about who a person is and who their family is. There is a pride and a unity that while subjective, is so very real. There is a felt unity – the same Mass that I am attending right now is the same Mass being attended by millions around the globe. When I am in a different country, I may not understand the words, but I know what to do, and I am in synch with the person sitting beside me, and linked in with the whole Church around the world and throughout the ages. And they look at Protestants and they pity them that they don’t have that – there’s hundreds of different kinds and they all argue with each other and they even argue with the ones that are supposed to be like them and something different happens in each of them and there is no one holding them accountable to what they are doing – what can they possibly be united on?

“Our separated brethren… are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those who through him were born again into one body.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

But the truth is that as Christians we are united on the solid rock of Christ, and the Roman Catholic Church is built on the sinking sand of traditions of men. So be aware that there is a powerful and prideful sense of belonging and subjective sense of unity. But it is fragile. If you push on it, it will start to crumble.

The best strategy for Roman Catholics of this type is to share the Gospel as you would with an agnostic or an atheist.

**IV. Concluding story**

One member of our Church who grew up in a Roman Catholic family relates the story of a conversation with a Roman Catholic friend.

Why do you pray to Mary?

Because God is scary and mad at me, and I can’t understand Jesus. How am I supposed to relate to a single man who was perfect and uptight and is supposed to resemble my father who abused me? But Mary, Mary I love – she’s a woman like me and she is kind and gentle and understanding. So I pray to Mary because I can relate to Mary and she will talk to God for me, and Jesus will do what she says because he’s perfect and will listen to his mom like he did at the wedding with the wine”

Her understanding of God is this mix of her own life experience and logical conclusion of relationships mixed up with Bible stories and uncontextualized verses.

You can also see that her whole life’s history and her identity is wrapped up in this. So it’s not a simple intellectual exercise of pointing out inconsistencies. It’s messy.

We should have compassion for our Roman Catholic friends and family who are confused about the Gospel. As this story shows, Roman Catholics can be familiar with the stories and language of the Bible, but miss the main point. We should seek lovingly to help them see what is in God’s word so they can meet the Savior whose name they profess.

Extra Material for Q&A:

Indulgences: “a remission of the temporal punishment due to sin, the guilt of which has been forgiven.” Wrongly understood to be a way to buy salvation or release someone from Purgatory, it supposes that the sin has already been forgiven and it “means a more complete payment of the debt which the sinner owes to God... In Baptism not only is the guilt of sin remitted, but also all the penalties attaches to sin. In Penance the guilt of sin is removed and with it the eternal punishment due to mortal sin; but there still remains the temporal punishment required by Divine justice, and this requirement must be fulfilled either in the present life or in the world to come, i.e., in Purgatory. An indulgence offers the penitent sinner the means of discharging this debt during his life on earth. ”[[21]](#endnote-21) The Church is the administrator of the extra merits earned by saints. John 2:2 “since the satisfaction of Christ is infinite, it constitutes an inexhaustible fund which is more than sufficient to cover the indebtedness contracted by sin, besides… The virtues, penances, and the sufferings of the saints vastly exceed any temporal punishment which these servants of God might have incurred.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

The Church applies the “superabundant merits” contained in the spiritual treasury. Issue that first started the fire in Luther, was upheld by the Council of Trent “the gift of holy Indulgences may be dispensed to all the faithful, piously, holily, and incorruptly. [[23]](#endnote-23)

Mass/Priests: The Mass is ultimately a sacrifice. When you walk into a Catholic Church in the middle is in altar because that is the most central part of the Mass. Sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, penance, and the Eucharistic sacrifice. The role of priests came about in the 5th and 6th centuries, and the official adoption of 7 sacraments in the 12th and 12th centuries necessitated the role as priests are the only ones able to administer them. The idea of the priesthood of all believers was condemned by the Council of Trent.[[24]](#endnote-24)Mass cannot happen without a priest because sins cannot be forgiven without a priest because transubstantiation cannot happen without a priest.

Transubstantiation: Bread and wine offered during Communion turn into Christ. The Church relies on Aristotle’s idea of the difference between the physical properties and the essential qualities of an object, accidents and substance. Squirrels come in different colors, shapes, and sizes (accidents), but there is an essential element, squirreliness, that makes a squirrel a squirrel. Thus squireleness is the substance while all physical attributes of different squirrels are its accidents. In the Mass, the accidents of the bread and wine remain the same, but the substance of the bread changes into the body of Christ and the substance of the wine changes into the blood of Christ. Transubstantiation was put forth in the 9th century and became dogma during the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.[[25]](#endnote-25)

1. Walsh, Michael “The Basics: Roman Catholicism” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Walsh, Michael “The Basics: Roman Catholicism” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Galea, Ray (111-112 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Catechism, 553 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Catechism pt 1 sec 1 chp 2 art 2 pt iii, 1993, paragraph 85. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Council of Trent, session 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Catechism, pg 31:82 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Catechism 34:95 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Catechism, pg 114:405 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Catechism, part 3 sec 1 chp 3 art 2 part iii, paragraph 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Council of Trent session 6 chp 5 http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/trent6.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Council of Trent, Session 6 On Justification Canon IX [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Pohle, Joseph. "Justification." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 8. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 26 Jun. 2012 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Catechism part 2 sec 1 chp 1 art 2 sec iv part 1128, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\_\_P33.HTM [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ibid 1129. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Hanna, Edward. "Purgatory." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 12. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 26 Jun. 2012 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical., Octobri mense, September 22, 1891. http://www.vatican.va/holy\_father/leo\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\_l-xiii\_enc\_22091891\_octobri-mense\_en.html [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Catechism, 116:411 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Galea, Ray, Nothing in my Hand I Bring. Kingsford NSW Australia, Matthisa Media, 2007 (95). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Vatican II, Unitatis Redintegratio, chp1, paragraph 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Kent, William. "Indulgences." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 26 Jun. 2012, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07783a.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Kent, William. "Indulgences." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 26 Jun. 2012, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07783a.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Council of Trent session 25, chp 21 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Council of Trent Session 23, chp 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Fourth Lateran Council, Constitution 1: Confession of Faith http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/lateran4.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-25)