

7 The Gospel - What Roman Catholics believe

Key difference

We believe that the Bible is the sole source of authority with regard to religious beliefs and that the Bible speaks for itself to each individual who will read it with a receptive mind.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that the Bible is the Word of God but that the Scriptures can only be interpreted by the church and not by individuals.

The Pope

- is head of the Roman Catholic church
- claims a unique and all-powerful authority in all matters of doctrine and practice
- claims to be 'Christ's representative on earth', the successor of the Apostle Peter
- claims at times to speak and decree with divine authority (called ex-cathedra)

So the Roman Catholic church teaches doctrines which are not found in Scripture, and doctrines have been added over the centuries since the Bible was completed.

AD	Doctrine
300	Prayers for the dead
320	Wax candles as effective religious offerings
375	Veneration of angels, dead saints, images
431	Beginning of the exaltation of Mary
593	Doctrine of Purgatory
998	Fasting on Fridays and on feast days
1000	Obligatory attendance at mass
1090	Introduction of the rosary
1215	Doctrine of trans-substantiation
1229	Bibles forbidden to laymen
1414	Cup (wine) forbidden for laymen at communion service
1545	Church has equal authority with Scriptures
1546	Apocryphal books added to the Bible
1864	Doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary
1879	Doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope
1890	Doctrine of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary



Beliefs shared with others

Roman Catholics believe many of the same things as most of Christendom. These include belief in the immortality of the human soul, hell as a place of torment, the existence of a being called 'the devil' and many others.

Positive aspects

Roman Catholics hold many scriptural doctrines, often more firmly than many other churches, and are less dismissive of doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and the literal resurrection of Jesus. They also uphold many of the scriptural teachings of morality

and behaviour so often ignored or rejected by other churches - the sanctity of marriage, for instance.

A former Roman Catholic writes:

The text which follows is based on notes written by Dennis Gillett, a Christadelphian who was previously a Roman Catholic, and he writes about their beliefs accurately but sympathetically. Read what he has to say and then consider the questions which follow:

Authority

The Church of Rome claims that its authority is derived from three sources

- the Bible
- tradition
- Popes and Church Councils

The Roman Catholic Bible is based upon the an early Latin text called the Vulgate. It not as good as the Authorised Version which is based on the Hebrew and Greek originals, but the Truth could be preached from it just as truly as from the Authorised Version.

The Apocrypha

There is one way in which the Catholic Bible differs from our Bibles - it includes the Apocrypha, which is regarded by the Roman Church as being on the same level of inspiration as the Old Testament. Two of the Apocryphal books - Tobit and II Maccabees - appear to give support to two Roman Catholic doctrines: salvation by works alone and praying for the dead. It is worth remembering that the Apocrypha was never acknowledged as being inspired by the Jewish people, and although Jesus and his disciples quoted extensively from the Old Testament, the New Testament records no occasion when they quoted from the Apocryphal books.

What would you say?

What would you say about the Apocrypha to someone who believed it had the same status as what we know as the scriptures? Try to find examples to support what you say.



Tradition

Some Roman Catholic doctrines have no connection with the Bible, but support is found in what the Roman church calls Tradition. It is held that outside and in addition to the teaching of the Bible there is a section of oral teaching which came from the Lord and his Apostles and which has been handed down and preserved in the Catholic church by continual and unbroken succession. Evidence that such a body of oral tradition exists is, according to the church, to be found in such passages as John 20:30 "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book", though there is no hint that the unwritten things must be passed on so that

later generations may know the saving truth. In fact the next verse in John 20 infers the reverse - that what is written is all-sufficient. "But these are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name."

What would you say?

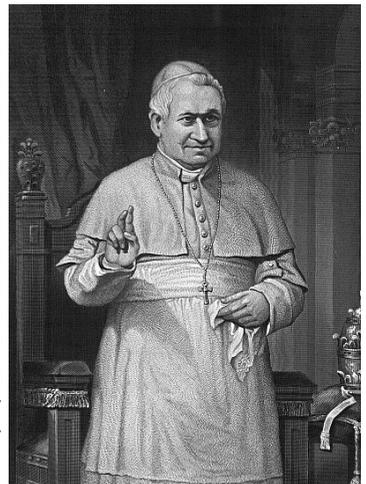
It is difficult to counter an argument for which there is no evidence, but what would you say on this subject to a Roman Catholic friend?



Popes and Councils

The Decrees of the Councils and the Popes are the third source of Roman authority and underlying this is the doctrine of Papal infallibility, which means that when the Pope is speaking *ex cathedra* on faith or morals to the whole church, he is believed to be preserved from error.

The doctrine was not declared as an article of faith until 1870. When the Catholic theologians came to define it they were faced with the problem that some popes in the past had certainly stumbled into errors, some even being convicted as heretics. So they said the pope is infallible only when he makes it clear that he is using his infallible gift, which had never happened before 1870. Since 1870 the infallible gift has been used only once - in 1950, to declare the doctrine of the assumption of the virgin Mary into heaven. Instead the pope issues what are called "Encyclical Letters." These give guidance and proclaim Catholic teaching on different subjects, but no infallibility is claimed for them and if subsequently they are proved wrong or inexpedient, they can be disavowed.



Pius IX - the first 'infallible' Pope

What would you say?

What would you say to someone who thought the Pope was infallible?



Papal Succession - passed on from Peter?

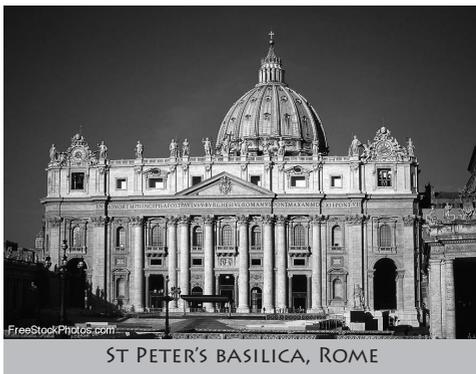
Catholics believe that the apostle Peter was the first bishop of Rome and therefore the first pope and that since then there has been an unbroken line of pontiffs (popes) presiding over the church, in whom Peter the first pope still guides, governs and presides

in the person of his successors, the bishops of Rome. Hence the pope is said to speak from the chair of Peter.

Even some Catholics admit that there is a lack of historical certainty about the supposed succession. Twenty nine popes are described as “pretenders” and on some occasions there were two or even three popes reigning at the same time and proclaiming their authority, denouncing each other and struggling for supremacy.

But what of the supposed first pope - Peter the Jewish fisherman? The church quotes 1 Peter 5:13, “The Church which is at Babylon, elected together with you saluteth you,” and asserts that Babylon in this passage is Rome; hence Peter must have been there when he wrote the letter. In the Bible, Babylon stands so often as a synonym for the incorporation of all that is in opposition to God’s purpose issuing at last in confusion; so in the letter of Peter it could stand for some place where God’s will was opposed and his church persecuted. Pagan Rome would come in that category at certain periods.

On the other side there are strong indications that Peter was never bishop of Rome. Roman Catholic tradition says that Peter went to Rome in AD 42 and was there for 25 years as bishop of the church. Yet when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church in AD 58 he does not refer to Peter at all though he expresses a great longing to see his fellow Christians there. In Romans 16 Paul refers by name to 27 disciples in the church at Rome. If Peter were there is it likely he would have ignored him, a fellow apostle whom he



loved? When Paul arrived in Rome some of the members of church met him - but is it not certain that if Peter were there as bishop he would have been among the first to meet Paul and would not the writer of Acts have recorded this historic -meeting? Furthermore if an inspired apostle of the quality of Peter had been bishop in the Roman church for 16 years is it likely that Paul would have needed to write to them in the way he did, laying the foundation of the gospel and dealing with such fundamental matters? Would not Paul’s journey and his work at Rome have been contrary to his own principle “not to build on another man’s foundation” if Peter were already that church’s bishop?

When Paul was at Rome he wrote letters from there to other churches - what are now known as the letters to the Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and the letter to Philemon. In these epistles he refers to others who were with him at Rome and who were labouring with him in the gospel but he makes no mention of Peter. Later on Paul was a prisoner in Rome and during that period he wrote what is now called the second letter to Timothy in which he used these expressions “Only Luke is with me” and “At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me.” Is it likely that if Peter had been the head of the Roman church he would have deserted his brother apostle, Paul, in the hour of his great need?

According to Acts 12 Peter was imprisoned a short while before Herod died, which is most usually reckoned to have occurred in AD 44. In Acts 15, some nine years later

he is taking part in the church Council at Jerusalem. Catholics have said that Peter's activity as bishop of Rome is "among the best ascertained facts of history" but to have arrived at that conclusion demands turning a blind eye to the New Testament.

What would you say?

What would you say to a Roman Catholic who insisted that their faith must be correct because of the apostolic succession?



Purgatory and Limbo

Today some of the churches of Christendom tend very much to push the doctrine of judgement and the future life into the background, but the Church of Rome holds fast to its doctrine of the future life, which remains in the forefront of its teaching. The doctrine is based squarely on a belief in the inherent immortality of the human soul. The idea of the soul's eternal bliss in heaven or eternal torment in hell is in accordance with orthodox teaching and need not be enlarged on here. The distinctive feature of what Roman Catholics believe is the doctrine of Purgatory.

In order to understand the need for Purgatory it is necessary to understand Catholic doctrine concerning forgiveness of sin. Absolution is gained either by confession to a priest or by a sincere act of contrition, but although forgiveness is secured the punishment for the sin still has to be suffered by the soul. This punishment is suffered by the soul in purgatory after death, after which the soul goes in its purged condition into heaven. The suffering in Purgatory is regarded as being very intense but its duration is not defined. Some Catholic writers have suggested that to the suffering soul it will seem like an eternity. The awfulness of the doctrine, even to the Catholic mind, demands some way of alleviating the suffering, and this is provided for in Catholic theology. One way is by prayers for the dead, and some prayers like the Rosary are supposed to be particularly efficacious to secure a remission of punishment. Another way is by having Masses said for the suffering souls in general or some named soul in particular. A further means of gaining remission of punishment is by Indulgences. These are usually spiritual exercises of one sort or another which are performed by the living and the merits of which are applied in advance to the total of their own suffering due to be endured in purgatory so as to reduce it. The merits of Indulgences can also be applied to the souls already in purgatory. So you may gain an indulgence now for your suffering wife or husband or some other relative or friend, and their punishment is reduced accordingly.

In Roman Catholic theology there is a place called Limbo. To this place go the souls of unbaptised persons. It might be described as a slightly inferior department of heaven. Those who go there are happy but not as happy as the souls in heaven because in Limbo they cannot come into the presence of the Almighty.

This strange doctrine of purgatory is manifestly unscriptural and more in harmony with paganism than with true Christianity. It is one of the tragic fruits of the Greek doctrine

of the immortality of the soul. The whole edifice of Roman Catholic belief about life after death is based upon this doctrine, and when it is realised that the foundation is a fraud the edifice crumbles. The true believer trusts in the redeeming sacrifice of Christ, depends upon his sympathetic priesthood and draws near in full assurance of faith, remembering gratefully that by one offering the Lord hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. To the Catholic, judgement has two stages. At death the soul is judged and assigned to heaven or hell or purgatory. This is called the particular judgement. At the end of human time, called the Last Day in Catholic theology, the souls in heaven and hell and purgatory are to be rejoined to their bodies in a general resurrection and judged again - not to alter the particular judgement but to seal it. This is called the general judgement. Thereafter purgatory is ended, the earth is burned up and for all eternity there remains hell with its everlasting torment and heaven with its everlasting bliss. In sharp contrast the Bible proclaims the second coming of the Son of God in flaming advent glory, to establish an everlasting kingdom on the earth which shall never be destroyed, to raise the righteous dead to a life unsullied, unwearied and unending, and consign the wicked to everlasting death.

What would you say?

How important, do you think, are the differences between what Roman Catholics believe and what we believe the Bible teaches. How would you think about a dead person if you believed in Purgatory and Limbo?



The Sacramental System

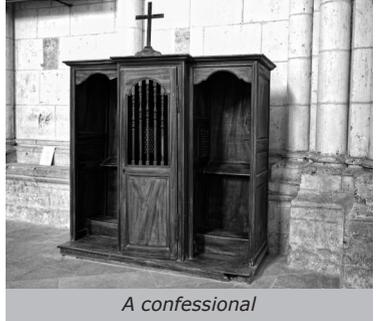
In the Catholic faith the important thing is for the believer to secure a constant supply of what is called "sanctifying grace." This expression describes a kind of spiritual energy and it comes to the individual through the sacraments. A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace - the channel through which God sends his blessing to earth. The system covers the Catholic from the cradle to the grave. There are seven sacraments: Baptism, Penance, the Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Extreme Unction. The practice of christening infants which the Catholic Church calls baptism is so well known as to need no description here. To the Catholic it is very important because without it the soul is doomed to exist in that twilight land which is called Limbo. The sacrament of Penance is another name for the Confessional, that practice of confessing sins to a priest in secret and receiving absolution for the sins confessed.

Confession

Catholics usually make their first confession about the age of seven, when in the Catholic view of things a child comes to the use of reason. There is an obligation, under the pain of eternal damnation, to confess once a year, but in practice Catholics usually do

it once a week

The Roman Church in justifying Confession does not claim that the practice is expressly mentioned in the New Testament but asserts nevertheless that Christ commanded it and gave his apostles the power to absolve or retain sins. The passage most usually cited is in John 20:23: 'Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained.' The church affirms that the words of Jesus mean that the apostles were given power to forgive sins, and that power was transmitted to their successors, its bishops and priests.



There is no example in the scriptures of someone confessing a sin to one of the apostles and being granted specific forgiveness. The words of the Lord to the disciples after his resurrection clearly indicate what was intended: '... thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things' (Luke 24:46-48, AV) In fact this is what the Apostles did. In Acts 2 is a record of Peter promising forgiveness to those who repent: "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of your sins."

Paul, when he was preaching at Antioch, declared the same thing: "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins."

It is true that confession is a proper precursor of forgiveness, as John says, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9), but the confession is made to God .

What would you say?

Can you think of any other examples of the apostles teaching about forgiveness.

Read James 5:14-16, and discuss what it is saying. How does this verse contrast with what Roman Catholics believe?



The Eucharist

Catholics believe without doubting, that when the priest pronounces over the bread the Latin words “Hoc est corpus meum” (this is my body) the bread becomes the literal flesh of Jesus Christ, and over the wine “Hoc est sanguis meus” the wine becomes literal blood. So that when the priest breaks the consecrated bread Christ’s body is being broken once again, and when he pours out the consecrated wine Christ’s blood is shed again. The consecrated bread to the Catholic the body of Christ is taken and eaten by the believer, bestowing spiritual energy or sanctifying grace (the laity do not take the wine).



The Son of God enjoined two ordinances upon his church: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. There is no magic in Baptism - the essential element is faith. The Lord’s glorified body is not in the Eucharist but in heaven at the right hand of His Father. To eat the literal flesh of the Son of God would confer no spiritual benefit. What goes into the belly does not change the heart. Jesus said, in the very discourse where he spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, “The flesh profiteth nothing: the words I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life.”

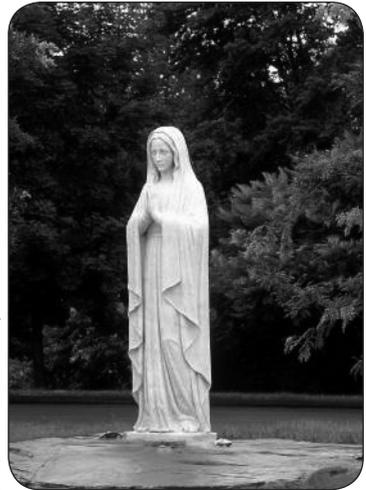
What would you say?

What did Jesus mean when he said of the bread ‘This is my body’



Aids to Catholic Living

Prayer plays an important part in the Catholic faith and one of the most popular forms is “saying the rosary.” This consists of saying the Lord’s Prayer once and the Ave Maria ten times and then repeating the whole process five times which results in five Pater Nosters and fifty Ave Marias. Another important practice is praying to the saints in heaven, seeking their intercession. It is usually reckoned that certain saints are good for particular causes - St. Aloysius for students in their studies, St Anthony for lost property, St. Blaise for sore throats. At the head of the list of saints is Mary, styled by the church Mother of God and as an advocate regarded with veneration, superior to all other saints.



Images and pictures are used as external aids to worship. In fairness to the Church of Rome, it stoutly denies that these images are worshipped but claims they are ways of worshipping those whom the image represents - the veneration of the image being transferred to

the holy person or saint. In the judgement of the writer this is what most Catholics feel and believe about images. They do not have the intention to worship the image itself.

Relics are venerated in the Church of Rome. Relics are pieces of material of one kind or another which have a sacred association, such as the bones of a saint, a piece of the table at the Last Supper, the shroud of Jesus, a piece of the True Cross, one of the thorns from the crown of thorns and so on. In a certain sense relics have become something of an embarrassment to the church. If all the relics of the wood of the cross were put together it would be enormous; there was one spear which wounded the Lord's side but four are preserved in the church; Jesus possessed one seamless robe, the church has three. It is said that the church has two heads of John the Baptist - one at Rome and one at Amiens. To this the church replies that it matters little if the relic is not authentic, for the reverence is paid to the saint not to the relic itself, and in any case if an attempt was made to gather out the false relics the true ones might be rejected and dishonoured.

The New Testament proclaims that there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. He is the High Priest of our profession and his intercession is all sufficient. The saints are not an aristocracy of special souls in heaven, but according to the New Testament are men and women on the earth who have been separated by belief of the gospel and washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus. Once afar off, but in Christ made nigh, the saints are exhorted to pray ceaselessly but not with vain repetitions. They are to pray intelligently and sincerely, praising God and making their requests known unto him. They are taught by the Apostle Paul, "Every creature of God is good and nothing to be rejected, if it be received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." So they may eat and drink with gladness of heart and thank God. If they fast it is to be a voluntary exercise done in secret as an accompaniment of prayer. In the face of danger, seen and unseen, known and unknown, spiritual or physical, they are to rely for help upon God alone. They have the assurance of God's word through Jesus, "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need." and through Peter, "He careth for you." So they may trust and take courage.

Many in the Anglican Church are converting to Catholicism - Tony Blair is an example, and many priests are transferring the allegiance. Let the exhortation of Paul be our watchword: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."