

## Aim of lesson

The purpose of this lesson is to consider the beliefs of another group of people so that we may be able to discuss both our beliefs and theirs from a position of some understanding. Inevitably it will become apparent that we believe that they are mistaken in their understanding of scripture and God's plan of salvation, but we must recognise that their views are held sincerely and that many try to live according to their principles. We should not ridicule the beliefs of others but rather assert the doctrines of scripture firmly, with gentleness and consideration.

## Bible background

2 Peter 1:19-21

## Preparation required

It goes without saying that there is far too much material in the students' notes for you to cover in one week; it has been included because of its potential for future reference. You will need to decide on some parts to deal with. One suggestion would be to cover the sections on 'Popes and Councils', 'Papal Succession - passed on from Peter?', and 'Confession', since these all deal with the authority and role of the Roman Catholic clergy.

## Suggested outline of lesson

### 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 Roman Catholic church is equally authoritative. Furthermore, it is asserted that a correct interpretation of the scriptures can only be made by the church and not by individuals. Hence the authority and doctrinal interpretation of the church supersedes all else.

The Pope, as head of the Roman Catholic church, also claims a unique and all-powerful authority in all matters of doctrine and practice. He claims to be 'Christ's representative on earth', the direct successor of the Apostle Peter and, under certain conditions, to speak and decree with divine authority (called ex-cathedra). This results in a belief in a progressive revelation of the will of God which allows the Roman Catholic church to believe and teach doctrines which are not found in scripture at all. The list in the Students' notes illustrates the way in which doctrines have been added over the centuries since the Bible was completed.

### Beliefs shared with others

Roman Catholics believe many of the unscriptural beliefs of Christendom. These include beliefs 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

It must also be recognised that 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 reality of the resurrection of Jesus. They also uphold many of the scriptural teachings on morality and behaviour so often ignored or rejected by other churches.

### Distinctive differences

As well as their particular approach to the Bible and the authority of the Pope, Roman Catholics hold several doctrines shared only and in part with the Eastern Orthodox church. They are not taught in scripture and in many cases are directly opposed to Bible teaching; this is particularly so with regard to the doctrines of salvation. Such teachings include the following and further details may be found in the Mutual Class Essay written by Brother Dennis Gillett and included with these notes. Leaders may wish to discuss each or selected topics from this list and ask the class to compare with the teachings of scripture and our doctrines. In each case it should be emphasised that such Roman Catholic teachings are additions without scriptural justification (as opposed to misunderstandings of scripture teaching).

- Purgatory and atoning for sins
- Limbo
- Sacraments
- The Virgin Mary
- Prayers to Mary and saints

- Images and relics
- The Eucharist

## **Another source of information**

*An Appeal to Roman Catholics*, A D Norris (Christadelphian Office)

## **Relevance to our lives**

It is important that our young people know why we believe what we believe and can defend their beliefs if necessary.

## **Prayer**

'Teach us, O Lord, to deal gently with others whilst holding fast to the doctrines revealed in your word. Help us to value the clear teaching of scripture and accept it as the only authority in the things we believe and the way we try to live'. Amen.

## **Other suggestions for activities**

You might like to discuss:

1. The Roman Catholic Church in Prophecy. Many Bible students, including many non-Christadelphians, believe they have identified the Roman Catholic church in Bible prophecy, particularly in the book of Revelation. It is suggested that the Roman Catholic church and the Pope in particular will be a focus of opposition to the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns to the earth. The apparent strengthening of the Roman Catholic church in 'Protestant' countries and its dominance and influence in 'Catholic' countries could also be discussed.
2. Christian Behaviour. The Roman Catholic church also has particular beliefs about discipleship, some of which often make the headlines: in particular their teaching against abortion and artificial means of birth control. These could be mentioned though detailed discussion will depend on the particular group doing the lesson. There are also later lessons which will deal with these topics.