

# THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

by Wes Tracy and Stan Ingersol<sup>1</sup>

## Focus

Throughout the world, 1.05 billion claim to be Roman Catholic. Twenty-four percent of the United States population identified themselves as Catholics in 2001.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, all the Wesleyan-Holiness groups added together would total something less than 2 million persons.

Wesleyan-Holiness folks are basically in harmony with the Roman Catholics on the doctrines of the Trinity, the Son of God, the Holy Spirit, sin, and redemption. Differences arise over the place of the Bible—final authority for us, one of several authorities for them. We do not venerate Mary or forbid birth control, but we do oppose abortion, homosexual activity, and adultery as Catholics do. We, as Protestants, affirm salvation by grace alone through faith. Catholics see grace as the primary means of salvation, but one must partially pay for salvation through various disciplines, service, and suffering. Protestants also disagree with the Catholic dogma of confession to a priest.

## BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Ephesians 4:4-6; Matthew 16:17-19; Revelation 7:9-10

## COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

### Introduction

Though outcast and outlawed, the early Christians conquered the Roman Empire. The Holy Spirit descended on the 120 believers on the Day of Pentecost and set that little community of faith ablaze with evangelical fire. When the hammer of persecution struck the Jerusalem church like an anvil, the sparks of divine fire showered the Mediterranean world as those heroes of faith went everywhere preaching the gospel. That church, like Jesus, belongs to all of us who take the name Christian. That church called itself the “catholic” or “universal” church of Jesus Christ at least as early as A.D. 110.

### The Early Years

The community of faith we now call the Roman Catholic Church came into being in A.D. 312. At that time, Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire. By 381, Emperor Theodosius made it illegal to practice any other faith in the Empire.

The growth of Christianity accelerated. Powerful centers of Christian influence developed in Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Byzantium, Carthage, Ephesus, and Rome. More and more, the Bishop of Rome came to be recognized as the “first among equals” in the fellowship of bishops. Rome was located at the heart of the Empire, was home to the fastest growing part of the Church, and was building a reputation as the champion of orthodox teachings. While Asian and African believers touted heresies, Rome remained true to the core of the faith.

The years between 325 and 787 formed the era of the seven councils at which the Christian church hammered out its orthodoxy. Councils at Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon clarified the standard Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the nature of Christ. These dogmas were confirmed by Ecumenical Councils in 553 and 680 and still form orthodox Christian beliefs. The last Ecumenical Council, 787, dealt with the veneration of icons.

## Political and Religious Power

When Attila the Hun threatened Rome in the fifth century, it was Pope Leo I who saved the city, not the civil emperor. A few years later when the Vandals sacked Rome, it was Leo who limited the destruction to 14 days and more or less saved the city. At the same time that these things were going on, Leo found time to write and deliver the defining doctrine of the Trinity that carried the day at the Council of Chalcedon. He also established the doctrine of the papacy as Peter's own office and the pope as the very voice of Peter and Christ. Thus, secular and sacred leadership were combined in the church's highest office. The pope assumed authority of king and emperor of the empire and the church.

With the church in charge (more or less) of both the secular and religious seats of power, we should expect a veritable millennial reign of peace and paradise. Well, you would think that, but you would be wrong. The millennium between 500 and 1500 produced events that would provoke no one to think of peace or paradise.

Still, the Roman Catholic Church did a lot of good. It was the fountain of learning, the force for civilization that parried the blows of the invading barbarians, established rule by law, and became the most stable organization in Western Europe. Monasteries served as mission frontiers, and the gospel was carried to every nook and cranny of Europe.

But the lures of worldly power proved too strong. The papacy and other high offices became the political plums for which no sacrifice in terms of honor and character was too great to pay. Popes sold ecclesiastical positions to the highest bidder and then created new positions so they could ring up still more sales. Family members and "buddies" of the popes were made cardinals and bishops. By the end of the eighth century, the popes ruled not only the Papal States in Italy but most of Portugal, much of Spain, and all of England, Ireland, Bulgaria, Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily, from which revenues were energetically extracted. Taxes were levied on Christians, extortion was practiced, indulgences peddled. Popes tortured competitors, poisoned opponents, openly took mistresses and sired children, and presided over the grossest sexual orgies imaginable.

Some Catholics say that one sure sign the papacy is divinely ordained is that it survived the millennium of horrid abuse, inordinate ambition, and monstrous lust inflicted on the church by some of its leaders. Such abuses provoked the Protestant Reformation and eventually the Catholic Counter-Reformation, as men of good conscience could no longer ignore the fact that something had gone terribly wrong with the "Christian" enterprise. Purging, renewal, and reformation were necessary. It should be noted that it is unfair and inappropriate to hold today's devout Catholics responsible for the vile sins of wayward church officials long ago.

## Reformation and Counter-Reformation

At first, the Roman church did nothing when Luther and his German believers bolted from the Catholic flock. Many supposed, that like other hotheaded reformers, Luther would be excommunicated and, upon his death,

his following would fade away. Slowly the realization came that the rent in the church fellowship was permanent.

The attention of Catholic Christians turned back to basic reasons for the church's existence. A spiritual revival occurred through the influence of mystics. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was called to deal with the theological and administrative concerns that the clamor for reform had raised. After affirming that there would not have been a Protestant Reformation had it not been for the "ambition, avarice, and cupidity" of high-ranking clergy, the council proceeded to condemn the principles and written works of the Protestant Reformers. Theologically, the Council of Trent was an angry denunciation of Protestants. Traditional Catholic theology remained about the same. Preserved from the Protestant warriors were the pope as monarch, the seven sacraments, the Latin sacrificial mass, indulgences, icons, veneration of saints, confession to priests, and the primacy of church tradition over Scripture. The anger would be expressed in inquisitions, civil wars, and persecutions as both sides declared themselves the true church.

## The Modern Roman Catholic Councils

Two general councils of the Roman Catholic Church have transpired since the Council of Trent. Vatican I came to pass in 1869-70 in Rome, and moved to reinforce the power of the pope. It picked up the general doctrine of papal infallibility and made it specific dogma. Catholics were required to believe that when the pope makes official announcements (speaks *ex cathedra*) about the faith and practice of the church, it is the very voice of Saint Peter and Christ and is, therefore, infallible and not subject to challenge or change.

Vatican II was different. For the first time in history, a general Catholic conference was held *for* something, not *against* something. The purpose was to bring the church up to date and relevant to the everyday life of Christians. Most of the compromises and adjustments were, in fact, steps toward the principles of Protestantism. It seemed that the Catholic church was finally saying that those who had left her had good reason to do so.

The council moved toward democratizing the church, at least at the local level. For the first time they announced that the laity had a priestly service to fulfill by taking over many of the local church functions that had always before been left up to the priests. This stops short of the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, but it is a step in that direction. The liturgy was simplified. The mass was to be given in the language of the people—not in Latin.

While still affirming the Catholic Church as the true church, Vatican II declared that this did not mean that people in other churches would go to hell. Luther and Calvin were still heretics, but those who were raised in their traditions—raised in invincible ignorance of the true church—would not be held guilty by God or the Catholic Church. Thus, an official "respect" for Protestants was voiced. They were not termed heretics but "separated brethren." This was a radical change from Trent. Protestant churches could be a way to salvation, a preparation for the

Kingdom. Even other religions could be a way to God.

Scripture was given more prominence as the rule for faith and practice. It did not rise above tradition, councils, and *ex cathedra* pronouncements by the pope. But the Bible, almost as a courtesy to Protestants, seemed to be elevated to first among equals. Further, for the first time, lay study of the Bible was strongly encouraged. Since then, many Catholics have participated in an explosion of small-group Bible studies. The infallibility of the pope was muted by an equal emphasis on the importance and authority of the council of bishops.

The changes were so dramatic that many rank-and-file Catholics were not prepared for them. Conservatives thought the changes added up to compromise with the heretic Protestants and secular popular opinion. Many thought that the moves, while elevating the laity, diminished the priesthood. Roman Catholicism has had a sort of identity crisis after Vatican II.

### A Survey of Roman Catholic Beliefs

**The Triune God:** The orthodox beliefs about the Holy Trinity were worked out in the early Ecumenical Councils and are affirmed by Roman Catholics and by most Protestant churches.

**The Incarnation:** They clearly teach the orthodox doctrines about the Incarnation and the nature of Jesus Christ, that He was fully human and yet fully God.

**The Holy Spirit:** Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit is fully God and not just a messenger for God the Father and the Son. Protestants find no stronger ally than the Catholics when it comes to defending the standard doctrine of the Trinity—one divine essence, three distinct persons, with the totality of the essence dwelling concurrently in each person.

**The Virgin Birth and Resurrection:** Roman Catholics refer to the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew in support of the Incarnation, as do we. Catholics also teach the real, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**Mary:** Roman Catholics call Mary *theotokos*, the “Mother of God,” rather than the mother of Christ. This label has intended to protect the divinity of Jesus against certain early heresies. Catholics teach the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX made it mandatory for Catholics to believe that Mary was the only human being ever born without original sin. Catholic theology taught that original or Adamic sin is passed down genetically from generation to generation, thus the necessity for the Immaculate Conception of Mary in order to make the birth of the divine Son of God possible. Mary, they say, was without sin and “full of grace” from her conception. Thus she was free from the bent to sinning.

**Perpetual Virginitly:** Catholics teach that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. They regard the brothers of Jesus mentioned in the Bible as spiritual brothers or children of Joseph by a former marriage. They also are required to believe in the Assumption of Mary. The only *ex cathedra* pronouncement of a pope in the last 100

years included the teaching that at the end of Mary’s life Christ gave her victory over death, and since she had never sinned, she was “assumed” or “translated” directly to heaven into complete union with her Son.

**Praying to Mary:** Catholics pray to Mary, but not in the same way that they pray to God. They claim to *worship* God but only *venerate* Mary. They believe that given Mary’s special status as the Mother of God, she can help them by interceding with her Son in their behalf. Thus, they often pray for her to pray for them. She has a special place above all saints.

**Praying to Saints:** Again, they prefer the term veneration over prayer or worship, but prayer to deceased persons is a common practice among Catholics. To the Catholic mind, the line between the living and the dead is very faint. Persons alive or dead are considered church members whom we might ask to pray for us in much the same manner that you might ask your pastor to remember you in prayer as you face a tough decision. Among Protestants, the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” has replaced this kind of mediation practice.

**The Lord’s Supper:** The Lord’s Supper (Holy Communion, Eucharist) is one of the areas over which Catholics and Protestants have always disagreed. Both practice this holy sacrament but disagree about what goes on during the service. Catholics insist that the bread and wine actually become the real body and blood of Jesus. Most Protestants regard the bread and wine or juice as *symbols* of Jesus’ broken body and shed blood. Both traditions encourage spiritual examination before receiving the sacrament. Fasting and confession to the priest of any mortal sin must precede Communion for Catholic believers. The sacrament also nourishes spiritual life, draws us closer to God and to each other, and foreshadows the return of our Lord. For Catholics, it is also a sacrifice that occurs during the mass. Drawing on the idea of the Pass-over lamb whose blood saved the Israelites, Catholics see the Eucharist as a sacrifice for their own sins. The real Christ is present in the bread and wine, they believe, and the body and blood of Jesus are offered to God as a holy sacrifice in payment for their sins.

**Baptism:** Catholics teach that baptism brings four blessings: the forgiveness of sin (personal and original), regeneration (new life in Christ), union with God, and membership in the Church. The rather elaborate ceremony includes baptism by immersion or pouring.

Though baptism is the occasion of forgiveness of sin, Catholics do not say that baptism saves them. Baptism is necessary to salvation, but it alone does not save. Catholics are careful not to say they are “saved.” Instead of salvation as a singular experience, they see it as a journey. It is a journey begun in baptism, the first of three initiation sacraments. Baptism is followed by first Communion and then by confirmation.

**Confirmation:** Confirmation is the third initiation rite that gets one started on the path to heaven. Baptism brings forgiveness and regeneration, Catholics believe. Holy

Communion is, among other things, a sacrament of sanctifying grace. Confirmation is also a sacrament of sanctification. More precisely, it is viewed as giving the gift of the Holy Spirit to the believer.

**Other Sacraments:** The Roman Catholic catechism lists seven sacraments categorized in this manner. Three sacraments of initiation—baptism, Eucharist, and confirmation; two of healing—penance (or reconciliation) and healing of the sick; two of service and mission—holy orders and marriage. Most Protestant groups recognize only baptism and Holy Communion as sacraments.

**Salvation by Grace Alone:** Roman Catholics teach that grace is the primary source of salvation. Without the gracious love of God and the atonement of Christ, no one would have any hope of salvation. But given that, they teach that one must by his or her own works, piety, suffering, and service earn, or partially pay for, their own salvation.

John Wesley, our spiritual ancestor, tried to find a middle road between the classic Protestant view of grace and Catholic view of works. He said that good works (acts of piety and acts of mercy) were necessary in a secondary sort of way, but that they never were to be regarded as earning or meriting salvation or even a little part of it. Good works were simply what any Christian should and would do. Wesley declared that he did not regard a person as having one grain of faith if he (or she) was not willing “to spend and be spent” for others.

**Penance:** Penance is one step in the Catholic practice of Confession or Reconciliation. First is *contrition* or sorrow for one’s sins. Second comes *confession* to a priest. Third, the priest weighs the offense and assigns a proper *satisfaction* or *penance*. This is an effort to make up for the damage that one’s sins caused. The closest thing to this in Evangelical teaching is the practice of restitution. The convert is expected to pay back money that was stolen, apologize for falsehoods whispered, and so on.

**Inspiration of the Bible:** Catholics believe the Bible is inspired, but it does not have the authority for them as it does for most Protestant believers. We believe that the Bible is the final authority on matters of faith and salvation. Catholics hold that the church created the Bible for its own use and therefore has power to add books to the canon and interpret the Bible officially. Though they view the Bible as the Word of God, they hold that church tradition, infallible papal decrees, and theological councils have authority equal to that of the Scriptures.

**The One True Church:** The Roman Catholic Church believes itself to be the one true church. This does not mean that Catholics believe that other Christians are going to be lost eternally. They consider Protestants as “separated brethren.” Vatican II stated that the sin of separation of the Protestant Reformers cannot be held against current Protestants. Rather the Catholic Church “accepts them with respect and affection as brothers.”

## IN-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today’s subject.

### 1. Differences

Ask your class members to offer personal experiences they may have had with the Catholic Church and to give their impressions of Catholics they may have been associated with. Then ask your class to name differences they perceive between Christians from a Roman Catholic tradition and those from a Holiness tradition.

### 2. The Church Established

Ask someone to read Matthew 16:17-19 aloud to the group. Then ask the participants to respond to this:

- Does this sound to you like Jesus was establishing the church that became the Roman Catholic Church?
- How could you interpret this passage differently?

### 3. Definition

Share the following information with your young adults: “The word ‘catholic’ means ‘universal.’ The dictionary defines ‘universal’ as ‘a distinct field or province of thought that forms a [single] closed system.’” The English word ‘universe’ comes from two Latin words: *uni* meaning one, and *versus* meaning to turn toward.”

Then ask the group to read Ephesians 4:4-6 in light of the above definition of “catholic” as one. Give them time to share any insights they have after the reading.

### 4. Religious Family Tree

In this lesson, and in every lesson this unit, show *Duplication Master No. 3* to help your students understand the various religious traditions and how they stand in relation to one another.

## PRESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today’s topic.

### 1. Becoming the Church

Present the material in the Commentary about the origins and historical council meetings of the Roman Catholic Church. In what ways do Protestants today share a com-

mon heritage with the Catholic Church? When did Protestants and Catholics officially separate from one another? What were the major points of difference between the Protestants and Catholics of Luther’s day?

## 2. Agree-Disagree

Use *Duplication Master No. 1* to guide a presentation of beliefs on which Protestants and Catholics agree and disagree. Allow your students opportunities to share their reactions to a particular belief at any point in the discussion.

## 3. Debate

Divide the class in half. Ask one half of the group to defend one of the statements below. Ask the other half to defend the other statement.

Statement 1: There should be one, universal Christian church.

Statement 2: There should not be one, universal Christian church.

# SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

### 1. Are You Saved?

Share these two sentences with your young adults: “Catholics are careful not to say they are ‘saved.’ Instead of salvation as a singular experience, they see it as a journey.”

Then, invite them to respond to this:

- Must Catholics become Protestants in order to go to heaven?
- Based on your answer, how can we best interact with our Catholic friends? Are they enemies of the faith, misguided seekers, or fellow Christians?

### 2. The Great Multitude

Ask someone to read Revelation 7:9-10 aloud to the group. Then ask the young adults how they react to hearing that scripture in light of today’s lesson.

### 3. What We All Believe

Use *Duplication Master No. 2* to close this session. Invite the young adults to recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed in unison.

Use *INTERSECT: Young Adult Discussion Starters* to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today’s lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

## Notes

1. All of the Commentary has been adapted from Wes Tracy and Stan Ingersol, *Here We Stand* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999), 96-108.

2. Statistics from <www.adherents.com>, 7-12-04.

3. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., s.v. “universal.”

## Selected Bibliography

Miller, Stephen M. *Misguiding Lights?* Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1991.

Tracy, Wes, and Stan Ingersol. *What Is a Nazarene?* Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1998.

# Agree-Disagree

- The Triune God
- The Incarnation
- The Holy Spirit
- The Virgin Birth and Resurrection
- Mary
- Perpetual Virginity
- Praying to Mary
- Praying to Saints
- The Lord's Supper
- Baptism
- Confirmation
- Other Sacraments
- Salvation by Grace Alone
- Penance
- Inspiration of the Bible
- The One True Church

# The Apostles' Creed

We believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
He descended to the dead;  
the third day He rose again from the dead;  
He ascended into heaven,  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.  
We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic\* church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

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\*universal

# A FAMILY TREE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

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