

Session 1: THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

FOCUS

There are many differences between those of us from a Wesleyan-Holiness tradition and those from a Catholic tradition. However, it might be our commonalities that are most surprising. The purpose of this study is delve into the beliefs of the Catholic church and to better understand our similarities, rather than our differences.

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Access the online version of the Leader's Guide at FoundryLeader.com using the password:

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 session.

Introduction

The Holy Spirit descended on the 120 believers on the Day of Pentecost and set that little community of faith ablaze with evangelical fire. That church called itself the "catholic" or "universal" church of Jesus Christ at least as early as AD 110.

The Early Years

The community of faith we now call the Roman Catholic Church came into being in AD 312. At that time, Emperor Constantine made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire.

The growth of Christianity accelerated. 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.

Political and Religious Power

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 throughout Europe.

But the lures of worldly power proved too strong. 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. 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.

Such abuses provoked the Protestant Reformation and eventually the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

At first, the Roman church did nothing when Luther and his German believers bolted from the Catholic flock. Slowly the realization came that the rent in the church fellowship was permanent.

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. Traditional Catholic theology remained nearly the same.

The Modern Roman Catholic Councils

Vatican I came to pass in 1869-70 in Rome. 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.

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. 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. 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. Protestants were not termed heretics but “separated brethren.”

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, seemed to be elevated to first among equals. Further, for the first time, lay study of the Bible was strongly encouraged.

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.

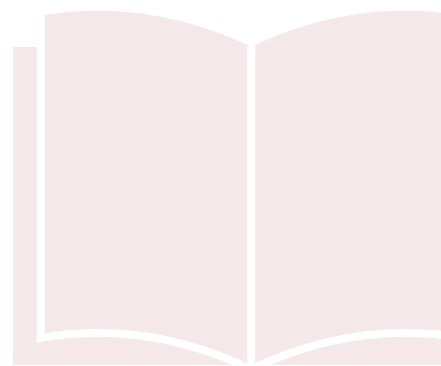
The Incarnation: They clearly teach the orthodox doctrines about the Incarnation and the nature of Jesus Christ, that He was fully human and yet fully God.

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.

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.

Perpetual Virginity: 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.



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. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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."

IN-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between group members as you introduce today's subject.

1. 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.'¹ 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.

2. Religious Family Tree

In this session, and in every session of this unit, show **Handout 1** to help your group 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 common 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. Debate

Divide the group 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.

3. One Body

Read Ephesians 4:4-6. Then ask,

- What is the message of this passage?
- How does it relate to our discussion today?

SUGGESTED READING

Here We Stand: Where Nazarenes Fit in the Religious Marketplace (Wesley Tracy and Stan Ingersol: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1999)

PRACTICE

Next week's session focuses on Hinduism and Buddhism. Encourage your group to do some reading and research during the week on these two religions.



SUMMARY OPTIONS

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

1. The Kingdom of God

Share these two sentences with our 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 be part of the kingdom of God? Why or why not?
- Based on your answer, how can we best interact with our Catholic friends? Are they misguided seekers or fellow Christians?
- In what ways can Catholics and Protestants work together to make a difference in the kingdom of God?

2. What We All Believe

Both Catholics and Protestants accept the Apostles' Creed. To close this session, invite young adults to recite the words of the Apostles' Creed in unison.

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.

*universal

by Wes Tracy and Stan Ingersol²

A FAMILY TREE OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

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