

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Roman Catholic Theology

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Different schools of theology arose very early in the church, but it remained essentially united for a thousand years despite schisms, heresies and bitter controversies. During this period the prominence of the see of Rome steadily increased. Its authoritarian claims were well advanced by the 11th century and certain doctrinal emphases became increasingly clear. It is only with the division between the Eastern and Western churches formalized in 1054 (the “Great Schism”) that we can speak more precisely of a Roman Catholic theology. The 16th-century rift with Protestantism at the Reformation sharpened its distinctiveness.

Roman Catholic theology is so comprehensive that it cannot easily be summarized. It is necessary to distinguish between official teaching and the opinions expressed by the many schools of theology. The teaching office of the church, the *Magisterium*, presents a far more monolithic structure than the diversity of the schools might suggest. There was, for instance, a major clash in the Middle Ages between the followers of Duns Scotus and those of Thomas Aquinas. It has been the role of the bishops of Rome and of ecumenical councils to sift the findings of the various theological schools. This was a significant part of the work of the Council of Trent (1545–63), which not only took a firm stance in the face of the challenge of Protestantism, but also anathematized many of the opinions that had been debated in medieval theology. Even then a large number of options were left open.

Yet even papal pronouncements and conciliar definitions are recognized to be historically conditioned. They are constantly open to fresh interpretation and application by the living authority of the church. This results in a remarkable elasticity in elucidation, which can be a source of bewilderment to non-Catholics. It also points up a fundamental factor in Roman Catholic theology, which is its emphasis on a centralized priestly authority. This is focused in the bishop of Rome in his responsibility for the universal church, supported by the college of bishops. Though it has been variously interpreted, apostolic succession in the ministry requires ordination in the line of the successors of Peter and being in communion with the see of Rome. Sacramental graces are bestowed through the priesthood, which thus exercises a very great authority in the church’s life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) sought to rediscover the role of the laity, to which the Catholic

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Church has always paid lip-service, but clerical control is firmly built into the doctrine of the priesthood.

There is, nevertheless, much common ground with Christians of other traditions. Roman Catholics accept the same Scriptures as normative, though they include the writings in the Apocrypha: they hold to the same early creeds: they believe in the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. But the teaching authority of the church enables them to extrapolate from the Scriptures through a belief in doctrinal development, ably expounded by Newman in the 19th century. What therefore appears to be unacceptable dogma to the outsider will still be claimed as scriptural. The Marian dogmas of the immaculate conception and of the assumption illustrate the point. The claim to papal infallibility only compounds the problem.

Early medieval theology was evolved largely in a monastic setting (see Monastic Theology). The Rule of Benedict (c. 540) had a long-lasting influence, where the “divine office” (worship at regular hours) was the inspiration for the work, study and private prayer that filled the rest of the day. Theology in such a context aimed at holiness and dedication of life. A radical change came with scholasticism in the eleventh century. This was a largely new method, of which Anselm was regarded as father, though some of its principles were traced back to Augustine. It held that reason had some access to the truths of faith, so faith should be shown to be reasonable even for the unbeliever. Anselm was not a rationalist: faith was still supreme over reason.

Meanwhile Peter Abelard was formulating many of the questions that would be faced by the scholastics. Their supreme achievement was the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. The rediscovery of Aristotle turned theology into a scientific discipline. Reason and faith were sharply differentiated. Philosophy was now the tool of theology, with the consequent danger of theology becoming increasingly divorced from experience. So fundamental did Aquinas become to Catholic theology that philosophical training has for centuries played a far more important part in preparation for the priesthood than scriptural studies. Only recently has this pattern begun to be reversed.

Philosophical categories can quickly become dated. When they have been hallowed by theological use, they can become a serious hindrance. For example, the concept of “transubstantiation” in the mass, whereby the bread and wine are understood to become the body and blood of Christ, was originally used to try to correct a physical literalism. Ultimately it had the reverse effect. At the Reformation it became a major subject of dispute. To all appearances the priest at the mass was offering again the sacrifice of Christ. Although such an interpretation would be hotly denied by most Catholics today, liturgical language still uses the words “We offer Christ”. Contemporary theologians find

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the Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accidents” a very inadequate theological tool.

The central theological debate at the Reformation concerned the nature of grace. The situation was confused by the fact that when Catholics spoke of justification, they also included sanctification, whereas Protestants sharply differentiated between the two. Catholic theology has long been concerned with the question of human freedom—what part does man play in his salvation, if he is at all a responsible agent? It was such issues that the Council of Trent sought to clarify. This Council was held to be ecumenical by the Catholic Church. It confirmed the seven sacraments as instituted by Christ, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the equal authority of Scripture and tradition as sources of truth, and the right of the church to declare how the Bible should be interpreted. Its stance against the Reformation pervaded Catholic theology well beyond Vatican I (1869–70) and affected Catholic opposition to the whole trend of the 18th-century Enlightenment.

Modern developments in Catholic theology include the liturgical movement and the return first to patristic studies and then to the Bible. The Second Vatican Council opened the door to ecumenical dialogue and laid the foundations for the construction of liberation theology in Latin America.

At the heart of Roman Catholic theology lies its exclusive understanding of the church and its authority. Its teaching authority stands over that of the Bible and its interpretation. Its priestly authority has control over the church’s sacramental life. Yet there is great diversity of opinion among individuals, discernible even in the documents of a Council such as Vatican II. Far from being unchanging, the Catholic Church is constantly in process of development: it is the direction that it will take which remains unpredictable.

Bibliography

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