

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What Think Ye of Rome—Part 1

An Evangelical Appraisal of Contemporary Catholicism

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SYNOPSIS

A crucial starting point in an appraisal of the Roman Catholic church is to understand some of the unique sociological features of contemporary Catholicism. Erroneous classifications of Catholicism frequently fail to grasp the significant diversity within the church. While the church's unity is of central importance, Catholicism possesses incredible diversity — the church is anything but monolithic. This diversity is illustrated by the six major theological types of Catholics: ultratraditionalist, traditionalist, liberal, charismatic/evangelical, cultural, and popular folk. A Protestant appraisal of Catholicism should then examine the areas of genuine doctrinal agreement between Catholicism and Protestantism (especially evident in the creeds), before moving on to analyze the significant areas of difference.

One of the most perplexing issues evangelical Protestants face is how to understand, evaluate, and ultimately classify the Roman Catholic church. Few topics prove to be as controversial as the question of just how Protestants view and relate to Catholics. There exists no universal agreement or consensus among conservative Protestants in this regard. The spectrum of opinion ranges from one extreme to another.

On the one hand, some people hold to an optimistic but seemingly naive ecumenism that sees no essential or substantial differences between the church of Rome and historic

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Protestantism. This camp views Catholicism as authentically Christian, but largely ignores the doctrinal controversies that sparked the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. They seem to only take into account the vast areas of agreement between Protestants and Catholics. At the other extreme is a band of Protestant fundamentalists who are literally rabid in their denunciation of Catholicism. This assemblage (usually led by vociferous ex-Catholics) dismisses Catholicism outright as an inherently unbiblical and evil institution. They not only consider the Roman church to be doctrinally deviant, but also the efficient cause of many or most of the social, political, and moral ills evident in the world today. Genuinely “anti-Catholic,” this faction views the Catholic church as the “Whore of Babylon,” a pseudo-Christian religion or cult. They seem to concentrate exclusively on those various doctrines that sharply divide Protestants and Catholics.

I believe most evangelical scholars who are knowledgeable about Catholicism would feel uncomfortable with both of these positions. Unfortunately, however, these two camps often operate as if their own views are self-evident and exhaustive. Both camps (especially the anti-Catholics) virtually anathematize anyone who is not squarely in their camp. If one is critical of Catholicism because of Reformational doctrinal distinctives, the first camp accuses that person of being divisive, not supporting Christian unity in this important age of ecumenism. In contrast, if one defends certain Catholic beliefs as being authentically Christian, the second camp accuses that person of being a betrayer of the Protestant Reformation and fraternizing with the enemy. *Both* camps fail to see that there is an acceptable alternative position between the two extremes.

This series of articles will attempt to provide some needed balance to this important discussion by doing several things. First, we will seek an accurate understanding of contemporary Catholicism by exploring some of the unique sociological features of the Catholic religion. We will consider the Catholic church’s size and sphere of influence, as well as its unity and contrasting diversity. We will look at the major theological types or classifications of Catholics, and explore the uniqueness of the American Catholic church. Second, we will begin our theological appraisal of Catholicism by probing the common areas of agreement between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism.

In Part Two we will consider serious problems with both the anti-Catholic and uncritically ecumenical Protestant views of Catholicism. Then, in Parts Three and Four, the most important doctrines on which Catholics and Protestants disagree will be carefully examined. At the close of this series the necessary groundwork will have been laid to reach some conclusions about how evangelical Protestants should view Roman Catholics.

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Our goal will be to steer clear of the extreme and erroneous classifications of Catholicism described above by providing an evaluation which is fair and representative of Catholicism, but genuinely evangelical in its perspective, and squarely rooted in the central theology of the Protestant Reformation.

Defining “Evangelical”

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Before we begin our evangelical appraisal of Catholicism, we need to give some definition to what is meant by the often vague and ambiguous term “evangelical.” The term is derived from the Greek noun *euangelion*, which has been translated “good news,” “glad tidings,” or “gospel.” Therefore, at the most fundamental level, being an evangelical Christian means being a believer in and proclaimer of the gospel (the good news that sinful humanity can find redemption in the doing and dying of Christ [1 Cor. 15:1-4]).

If this were all there was to being an evangelical, however, virtually every Christian group would claim this title. Obviously, the term carries a deeper historical and theological meaning. Lutheran theologian and apologist John Warwick Montgomery has summarized well the historical roots and doctrinal foundations that stand behind evangelical Christianity:

To my way of thinking, “evangelicals” are bound together not by virtue of being members of the same Protestant confessional stream, but by their firm adherence to certain common theological tenets and emphases. These latter would summarize as follows:

- (1) Conviction that the Bible alone is God’s objectively inerrant revelation to man;
- (2) Subscription to the Ecumenical creeds as expressing the Trinitarian heart of biblical religion;
- (3) Belief that the Reformation confessions adequately convey the soteriological essence of the scriptural message, namely, salvation by grace alone through faith in the atoning death and resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ;
- (4) Stress upon personal, dynamic, living commitment to Christ and resultant prophetic witness for Him to the unbelieving world; and
- (5) A strong eschatological perspective. Whether a member of a large “inclusivist” church or of a small “separated” body, whether Anglican or Pentecostal, an

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evangelical regards himself in home territory where the above theological atmosphere exists.¹

This concise summary cogently sets forth the belief system that stands behind authentic evangelical Christianity. And it is this broad base that evangelicals affirm to be the very bedrock of Christianity itself. It is from this historic evangelical perspective that we begin our appraisal of contemporary Roman Catholicism.



UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S CATHOLICISM

Some of the more striking features of Catholicism include its imposing size, its vast sphere of influence, its unity, and its contrasting diversity. Gaining an appreciation of each of these characteristics can help us better understand contemporary Catholicism.

Size. The size of the Roman church is astounding. Just less than eighteen percent (17.7) of the entire world population is Roman Catholic (a whopping total of over 928 million people, soon to be a billion).² Additionally, the church is truly universal in scope, having parishes in virtually every major part of the world. There is a significant Catholic presence on every continent, with the possible exception of Asia. The following are some percentages of Catholics in the world: Africa, 13.9; North America, 24.2; Middle (central) America, 86.6; South America, 88.9; Europe, 39.9; Oceania, 26.5; and Asia, 2.7.³

In terms of other religious bodies, the Roman Catholic population is larger than the other two main branches of historic Christianity combined (Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism). There are approximately the same number of Catholics in the world as there are Muslims. The Catholic population in the United States is presently well over 55 million (approximately 22 percent of the U.S. population),⁴ and by some Gallup estimates may actually be significantly higher.⁵ By comparison, the second largest Christian

¹ John Warwick Montgomery, *Ecumenicity, Evangelicals, and Rome* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), 16-18. While this writer holds firmly to the full and complete inerrancy of Scripture (and believes that the "limited inerrancy" view is seriously flawed), some would be reluctant to exclude those who are, except for their rejection of inerrancy, clearly evangelical in belief and practice. For further discussion concerning the proper definition of the word "evangelical," see Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), s.v. "Evangelicalism," 379-82.

² 1993 *Catholic Almanac* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1992), 367.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁵ A recent Gallup survey estimates that the present U.S. Catholic population may be as high as 65 million (28%). See Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Myth* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 109.

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denomination in the United States is the Southern Baptists with approximately 14 million members.

Sphere of Influence. The influence that the Catholic church has had on the world is incalculable. One of Western civilization's greatest influences has undoubtedly been Roman Catholicism. In many respects, European culture has been directly shaped and molded by events surrounding the Vatican. From the fourth century to the present, Roman Catholic thought has had a momentous influence in the areas of politics, economics, history, science, education, theology, philosophy, literature, art, and numerous other areas of culture. The church has wielded great power over the centuries, often spreading enlightenment and benevolence among humanity, but at some points corruption and tyranny.⁶

While modern-day Catholicism does not exert the kind of control over Western culture that it did in the high Middle Ages, it is still, as the great Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan put it, "the most formidable religious institution in the history of America and of the world."⁷ Evangelicals should be interested in the study of Catholicism if for no other reason than its immense size and vast sphere of influence. This broadly based system of religious and philosophical thought has captured the hearts and minds of untold millions through most of Christian history.

Unity. The unity of the church is of central importance within Catholicism. The Catholic church is understood to be a *union*. This oneness is spoken of when Catholics refer to the "four marks of the church": (1) one, (2) holy, (3) catholic, and (4) apostolic. Ideally, this essential oneness is to be expressed in many aspects within the church: doctrine, ethical teaching, authority, the visible and concrete institution, historical continuity, and sacraments.⁸ Unquestionably, one of Catholicism's greatest strengths over the centuries has been its sense of unity and historical continuity. Many converts to Catholicism identify this as their central reason for considering the claims of the Roman church.

Catholic apologists frequently try to marshal the argument that it is this oneness that identifies the Roman church as the one true and authentic church of Jesus Christ. And in certain respects, the Catholic church has fared better in terms of unity than its rival — Protestantism. However, the Protestant evangelical rejoinder is that they, rather than Rome, are more faithfully unified in *authentic* apostolic doctrine. Additionally, if we are to take the Catholic argument seriously, then it could be pointed out that the Eastern

⁶ See Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 12.

⁸ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 245-71. Kreeft discusses several other ways in which the Catholic church expresses its essential oneness.

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Orthodox church has remained more consistently unified in certain respects than has the Roman church. Regardless, this strong emphasis on unity within Catholicism has left many non-Catholics with the impression that Catholicism is in actuality a monolith — a church completely uniform in belief and practice and marching to the same tune.

Diversity. Catholicism has probably never been the strict monolith that outsiders have perceived it to be. However, even 50 years ago it still carried many of the unyielding and inflexible characteristics associated with a monolithic structure. In many respects this era of seeming invariability and immutability came to an end with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). This council truly revolutionized the church.⁹ It was not so much a revolution in doctrine as in perspective. Vatican II allowed the “wind of change to blow through the church.” This change created an environment that allowed for greater freedom in theology and practice — and a greater tolerance of diversity.¹⁰ In times past the measure of being Catholic was submission to the teaching and discipline of the magisterium (official teaching office). Since Vatican II, however, being Catholic may mean many different things.

Today the Catholic church is incredibly divergent. Its diversity is actually on the level of that within Protestantism. This diversity is evidenced in the various types of Catholics one finds in the church. While the *genus* (class) remains Catholic, there are several different *species* (varieties). Evangelical theologian Kenneth Kantzer calls it “the Catholic montage.”

Different Types of Catholics

The following varieties of contemporary Catholics should not be understood as exact classifications. Not every Catholic fits neatly into one particular type — there is significant overlapping. (Unfortunately, this overlapping has sometimes caused outside observers to lump differing viewpoints together.) In addition, the types reflect both a sociological and theological assessment, and are best understood in terms of a paradigm (an example or model).

Ultratraditionalist Catholics. Ultratraditionalist Catholics consider themselves nonrevisionist Catholics. They are extremely critical of the changes brought about by Vatican II and wish the church would return to its earlier course. They can be somewhat radical in their defense of “old time” Catholicism. For example, they would be happy if the mass (liturgical service centered around the Eucharist) were still recited in Latin. They hold the traditions and hierarchy of the church in highest esteem (except when the

⁹ See David F. Wells, *Revolution in Rome* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972).

¹⁰ George Carey, *A Tale of Two Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 7-15.

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hierarchy steps on their nonrevisionist toes). They would strongly affirm classical Catholicism as revealed in the ancient creeds, councils, conciliar documents (i.e., documents produced during councils), and papal encyclicals (i.e., letters). They are generally suspicious and intolerant toward other divergent groups within Catholicism.

One of the best examples of an ultratraditionalist was the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre of Switzerland who stated that the reforms of Vatican II “spring from heresy and end in heresy.”¹¹ During his reign as archbishop, Lefebvre continued to ordain priests even after the pope ordered him to stop, and he continued to use the form of the mass as prescribed at the Counter Reformation Council of Trent instead of its modern form.¹²

While staunch in their beliefs and commitment to nonrevisionist Catholicism, the ultratraditionalists are small in number and their influence within the church is not of great significance. The ultratraditionalists should probably be seen as the more extreme segment within the traditionalist camp.

Traditionalist Catholics. The traditionalist Catholics in many ways make up the backbone of the church hierarchy. A *Christianity Today* editorial described the group this way: “This important segment of the church, specially powerful among the laity of the national churches, the older clergy, and the bishops and upper level of the hierarchy, adheres to the whole of creedal Roman Catholicism and obedience to the church as interpreted by the pope.”¹³ The traditionalists are very critical of liberalism and modernism within the church, but they are generally accepting of the reforms found in Vatican II. Although this group’s influence diminished somewhat after Vatican II, they have enjoyed a revival during John Paul II’s reign as pope. While Pope John Paul may be considered progressive in many of his decisions concerning the church, at heart his doctrinal views are those of a traditional Catholic. This is especially illustrated in his beliefs concerning the Virgin Mary.

Liberal Catholics. Liberal Catholics have substantially departed from traditional Catholicism, and one might say from traditional Christianity as a whole. While liberals differ among themselves in the degree to which they depart from classical Catholicism, like their Protestant counterparts they have conceded much to the rationalistic unbelief so prevalent in Western culture since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period. They

¹¹ Andrew T. LePeau and Noel Becchetti, “Understanding Roman Catholicism,” *His Magazine*, April 1981, 22-25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ “What Separates Evangelicals and Catholics?” *Christianity Today*, 25 February 1983, 12-15.

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have in effect replaced the Bible and church authority with the authority of human reason.

Many liberal Catholic scholars, such as the German scholar Hans Kung, have questioned the infallibility of the pope, church councils, and the Bible. Others, going farther, have clearly abandoned traditional Christological beliefs and the miracles of the New Testament, and have forsaken almost completely the orthodoxy of the ecumenical creeds. Liberals also question the ecclesiastical practice of an exclusively male priesthood, and many have cast off the church's teaching regarding such moral issues as birth control, abortion, and homosexuality.

Some within the liberal camp have been strongly affiliated with liberation theology, especially in Latin America. Liberation theology interprets the gospel in terms of liberation from poverty and social oppression, and the reconstruction of society — usually along Marxist lines.¹⁴ Catholics who embrace liberation theology often show an amazing disregard of traditional doctrinal issues.

Another subset within the broader category of liberal Catholics is what might be called “Eastern mystical” or “New Age” Catholicism. This group seeks to blend Catholic and New Age spirituality. Orthodox Christian beliefs about God and Christ are, to varying degrees, replaced with distinctive New Age beliefs such as pantheism (God is all and all is God), panentheism (God is intrinsically in the world and the world is intrinsically in God), and emphasis upon the Cosmic Christ (a universal, impersonal spirit or cosmic force). Probably the leading “Catholic guru” is Dominican priest Matthew Fox with his “creation-centered spirituality.”¹⁵

Since Vatican II, this liberal camp as a whole has grown significantly within the scholarly ranks of the church, and to a lesser degree among the laity (although both the liberation theology and New Age subsets have strong lay components). Pope John Paul has attempted to curb this influence, however, by disciplining some of the more outspoken liberal scholars (for example, both Kung and Fox have been disciplined by the church). This crackdown has been met with some resistance, especially in America.

Charismatic/Evangelical Catholics. 1992 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Catholic charismatic renewal movement. Emerging from humble beginnings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1967, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the Catholic charismatic

¹⁴ See Ron Rhodes, “Christian Revolution in Latin America: The Changing Face of Liberation Theology,” *Christian Research Journal*, Winter 1991, 8-14.

¹⁵ See Mitchell Pacwa, S.J., “Catholicism for the New Age: Matthew Fox and Creation-Centered Spirituality,” *Christian Research Journal*, Fall 1992, 14-19, 29-31.

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renewal flourish in the church. While it experienced slow decline in the 1980s, it remains one of the most energetic forces in the Catholic church. It is estimated that 10 million American Catholics have been involved in the renewal, and that worldwide Catholic involvement may be as high as 50 to 65 million.¹⁶ Catholics now make up more than a fifth of the worldwide Pentecostal-charismatic constituency.

Like the broader movement, charismatic Catholics emphasize the *charisma* or gifts of the Holy Spirit, the importance of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit-filled life. Charismatic Catholics tend to be more evangelical in belief, emphasizing personal faith and trust in Christ, and the assurance of salvation.¹⁷ Reformed theologian J. I. Packer comments concerning charismatic Catholic piety:

It is a fact that in charismatic Catholicism, joyful trust in Christ as one's sin-bearing Savior and loving fellowship with him in his risen life have shifted the traditional devotional focus away from the somber disciplines of self-denial and suffering and away, too, from the anxieties about merit and destiny to which the formulations of the Council of Trent naturally give rise. Does Catholic doctrine as Trent defined it permit assurance of salvation based on once-for-all justification through faith? Opinions, both Protestant and Catholic, differ about that. Nevertheless, Catholic charismatics do observably enjoy this assurance, while yet maintaining humility, a sense of sin, and a life of repentance often more successfully than do their Protestant counterparts. And Protestant and Catholic charismatic teaching on the Christian life is to all intents and purposes identical. Is this not significant for the Christian future?¹⁸

It is true that many charismatic Catholics describe themselves as "born again, Spirit-filled Catholics."

Along with possessing a Pentecostal piety, charismatic Catholics generally tend to give Scripture more of an authoritative place in their personal spiritual lives. However, many (though by no means all) charismatic Catholics also have a strong devotion to Mary. While the issue of Marian devotion tends to be a stumbling block between evangelical Protestants and charismatic Catholics,¹⁹ evangelical Protestants surely have more in common with charismatic Catholics than with any other type of Catholics.

¹⁶ Julia Duin, "Charismatics on the Pentecostal Trail," *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1992, 25.

¹⁷ Stephen Board, "Are Catholic Charismatics 'Evangelicals'?" *Eternity*, July 1978, 12-16.

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, "Rome's Persistent Renewal," *Christianity Today*, 22 June 1992, 19.

¹⁹ See Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

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Long-time renewal leader, Ralph Martin, is one of the most recognizable American Catholic charismatics/evangelicals.

Cultural Catholics. The majority of Catholics in the world probably fit into the category of cultural Catholics. This group is unlike any other type we have considered above. Their identification as “Catholic” is simply more cultural and social than religious. They might rightly be called “womb to tomb Catholics.” They often are born in a Hispanic, Irish, Polish, or Italian family — and are therefore baptized, married, and buried in the Catholic church — but have little or no concern about spiritual matters.

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Cultural Catholics do not understand Catholicism, nor do they seriously follow its ethical teaching. But they nevertheless have an emotional commitment to the Catholic church. When they attend mass, it is out of habit or family obligation, not religious conviction. Being Catholic to them is essentially a cultural identity (they may even be secular or humanistic in their thinking). This is not unlike how some Jews are merely ethnically or culturally Jewish, rather than adherents to Judaism. It is also like the person who is Lutheran *only* because he happens to be born into a German family, or the Anglican who is *only* Anglican because she was born into a British family. You see, it happens in Protestantism as well. Nominal Catholics, like nominal Protestants, do not understand Christianity, and they do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ. With all due respect, President John F. Kennedy would seem to have fit well the mold of a cultural Catholic.²⁰

Popular Folk Catholics. Popular folk Catholics are found especially in Central and South America. These Catholics are very eclectic in their religious thinking and practice. They often combine elements of an animistic or nature-culture religion (the primitive religious beliefs that associate the forces of nature and culture with myriads of spirits) with a traditional medieval Catholicism. The result is a syncretistic nightmare. People in countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina frequently engage in a religion composed of polytheism, occultic spiritism, and a superstitious form of Catholicism. This spiritual smorgasbord enslaves millions of Latin America’s peasantry.

Certainly, official Catholic teaching does not sanction this kind of syncretistic religiosity. In certain respects, however, the Catholic church remains culpable. First, the Catholic church has been negligent by failing to train these people to reject all forms of paganism and to embrace solely the Triune God of Christianity.²¹

²⁰ See Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (Toronto: The Free Press, 1991).

²¹ Some Catholic scholars and clergy have been greatly troubled by this syncretism, and have attempted to reform the Latin wing of the church in this regard. However, as a whole the church has virtually neglected this problem.

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Second, the unhealthy and unbiblical aspects of the Catholic understanding of the communion of saints (i.e., the belief in the unity and cooperation among believers in both this world and the next) has contributed to the problem. Even some Catholics in the United States virtually worship saints and the church has failed to take aggressive measures to correct this serious problem of idolatry. It is actually much worse when it comes to devotion to the Virgin Mary, where on a practical level millions of Catholics commit idolatry on a daily basis by worshipping the virgin. This is certainly contrary to official church teaching (i.e., teaching set forth by the Vatican as standard Catholic doctrine), but the Catholic church has been derelict in correcting this serious problem. If the Catholic church wants to convince evangelical Protestants that they merely *honor* Mary, but do not *worship* her, then they must step in and stop this gross idolatry.

Third, the Second Vatican Council's openness to forms of religious pluralism has greatly exacerbated the problem. Ideas such as the "anonymous Christian" (the belief in the possibility of salvation without explicit Christian faith — even through non-Christian religions) as set forth by the influential German theologian, Karl Rahner, has acute and distressing repercussions.²²

We have discussed six different species of the one genus: Roman Catholicism. Certainly there are other viewpoints expressed in today's Catholicism, but these appear to be the major types of Catholics. We will now turn our attention to the American Catholic church.

American Catholicism

Just as Americans in general exhibit a different ethos from the rest of the world, American Catholics have a mindset distinct from other Catholics. Generally speaking, American Catholics tend to be both more independent and more selective in their practice of Catholicism. This attitude certainly contributes to the fact that many American Catholics follow their conscience over church authority, especially when it comes to some of the issues regarding sex and personal lifestyle. In fact, in 1990 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was so concerned about the inroads the pro-choice element was making into the American church that it hired a public relations firm to "jazz up its public appeal on the abortion issue."²³ (This was the same public relations firm, by the way, that handled former President Ronald Reagan!)

Russell Chandler comments on the extent of this American Catholic individualism:

²² We will return to the issue of religious pluralism later in this series. For more discussion of Rahner's concept of the "anonymous Christian," see Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), s.v. "Anonymous Christianity," 25-26.

²³ "Catholic Soul-Searching in America," *Insight*, 14 May 1990, 52.

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American Catholics are more likely to follow their own conscience or personal preference than to assent unquestioningly to papal pronouncements. In no area is this more true than matters of sex and lifestyle. Not only do a large majority of U.S. Catholics disapprove of the church's teaching against contraception, they also favor a limited pro-choice position on abortion.

And many Catholics agree with dissident theologian Father Charles Curran who says that homosexual behavior, masturbation, premarital sex, and divorce aren't always sinful. (About one-fourth of U.S. Catholics have been divorced and a half of these have remarried.)²⁴

This is certainly powerful evidence that American Catholics tend to think for themselves. The fact is, there is a defiant attitude among a significant number from the clergy down to the general laity.²⁵ This also seems to illustrate just how strong the cultural and liberal factions of Catholicism are within the American church. American Catholicism, like American Christianity as a whole, suffers from a growing secularization of both society and the church.

Another area of great concern in Catholicism worldwide, but especially in America, is the growing shortage of priests and nuns. One estimate reported that one out of ten U.S. parishes had no regular priest in 1990.²⁶ What has made this problem more acute is the fact that the American church continues to experience rapid growth. The church's demand concerning celibacy is the central reason given for men not entering the priesthood. This would only seem to exacerbate the already explosive issue of women's ordination. However, on the positive side, this shortage of clergy has led to a great increase of lay involvement in ministry. As of 1989, an "authorization allows bishops to designate a deacon, non-ordained sister, brother, or lay member to lead prayers, read Scripture, preach, and perform a Communion service if bread and wine consecrated by a priest is available."²⁷ In today's church, the laity is performing many of the duties once performed exclusively by the priest.

A continuing bright spot for American Catholicism is its educational system. From elementary schools to colleges, the Catholic church has some of the best educational institutions in the country.

²⁴ Russell Chandler, *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 173.

²⁵ See Richard N. Ostling, "Drawing the Line on Dissent," *Time*, 9 July 1990, 62.

²⁶ Chandler, 168.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

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Having gained some appreciation and understanding of many of the facets of contemporary Roman Catholicism, we are now in a position to examine Catholicism from a theological perspective.

AN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT APPRAISAL

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In appraising the Roman Catholic faith, we must first identify which Catholic faith we are speaking about, for as the previous discussion has clearly shown, Catholicism is actually more of a montage than a monolith. Nevertheless, while there are many competing contemporary interpretations of the Catholic faith, there remains the so-called “official teaching of the church.” This body of official teaching is quite fluid in many respects, but, nevertheless, it represents what may be considered the classical or orthodox position of the Catholic church. Our focus must therefore be directed toward classical or orthodox Catholicism (as found in the ancient creeds, councils, and official documents of the church) as interpreted by the magisterium.

Standing on Common Ground

The appropriate place to begin our appraisal of Catholicism is with the vast amount of doctrinal agreement found between classical Catholicism and historic Protestantism. This doctrinal agreement is especially evident in our mutual commitment and loyalty to the great ecumenical creeds of historic Christianity. The creeds, which attempt to summarize the essence of Christian truth,²⁸ are believed and recited in both Catholic and Protestant churches.

The common points of agreement between orthodox Catholics and evangelical Protestants extend to: belief in the Triune nature and full theistic attributes of God; assent to God as the sovereign creator and sustainer of the world; acceptance of Christ’s incarnation as the God-man, including trust in His virgin birth, attesting miracles, atoning death on the cross, bodily resurrection from the grave, ascension into heaven, future return in glory, and work of judgment and resurrection of mankind; affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s personality, deity, and involvement in redemption; the acknowledgment of sin, the necessity of grace, and the need of salvation; and confidence in God’s preservation and guidance of the Christian church. And, while not mentioned

²⁸ Some Protestants, especially those from noncreedal or nonconfessional churches, experience discomfort when one appeals to the ecumenical creeds of Christendom as having some authority. This is unfortunate, however, because while the creeds are certainly not inspired or inerrant, and while they are subservient to Scripture in terms of authority, they nevertheless adequately convey biblical truth and are thus authoritative statements.

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explicitly in the creeds, both camps have a high view of Scripture, affirming both the inspiration and infallibility of the Old and New Testaments.

There is certainly much common ground between the two traditions, but seldom is this carefully and reflectively considered. Most discussions concentrate almost exclusively on the differences between the two camps, which are unquestionably quite significant, as we shall see in detail in future installments of this series. But, the areas of common commitment are also quite significant. We should not gloss over these areas of agreement simply because there remain serious differences.²⁹

Further areas of agreement are also apparent. For example, a number of Catholic scholars who would otherwise be considered traditionalist Catholics (strong in their defense of the Catholic views on authority, the nature of the church, the sacraments, etc.), nevertheless set forth the gospel in very evangelical-sounding terms. Catholic philosopher and apologist Peter Kreeft fits this category. Kreeft, a prolific author whose books sell well among evangelical Protestants, describes himself as an “evangelical Roman Catholic.”³⁰ He made the following provocative comments in his book *Fundamentals of the Faith*:

How do I resolve the Reformation? Is it faith alone that justifies, or is it faith and works? Very simple. No tricks. On this issue I believe Luther was simply right; and this issue is absolutely crucial. As a Catholic I feel guilt for the tragedy of Christian disunity because the church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was failing to preach the gospel. Whatever theological mistakes Luther made, whatever indispensable truths about the Church he denied, here is an indispensable truth he affirmed — indispensable to union between all sinners and God and union between God’s separated Catholic and Protestant children.

Much of the Catholic Church has not yet caught up with Luther; and for that matter, much of Protestantism has regressed from him. The churches are often found preaching one of two “other gospels”: the gospel of old-fashion legalism or the gospel of new-fangled humanism. The first means making points with God and earning your way into heaven, the second means being nice to everybody so that God will be nice to you. The churches, Protestant and Catholic, may also preach the true Christian gospel, but not often enough and not clearly enough and often watered down and mixed with one of these two other gospels. And the

²⁹ On this see Carey, 61.

³⁰ Peter Kreeft, “The Catholic Market,” *Bookstore Journal*, February 1992, 28.

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trouble with “other gospels” is simply that they are not true: they don’t work, they don’t unite man with God, they don’t justify.³¹

Kreeft is just one of an increasing number of Catholic scholars who see validity in the Reformation concept of justification by faith.³² Kreeft goes on to say: “Catholicism as well as Protestantism affirms the utterly free, gratuitous gift of forgiving grace in Christ, free for the taking, which taking is faith. Good works can only be the fruit of faith, flowing freely as a response to the new life within, not laboriously, to buy into heaven.”³³ While we will examine the crucial issue of justification in some detail in Part Three, it is important to note that a number of Catholic scholars have an appreciation for the insights of the Protestant Reformers. Certainly this trend does not insure that there will be a change in the church’s official teaching on justification; but neither should it be dismissed as insignificant.

Another point that should be understood and weighed, in terms of Protestant-Catholic agreement, is that evangelical Protestants actually have far more in common with orthodox Catholics than they do with liberal Protestants. And orthodox Catholics have much more in common doctrinally with evangelical Protestants than they do with liberal Catholics. Both camps continue to face the challenge of religious liberalism which in many respects denies the very essence of Christianity.

Even with the significant areas of agreement that I have discussed above, a notable number of evangelicals remain utterly convinced that the Roman Catholic church is a non-Christian cult.³⁴ They frequently charge that “Romanism” is: (1) an apostate religious system, (2) an invalid expression of Christianity, and (3) the largest and most influential non-Christian cult in the world. In Part Two I will demonstrate just why Catholicism should *not* be classified as a cult. At the same time I will highlight several aspects of Catholicism which should be of serious concern to Protestants.

GLOSSARY

Counter Reformation: A period of reform and revival in the Roman Catholic church following the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The goal was to stem the tide of Protestantism by genuinely reforming the Catholic church. This reform included

³¹ Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*

³² See Carey, 44.

³³ Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*

³⁴ See Dave Hunt, “Heeding the Berean Call,” *The Berean Call*, April 1992; Albert James Dager, “Roman Catholicism: Is It a Cult?” *Media Spotlight*

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among other things the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the establishment of The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1540.

Fundamentalist: This term, like “evangelical,” suffers from ambiguity, and has changed much in meaning since its first usage early in this century. Fundamentalists have always stood in opposition to liberalism within the church. But today the term conveys certain additional characteristics which set fundamentalists apart from other evangelicals, including: a general suspicion of scholarship, a separatist mentality which includes a rejection of the entire ecumenical movement, an anti-historical (anti-creedal) or restorational view of the church, and a rigid approach to what constitutes appropriate Christian conduct.

Papal encyclical: A letter of instruction from the Pope which circulates throughout the church.

Reformation: A wide-ranging, predominantly religious movement of sixteenth century Europe which attempted to reform Western Christianity, but in effect resulted in (1) the rejection or modification of some Roman Catholic doctrine and practice, and (2) the establishment of Protestant Christianity. See Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

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