

Understanding Catholic Concepts

Please Note: The following is only a summary of some beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church and its people, in contrast to what Scripture teaches. Be aware that there is a lot of discrepancy between the official theology of the Catholic Church and what its members actually practice in their daily lives. This report is by no means a comprehensive study but it is instead a very simple guide for understanding the religious traditions, customs, and beliefs of people coming from a predominantly Catholic background.

Some General Catholic Beliefs

I. Jesus Christ and Salvation

In official documents of the Catholic Church, all aspects of salvation are linked to Christ. However, the Church also teaches that **no one** can go to heaven only by trusting in Christ. When Catholics think about going to heaven they think about what they have to **do**. Salvation is the result of a combined effort between Christ and the believer.

Christ is never presented in the Church liturgy as the victorious Savior who guarantees salvation to all who trust in him. Instead, they explain that Christ made it *possible* for one to go to heaven; however, for you to make it there you have to do certain things such as: be baptized, participate of the sacraments, live a good life, obey the ten commandments, do good works, and ultimately die in a state of ‘grace.’ The message Catholics receive is that salvation depends on them. Christ is not the key to their salvation, they are.

In fact, the rendering of John 3:16 in an “official” Catholic Bible, such as the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible, would say, “For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in him, *may* not perish, but *may* have life everlasting.” The implication here is that Christ’s sacrifice makes salvation a *possibility* but it is not a done deal. You have to do your part to earn your way into heaven.

That’s why when asked, “Do you believe that Christ died on the cross for your sins?” all Catholics will say yes. However, when asked, “How will you make it to heaven?” most will respond with a list of the things they have to do but will not mention Jesus Christ.

The idea most Catholics have about Christ is of a dead man, still hanging on the cross, or wrapped in a cloth and laying in Mary’s lap, as in Michael Angelo’s famous statue. In Church liturgy, the emphasis is always placed on his death, never on his resurrection. [I’ve even met some Catholics who have never heard of a resurrected Christ!]

What the Bible Says:

1. We cannot save ourselves; Christ died for our sins

Isaiah 64:6—“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...”

Romans 3:10-12—“As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have

turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’”

Romans 5:6-8—“When we were unable to help [save] ourselves, at the right time, Christ died for us, although we were living against God. Very few people will die to save the life of someone else. Although perhaps for a good person someone might possibly die. But God shows his great love for us in this way: Christ died for us while we were still sinners.”

Ephesians 2:1-5—“In the past you were spiritually dead because of your sins and the things you did against God. Yes, in the past you lived the way the world lives, following the ruler of the evil powers that are above the earth. That same spirit is now working in those who refuse to obey God. In the past all of us lived like them, trying to please our sinful selves and doing all the things our bodies and minds wanted. We should have suffered God’s anger because we were sinful by nature. We were the same as all other people. But God’s mercy is great, and he loved us very much. Though we were spiritually dead because of the things we did against God, he gave us new life with Christ. You have been saved by God’s grace.”

2. Salvation from sin and justification before God are by faith not by works

John 6:28-29—“Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’”

Romans 3:20—“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

Romans 3:28—“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”

Romans 4:3-5 and 23-24—“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

Galatians 2:16—“We know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that

we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

Ephesians 2:8-9—”For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Titus 3:4-7—”But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”

3. Salvation from sin and eternal life with God depend on knowing Christ and having a relationship with Him

Matthew 7:21-23—”Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does **the will of my Father** who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, **‘I never knew you.** Away from me, you evildoers!’”

(NOTE: **John 6:40**—”For **my Father’s will** is that everyone who looks to the Son and **believes in him** shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”)

John 17:3—”Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

Acts 4:12—”Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

John 3:16—”For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 1:12—”Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

4. He is alive! And you must believe it to be saved

Luke 24:5-7—”In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”

1 Corinthians 15:3-8—”I passed on to you what I received, of which this was most important: that Christ died for our sins, as the Scriptures say; that he was buried and was raised to life on the third day as the Scriptures say; and that he was seen by Peter and then by the twelve apostles. After that, Jesus was seen by more than five hundred of the

believers at the same time. Most of them are still living today, but some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all he was seen by me—as by a person not born at the normal time.”

Romans 10:9—”That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

II. Sin, Forgiveness, and Punishment for Sin

The Catholic Church teaches that there are two kinds of sins: *venial* and *mortal*.

a. **Venial sins** are *minor* infractions against the law of God and deserve only a temporary form of punishment either here on earth or later in ‘purgatory’. These can also be sins of ‘grave matter’ but in which the sinner *did not fully consent* to the sin or *did not have knowledge that his actions were sinful*. Venial sins will not destroy ‘grace’ in the soul (originally obtained through infant baptism), and will not directly cause a person who dies in the state of venial sin to lose the promise of heaven. In this life, the individual can pay for his/her sins through confession and by doing ‘acts of penance,’ such as abstaining from certain foods, repeating a series of prayers, or giving money to the poor. The individual can choose what kind of penance he/she will do or, in the case of the sacrament of confession, the priest assigns an act of penance. Most sins are counted as venial and these are not taken into consideration for the final destiny of a person.

b. **Mortal sins** are *major* sins that take away the sanctifying ‘grace’ of God from the person’s soul. Three requirements must be met before a sin is considered as mortal:

- 1) Must be a ‘major’ sin (serious or grave)
- 2) The person who commits the sin must be aware that his/her actions are seriously grave
- 3) The individual must voluntarily make the decision to disobey God

That means that mortal sins cannot be done ‘accidentally’ but are ‘premeditated’ by the sinner; the person knows that their actions are wrong, but still deliberately does the deed anyway. A person who dies in this condition will go to hell. To be forgiven of a mortal sin, the person must go through the sacrament of confession (or penance).

Though, officially, the Catholic Church lists the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and similar passages as ‘mortal,’ in practice most Catholics only consider a few sins as ‘major,’ such as murder, adultery, and robbery. Most Catholic people can rationalize sin to the point that even a lifetime of immorality or drunkenness is not considered worthy of an eternity in hell. For example, an adulterer can claim that he had no control over his passions or that women were pushing him to sin; an alcoholic can claim he is a victim of a genetic weakness to alcohol.

According to Catholic teaching, sin can be forgiven (by the Church through the priest). However, a just punishment still remains. A person who has not paid for the punishments of his sins by the end of his lifetime must expiate himself in purgatory (provided he dies in the state of grace).

The punishment for one's sin can be paid for in this life by offering up your sorrows to God or by the use of indulgences. Indulgences are obtained by completing a prescribed prayer or good work given by the Church. Certain prayers are said to take three years off one's sentence in purgatory while other actions carry a complete and absolute pardon, releasing the soul from all their purgatory sentence, no matter how long. In general, plenary indulgences require four things: a good work or prayer, a sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Pope.

A person who gains more indulgences than they need to wipe out their own time in purgatory may assign the excess indulgences to any deceased person of their choosing. Some Catholics make a practice of collecting as many plenary indulgences as they can and then they assign them to their deceased relatives and to souls in purgatory with the longest sentences.

In summary, the Catholic view of sin can be explained in this way: we are not depraved sinners; most sins do not deserve or receive eternal death as punishment; and if you live a good life, you will probably go to heaven.

It is for this reason that most Catholic's do not have a real understanding of their true spiritual condition or of the seriousness of their sin. When Catholic persons are confronted with what the Bible says about sin, they find it unreasonable, excessively severe, and even shocking.

What the Bible Says:

1. We are all sinners; all sins are mortal sins

Romans 3:10-12—"As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"

Romans 3:23—"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 6:23—"For the wages of sin is death..."

1 Corinthians 6:9-10—"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Galatians 5:19-21—"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before,

that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

2. All sinners must repent and turn to God to receive His forgiveness and live

Ezekiel 18:30-32—"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses, then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!"

Acts 3:19—"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

3. When God forgives our sin, there is nothing else to do and no punishment to fear

John 3:17-18—"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

John 5:24—"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

Romans 8:1—"Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

4. People who persist in living in sin must understand that they have never been born again

1 John 2:3-4—"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him."

1 John 3:6-10—"No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

III. Grace

According to Catholic teaching, salvation is by 'grace.' However, Catholic understanding of 'grace' differs from the Scriptural/evangelical understanding of the term.

The Catholic Church teaches that people receive the original ‘grace’ through baptism, and this is called the ‘initial grace of justification’ or the ‘sanctifying grace.’ This is what a Catholic understands as the ‘new birth’ or being ‘born again.’ Once in this ‘state of grace’ Catholics can and must earn additional ‘grace’ throughout their lives if they want to go to heaven.

There are also the ‘actual graces’ which are said to move a person’s heart to ‘conversion’ and penitence and which ‘sustain the soul in the process of justification and sanctification.’ The Church’s sacraments are some of these ‘actual graces.’ The Eucharist, as the central sacrament, provides the “body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ as the heavenly food for the soul.” They also consider the gifts of the Spirit as a special ‘grace.’

As mentioned before, the Tradition of the Church affirms that mortal sin destroys the ‘sanctifying grace’ of the soul and cuts the sinner off from the body of Christ (which, by the way, refers to the Catholic Church itself); however, it can be regained through penance or confession.

The Catholic Church understands ‘grace’ as a gift that can only be known through faith, but this faith does not need to be the faith of the person receiving the gift, as in the case of infant baptism where it is the parent’s faith that counts.

What the Bible Says:

1. **The biblical understanding of grace is the undeserved favor of God toward sinners. It may not be given by rites or sacraments or earned by good works.**

Ephesians 2:8-9—“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Acts 15:11—“But we believe that we and they too will be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.”

Romans 3:23-24—“Everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glorious standard, and all need to be made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin through Jesus Christ.”

Please understand that this is one of those concepts which are difficult to refute with a few verses of Scripture. To clarify this will require an in-depth Bible study. However, you need to be aware of the situation because using the term can lead to undesired results and misunderstanding when witnessing to Catholics.

IV. Church and Cultural Tradition

Catholics think that their church is in a class of its own. It is THE Church, the Catholic Church, with capital ‘C.’ They claim it is the only true Church, established from the beginning by Christ himself and the apostles. They also believe that only in the Catholic Church you will find the fullness of all revealed truth and the means of salvation. In fact, *Vatican II* says that no one can be saved if, knowing

that the Catholic Church was founded by God through Christ, refuses to join it or remain in it.

The rest of Christianity is considered to be on an inferior level. Evangelicals are called ‘separated brethren,’ and members of divided churches established by rebels and heretics. In areas or countries where Catholicism dominates, evangelicals are considered members of a sect or even a cult.

Catholics place God and the Church on the same level: to be faithful to God is to be faithful to the Catholic Church, and to reject the Catholic Church is to reject God. For example, if a member of a Catholic family dares to even consider the possibility of joining an ‘inferior church,’ the reaction can vary from moderate concern to outright hostile opposition. A person born in a Catholic family is almost considered to have Catholicism in his blood. Catholicism is part of his heritage, and it is not to be changed without serious repercussions. Leaving the Catholic Church and/or joining an evangelical church, is considered an act of treason against family and one’s heritage. (This is true of Hispanics and other ethnic groups where Catholicism is predominant, such as Irish, Italian, French, Filipino, Polish, Austrian, etc.) This causes much hurt to all sides of the family. In extreme cases, there can be physical harm done to the person and/or the person can be disowned by the family.

Response:

1. **The Catholic Church’s claims regarding its foundation have no basis in Scripture.** The few verses they claim that back up their story are clearly taken out of context. In-depth Bible study is recommended. [Please refer to the handout titled, “*What is the origin of the Catholic Church?*” (WARNING: *The information in the handout is offered for your benefit and it is not to be used to attack Catholics, unless you want them to permanently close the door to the witness of the true gospel of salvation.*)]
2. A Catholic family’s reaction against one of its members abandoning the Church has more to do with tradition and culture than with theology. It is important to explain to new believers that **rejection of the Catholic religious system does not imply rejection of his culture and family.** In fact, as the new believer grows spiritually, the relationship to his family will improve and grow. In many cases, family acceptance of the person’s decision will take time, even years, but the good testimony of the believer will help heal the family’s hurt and the family will get to see beyond their initial response.
3. It is also extremely important to **take extra time and care in discipling new believers of Catholic background.** They need to be taught to trust the Scriptures over and above any dogma or denomination or teacher; they need to learn that they do not need to believe anything that has no Biblical basis. They need to be “cared for” until they have a solid foundation in Scripture and are able to express their beliefs with conviction so they can in turn use the Scriptures to defend their new found faith. Otherwise, the constant pressure from relatives

and friends, and the guilt of abandoning the religious traditions inculcated from childhood, will cause the new believer to compromise in his faith or to abandon it completely in favor of the “comfort” of the old traditions.

V. Scripture vs. Tradition

“It does not matter that it is written, that does not mean that it is true,” seems to be the motto of the Catholic Church when referring to discrepancies between the Church’s teaching and the Scriptures. The Catholic Church does not depend on the Bible alone for its doctrine. The Church’s Tradition **and** the Bible, together, are considered norms of truth. However, in their teaching, Tradition is superior to the Scriptures. Catholics are instructed that if there is a conflict between what they read in the Bible (if they ever do so) and the teaching of the Church, they are to put the Bible aside and obey what the Church teaches. And no one can use the Bible to criticize the Catholic Church!

The Catholic bishops, under the direction of the Pope, have the mission of safeguarding the doctrines of the Church and of teaching them to the people. They claim exclusive right to interpret the Word of God, and to judge and dictate its original meaning. The Church teaches that Christ has granted the Catholic bishops with the gift of infallibility. That means that the bishops, acting together, are incapable of committing errors when dealing with matters of faith. The Roman Catholic Church also proclaims that the Pope, even when acting on his own, is infallible, meaning that he is immune from errors in his official teachings: his words have the authority of God’s words, and supersede any Scripture.

In places where Catholicism dominates, the Catholic Church usually discourages its members from reading the Scriptures, to the point that many of its own priests lack basic knowledge of the Word of God. However, because of the strong evangelical tradition, Roman Catholic priests in the US tend to be more prepared to defend their faith using Scripture, but it is not so in other places.

Many times, when confrontation occurs between these priests and evangelicals, they tend to focus their attack not on matters of salvation but on tradition. They acknowledge that Christ is the only Savior, but since they also claim the Roman Catholic Church is the only agent for dispensing His salvation to humankind, they are not really interested in talking about salvation until you recognize the Roman Catholic Church as the only true Church. They will forever argue about Peter and his ‘supremacy’ over the other apostles and how the Pope is his right ‘heir.’ They will categorically affirm that the Roman Catholic Church was founded by Jesus Christ himself, thus making it the one and only “true Church and Body of Christ.” They will warn you of the consequences of your sin of rejecting the will of God by not recognizing the supremacy of the Roman Church and returning to its fold. And so forth.

In predominantly Catholic areas, when evangelical groups offer Bible studies, usually the local priest will do everything in his power to dissuade people from attending the meetings. When necessary, the priest will start his own Bible study group to keep his members from attending the other. However, in most of their so called ‘Bible studies’ the priests will usually try to discourage people from actually reading the Bible, presenting it as extremely difficult to understand, and convincing people that they should trust only the Catholic Church’s interpretation of it. These groups generally succeed in ‘inoculating’ Catholics from trying to read the Scriptures on their own, or from trusting teaching or explanations based solely on Biblical texts.

What the Bible Says:

- 1. The church in the first century did not even consider that anyone could be immune to error or above reproach**, as illustrated by an incident between Peter (whom the Catholic Church considers its first Pope) and Paul, who had to publicly rebuke him: Galatians 2:13-14—“The other Jews joined [Peter] in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?’”
- 2. There is no Biblical precedent for the church hierarchy as the Catholic Church imposes on its followers, nor is there any evidence that the apostles ever demanded of anyone to submit to their teachings without question.** In fact, the commandment is to the contrary: Colossians 2:8—“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”
1 Thessalonians 5:21—“Test everything. Hold on to the good.”
1 John 4:1—“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”
- 3. The Bible warns against false prophets or teachers that do not stick to the revealed truth in Scriptures** Galatians 1:6-9—“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned. As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned.”

2 Corinthians 11:13—“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.”

4. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his time for following traditions over Scripture

Mark 7:5-8—“So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?’ He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’”

5. The traditions of the Catholic Church’s leaders parallel those of the religious leaders Jesus condemned

Matthew 23: 1-12—“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’ Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. And don’t let anyone call you ‘Teacher,’ for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’”

6. Christians should follow the example of the Berean church and always examine Scripture

Acts 17:11—“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

7. It is imperative that Christians study their Bibles and know for certain what they believe and why, and be able to explain and to defend their faith using Scripture only.

1 Timothy 4:16—“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

John 5:39—“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal

life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”

2 Timothy 2:15—“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

Luke 4:1-13—This is the passage where we learn of the temptation of Christ. Each time the devil tempted Him, Jesus responded quoting Scripture. Being God in human form, Jesus could have argued with the devil to teach us something new. Instead, He showed us that the only way to defend us against the enemy’s attacks is with Scripture. When the enemy used Scripture itself to attack, Jesus still corrected him by quoting other Scripture. We can come up with wise and reasonable arguments to explain or defend our faith but nothing will ever surpass the power of God’s Word to correct, convince, instruct, defend, or even attack. The only way to overcome the attacks and perversions of the gospel by the Roman Catholic Church or any other religious group is by immersing ourselves in the study and memorization of the Word of God and trusting the Lord to bring His Word to our minds in the time of need, as He has promised (*John 14:26*).

8. **It is important for Christians who desire to reach their Catholic friends for the Lord to be aware of the Roman Catholic Church’s beliefs, traditions and history.** Though it is never wise to get into an argument over these matters, it is imperative to have at least basic knowledge of their claims and to always be prepared to answer their arguments with Scripture. Otherwise, the Christian witness may end up looking silly and plain ignorant in a direct confrontation or when questioned on matters important to them, and this may cause people who are still weak in their faith or those who are seeking the truth to be discouraged and to doubt the truth of the Gospel being presented to them.

VI. Mary

The Mary of the Roman Catholic Church possesses divine qualities and attributes, and limitless power. According to the Roman Catholic Church teaching, and in words of Pope Pius IX, Mary is: “Immaculate in all aspects... innocent, truly to the highest degree innocent... absolutely without blemish... holy and removed from all blemish of sin... all purity, all without blemish, the true model of purity and innocence... more beautiful than beauty, more holy than holiness, and singularly holy in body and soul... the one who exceeds all integrity and virginity... the only one who has become the dwelling place of all grace of the Holy Spirit... Except for God himself, Mary is more excellent than all and by nature perfect and beautiful, and more holy than *Cherubims* and *Seraphims*... to worship her, all the tongues of heaven and earth will not be sufficient.”

The doctrine of her ‘immaculate conception’ says that she was miraculously preserved by God from original sin, and

so she lived a perfect, sinless life. The doctrine of her *ascent into heaven* says that at the end of her life on earth, she was taken into heaven in bodily form. The Catholic Church honors Mary as being ‘always virgin’ —before, while giving birth and after (even though she was married to Joseph). The Catholic Church exalts her as “Mother of God, Mother of the Church, and Co-redeemer (with Jesus Christ) of all humanity” (see #3 below), and “Queen of heaven and earth.” The Church commands all Catholics to trust all their problems and petitions to Mary, commending the hour of their death only to her care. In the *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* (21 November 1964), passed during the Second Vatican Council, Mary was also given the title *Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix*. This means that she is the greatest intermediary between God and man, lovingly interceding on our favor before her son Jesus, who is King and Judge. As his mother, Jesus is expected to listen and to grant her requests (this they base on the story of the wedding at Cana in John chapter 2).

What the Bible Says:

1. **The Mary of the Scriptures was a faithful servant of the Lord**
 Luke 1:38—“‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered, ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ Then the angel left her.”
2. **She also acknowledged her own need for a Savior**
 Luke 1:46-48—“And Mary said: ‘My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. For now all generations will call me blessed.’”
3. **Jesus confers blessing to those who obey God’s word rather than to his own mother, implying that the fact that she gave birth to him did not give her any privileges or a special position**
 Luke 11:27-28—“As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, ‘Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.’ He replied, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’”
4. **In John 2, Jesus is never subject to his mother but rather in full control of the situation**, as His reply in verse 4, “My time has not yet come,” clearly indicates. He decides what, when, where, and how He chooses to act. On the other hand, Mary’s actual command in the story is not directed to Jesus but to the house servants: “Do whatever he tells you” (v.5). If there is anything we can learn from Mary from this passage, is that: Do whatever Jesus tells you to do!
5. **In the whole of the New Testament, very little is mentioned of Mary**. She is seen primarily in the two accounts of Jesus’ birth, in Matthew 1 & 2, and in Luke 1 & 2. In most of the few other occasions where she is mentioned, she is not even called by name but referred to as “the mother of Jesus” or just as “his mother”. After one reference in the first chapter of the book of Acts, she is never again mentioned in the rest of the New Testament books. In all these accounts, not

one of the things the Roman Catholics claim regarding her is ever mentioned or implied.

6. **Not one of the Catholic Church’s doctrines regarding Mary has any Biblical basis**. Roman Catholic dogmas are actually based on the Tradition of the Church, which was later made into official doctrines by Papal or Church council decree. For example, the assumption of Mary in bodily form into heaven was held infallibly by both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. However, it was not until 1950 that it was officially pronounced a dogma by Pope Pius XII in his Papal Bull *Munificentissimus Deus*. There was another decree by the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicea that declared her not only perpetual virgin but also sinless.

Even now, Mary’s title of “Co-redeemer” is already accepted and of common use by many Catholics, but it is “officially” still under discussion. If approved by Roman Catholic officials, it would dogmatically authenticate that Mary cooperated in our redemption, because of her free participation in the birth of Christ. A petition to urge Pope John Paul to make such a move, by defining the teaching of the Church that Mary is *Co-Redemptrix, Mediatrix of All Graces, and Advocate for the People of God* collected more than six million signatures from 148 countries. The title has been approved by the Catholic *Magisterium* though it is yet to be declared official dogma of the Church. It has been the same way with all other dogmas relating to Mary. In fact, this is basically the way that all the Catholic Church’s dogmas are adopted.

The Catholic Concept of Salvation

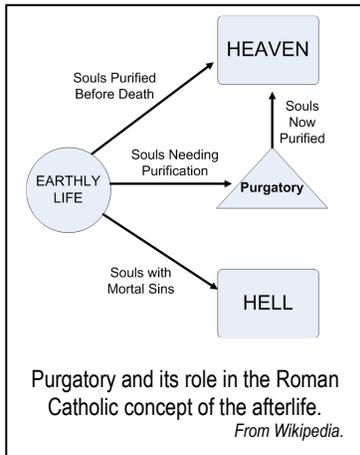
I. It is Uncertain

Most Catholics are surprised when a person says that he *knows* that he is saved. They do not have that security. They can just wait and *hope* that they make it into heaven, but they will not know for certain until they get there. The Roman Catholic teaching is that no human can definitively know that they possess assured salvation, because it would mean that they have infallibility to judge their own souls, something that is reserved to God alone. Not even the Pope himself, can know for sure if he will go to heaven. They can only trust, pray, and do the best they can in this life.

From the time the Catholic person is baptized to the day of his death, the individual is being tested and tried to see if he is worthy of salvation. Entering heaven is the reward for the good works done while on earth. Salvation is by works: it must be earned. Baptism into the Church is the best guarantee they have, but is only one of several things Catholic “Christians” must do to make it to heaven.

Their view of salvation can be explained as a comparison between salvation and a bank account: You open a bank account when you are baptized. Receiving the sacraments and doing good works is like depositing money into the account. Committing a venial sin is like withdrawing money. A mortal sin is like bankruptcy. The sacrament of confession (or penance) will grant a positive balance on the account again. Your final destination in the afterlife will be determined by the final balance on the account at the time of death. You will not know what your balance is or where you will go after death until you get there.

But there is another way to heaven. According to Roman Catholicism, pardon of sins and purification can occur during life, for example, in the sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of penance. However, if this purification is not achieved in life, venial sins can still be purified after death. The



specific name given to this purification of sin after death is “purgatory.” Since only mortal sins deserve hell, most Catholic people are guaranteed a time in purgatory where they will still be able to work their way into heaven.

What the Bible says:

1. Our good works will never measure up to God’s standards

Romans 3:10-12—“As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.’”

Isaiah 64:6—“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”

2. Salvation may not be earned by works but it is the gift of God through faith in Christ

John 6:28-29—“Then they asked him, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’”

Ephesians 2:8-9—“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Romans 3:21-26—“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the

glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished...”

Romans 4:3-5 and 23-24—“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

3. We can have certainty about our final destiny

John 5:24—“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”

John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 10:28—“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

Romans 8:1—“Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Hebrews 7:25—“Therefore he [Jesus] is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

1 John 5:13—“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Catholics will call our security of salvation “blind and arrogant confidence.” Belief in the biblical promises, however, is not blind arrogant confidence, **but faith in God and in his Word**. It is to allow Scripture to speak for itself; it is to accept the truth of God’s Word, and believe what He says.

II. Salvation is Intermediated

Salvation and forgiveness of sins are mediated through the Church, priests, Mary and the Saints. Only the Catholic Church is the source and means of forgiveness and salvation. Mary and the Saints act as intermediaries to Christ and to God himself.

What the Bible Says:

1. Scripture makes it clear that Christ is our only mediator

1 Timothy 2:5-6—“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.”

Acts 4:12—“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

1 John 2:1-1—“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”

2. We have direct access to the throne of God through Jesus Christ

Hebrews 10:19-22—“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”

3. We do not need intermediaries for any other needs either. We are free to bring our requests directly to the Father, in Jesus’ name.

John 14:13-14—“And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.” (*John 15:7; 1 John 5:14*)

John 16:23—“In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”

John 16:26—“In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”

4. When we actually need assistance in prayer, the Holy Spirit will be there for us

Romans 8:26—“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.”

III. Salvation is through the sacraments

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the sacraments as “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” The Catholic Church affirms that, for believers as a whole, the sacraments are necessary for salvation, as the modes of grace divinely instituted by Christ himself. Through each of them, Christ bestows that sacrament’s particular grace, such as incorporation into Christ and the Church, forgiveness of sins, or consecration for a particular service. The Catholic Church teaches that there are seven sacraments.

A. **Baptism**—administered shortly after birth.

According to the Catholic Church teachings, the baptism has two very important effects:

- i. Cleanses the soul from the ‘original sin’—the guilt inherited from Adam

- ii. Bestows ‘sanctifying grace’ over the soul—the individual is considered holy and acceptable before God

The Church says that through baptism the person is “born again” and is placed in a state of “grace,” pure and innocent before God, and as such the person is considered a member of the Body of Christ (which, for them, is the Roman Catholic Church itself).

Parents have the right and the duty to decide for their children regarding these matters. Parents take their babies to church, they are baptized, they receive a certificate of baptism from the Church, and the children grow up believing that they are Christians bound for heaven.

It is for this reason that when a Catholic person is told that he/she is a sinner and that they must be born again, he/she cannot understand or accept because, according to the Church, they have already been “born again” and venial sins don’t really matter.

What the Bible Says:

1. The only way to have a relationship with God is through personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Mark 1:15—“The time has come,” he said, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Acts 3:19—“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”

Romans 10:9-10—“That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”

2. A personal decision of the individual is required. No one else can decide.

John 1:12-13—“Yet to all who receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

John 3:18—“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.”

3. Baptism is only a symbol and a public expression of the person’s commitment with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Romans 6:4—“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in

order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Colossians 2:12—“...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

B. Confirmation—The Catholic Church teaches that it gives the person a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the Catholic faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the cross. This effect has been described as making the confirmed person “a soldier of Christ”. It is also said to render his bond with the Church more perfect. This sacrament is administered as soon as the child is old enough to understand what it means to be a part of the Church. (In practice, though, most children are usually too young and have no idea as to what is going on, except that it is a special event because they receive special new clothes, gifts, and enjoy a big party.)

C. Holy Eucharist (‘Holy Communion’)—Consecrated bread and wine. Catholic theology teaches that at the time of consecration the bread and the wine are miraculously transformed, into the body, blood, soul and Divinity of Christ, meaning that at that moment Jesus Christ comes to exist in his fullness as man and God under the appearance of bread and wine. Catholics are taught to worship the host as the real presence of Christ on earth. They claim that receiving the Holy Eucharist will bring the person closer to Christ. This is the main and holier source of ‘grace’ for Catholics.

The Catholic Church teaches that every time that the bread and wine are consecrated Christ himself descends to the altar and is presented by the priest as a living sacrifice in order to calm the wrath of God and earn forgiveness for the sins of the living and the dead. Most Catholics, however, do not realize that the Church considers the mass not a symbol but a **real** sacrifice, just as the sacrifice that took place on Calvary. The very word ‘host’ is from Latin meaning ‘sacrificial victim.’ That means that every time the mass is offered, the Catholic priest is sacrificing Christ all over again.

What the Bible Says:

1. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was done once and for all, and it is not to be repeated

Hebrews 9:24-28—“For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enter the Most Holy Place

every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as a man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Hebrews 10: 10—“...And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Hebrews 10:14—“...because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

2. Contrary to Catholic interpretation, Jesus did NOT turn wine into blood during the Last Supper

Matthew 26:27-29—“Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this **fruit of the vine** from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

Note that he says, ‘this is my blood’ but right in the next sentence he refers to it as the ‘fruit of the vine.’ If the wine had been miraculously made into blood, as the Catholic Church teaches, Jesus would not have referred to it again as the ‘fruit of the vine’ yet again.

3. The Roman Catholic literal interpretation of the passage would require that believers drink blood, something forbidden by God throughout Scripture

Leviticus 17:10-12—“Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood—I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, ‘None of you may eat blood, nor may an alien living among you eat blood.’”

Acts 15:28—“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from

sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

4. **The Catholic Church also claims John 6 as base for its teaching**, where Jesus talks about him being the *bread of life*. However, in pretending to take His words in this passage literally, Catholics completely ignore the fact that Jesus took ideas common to people’s daily life to illustrate spiritual concepts that would otherwise be impossible to explain. For example, Jesus said he is the light of the world, the good shepherd, the true vine, the water of life, the way, the resurrection and the life, the gate, etc. He did not mean to say that He was going to turn into those things. He was just using them to illustrate some spiritual qualities or characteristics that are similar to them.

The context of John chapter 6 is Jesus’ teaching about the need to place our faith in him. In the passage, Jesus is not speaking about common bread nor is he speaking about the last supper with his disciples, which was yet to happen. He is trying to make them understand that, to satisfy their spiritual thirst and hunger permanently, they needed Him in their lives. They had to experience Him internally (*receive Him, John 1:12*), to receive spiritual satisfaction, just as you experience the benefits of food when you consume it.

Moreover, the Bible never attributes any special or miraculous powers or meaning to the bread and the wine used in the ‘Lord’s Supper’ other than as symbols of what the Lord has done for us on the cross.

5. **We observe the ‘Lord’s Supper’ as a remembrance and proclamation of what our salvation cost the Son of God.**

Luke 22:19—“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

1 Corinthians 11:26—“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

- D. **Penance**—An exchange of responses and prayers between the Catholic person and the priest in order to receive pardon for sins. The person recites a list of his/her sins and how many times they occurred; the priest assigns an act of penance and a prayer expressing sorrow for the committed sins. Then the priest absolves the person from all sins.

Catholics do not have an understanding of the seriousness of their sin (see section II. *Sin and Forgiveness*) nor do they understand what sincere repentance demands. They perform repeated acts of penance while at the same time not believing they are sinners.

Catholic teaching regarding acts of penance undermines the meaning of Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. The Roman Church also teaches that we all have part in our own redemption through our own sufferings. It is common to hear Catholic people complaining about their sufferings and tribulations as their ‘Calvary’ (referring to the place where Christ died) or as their ‘cross’ that God has given them to bear. It is unthinkable to a Catholic that a ‘good person’ who has suffered much in this life will not be allowed into heaven on account of such suffering. Their suffering is counted as penance. Then, there is nothing special about Christ’s suffering on the cross.

- E. **Anointing of the sick** (or extreme unction)—this is not meant for healing but as the person’s last chance to confess his/her sins and be forgiven by the priest before death.

- F. **Holy Orders** (priesthood)

- G. **Matrimony**

These are only a few areas in which evangelicals and Catholics differ. Other Catholic beliefs that run contrary to Scripture include, but are not limited to: use of amulets (crucifix, medals of the Virgin Mary, etc); worship and/or veneration of images, relics, ‘holy’ objects, saints, statues or sculptures; repetitions of prayers; use of religious titles; purgatory; praying for the dead; and various others.

For more information please check these out:

Sánchez, Daniel R., and González, Rudolph D. *Sharing the Good News with Roman Catholic Friends*. Church Starting Network, Fort Worth, Texas, 2003.

McCarthy, James G. *Conversations with Catholics: Catholic Tradition in Light of Biblical Truth*. Gospel Folio Press. Port Colborne, Ontario, 1997.

McCarthy, James G. *The Gospel According to Rome: Comparing Catholic Tradition and the Word of God*. Harvest House Publishers. Eugene, Oregon, 1995.