

Church History (16): The Gradual Rise of Roman Catholicism

Roman Catholicism in its present form, was gradual in its formation. Contrary to their claim that it began with Peter as the first pope, it gradually grew over the first 14 centuries, and came to full growth in the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

I. The Gradual Rise of Roman Catholicism

1. *Its early roots.* Roman Catholicism is a large tree with three very deep roots: papal roots, political roots, and doctrinal roots. (1) Papal roots. The word pope comes from the Latin word *papa* meaning father. "In the early times it was used to refer to any important and respected bishop. Whereas in the West it eventually was reserved for the bishops of Rome, in the East it continued to be used with more liberality" (Gonzalez).¹ Beginning with Leo I (bishop of Rome from 440-461), a theological justification for the priority of the Roman bishop was given. "In Leo we see a very strong statement of Roman Catholicism. Leo the Great concentrated, elevated, and glorified the power of the Roman Catholic Church" (Calhoun).² But it was in Gregory I (bishop of Rome from 590-604), where several beliefs are introduced that would be known as Roman Catholic dogma. Gregory is regarded as last of the church fathers and first of the medieval popes. Later popes would elevate the priority and power of the bishop of Rome. This would be especially true of Pope Innocent III (bishop of Rome from 1198-1216). "The claims and might of the papacy reached their high noon during the reign of Pope Innocent III. He was the first pope who made the title 'vicar of Christ' central to the claims of the papacy ('vicar' means a person who stands in someone else's place). Previously, popes had claimed that their special position was as the 'vicar of the apostle Peter.' Innocent was the first pope to refer to himself by the title 'vicar of Christ'" (Needham).³ He declared: "We are the successor of Peter the prince of the apostles, but we are not his vicar, nor are we the vicar of any man or any apostle; we are the vicar of Jesus Christ Himself."⁴

Innocent also took to himself the traditional title of kings and Emperors, 'vicar of God.' He was claiming that he, as pope, was the visible manifestation of Christ on earth, exercising Christ's supreme authority, not just over the spiritual kingdom of the Church, but over all human beings, all earthly kingdoms, and even the angels and demons. This was the doctrine of the pope's 'plenitude of power' – that all spiritual and political authority flowed from him. From Innocent's reign onwards, then, 'vicar of Christ' became the customary title by which the popes both defined and described themselves and their exalted position. Kings and ordinary bishops would have to be satisfied with lesser names from now on.⁵

(2) Political roots. Roman Catholicism was the inevitable result of the church's union with the Roman Empire. "With the conversion of Constantine, thousands of unsaved people flooded the church for political and economic advantages. Such people were not content with NT simplicity of worship and church life. They wanted the churches to establish more elaborate rituals, that appealed to them in their own fleshly carnality" (Smith).⁶ From this point forward, the church developed a lust for art, property, and material wealth. As the Roman Empire was weakened first by the Vandals and then Muslims, the Roman Church usurped a greater influence. "The Roman church, as a stabilizing influence, filled the

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:242

² David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church*, 19:1

³ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:325-326

⁴ As quoted by Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:326

⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:326-327

⁶ Jeff Smith, unpublished notes on Church History, lecture 15

vacuum that was left by the collapse of the Roman Empire. And thus gained more and more power" (Smith).⁷

There were several important reasons for the elevation of the papacy. Rome was the capital and chief city of the western Roman Empire and thus enjoyed political and commercial importance. When Rome was sacked by barbarians in 410, a power vacuum emerged in the western empire. This void paved the way for the emergence of the bishop of Rome as the key leader. Additionally, the orthodoxy of the church of Rome was widely acknowledged; rarely had a bishop of Rome held to false doctrine. Moreover, the tradition of Peter's burial in Rome became an important reason for the elevation of that church and its bishop.⁸

(3) Doctrinal roots. The development of Roman Catholic dogma, was a process with roots in a distorted view of Scripture, early church fathers, and pagan religion. From 313, and the union of the church with Rome, many pagan practices were incorporated into the church. For example, praying for the dead and relic worship, both have pagan roots. *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism* says: "In certain respects she (Roman Catholicism) has copied her organization from that of the Roman Empire, has preserved and made fruitful the philosophical intuitions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, borrowed from both Barbarians and the Byzantine Roman Empire—but always remains herself, thoroughly digesting all elements drawn from external sources. In her laws, her ceremonies, her festivals and her devotions, she makes use of local customs after purifying them and 'baptizing' them."

2. *Its major tenets.* While Roman Catholicism and Protestantism hold many things in common (inspiration of Scripture, Trinity, person of Christ), there are obvious and important differences. (1) Papal authority and tradition. "According to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, defined at the First Vatican Council (1870), Jesus Christ established the papacy with the apostle Peter, and the bishop of Rome as Peter's successor bears the supreme authority over the whole church" (Shelley).⁹ "We teach and declare that, according to the gospel evidence, a primary of jurisdiction over the whole church of God as immediately and directly promised to the blessed apostle Peter and conferred on him by Christ the Lord."¹⁰ As early as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), Pope Innocent III claimed that when the bishop of Rome (pope) spoke from his chair (*ex cathedra*), he spoke with authority and infallibility.

We teach and define as a divinely revealed dogma that when the Roman Pontiff speaks EX CATHEDRA, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. Therefore, such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are of themselves, and not by the consent of the Church, irreformable. So then, should anyone, which God forbid, have the boldness to reject this definition of ours: let him be anathema.¹¹

Authority in the RCC resides in Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. By the Scripture is meant the 66 books of the Bible plus the Apocrypha, by Tradition is meant the oral teaching of the church,

⁷ Jeff Smith, unpublished notes on Church History, lecture 15

⁸ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 22-23

⁹ Bruce Shelley, *Church History*, 142

¹⁰ First Vatican Council, 4:1

¹¹ First Vatican Council, 4:9

and by the Magisterium is meant "the pope together with the bishops in communion with him" (Allison).¹² Thus, while the RCC gives lip service to both Scripture and Tradition, it's really the pope who determines both. "The Magisterium determines the canon of Scripture and its official interpretation as well as the content of Tradition and its official interpretation" (Allison).¹³

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore, both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.

But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.¹⁴

(2) Veneration of Mary. By the fifth century, views of Mary began to evolve from admiration to veneration. "In the beginning of the fifth century the worship of saints appeared in full bloom, and then Mary, by reason of her singular relation to the Lord, was soon placed at the head, as the most blessed queen of the heavenly host. Pope Boniface IV, in 608, turned the Pantheon in Rome into a temple of Mary. Subsequently even her images were divinely worshipped, and in the prolific legends of the Middle Age, preformed countless miracles" (Schaff).¹⁵

The veneration of Mary was/is built upon three doctrines: immaculate conception, perpetual virginity, and bodily assumption. (a) Immaculate conception. This means Mary was conceived free from original sin and thus actual sin. "By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long" (CCC).¹⁶ The Immaculate Conception was made dogma by Pope Pius IX in 1854: "We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin."¹⁷

¹² Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 108

¹³ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 87

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 2:8-10

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:423

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 492

¹⁷ *Ineffabilis Deus: The Immaculate Conception*, Pope Pius IX, 1854

"Just to be clear, this papal proclamation has nothing to do with the conception of Jesus Christ. Rather, it decrees that at the conception of Mary, she did not inherit the devastating taint of original sin, which includes guilt before God and a fallen human nature" (Allison).¹⁸

(b) Perpetual virginity. This means she remained a virgin her entire life (which is one reason why nuns are considered extra holy). In fact, the RCC teaches that the birth of Jesus was as miraculous as His conception, for, according to the Church, Mary experienced no pain in giving birth to the child. This was in consequence to being born without original sin ('In pain you shall bring forth children'). "Born of His Mother without any diminishing of her maternal virginity just as the rays of the sun penetrate without breaking or injuring in the least the solid substance of glass, so after a like but more exalted manner did Jesus Christ come forth from His mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity" (CCC).¹⁹

(c) Bodily assumption. This refers to Mary's assumption into heaven, body and soul, at the end of her life. Pope Pius IX made this dogma in 1854: "Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords, and conqueror of sin and death."²⁰ "Because Mary was preserved from original sin at her conception and lived a life of thoroughgoing holiness, there was no need for her to suffer the usual penalty assessed to sinful human beings. Rather, in the integrity of body and soul, Mary was assumed into heaven" (Allison).²¹

(3) Worship of saints and relics. This began from a sincere desire to honor faithful saints and especially martyrs. "The worship of saints proceeded originally, without doubt, from a pure and truly Christian source, to wit: a very deep and lively sense of the communion of saints, which extends over death and the grave, and embraces even the blessed in heaven" (Schaff).²² Related to the worship of saints is the worship of relics. Relics refer to the remains of the heavenly saints on earth. "The veneration of martyrs and saints had respect, in the first instance, to their immortal spirits in heaven, but came to be extended, also, in a lower degree, to their earthly remains or relics. By these are to be understood, first, their bodies, or rather parts of them, then all which was in any way closely connected with their persons" (Schaff).²³

But according to RCC dogma, the saints in heaven are not only venerated, but prayed to. As they are in heaven, and thus closer to Christ, saints on earth must seek their assistance. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: "In regard to the intercession of the saints, being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness. They do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ. So by their brotherly concern is our weakness greatly strengthened."²⁴

(4) Purgatory and indulgences. Roman Catholics believe Christians enter heaven either "through purification or immediately." "The process of purification is the temporal destiny known as purgatory. It is not an eternal state, only heaven and hell are. Rather, it is a temporal state, for the souls of all those

¹⁸ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 278

¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 499

²⁰ *Ineffabilis Deus: The Immaculate Conception*, Pope Pius IX, 1854

²¹ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 280

²² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:431

²³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:449

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 7:49

who are in purgatory will eventually go to heaven" (Allison).²⁵ "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (CCC).²⁶ Saints on earth can help those in purgatory through acquiring indulgences. "These are special credits that cancel out temporal punishment. Roman Catholicism teaches that the Church has the power to dispense indulgences from a vast reservoir of merit called the treasury of the Church" (McCarthy).²⁷

The treasure of the Church is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God. This treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission the Father entrusted to them. In this way they attained their own salvation and at the same time cooperated in saving their brothers in the unity of the Mystical Body.²⁸

The first known use of indulgences was in 1095 when Pope Urban II remitted all people who participated in the crusades and who confessed their sins. Later, the indulgences were also offered to those who couldn't go on the Crusades but offered cash contributions to the effort instead. By the early thirteenth century, the church began claiming it had a "treasury of indulgences" which consisted of the merits of Christ and the saints. A full orbed doctrine of indulgences would come in the thirteenth century under Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). "The pope, Aquinas argued, could transfer the surplus of saintly merit to souls in purgatory by means of an indulgence, thus paying off their temporal punishment for them and releasing them" (Needham).²⁹

(5) Mass and the sacraments. The RCC has seven sacraments: Eucharist, Reconciliation (penance), Confirmation, Marriage, Extreme Unction or Last Rites (anointing of the sick), and Holy Orders (ordination). Of these seven, the Eucharist (Lord's Supper or Mass), quickly rose to prominence. From the fourth century, the Lord's Supper was viewed as a sacrament and sacrifice. Augustine defined a sacrament as "a visible sign of an invisible grace or divine blessing." According to this definition, Protestants agree the Supper is a sacrament. But following the fourth century, some advocated that grace was given through the sacrament apart from personal faith. Because they maintained that the bread and wine changed into the actual body and blood of Christ, to partake of the bread and wine was to partake of the actual body and blood of Christ. This became known as Transubstantiation (change of substance). The term was formally adopted in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council. "The Catholic church sees in the Eucharist not only a *sacrament*, in which God communicates a grace to believers, but at the same time, and in fact mainly, a *sacrifice*, in which believers really offer to God that which is represented by the sensible elements. According to this doctrine the Eucharist is an unbloody *repetition of the atoning sacrifice of Christ by the priesthood for the salvation of the living and the dead*; so that the body of Christ is truly and literally offered every day and every hour, and upon innumerable altars at the same time" (Schaff).³⁰

²⁵ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 258

²⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1030, 1031

²⁷ James McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*, 94

²⁸ Pope Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrinal*, 5 (this is a revision of Vatican II by Paul VI in 1967)

²⁹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:293

³⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:503-505

There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation. In which there is the same priest and sacrifice, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (*transsubstantiatio*) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood, so that to realize the mystery of unity we may receive of Him what He has received of us. And this sacrament no one can effect except the priest who has been duly ordained in accordance with the keys of the Church, which Jesus Christ Himself gave to the Apostles and their successors.³¹

And because that Christ, our Redeemer, declared that which He offered under the species of bread to be truly His own body, therefore has it ever been a firm belief in the Church of God, and this holy Synod doth now declare it anew, that, by the consecration of the bread and of the wine, a conversion is made of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood; which conversion is, by the holy Catholic Church, suitably and properly called Transubstantiation.³²

(6) Justification and salvation. Though men such as Cyprian and Augustine taught that outside the church there was no salvation, it became a Roman Catholic dogma that the church possesses and dispenses grace. As Pope Innocent III said in 1215: "There is only one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all can be saved." This simply meant, that those who disagreed with the pope were not true Christians. "Salvation was confined within the teachings of the Roman Church. Every person who disagreed with the Roman Church was in line for a heresy trial and perhaps excommunication" (Arnold).³³ For Roman Catholics, the first step of salvation is baptism. "The baptized are cleansed of original sin (and, in the case of adults, both original sin and actual sins committed up to that point), regenerated, and incorporated into Christ and his Church" (Allison).³⁴ Following this, there's conversion which effects justification. "Conversion results in justification, which is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man" (CCC).³⁵ The grace of justification is maintained through a diligent use of the seven sacraments. "Through the other sacraments, the Catholic faithful receive new infusions of grace to continue the process of sanctification. Such grace prepares and empowers them to engage in good works and thereby merit eternal life" (Allison).³⁶

If anyone saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema. If anyone saith, that men are just without the righteousness of Christ, whereby He merited for us to be justified; or that it is by that righteousness itself that they are formally just; let him be anathema. If anyone saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema.³⁷

³¹ Fourth Lateran Council (1215), *Canon 1*

³² Council of Trent (1545-1563), 13:4

³³ Jack Arnold, https://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/jac_arnold/CH.Arnold.RMT.1.html

³⁴ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 214

³⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1989

³⁶ Gregg Allison, *40 Questions About Roman Catholicism*, 215

³⁷ Council of Trent, Session 6, chapter 15, canons 9-11