

# Lecture 1: Roman Catholicism

## Introduction: Geography and Attitudes

As a percentage of world population, Christians have remained remarkably constant at either 34 % or 35% of world population throughout the period from 1900 to 2012; and this percentage is forecast to continue until 2050 [Anthony Gottlieb, “Believe it or not”, in *Megachange: The World in 2050*, London: The Economist/Profile Books, 2012, p.80]. Within this group of more than one-third of the world’s population—the largest number of people committed to any religion—baptized Roman Catholics form the largest segment, some 1.1 billion people, 17.8% of the world’s population and half of the world’s Christians. There are wide regional differences in the strength of Roman Catholicism in different continents with 81% of the current population of South America estimated to be baptised Roman Catholics, 55% of the population of Western Europe, 39% in North America, but only 15% in Africa, 3% in Asia and 1% in the Middle East [*CIA Factbook*, as reported on the Wikipedia website, “Catholic church by country”].

The manner in which Roman Catholicism is practiced in the different continents also varies significantly in relation to attitudes to worship, piety, belief and the institutional church. Furthermore, baptism (the sole basis of these figures) does not necessarily lead to regular church attendance, as only some 1% of the population of the United Kingdom attend a Roman Catholic service of worship each Sunday. The wide disparity between those who are baptized as Roman Catholics and those who practise their faith, as well as the difference in attitudes in different continents means it is difficult to give a monolithic description of the Roman Catholic faith. Nevertheless, a monolithic model could readily be defined on the basis of Papal statements and pronouncements of the Curia, the central administration which works under the leadership of the pope in The Vatican in Rome, governing the Roman Catholic Church. This lecture attempts to describe the attitudes and beliefs of Roman Catholics in the British Isles, which is often in keeping with Papal pronouncements, but at other times highly critical of guidelines emanating from Rome.

For example, under the heading “What Catholics believe”, the International Catholic Weekly, *The Tablet*, recently published two letters. The first suggested that “The Church needs to take account of the *sensus fidelium* [the beliefs of the lay membership of the Roman Catholic Church] which constitutes 95 per cent of its membership”. The second, from a member of the organization, Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice [for the Church and the Pope] insisted that “Catholic Schools [in the United Kingdom] stopped teaching the truths of the faith in their entirety in 1970”; and “We must be very grateful that the Pope is addressing this problem of religious ignorance with his Year of Faith and by requiring every bishops’ conference to examine critically the religious textbooks currently used in their schools and parishes” [21 April 2012, p. 15]. This pattern of open and forthright disagreement is also evident in attitudes to the new translation from Latin into English of the liturgy which has been ordered by the Curia but is viewed by many Roman Catholics, both priests and lay people, as Latinized English containing prescribed prayers with awkward syntax and obtuse vocabulary that has created “a pastoral disaster” [Father James Hawes, *The Tablet*, 21 April 2012, Letters, p. 55].

In an international context, this pattern of disagreement is also evident in disagreements between an important section of the Curia, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and individual theologians. Professor Nicholas Lash from Cambridge contends that: “Without doubt, all Catholics are required to treat seriously, and with respect, instructions from their bishops, and especially instruction from the Pope.” However, he insists that there is a danger of Catholics “behaving as if we were required to suppose that just about everything a pope says must be treated as not only true but appropriate!” In his view, there is a problem of confusing “teaching, which is a matter of education, with governance, which is a matter of commands” [*The Tablet*, Letters, 28 April 2012, p. 17]. This distinction between “teaching” and “governance” is significant, but how these different emphases should be balanced is not immediately evident for either Roman Catholicism or other Christian denominations and will be considered further at the end of this lecture.

## The Role of the Papacy and Ecumenical Councils

The very words “Roman Catholicism” are defined by an entry in *Dictionary of the Christian Church* as “the faith and practice of Christians who are in communion with the Pope”; and the focus is on “Catholicism as it has existed since the Reformation, in contradiction to Protestants” [F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds.), Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, p. 1408]. This definition is somewhat misleading, as many Roman Catholics would view themselves as being in communion with Jesus Christ, rather than the Pope. However, Cross and Livingstone do expand their initial definition of Roman Catholicism with the reflection that: “Whereas in the early centuries the Church had to clarify especially the great mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and in the Middle Ages doctrines concerning the relation of God and [humanity] through grace and the sacraments, post-Tridentine theologians [that is, Roman Catholic theologians after the Council of Trent held from 1545 to 1563 and seen by Roman Catholics as the 18th Ecumenical Council] have been especially concerned with the structure and prerogatives of the Church, the position of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the economy of salvation, and the function of the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth, culminating in the dogma of Infallibility promulgated at the First Vatican Council of 1870” [pp. 1409, 1639-1640, 831].

This emphasis upon the importance of the First Vatican Council must be balanced by an awareness of the significance of the Second Vatican Council, initially called by Pope John XXIII, continued by Pope Paul VI, and held between 1962 and 1965. These two councils, considered by Roman Catholics as the 19th and 20th ecumenical councils, adopted rather different perspectives on papal authority, the liturgy and attitudes to other Christians, with the Second Vatican Council emphasising the collegiality of the bishops, the use of vernacular language in the liturgy, and the importance of openness to other Christians in the hope of achieving some kind of unity [cf. Cross & Livingstone, pp. 1681-1683, 1240-141, 376]. Today, Roman Catholics hold strong views about the significance of these two most recent councils and how their different doctrines should be integrated. While few contemporary Roman Catholics would characterize themselves as “Vatican I Catholics”,

many would insist they are “Vatican II Catholics” and have different views about the extent to which the many decrees of Vatican II have or have not been implemented.

The importance of these different conciliar perspectives should not be overestimated, because as the Editor of *The Tablet*, Catherine Pepinster, has pointed out many Catholics remain or return to the Catholic Church for cultural reasons because “there’s no place like home”; however, the Church’s rejection of all forms of contraception except “the safe period”, the continuing “deep unhappiness about the way in which the Church has dealt with child abuse”, the lack of “women in leadership positions”, as well as “lack of access to the sacraments” for those who have divorced and remarried have led many baptised Roman Catholics to become alienated from the Church [*The Tablet*, 5 May 2012, p. 9].

Despite the possibly excessive emphasis given to the Pope by Cross and Livingstone’s entry on “Roman Catholicism,” there is no question that Roman Catholics consider the Pope as the sole successor to St Peter. This perspective is in stark contrast to the Orthodox teaching that it is all the apostles, and not St Peter alone, who “preserved and transmitted to the Church the Christian teaching of faith and life in the form in which they had received it from their Master and Lord” [Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: A Concise Exposition*, 3rd ed. St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2005, p. 247]. However, the emphasis upon the importance of the papacy is also evident in Father Adrian Hastings’ entry on “papacy” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* which notes bluntly that “the papacy was a principal cause of the division of the church, both between east and west and between Catholic and Protestant, so much so that Paul VI astonishingly admitted that ‘The pope, as we all know, is undoubtedly the greatest obstacle in the path of ecumenism’” [Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason & Hugh Pyper, eds., Oxford University Press, p. 512].

The difficulty in evaluating the papacy is evident in the tension inherent in the two different perspectives with which the Roman Catholic theologian, Father Hastings, closes his reflections on the papacy. On the one hand, the need for Christian unity and leadership did not “require the later politicization of the papacy, the claim to absolute power apart

from the wider college of the episcopate, or any specific papal infallibility.” Yet on the other hand, Father Hastings concludes his comments on the papacy with the words of “a sympathetic Anglican scholar, T. G. Jalland, ‘It is a strange form of historical blindness which is unable to perceive in its long and remarkable history a supernatural grandeur which no mere secular institution has ever attained in equal measure....The Papacy must always defy a categorisation which is purely of this world’” [p. 512]. Today many Roman Catholics, as well as other Christians, would lean toward the first view, rather than the friendly Anglican perspective. That first view is certainly the perspective of the Orthodox theologian, Father John Anthony McGuckin who concludes his own entry on papacy with the acerbic but fair comment that the papacy has “emerged no longer as a symbol of unity for the churches, but as a special point of contention over varying ways to interpret apostolicity” [*The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 251].

### **The Catechism: Searching for Christ**

The 778 pages of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Burns & Oates, 2000] begin with the words: “God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life” (p. 7). This sharing of each human being with the life of God begins with the response of faith—both personal faith and the faith of the Church as a community (pp. 14-44). The faith professed by the Roman Catholic Church is grounded in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, as set out in the Bible, papal pronouncements and twenty ecumenical councils. The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed proclaimed at the first two ecumenical councils in 325 and 381 are explained in great detail in Part One of the Catechism, The Profession of Faith (pp. 14-242), along with the correct assertion that these creeds “remain common to all the great Churches of both East and West to this day” (p. 47). The Canon of the Bible, as accepted by the Roman Catholic Church, includes almost all of 18 Jewish apocalyptic books, written between 200 BC to 100 AD, known as the Apocrypha (from the Greek, meaning “hidden things”), all of which are accepted by the Orthodox Church and included within the

Septuagint [John R. Kohlenberger III (ed.), *The Parallel Apocrypha*, Oxford University Press, 1997]. The Roman Catholic belief is that “both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence” [*Catechism*, p. 25, par. 80].

Part Two of the *Catechism*, The Celebration of the Christian Mystery [pp. 242-377], focuses on the seven sacraments and the liturgy. Part Three, Life in Christ [pp. 379-542], considers the vocation of both the individual and of humanity “to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father’s only Son” [p. 413], as well as a very full analysis of the Ten Commandments. Part Four, Christian Prayer [pp. 543-610] includes many helpful suggestions about how to pray, as well as a very full analysis of the Lord’s Prayer. The foundations of the *Catechism* are caught in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, published in 2000, before his selection to become Pope Benedict XVI: “All time is God’s time. When the eternal Word assumed human existence at his Incarnation, he also assumed temporality. He drew time into the sphere of eternity. Christ is himself the bridge between time and eternity” [Ignatius Press, p. 92]. The final sentence of that book is a quotation from the Gospel of St John 21:7, “It is the Lord”, when St John, fishing in the Sea of Tiberias after the crucifixion, recognised that the strange visitor was Jesus Christ. It is precisely that moment of recognition that the *Catechism* seeks to create.

Given its length and comprehensive approach, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is not well known by Catholics today, except in pithy excerpts such as the quotation from Pope John Paul VI’s encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*: “Every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, proposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible is intrinsically evil” [p. 508; HV 14]. However, there is considerable, animated discussion among Catholics about both liturgy and theology, with a genuine acceptance that at times, such as in the writings of the theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), “perplexity is but the reader’s inevitable response to an author’s complexity” [David Moss &

Edward T. Oakes, “Introduction” to Oakes & Moss, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 1]. In these discussions about both the liturgy and theology, there is a tendency to refer to participants as “conservative” or “liberal” in their perspectives; however, such labels are rather superficial when confronted with the reflections of Lawrence Paul Hemming, a deacon of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of London in his book, *Worship as a Revelation: The Past, Present and Future of Catholic Liturgy* (Burns & Oates, 2008): “To pray is to ask to be made ready to hear. This book springs from the understanding that praying is a kind of hearing—not a mere opening of the ears, but a trained attentiveness in a habit acquired over years, even decades; a directedness *towards* in a particular manner....Theology—contrary to common definitions—is not speech about God. It is reflective deliberation on the work of faith ...[that is] the practice of worship, the sacred liturgy itself, and nothing else... We do not pray in order to speak to God, but so that God can address us” [p. 1].

### **An Orthodox Perspective on Roman Catholicism**

The continuing separation between Roman Catholics and other Christians is evident in the manner in which Roman Catholics often refer to themselves simply as “Catholics,” while most other Christians consider them “*Roman Catholics*”. Rather more significant are the substantive theological differences between Roman Catholic and Orthodox perceptions of the meaning of faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. Like Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism is a sacramental faith that believes that the body and blood of Jesus Christ become present in the liturgy as set out in the Gospels of St Mark 14:22-24, St Matthew 26:26-28, St Luke 22:19-20 and 1 Cor 11: 23-25, and that this real presence of Christ can reach out to others. However, there are significant theological differences between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism in trying to understand in what sense bread and wine become the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ which the Orthodox Church views as a mystery, but the Roman Catholic Church defines carefully in a complex doctrine of

transubstantiation which non-Roman Catholics view as based upon “the philosophy and physics current in the Middle Ages, but now superseded” ([Hastings, p. 714]

In a recently published study, *Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Exploring Belief Systems Through the Lens of the Ancient Christian Faith* [Conciliar Press, 2011], Father Andrew Stephen Damick, an Antiochian Orthodox pastor in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, has highlighted a number of significant issues on which there are major differences in doctrine between the Roman Catholic (RC) and Orthodox (O) Churches:

- RC emphasis upon reason as on the same level as faith as a means to truth in contrast to the O reliance primarily on faith;
- RC stress on anthropocentric spirituality with focus on earthly images and sensations, three-dimensional statues and importance of the body in contrast to the deliberately non-realistic presentation of O iconography to draw believers away from the world;
- RC focus on legalism and importance of observing rules in contrast to O commitment to guidelines requiring decisions from individual Christians;
- RC belief in the universal jurisdiction of the papacy and on papal infallibility in contrast to the O belief in the authority of Ecumenical Councils over the pope;
- RC insistence that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque* clause, Latin for “and the Son”) not from the Father alone as with O, based on John 15:26 and the wording of the original Nicene-Metropolitan creed;
- RC belief that the oneness of God is an absolute divine simplicity in contrast to the O insistence that God is both unknowable essence and knowable energies;
- RC emphasis on original sin and the resulting belief that Holy Mary was preserved from original sin through an immaculate conception in contrast to the O stress on forgiveness cancelling punishment for sin;
- RC emphasis upon sacrifice and “satisfying” God and averting his wrath in contrast to O emphasis on healing and transformation of the human person; and

- RC delay in children receiving communion until age 7 and confirmation usually until age 13 in contrast to O commitment that all infants and adults should receive communion and confirmation as soon as they are baptised [pp. 30-57].

However, Father Andrew acknowledges that “much of modern Orthodox criticism of Roman Catholicism is based either on pre-twentieth-century models of Rome’s thought or simply on mischaracterisations and oversimplifications of its theology and practice” [p. 58]. His own analysis as set out above leaves little space for ecumenical reconciliation. Furthermore, “Orthodox believers should tread lightly in discussing theology with Roman Catholics” because individual Roman Catholics “may be closer to or further from Orthodoxy than what is officially taught by the Vatican.” [Therefore,] “it is critical to discern what the person in front of you believes before launching into any sort of detailed refutation of Roman Catholic dogma and practice” [pp 57-58]. For a comprehensive review of Orthodox perspectives of Roman Catholicism, see the reflections of Father Gregory Hallam at: <http://www.orthodoxresource.co.uk/comparative/roman-catholic.htm>

### **Clarifying the Relationship between Teaching and Governance**

To conclude this first lecture of the E-Quip course on different understandings of Christianity, consider the distinction between teaching and governance made earlier by Professor Nicholas Lash. How can Christianity best be taught and how should the Church of Christ be governed? In order to teach effectively, we need to pray and to listen carefully to those to whom we would teach, because sound doctrine can only be communicated well when it begins in prayer and in considering the existing understandings of those to whom we seek to communicate. Governance of the Church is a matter not only of commanding others but of prayer and of reaching out to others to clarify and implement the will of God in the context of each of our individual lives and in our lives as a Christian community.

Perhaps then since sound teaching begins with prayer and with listening to others, while effective governance arises out of prayer that unites the listener with the will of God

and the fullness of the Church of Christ, it is sensible to recognise that good teaching is an important step toward good governance. It may even be that given sufficient prayer good enough teaching can lead to good enough governance, both for our own individual lives in Christ and for the Church of Christ on this earth. None of us would think we are “perfect Christians” any more than we are “perfect” parents or “perfect” spouses or “perfect” persons. However, through prayer and experience and study we can still improve our ability to be parents or spouses or persons or Christians. This awareness that good teaching grounded in an Orthodox prayer life can ultimately help create good governance is deeply encouraging for all of us who are committed to the teachings of the Orthodox Church and committed also to this course of E-Quip lectures on Christianity.