



# Who Are Roman Catholics?

## In this class session we will study:

- The origins and history of Roman Catholicism.
- Some specific characteristics of the Roman Catholic Church.
- The fundamental beliefs of Roman Catholicism.

## Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest of all Christian denominations. Although present in all parts of the world, it is identified as *Roman* because of its historical roots in Rome and the importance it attaches to the worldwide ministry of the bishop of Rome, the Pope.

## History

From the beginning, the first Christian believers formed a close-knit community and were conscious of being members of a unique fellowship. They identified themselves as the saints, the elect, and the church of God.

The historical period known as *patristic* and the expression patristic literature refers to the writings of the Fathers of the Christian church. The Greek word *patristikos* means relating to the fathers. The themes of reflection of the Fathers focused on the Christological controversies and the Trinity. Some of the writings of the Fathers reflect the philosophical and religious thought of the Hellenistic and Roman world from which it derived the majority of its concepts and vocabulary. The concepts of these times had a strong influence on religious thought during the Middle Ages and played a part in the development of modern Western philosophy. During this time arose neoplatonism, a philosophical school that flourished in the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries A.D. and that later influenced the thought of the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup>

An estrangement between West and East occurred early in the church. The centralization of the church in Rome isolated the Christian church from its Jewish roots and created a new identity influenced by paganism and neoplatonism. Several factors favored this tendency: (1) The destruction of Jerusalem in the Second Jewish War (A.D. 135) ended any possible leadership that might have been asserted there; (2) The prominence of the bishop of Rome, which grew in the Gnostic struggle;

(3) The apparent lack in Antioch of leaders of eminence and the decline of the influence of Asia Minor, which left Rome, by A.D. 200, the most influential center of Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

An early controversy arose between Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, with Anicetus, bishop of Rome, around A.D. 155, on the observance of Easter. At that time, the practice of Asia Minor, probably the more ancient, was to observe Easter with a vigil, terminating in the Lord's Supper, through the night of the 14th of the month Nisan, like the Jewish Passover, regardless of the day of the week on which it might fall. The Roman custom, and that of some parts of the East, was to hold the Easter feast always on Sunday.<sup>3</sup>

Renaissance humanists gave the name "Middle Ages" to the period between the end of the Roman Empire and their own time, which they believed was a rebirth of the civilization of Greece and Rome. Within the years of the Middle Ages, historians have recognized subperiods. The Middle Ages, especially the early period, were also known as the Dark Ages. The Middle Ages were a time characterized by:

*Feudal powers.* The authority of the emperor and the kings was thought to derive from God as symbolized by coronation by the pope or another prelate.

*The authority of the pope.* More dangerous to the authority and the power of medieval monarchs were the claims of churchmen, particularly the increasing secular power of the papacy. If popes and prelates crowned emperors and kings, why should not the churchmen claim superiority as vicereagents for God?

*The schism.* In the year 1054, centering on a minor matter, such as the kind of bread that must be used in Eucharist, arose the first great schism that broke the unity of Christianity. From that time, the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches went their separate ways.<sup>4</sup>

*The Inquisition.* The Inquisition was a medieval church court instituted to seek out and prosecute heretics. Normally, this court conducted an interrogation of the suspect, trying to obtain the confession that was necessary for conviction. In order to do this, assisting secular authorities frequently applied physical torture. This institution was one of the worst instruments of abuse that history has seen.

The popes of the Middle Ages were notoriously worldly. Simony, nepotism, and financial excesses increased. The church was riddled with venality and immorality. The sale of indulgences was a wide practice of the Catholic Church that impinged upon true spiritual repentance and improvement of life. At the same time, a genuine upsurge of popular religiosity manifest itself and increased the disparity between the people's expectations and the church's ability to satisfy spiritual needs. Some turned to mysticism and inward religion, but the great mass of people were restless and dissatisfied. The Reformation of the

sixteenth century was a movement within Western Christendom to purge the church of medieval abuses and to restore doctrines and practices in harmony with the Bible and the New Testament model of the church. This led to a breach between the Roman Catholic Church and the reformers, whose beliefs and practices came to be called Protestantism.

The Reformation began in Germany on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther, an Augustinian university professor at Wittenberg, posted 95 theses inviting debate over the legitimacy of the sale of indulgences. The papacy viewed this as a gesture of rebellion and took steps against Luther as a heretic. The German state supported Luther's cause during the early years.

Luther's central message was *Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, and Sola Scriptura* (only the faith, only the grace, and only the Scriptures). In this way Luther was putting aside church traditions. The movement initiated by Luther was followed by other early reformers like Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, Farel, and many others. Soon the Reform movement was known and accepted in Europe and the world.

**It is** *not without reason that the claim has been put forth in Protestant countries that Catholicism differs less widely from Protestantism than in former times. There has been a change; but the change is not in the papacy. Catholicism indeed resembles much of the Protestantism that now exists, because Protestantism has so greatly degenerated since the days of the Reformers* (The Great Controversy, p. 571).

For Catholicism, the French Revolution was like a deadly wound. Through the French Revolution the Roman Catholic Church lost not only territories and influence, but also experienced all those woes that medieval Catholicism had inflicted on those who suffered from its intolerance and persecution. A well-known Catholic writer, Richard P. McBrien, says: The Enlightenment marked the beginning of the end of unhistorical, classicist Catholic theology, the French Revolution (1789) marked the definitive end of medieval Catholicism. The feudal, hierarchical society that had been so much a part of medieval Catholicism disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

The First Vatican Council, the twentieth ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, is best known for its decree affirming the doctrine of papal infallibility. On July 18, 1870, the council solemnly accepted the proposition that when a pope speaks *ex cathedra* on faith or morals, he does so with supreme authority.<sup>6</sup>

Modernism was a movement within the Roman Catholic Church that tried to adapt Catholic beliefs to the intellectual, moral, and social needs of modern times. But all the controversies on this inner Catholic movement ended when Pope Pius XII opened the way in 1943 for the use of biblical criticism in Catholicism by his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.<sup>7</sup> The biblical criticism of the Bible—an interpretation method that considers the Scriptures on the same level as any other literature—is widely applied in Catholic seminaries today.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was a modern effort to change the Roman Catholic Church. This meeting produced 16 documents<sup>8</sup>—all of which had to be approved by the pope before they became official—on subjects such as revelation, liturgy, the church in the modern



**Review** *How did the centralization of the Catholic Church in Rome affect its development?*

*How did the French Revolution affect the Roman Catholic Church?*

*What are the implications of the term separated brothers as it is used in Catholic documents?*

world, the instruments of social communication, ecumenism (the expression separated brothers appears in reference to Protestants instead of *sects* or *cults*),<sup>9</sup> Eastern Catholic churches, renewal of religious life, the laity, the ministry and life of priests, missionary activity, Christian education, the relationship of the church with non-Christian religions, and religious freedom. There is, however, a Catholic aphorism in reference to the church, *Semper Aeden* (The Roman Catholic Church is always the same); this maxim is in conflict with any reform and with the spirit of change. It is necessary to recognize that this duplicity is a peculiarity of the Catholic Church.

## Characteristics of the Catholic Church

One of the principle characteristics of the Roman Catholic Church is the papacy. *Papacy* is defined as the system of ecclesiastical government in which supreme authority is vested in popes.<sup>10</sup> Catholics believe that the pope is the successor to Peter. They assert that, The dogma of Apostolic Succession dates from the age of Irenaeus, when it arose in order to protect the faith of the church against Gnostic heresy.<sup>11</sup>

But there is no biblical evidence of a monarchical episcopacy in the early Christian church. It is evident that from an historical moment the apostolic form of guidance was transformed into a monarchy of the bishop of Rome. Many authors suggest that this vacuum is the root of the problem, but we must not forget that this kind of silence may have a double explanation: (a) the absence of historical references, and (b) the possible destruction or loss of important historical references.

**The papacy** *is . . . prepared for two classes of mankind, embracing nearly the whole world those who would be saved by their merits, and those who would be saved in their sins. Here is the secret of its power* (The Great Controversy, p. 572).

The authority of the popes, which lacked biblical foundation, progressed toward unimaginable levels. The medieval church affirmed: The decision of the Pope and the decision of God constitute one decision, just as the opinion of the Pope and of his assistant are the same.<sup>12</sup> Lay members do not participate in the election of the authorities of the Catholic Church.

In 1990 there were some 906 million Roman Catholics, or approximately 18 percent of the world's population. The 55 million Roman Catholics in the United States constituted 22 percent of its population. These statistics are based on baptisms, usually conferred on infants, and do not necessarily imply active participation in the church's life or full assent to its beliefs.

## Fundamental beliefs of Catholicism

Catholics believe in the following:

**To him** *who loves self-indulgence, it is more pleasing to confess to a fellow mortal than to open the soul to God. It is more palatable to human nature to do penance than to renounce sin; it is easier to mortify the flesh by sackcloth and nettles and galling chains than to crucify fleshly lusts. Heavy is the yoke which the carnal heart is willing to bear rather than bow to the yoke of Christ*  
(The Great Controversy, pp. 567, 568).

- *God, the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus.*
- *The authority of the bishop of Rome* (the pope). They believe that he is infallible when speaking *ex-cathedra*.
- *Holy tradition.* They hold that tradition is the deposit of the faith, because, while the revelation concluded with the death of the apostles, the deposit of the faith was passed to the bishops, who succeeded the apostles.
- *The sacrifice of Mass.* Mass is said to be a reiteration of Christ's sacrifice at Calvary, symbolically represented on a sacrificial table by a priest authorized by the church.
- *The Holy Scriptures.* Catholics include, however, the deuterocanonical books (the Apocrypha), which contain some of the particular teachings of the Catholic Church.
- *Immortality of the soul.* Catholics believe that after people die, they continue to exist. Depending on their works, people are in heaven, in purgatory, in limbo, or in hell.
- *The exaltation of Mary, the mother of Jesus.* She is said to have ascended into heaven, where she receives the prayers of her devotees.
- *A celibate, all-male priesthood.*
- *Communication with dead saints.*
- *The inherent benefit of the water used in baptism when it is blessed by a priest.*
- *The holiness of Sunday and all Catholic feasts.* These must be observed by all members.
- *The doctrine of transubstantiation.* This means that the wafer, or host (from Latin *hostia*, which means sacrifice), is transformed into Christ's blood and flesh by the clerical prayer.
- *The confession of sins to the priest.* He is said to have the power to absolve sin.
- *The doctrine of original sin.* This is transmitted *a macula*, on every human being, and can be removed only by baptism.
- *The baptism of infants by sprinkling.*