



# Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

## SPECIAL REPORT

# ROMAN CATHOLICISM

## IS IT A CULT?

by Albert James Dager

To many Christians The Roman Catholic Church is an enigma—a mysterious ecclesiastical system of laws, rituals and religious orders. For centuries there have been angry denunciations from Roman Catholics against Protestantism for the schism created by the Reformation, and from Protestants against Roman Catholicism for its theological errors and its claim to be the only true church.

Out of this controversy charges have arisen that Roman Catholicism is not truly Christian, but is, in fact, the largest and oldest “Christian” cult in the world.

The Christian Research Institute, founded by the late Dr. Walter Martin, is regarded by many as the foremost authority on cults and the occult. They are also seen as experts on what constitutes biblical theology. CRI has produced position papers on Roman Catholicism, addressing some of the doctrines with which they are in disagreement. They have stopped short, however, of acknowledging Roman Catholicism as a cult. They are, in fact, adamant in their defense of Roman Catholicism as an orthodox Christian religion. In this regard they have come against others for their insistence that Roman Catholicism meets the criteria of a cult.

That there are problems with some Roman Catholic doctrines and interpretations of Scripture, no knowledgeable non-Catholic would dispute. But to what degree does Roman Catholicism present a danger to the purity of biblical truth? Are their teachings, practices, and liturgy commiserate with cultism? Or are they truly Christian, differing only in minor interpretations and applications? To answer these questions it is necessary to define just what constitutes a cult.

### WHAT IS A CULT?

The word “cult” connotes neither good nor evil. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines a cult as “a system of religious beliefs and ritual; also: its body of adherents.”

Based on this rather simple definition, every church body may be classified as a cult. But there is another definition offered by *Webster's*, which is more akin to the use of the word employed by theologians and sociologists: “a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; also: its body of adherents,” and “great devotion to a person, idea, or thing.”

But even this definition is inadequate in light of current trends in Christian thought. There is a wide distinction between the sociological and theological viewpoints.

Our concern is with the theological definition. Yet even here, one of the problems we have today is that there have developed several benchmarks from which to define a cult. For example, the Christian Research Institute has established as its benchmark what it terms “orthodoxy.” That is, the historical position of the Church or churches from the time of the apostles to the present. This includes the early Roman Catholic Church fathers. On this basis, C.R.I. (as do other cult-watching groups) considers Roman Catholicism as orthodox but in error in some teachings. However, Dr. Martin's original assessment would include Roman Catholicism:

...a cult might also be defined as a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's interpretation of the Bible. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses are, for the most part, followers of the interpretations of Charles T. Russell and J.F. Rutherford. The Christian Scientist of today is a disciple of Mary Baker Eddy and her interpretations of Scripture. The Mormons, by their own admission, adhere to those interpretations found in the writings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. It would be possible to go on citing many others, including the Unity School of Christianity, which follows the theology of Charles and Myrtle Filmore. From a theological viewpoint, the cults contain not a few major deviations from historic Christianity. Yet paradoxically, they continue to insist that they are entitled to be classified as Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The basis for determining what constitutes a cult must go beyond stated doctrinal positions. If we use Dr. Martin's original test, “a group of people gathered about a specific person or person's interpretation of the Bible,” we will not be fooled into thinking that, just because an organization issues a doctrinal statement in conformity with “orthodoxy,” that organization is truly Christian.

Even if an organization can be said to have been established by God, there are no guarantees that God is going to continue to sanction it if it doesn't continue in the spirit and purpose for which He established it. And unless its criterion for establishing truth is the unadulterated Word of God rightly divided, its existence is counterproductive to the Faith. Add to this any liturgy or practices which are counter to the spirit of the Word, and you have the makings of a cult in the theological sense.

Ron Enroth, author of *The Lure of the Cults and New Religions*, and professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, cites Brooks Alexander, co-founder of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, as having established the criteria for determining what constitutes a cult from a biblical theological perspective. These are twofold:

1. *A false or inadequate basis of salvation.* The apostle Paul drew a distinction that is utterly basic to our understanding of truth when he said, “By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Inasmuch as the central doctrine of biblical Christianity is the sacrificial death of Christ for our sin, all cultic deviations tend to downplay the finished work of Christ and emphasize the importance of earning moral acceptance before God through our own religious works as a basis of salvation.

2. *A false basis of authority.* Biblical Christianity by definition takes the Bible as its yardstick of the true, the false, the necessary, the permitted, the forbidden, and the irrelevant. Cults, on the other hand, commonly resort to extra-biblical documents or contemporary “revelation” as the substantial basis of their theology (e.g., Mormons). While some cult groups go through the motions of accepting the authority of Scripture, they actually honor the group's or leader's novel interpretation of Scripture as normative (e.g.: Jehovah's Witnesses, The Way International).<sup>2</sup> (emphasis Enroth's)

Enroth and Alexander make the distinction between *sociological* understanding of what constitutes a cult, and *theological* understanding. The sociological position is that whatever is normative to a given cul-

ture is not a cult. Whatever is not normative is a cult. The biblical theological position is that those groups that adhere to the Bible as the basis for all theology and practice are normative. Those groups that offer other criteria as equal to or superior to the Bible, including erroneous and/or exclusive interpretations of Scripture, are cults.

From the sociological point of view Roman Catholicism is not a cult. But what about the biblical theological point of view? To ascertain the answer to this question we will be quoting almost exclusively from the Vatican II documents. This is because of the misconception that the Roman Catholic Church is not the same as it was in the past, and that it has instituted reforms through the Vatican II Council which allow for evangelical Christianity to seek unity with the papacy. While it has softened its stance in regard to its approach toward non-Catholics, it will be seen that it still holds major doctrines and practices that rule out unity for true Christians who have the knowledge to understand the insurmountable barriers erected by the Roman Church itself.

### THE BASIS FOR SALVATION

The Roman Catholic Church claims that salvation is by grace through the shed blood of Christ on the cross. But in practice and other teachings, how true is their affirmation of that essential doctrine?

Historically, Roman Catholicism has maintained that Jesus merely made the way open for salvation. But to enter into that salvation one must live in obedience to the authority of the papacy. In addition, Jesus' provision for salvation not being complete, the Church offers other means to assure one's salvation.

It is through the Roman Catholic Church alone that salvation in its fullest sense can be attained:

For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

### Penance

On the subject of salvation and the expiation of sin, Vatican Council II stated:

Therefore the Church announces the good tidings of salvation to those who do not believe, so that all men may know the one true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent and may be converted from their ways, doing penance.<sup>4</sup>

The full taking away and, as it is called, reparation of sins requires two things. Firstly, friendship with God must be restored. Amends must be made for offending his wisdom and goodness. This is done by a sincere conversion of mind. Secondly, all the personal and social values, as well as those that are universal, which sin has lessened or destroyed must be fully made good. This is done in two ways. The first is by freely making reparation, which involves punishment. The second is by accepting the punishments God's just and most holy wisdom has appointed. From this the holiness and splendor of his glory shine out through the world....

The doctrine of purgatory clearly demonstrates that even when the guilt of sin has been taken away, punishment for it or the consequences of it may remain to be expiated or cleansed. They often are. In fact, in purgatory the souls of those "who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions" are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debt.<sup>5</sup>

### Indulgences

One means of attaining salvation from the punishment of one's sins is what the Roman Church calls indulgences. These may be purchased with money or through acts of penitence, acts of charity, or other pietistic means. The concept of indulgences is based on the idea that one's good works merit God's grace. Since Christ's sacrifice was insufficient for the full payment of the penalty of sin, acts of piety and gifts to the Roman Church may be used as partial payment for one's sins. The efficacy of an indulgence depends upon the merit attributed to it by the church. For example, one may pay to have a mass said for a relative believed to be in purgatory. The mass will account for a certain number of days deleted from his purgatorial sentence.

The use of indulgences spread gradually. It became a very clear element in the history of the Church when the Popes decreed that certain works which were suitable for promoting the common good of the Church "could replace all penitential practices" and that the faithful who were "genuinely sorry for and had confessed their sins" and done such works were granted "by almighty God's mercy and ... trusting in his Apostles merits and authority" and "by virtue of the fullness of the apostolic power" "not only full and abundant forgiveness, but the most complete forgiveness possible for their sins.

For "God's only-begotten Son ... has won a treasure for the militant Church ... he has entrusted it to blessed Peter, the key-bearer of heaven, and to his succes-

sors who are Christ's vicars on earth, so that they may distribute it to the faithful for their salvation. They may apply it with mercy for reasonable causes to all who have repented for and have confessed their sins. At times they may remit completely, and at other times only partially, the temporal punishment due to sin in a general as well as in special ways (insofar as they judge it to be fitting in the sight of the Lord). The merits of the Blessed Mother of God and of the elect ... are known to add further to this treasure."<sup>6</sup>

While acknowledging that indulgences have been abused, the Roman Church ascribes that abuse to "the past," as if no such abuses occur today. But the very nature of indulgences is an abuse against the purity of the Faith. To make matters worse, the Roman Church condemns those who oppose the idea of indulgences:

[The Roman Catholic Church] "teaches and commands that the usage of indulgences—a usage most beneficial to Christians and approved by the authority of the Sacred Councils—should be kept in the Church; and it condemns with anathema [cursing by ecclesiastical authority] those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them."<sup>7</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church says it alone can grant this essential blessing for full salvation, and then condemns to hell those who disagree—virtually all non-Catholics.

It was primarily Martin Luther's realization that salvation is by grace and his opposition to the evil practice of selling indulgences that sparked the Reformation. While he sought to remain in the Roman Church and bring reform to it, he was eventually excommunicated for his stand, as were other Reformers.

The response of Roman Catholicism to the Reformation was a hardening of the papal heart which resulted in mass executions, torture, and other violent means to squelch the rejection of papal authority. The Counter-Reformation resulted in the creation of the Order of Jesus—the Jesuits—as a means to spy out and destroy those who sought to follow the path to freedom from Rome's tyrannical grip upon their souls. Thus ensued one of the bloodiest periods in the history of the Church, which saw countless martyrs for Christ at the hands of the papacy. With all its posturing to win the hearts of non-Catholic Christians today, the Roman Catholic Church has never offered an apology for its murdering of our ancestral brethren. This chapter in its history is virtually ignored by the Vatican.

## The Eucharist & The Mass

Roman Catholicism states that redemption is accomplished in the Eucharist:

For it is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, "the work of our redemption is accomplished."<sup>8</sup>

In Roman Catholic belief the Eucharist is the embodiment of Christ in the bread of the Roman Catholic communion table; the bread is literally His body, and the wine is literally His blood. To non-Catholics this can be confusing. But the Vatican II documents spell out the degree to which this literalness is held by its affirmation of the Council of Trent's Decree on the Eucharist that the wafer is to be worshipped as God. Is not idolatry the sign of a cult?

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind "that all the faithful ought to show to this most holy sacrament the worship which is due to the true God, as has always been the custom of the Catholic Church. Nor is it to be adored any the less because it was instituted by Christ to be eaten."<sup>9</sup>

The Roman Church insists that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient in itself to take away the penalty for our sins, but that we must add to His sacrifice through penance and through the application of the Roman Catholic mass as an ongoing sacrifice:

Hence the Mass, the Lord's Supper, is at the same time and inseparably: a sacrifice in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated.<sup>10</sup>

Christ's own association of what he did at the Last Supper with what he was to do on Good Friday has been the Church's own norm for intimately relating the two. The sacrifice of the altar, then, is no mere empty commemoration of Calvary, but a true and proper act of sacrifice, whereby Christ the high priest by an unbloody immolation offers himself a most acceptable victim to the eternal Father, as he did on the cross. "It is one and the same victim; the same person now offers it by the ministry of his priests, who then offered himself on the cross. Only the manner of offering is different."...

Worth stressing is that what makes the Mass a sacrifice is that Christ is a living human being with a human will, still capable of offering (hence priest) and being offered (hence victim), no less truly today than occurred on the cross.<sup>11</sup>

The writer of Hebrews stated:

*But this one man [Jesus], after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;*

*From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.*

*For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified....*

*And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.*

*Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin. (Hebrews 10:12-18)*

Scripture is clear that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for taking away not only the guilt, but the punishment for our sins. The whole purpose of His suffering was to bear our punishment:

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.*

*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6).*

The chastisement (or punishment) that reconciled us to God (establishing peace with Him) was laid upon Jesus at the cross. There is not a single Scripture that speaks of punishment for our sins if we die in Christ. At the worst, we will suffer the loss of reward for our failure to produce fruit in our lives to our capabilities. But all scriptural references to punishment apply to unbelievers only. For the believer, to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ (II Corinthians 5:8).

Does this make us more inclined to sin and take a cavalier attitude about our position in Christ? Just the opposite. When those who have the Spirit of God consider the awful price paid for our redemption, we abhor our sins all the more. If we fail it is, as Paul said, the result of sin that dwells in our mortal bodies. But our spirits—our attitude—is one of hatred for sin.

The history of the Catholic Church proves conclusively that its means for salvation is not by grace, but by works of its own laws. This, in itself, qualifies it to be deemed a cult. It was one of the "approved religions" under the pagan emperor Constantine—the first major cult that broke from the true teachings of the apostles.

### THE BASIS FOR AUTHORITY

Perhaps the most cogent argument offered against the cults by true believers in Christ Jesus is that Scripture is the sole authority for all belief and practice for those who are in Christ. The first avenue of attack against a cult's theology takes the researcher through that cult's basis for belief. Even those cults which affirm the validity of the Bible as the sole authority add their own authorities to it. And that is what cult researchers mark as one of the unmistakable signs of a cult.

Like other cults, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and that it is the basis for establishing truth, doctrine, and practice. But it also has other criteria that it says are equal to Scripture: tradition, and magisterium (the teaching authority of the Church).

While asserting, as do all aberrant "Christian" cults, that Scripture is the primary source of all revelation, the Roman Catholic Church in practice and in its teachings affirms that its interpretation of Scripture is the only valid basis upon which all truth resides and upon which its other authorities rest.

Sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles [the pope and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church] so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching. Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence....

But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.

It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that *one of them cannot stand without the others*. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.<sup>12</sup> (emphasis ours)

In addition, the Roman Church openly professes that its view of Scripture differs from that of other Christians:

But when Christians separated from us affirm the divine authority of the sacred books, they think differently from us—different ones in different ways—about the relationship between the scriptures and the Church. For in the Church, according to Catholic belief, its authentic teaching office has a special place in expounding and preaching the written Word of God.<sup>13</sup>

It is for the bishops, “with whom the apostolic doctrine resides” suitably to instruct the faithful entrusted to them in the correct use of the divine books, especially of the New Testament, and in particular of the Gospels. They do this by giving them translations of the sacred texts which are equipped with necessary and really adequate explanations. Thus the children of the Church can familiarize themselves safely and profitably with the sacred Scriptures, and become steeped in their spirit.

Moreover, editions of sacred Scripture, provided with suitable notes, should be prepared for the use of even non-Christians, and adapted to their circumstances. These should be prudently circulated, either by pastors of souls, or by Christians of any rank.<sup>14</sup>

The cry of the Reformation was “sola scriptura!”—the insistence that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority for all believers. The Holy Spirit’s enlightenment is a safeguard against religious tyranny.

But for the Roman Catholic Church the Scriptures are not sufficient of themselves to provide all that is necessary “for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:16-17) without the Roman Church’s interpretations. Isn’t this what Dr. Martin established as one of the primary criteria for determining if a group is a cult?

### Exclusivity

Another sign of a cult is its exclusivity and insistence that it alone holds the authority as God’s only true church. Rather than acknowledge that the true Church is comprised of individuals bound to God the Father through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, a cult looks upon the organization itself—that is, the hierarchical structure—as the Church. This is true of Romanism.

The Roman Catholic Church admits today that God’s grace is active in non-Catholic Christians. We are referred to as “separated brethren,” which the Roman Church, through its ecumenical movement, hopes to bring into fellowship under its authority. Unless we acquiesce to this movement toward “unity” we remain outside the graces of the Church, regardless of how much in God’s grace we live.

Bishops should show affectionate consideration in their relations with the separated brethren and should urge the faithful also to exercise all kindness and charity in their regard, encouraging ecumenism as it is understood by the Church.<sup>15</sup>

The key phrase in this statement is “as it is understood by the Church.” This betrays the cult mindset that sees the Church as a separate entity from the corporate body of all true believers. How the Roman Church views ecumenism is revealed in the Vatican II documents:

The term “ecumenical movement” indicates the initiatives and activities encouraged and organized, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity.<sup>16</sup>

To the papacy the purpose of the ecumenical movement is to meet the needs of the Vatican’s ecclesiastical system on the pretext of promoting Christian unity. But on what terms is unity to be realized?

This sacred Council urges the faithful to abstain from any frivolous or imprudent zeal, for these can cause harm to true progress toward unity. Their ecumenical activity cannot be other than fully and sincerely Catholic, that is, loyal to the truth we have received from the Apostles and the Fathers, and in harmony with the faith which the Catholic Church has always professed, and at the same time tending toward that fullness in which our Lord wants his Body to grow in the course of time.<sup>17</sup>

Through the ecumenical movement the Roman Catholic Church is attempting to undo the Reformation, and to bring all of Christendom under the authority of the papacy. While it encourages “dialogue” with non-Catholic Christians, its position is adamant: there will be no unity without surrender to “Mother Church.”

This establishes the pope as the central figure for the Faith in the same way that the apostles of other cults are established. While they acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the central figure of the faith to which they adhere, there can be no true relationship with Him apart from the dictates of the hierarchical pronouncements. The cult of the papacy is in itself sufficient grounds to recognize the Roman Church as a cult. The display of adoration, the gaudy parade of a mere man as if he were a god, the pandering to idolatrous worship through bowing down and kissing his ring, the insistence that he be addressed as His Holiness the Pope (or Father) of all Christians cannot but confirm to any Christian—let alone professed cult-watchers—that Roman Catholicism is a cult.

## CONCLUSION

There are other evidences of cultism in Roman Catholicism, too numerous to mention here. One significant consideration: any religious group that threatens damnation and/or excommunication to any segment of its membership for eating, drinking, marrying, or failure to attend religious rites is a cult.

As a former Roman Catholic I can testify of the bondage in which I lived, fearful that I might do or not do something to lose my hope for salvation. I was conditioned to rely on Mary for my salvation more than upon Jesus. I wore medals that the church told me would ensure Mary’s guarantee of salvation if I died while wearing them. I lit candles before statues and kissed their feet, hoping that the saint they represented would grant my petitions. For my sins I did penance prescribed by the priest. My hope was in the church, not in Christ alone.

Still, I have no doubt that God’s spirit is at work among Roman Catholics to bring some to a knowledge of the truth. Many, like Martin Luther and other Reformers, are naively attempting to bring about changes. Others hold a simple faith, ignorant of the implications of the church’s belief system.

Just as there are true believers in the Protestant churches, many of which are as reprobate as the Roman Catholic Church in its hierarchical structure and belief system, so I believe there are true believers among Roman Catholics who will one day recognize the freedom in Christ that is theirs. ■

## NOTES

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