

Religions in America: Roman Catholic

Who are the Roman Catholics?

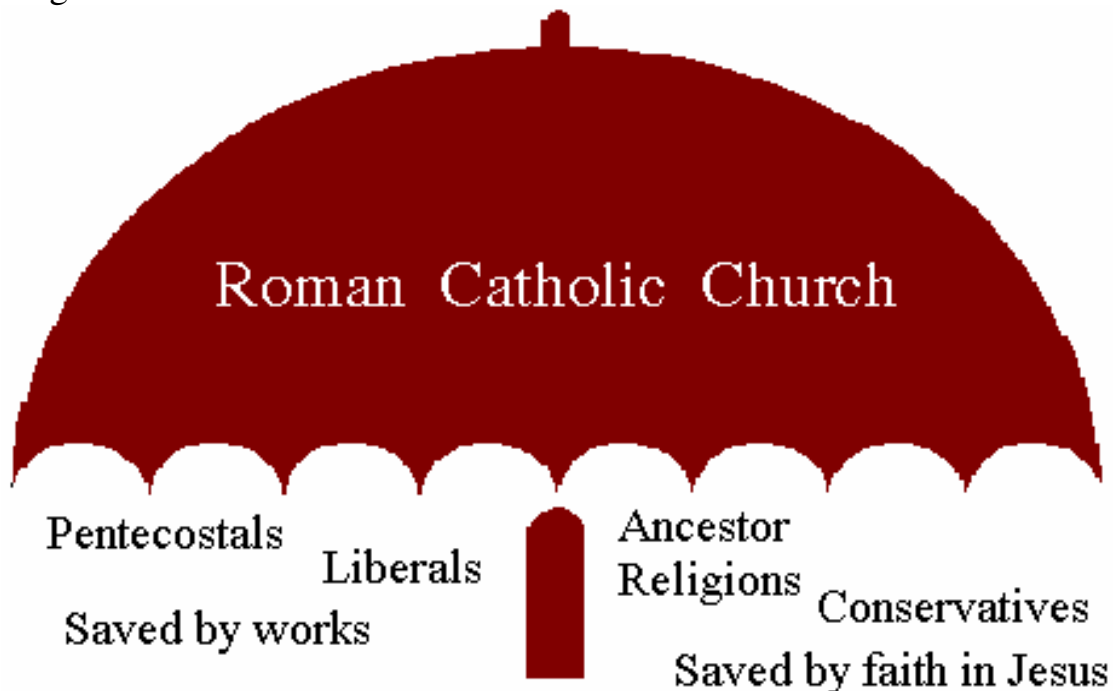
The Roman Catholic church is the largest Christian church in the world. There are about 1,000,000,000 (one billion) Roman Catholics in the world, and about 55,000,000 (55 million) live in the U.S.

How old is the Roman Catholic church? Both the Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church say they are the original church that Jesus began.

Catholics are well known for: the Pope (who is head of the church) and bishops, beautiful church buildings, monks, praying to Mary and the saints, priests can't get married.

What Do Roman Catholics Believe?

Roman Catholics believe many different things. Many churches say, "This is the right teaching, that is wrong teaching." But the Catholic church accepts many different teachings. The Catholic church is like an umbrella with many different groups under it. If a person says the Catholic church is the true church, they can belong even if some of their beliefs are different. We will not study all the groups in the Catholic church. We will only focus on the main accepted teachings.



Where is their teaching from?

Roman Catholics have two sources for their teaching: the Bible and church tradition. They say both are equally important. Lutherans only depend on teachings from the Bible. Examples of Catholic teachings from tradition: most teachings about Mary (that she was born without sin, that she didn't die), the pope is infallible (he can't make mistakes when he is talking about the church), having 7 sacraments, and purgatory. The Catholic church praises other churches for using the Bible, but criticizes them for not following Catholic church tradition.

What does the Bible say about itself and tradition?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-7 It is good for us to follow some _____.

Matthew 15:1-9 Which is more important? God's Word or Tradition?

How Are People Saved?

Roman Catholics believe people are sinners and need to be saved from sin and death. They believe that Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins, and He rose alive from the dead to promise us life. They say Jesus bought our salvation for us, but we also must have good lives to get that salvation.

This is how they say it works. There are two kinds of grace. The first kind of grace makes us able to do good works. The second kind of grace makes our good works become holy, so we can earn salvation from God. Catholics say both kinds of grace come from God, so God is the one who saves us. But then they also say that we must do good works, or we can't get God's grace for salvation. What does the Bible say? Read Ephesians 2:8-10. Are salvation and works related? How? Does our salvation depend on works?

Roman Catholics have 7 sacraments: baptism, Eucharist (Lord's Supper), holy matrimony (marriage), holy orders (becoming a priest or nun), anointing the sick (last rites, anointing with oil), confirmation and penance (confession). They believe that sacraments are special good works. God commands that we should do them and He will give us grace. Lutherans say the only sacraments are Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

What Happens When We Die?

Catholics believe that when you die, there are three places you can go.

1. Heaven. Heaven is for people who believe in Jesus, are members of the church, and have done good works to make their faith complete. Some Catholics say you must be Roman Catholic to go to heaven. Some Catholics today say even non-Christians can have enough grace to go to heaven. So this teaching really varies.
2. Hell. Hell is for people who don't believe in Jesus and aren't part of the church.
3. Purgatory. Purgatory is a temporary stop on the way to heaven. Catholics believe our sin causes two kinds of punishment: eternal punishment (hell), and temporary earthly punishment. They say Jesus died to forgive us and take away eternal punishment. But we must still suffer on earth and pay for our sins. Catholics say we don't live long enough to suffer the earthly punishment for our sins. So if we sinned too much and didn't do enough good works, when we die we must go to Purgatory. There, we will suffer and pay for the rest of our earthly punishment. When that is done, we can go to heaven. But the Bible says nothing about Purgatory or that we need to suffer for our sins before going to heaven.

The Church

Roman Catholics believe that you must have bishops. Without bishops, you don't have the true church. The pope is the head of the bishops. They say without true bishops, you don't have true sacraments. Without true sacraments, it is hard to get God's grace. That is why Catholics sometimes say if you are not a Roman Catholic church, then you are not a true church because you don't have real bishops. No pope means no bishops, no bishops means no church. Read Matthew 18:20 to see what Jesus said.

Mary and the Saints

Roman Catholics pray to Mary and other saints, why? Because people want help for their lives and help for salvation. They think the saints can help. Remember the Catholic teaching about how a person becomes saved? God gives you grace to begin your salvation. You do good works to finish it. They say saints did so many good works, they did many more than they needed. So if you pray to a saint, that saint can give you some of his or her good works.

Catholics say four main things about Mary.

1. She is a Redemptrix with Christ. That means she worked with Jesus to save all people from sin. Jesus didn't do all the salvation work Himself.
2. Mary is an example of faith and love.
3. Mary was born without sin, called "Immaculate Conception."
4. Mary was taken into heaven without dying. This is called the "Assumption of Mary." (That is why the Catholic high school in Davenport is named "Assumption.")

The Bible says that our works don't save us, and it says nothing about us giving good works to other people. Read Psalm 49:7-8. Mary was not always a good Christian. Read Mark 3:21,31. At one time, Mary thought Jesus was out of His mind.

What Do Lutherans Say?

Lutherans agree that the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches together are the original church. But we think they strayed from the original teaching. Most of all, we disagree with their idea that God gives us grace to start our salvation and we must finish it with works. Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus is the _____ and _____ of our faith. That means Jesus begins and ends our faith. He gives it and He makes it complete. We don't need to add anything from ourselves. Only faith in Jesus saves us, without us needing to do any works. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Remember not all Roman Catholics believe everything we studied here. This is the official church teaching. Many Catholics disagree, and many do simply believe in Jesus as their Savior. When Catholics use the Bible and talk about Jesus, they still often give out the good news of salvation through Jesus alone. We can encourage them to do that more and more.