

Can A Christian Remain A Roman Catholic?

By John Phillips

Rarely in all its long and colorful history has the Roman Catholic Church been in such internal disarray as it is today.

For centuries the Catholic Church presented to the world a United front. It appeared before men as a powerful monolithic structure, one Church under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Beneath the facade, of course, there were differences and power struggles, but the church as a whole gave the appearance of unity and strength.

This is not so today. Not only has Rome lost a great deal of its secular power but its very life seems threatened from within.

There are five major theological cleavages discernible in the Roman Catholic fold today, and any evaluation of Catholicism needs to take them into account:

The liberal theologians are convinced that almost everything Rome stood for dawn through the centuries is hopelessly out of date. They are challenging all the traditional dogmas of their Church--Papal authority, an exclusively male priesthood, even the idea of God and belief in Christ's resurrection.

These theologians are up in arms against the Church's ban on homosexuality, on abortion, on the celibacy of the priesthood. They represent a powerful liberal faction. Their weight in the underdeveloped countries of Latin America is thrown on the side of social change even if it means an outright alliance with communism.

Maryknoll priests, for instance, have been vocal and active in insurrectionist movements in numerous countries around the world (TIME magazine, July 6, 1981, p.36). So have many Jesuit priests, (TIME, Sept. 7, 1981).

The charismatics have made deep inroads into the Roman Catholic community and are, probably, the most disruptive force with which the Roman Catholic Establishment has to deal.

The charismatics insist that the Catholic church can only be saved by the exercise of the various gifts of the Spirit such as tongues. They would like to see the practice of these gifts become a regular part of the life of the Church in every parish and congregation. The idea sends shivers down the spines of Catholic conservatives.

The traditionalists look upon the liberals and the Marxists within the Roman Catholic communion with horror as heretics. This faction in the Church regarded the policies of Pope Paul VI as suicidal.

His view was that Marxism was changing and that communism was on the wavelength of the future. The Church, therefore, should make its peace with communism while it still could.

The conservatives occupy a half-way position between the traditionalists and the activists. They think the Church should become more liberal, but not at the expense of old-time dogmas nor at the expense of well established methods of Church government.

The radicals would go much farther than the conservatives. They think the church should give up all its social, political, and financial interests. In their opinion the Roman Catholic Church should fall back upon its dogmas and approach mankind with these well-proven assets.

For a full discussion of these differences see Malachi Martin's book, "**The Final Conclave**" (Stein and Day).

The Roman Catholic Church has long history of absorbing challenges and change and, at the same time, of maintaining the Establishment which changes very little.

The present Pope is doctrinal conservative, an advocate of human rights, and a determined foe of communism. He uses his great personal charm to make friends around the world, but he stands firm on all the traditional dogmas of Rome.

At his inauguration, for instance, he twice paid homage to the Virgin Mary who is venerated with extraordinary zeal in his native Poland. He also spoke of himself as "Bishop of Rome," (TIME, Oct. 30. 1978, p.56).

In his tour of the United States he made a tremendous impression everywhere, but firmly and repeatedly voiced his unyielding stand on traditional Catholic dogma despite the fact that some of his positions are distasteful to many American Catholics (TIME. Oct. 15. 1979, p.15).

This is what we must remember when considering the position of a born-again believer who elects to remain within the Roman Catholic fold. Roman Catholicism does not change. At heart it is the same as it ever was.

Dissidents come and go, but the Church remains impassively the same. It will make every effort to accommodate and absorb what it can of the opposition, but its basic structure and beliefs will remain unchanged.

Rome did not arrive at its dogmatic positions hastily nor lightly. She is the product of many centuries of gradual departure from the true faith of the Church found in the Word of God. For instance:

- Prayers for the dead were introduced in 310
- The lighting of candles in 320
- The worship of saints about 375
- The mass was adopted in 394
- The worship of Mary began to develop about 432
- Priests began to assume distinctive robes in 500
- The doctrine of purgatory was introduced in 593
- Worship in Latin (since repealed) was mandated in 600
- Claims to Papal Supremacy took firm foot in 606
- Feasts in honor of the Virgin Mary began in 650
- The custom of kissing the Pope's foot was introduced in 709
- The worship of images and relics was authorized in 788
- The invention of holy water was about 850
- The canonization of saints was formalized in 993
- Feasts for the dead were introduced 1003
- The celibacy of the priesthood was declared 1074
- The dogma of Papal infallibility was announced 1076
- Prayer beads were introduced in 1090
- The doctrine that there are seven sacraments was introduced in 1140
- The sale of indulgences began 1190
- The wafer was substituted for the loaf in 1200
- The dogma of transubstantiation was adopted 1215
- Confession was instituted 1215
- The adoration of the Wafer began 1220
- The Ave Maria was introduced 1316
- The cup was taken from the laity in 1415
- Purgatory was officially decreed In 1439
- Roman tradition was placed on the same level as Scripture 1546
- The Apocrypha was received into the Canon 1546
- The immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary was announced 1854
- The doctrine of the temporal power of the Pope proclaimed 1864
- The personal corporeal presence of the Virgin in heaven 1950

This is Rome. These are the dogmas we associate with Rome. They are unscriptural. All of them are the very antithesis of New Testament doctrine.

In deference to a more educated and enlightened constituency, the Church might well make a modification here and there. For instance, in 1956 Pope Paul VI proclaimed an end to the traditional obligation that Catholics abstain from eating meat on Fridays. He abolished the Index of Forbidden Books, and demoted a whole host of saints who had been canonized by the Church in previous ages and revered and prayed to by the faithful ever since.

Changes such as these have not changed Romanism. Roman Catholics today are permitted to read the Bible with a measure of approval by the Church, but the Church itself does not really like the Bible. It banned it for centuries from the laity, burned it, and persecuted those who loved it.

Roman Catholics today are permitted to look upon their Protestant neighbors as "separated brethren"ú, but what the Church would really like to do is to welcome them back into the fold of Roman Catholicism.

We will believe that Rome has changed when it repudiates the Papacy, removes all images from its churches, denounces the dogma of purgatory as unscriptural, sets aside the confessional, renounces the mass. and calls an end to the veneration of the Virgin Mary.

Until Rome does these things, it remains Rome--a vast, formal system of religion.

That is not to say, of course, that there are not a number, perhaps a very considerable number, of genuine Christians within the Roman Catholic Church.

Why do they stay there? That is a question each one would have to answer for himself.

Some stay there because it is the easiest thing to do. The pressure of family, friends, and fond memories perhaps makes a break very difficult. Others stay out of ignorance of the essentially unbiblical nature of the Roman Church.

Some stay because they feel they have a ministry there. They hope that, perhaps, they can influence others toward a more Scriptural Christian belief.

Some stay because they have not seen that while Rome often uses the same words as evangelical Christians--grace, confession, regeneration, baptism and so on--she does not by any means mean the same thing by those words.

Should a believer stay in the Roman communion?

The Word of God is uncompromising: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God..."

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

In a day and age of general compromise, toleration, and ecumenicalism, such a statement of Scripture rings out to some as harsh and uncompromising. But then, the Holy Spirit never compromises with error.

The early Church did not make its lasting impact on society by compromising with the religions by which it was surrounded. Down through the ages those who have counted for God in this world have been those who have taken their stand with God against the world.

It was Archimedes who said that, given a long enough lever and a fulcrum far enough out of the world, he would be able to lift the world. One cannot lift a barrel by remaining in the barrel. It is necessary to get out first, then the barrel can be lifted.

It was not Lot who made an impact with God on behalf of sin-ridden Sodom. He had become too much part and parcel of its system. It was Abraham, the separated believer, well removed from Sodom and all that it stood for, who counted in the hour of crisis (Genesis 14).

So, whether it be Rome or anything else that spells out compromise in our lives, let us take to heart the call of the Holy Spirit to separate ourselves from all that is unscriptural and then to count for God.