

Roman Catholicism: Part 2

The Way of Salvation

Catholicism teaches that Christ died on the cross to purchase man's salvation and that having purchased redemption by His blood and death He delivered it to the Catholic Church to be distributed to men.

“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 successors 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 all the elect ... are known to add further to this treasury”

Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

“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”

Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism

Baptismal Regeneration

According to Roman Catholic teaching, Salvation begins with baptism. It can be infant baptism for those born into Catholic homes or adult baptism for those who approach the Church later in life. Through baptism a person receives spiritual life. It is believed that baptism removes the guilt of all previous sin, both original and actual. After baptism a person is considered to have been born again and to be part of the Church, the body of Christ.

The new life that begins with baptism is said to be nurtured and kept alive by the grace that comes to through the sacraments. Those who do not receive the sacraments do not receive grace. Those who do not receive them properly: for example, if they receive them seldom or with little devotion, receive less grace.

The Eucharist

Participation in the Eucharist is an important part of maintaining a state of grace.

“The Eucharist is a sacrifice because it re-presents (makes present) the sacrifice of the cross, because it is its memorial and because it applies its fruit:

[Christ], our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption. But because his priesthood was not to end with his death, at the Last Supper "on the night when he was betrayed," [he wanted] to leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands) by which the sacrifice which he was to accomplish once for all on the cross would be re-presented, its memory perpetuated until the end of the world, and its salutary power be applied to the forgiveness of the sins we daily commit.”

"The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice: The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different. And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner. This sacrifice is truly propitiatory."

The Catholic Church Catechism, paragraphs 1366 – 1367

Sins: Mortal and Venial

Sins committed after baptism can result in the loss of one's salvation. According to the Catholic Church Catechism sins are to be evaluated according to their gravity.

"Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law... Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it. Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us...necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation (penance)."

The Catholic Church Catechism, paragraphs 1854 – 1856

Punishment: Eternal and Temporal

"To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a *double consequence*. Grave sin deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the loss of which is called the eternal punishment of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the "temporal punishment" of sin. These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin."

"The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains."

The Catholic Church Catechism, paragraphs 1472 – 1473

Salvation and Penance

It is through the sacrament of Penance that a believer receives forgiveness of sins committed after baptism. The penitent person must confess his sins to a priest. The priest will then grant absolution which removes the eternal punishment due for mortal sins.

"Christ instituted the sacrament of Penance for all sinful members of his Church: above all for those who, since Baptism, have fallen into grave sin, and have thus lost their baptismal grace and wounded ecclesial communion. It is to them that the sacrament of Penance offers a new possibility to convert and to recover the grace of justification. "

The Catholic Church Catechism

However, the temporal punishment due for mortal and venial sins is not removed by absolution. This must be expiated either in life by performing acts of penance imposed by the priest and by doing good deeds, or afterward in the flames of Purgatory.

Acts of penance vary. They include prayer, saying the rosary, reading the scripture, saying a number of "Our Father's" or "Hail Mary's", doing good works, fasting, and other such things. There is no limit or restriction to what the penitent sinner can be asked to do: it is entirely at the discretion of the priest.

A believer can never know how much God will require him to pay for the full atonement of his sins; therefore he can never know how long he may have to spend in Purgatory. What is more,

he can never be sure but that he will commit some mortal sin before his death which, if not absolved, will result in the loss of his salvation.

Indulgences

The sufferings and righteous acts of Christ and, to a lesser extent those of Mary and the saints, have led to an excess of merits being stored up in heaven — these acts of Mary and the saints are known as works of supererogation. The Church can draw from this store of merit for the granting of indulgences which will shorten the duration of an individual's temporal punishment in Purgatory. Only the Pope may grant plenary (full) indulgences. Bishops may grant indulgences of up to forty days and priests may grant indulgences for shorter periods.

In addition the duration of a believer's suffering in purgatory may be reduced by the good deeds, prayers and acts of service to the Church performed by relatives on their behalf.

"An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints. The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead."

The Catholic Church Catechism

Grace: But Not As We Know It

The Catholic Church does teach that we are saved by grace and on the basis of Christ's suffering on the cross. However, it is important to remember that when the Roman Catholic Church speaks of grace, it does not use the word as we would understand it. For a Roman Catholic grace is not an attribute of God but rather the divine help given to the believer to enable him to live a righteous life.

"All children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be the more severely judged"

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church

Justification Is Sanctification

It is also important to know that Roman Catholics have a very different understanding of how they become righteous before God. As we would understand it, God freely declares those who come to Him in faith to be righteous. We use the word justification, as does the New Testament, to describe that particular act of God.

The Roman Catholic understanding is that justification is the ongoing work of God within a baptised believer by which he is gradually transformed into a person who is acceptable to God. A Catholic would say 'righteousness by faith means that I cannot become righteous by myself, but by faith I receive God's transforming grace, through the sacraments, which will change my heart so that I am given the ability to become acceptable to God.'

The Roman Catholic must therefore strive after justification and will gain or lose ground depending on whether he maintains a state of grace either by committing no mortal sins or by having his mortal sins absolved and by maintaining sufficient grace through the performance of good works and participation in the sacraments. Even then, he always has before him the need to suffer or pay for the temporal punishment due for his venial sins.

Questions For Discussion

1. How would you explain the meaning of the word "grace" to someone from a Roman Catholic background?