

A Biblical Response to Catholicism

How do we respond to the Catholic worldview and belief system?

Review of their essential beliefs on salvation:

The Catholic View of Salvation

The RCC has an unbiblical understanding of justification. This can be seen in the following quotations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (paragraph numbers in parentheses), which asserts (1) that justification is initially granted to an individual through baptism; (2) that justification is maintained through the sacraments of the church; and (3) that justification ultimately depends on the obedience of man by which he merits eternal life.

- “Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back towards God...” (405).
- “Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ...” (977).
- “It is through the sacrament of Penance that the baptized can be reconciled with God and with the Church.... This sacrament of Penance is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after Baptism, just as Baptism is necessary for salvation for those who have not yet been reborn” (980).
- “In the forgiveness of sins, both priests and sacraments are instruments which our Lord Jesus Christ...wills to use in order to efface our sins and give us the grace of justification” (987).
- “Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies” (1127).
- “The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation” (1129).
- “The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation.... Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are ‘reborn of water and the Spirit.’ God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments” (1257).
- “By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin” (1263).
- “Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte ‘a new creature,’ an adopted son of God, who has become a ‘partaker of the divine nature,’ member of Christ and co-heir with him,’ and a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1265).
- “Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ” (1272).
- “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 Fathers of the Church present this sacrament as ‘the second plank (of salvation) after the shipwreck which is the loss of grace’” (1446).

- “One who desires to obtain reconciliation with God and with the Church, must confess to a priest all the unconfessed grave sins he remembers after having carefully examined his conscience” (1493).
- “With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us” (1991).
- “Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith” (1992).
- “By giving birth to the ‘inner man,’ justification entails the sanctification of his whole being: Just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification” (1995).
- “Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed* for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and *for the attainment of eternal life*” (2010; emphasis added).
- “Justification has been merited for us by the Person of Christ. It is granted us through Baptism. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who justifies us” (2020).

According to the RCC, Christ’s death on the cross purchased vast spiritual riches. Christ is said to have given the Church the sacraments as the way to have access to these riches of grace. The sacraments are channels by which the grace of God flows to the individual.

For the RCC, justification is conditional. Sins committed after baptism are not covered by the initial justification at baptism. Mortal sins committed after baptism cause a person to fall from a state of grace and become liable to eternal punishment in hell. The sacrament of confession can remove the guilt of those sins, but not the temporal punishment for them. Therefore penance is required to remove the temporal punishment for sin. This is done through making satisfaction for sin by certain acts of penance, which expiate the punishments required by God (e.g., suffering, tears, prayers, pilgrimages, acts of charity, etc.). Any sins that are not expiated in this way are then expiated through suffering in purgatory.

Salvation comes down to something earned by good works:

“It is a universally accepted dogma of the Catholic Church that man, in union with the grace of the Holy Spirit must merit heaven by his good works. These works are meritorious only when they are performed in the state of grace and with a good intention . . . We have shown that according to Holy Scripture the Christian can actually merit heaven for himself by his good works” (Matthias Premm, *Dogmatic Theology for the Laity* (Rockford: TAN Book Publishers), 262-63.

Salvation is the reward for a life of good works:

“In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere ‘to the end’ and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God’s eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ” (CCC, 1821).

Catholicism Teaches	Scripture Teaches
Justification is God's act of making man righteous by good works and obedience.	Justification is God's act of declaring a sinner righteous by faith.
Infused sanctifying grace through the sacraments makes the believer acceptable to God.	Christ's imputed righteousness makes the believer acceptable to God.
Justification is achieved by faith plus good works	Justification is received by faith alone.
Justification is granted the sinner when he is actually made just.	Justification enables God to see the sinner as if he were just.
Justification can be increased by receiving more sacraments.	Justification cannot increase since the ground is the perfect righteousness of Christ.
Justification is affected by sin.	Justification is a permanent verdict and is not affected by sin.
Final justification is not determined until death.	Justification comes at the moment of faith in Jesus Christ.
The ground of justification is the righteousness of the person.	The ground of justification is the righteousness of Jesus Christ.
Sanctification and justification are similar.	Justification precedes sanctification.
Emphasis is on the sacraments.	Emphasis is on God's verdict.

How to Witness to Roman Catholics

It's important to be conscientious in how we approach Roman Catholics with the gospel. We must not take for granted common knowledge of biblical concepts and common definitions for biblical words and ideas.

1. Recognize the Psychological Dependence on the RCC

Challenge a RC on his personal responsibility for the truthfulness of what he puts his faith in, you might get this response: "That's the Church's responsibility. If the priest taught me wrong, he'll go to hell, not me." From the sacrament of baptism at birth to the sacrament of last rites at death, the RC is dependent upon the priest.

This may be why so many RCs don't believe many of the doctrines of the RCC, yet are unwilling to look elsewhere for spiritual answers—there is a psychological bondage to the system. They might reason thus: "If this huge world-wide Church of one billion with the Pope and centuries of tradition and teaching cannot solve my spiritual problems, then there is no solution anywhere else." This thinking produces fear and increases their dependence on the system.

2. Establish Authority for Truth

In any witnessing opportunity, a major issue that needs to be dealt with is authority. Resolve the question: "In what or in whom will you trust for your eternal destiny?" Each person ultimately must choose between man and his teachings or Jesus and His word. To choose the latter is the safest and wisest decision anyone will ever make because Jesus is the truth (John 14:6); His word is truth (John 17:17) and He came to testify to the truth (John 18:37). Furthermore, every religious leader must be held

accountable to Scriptural authority (Acts 17:11). No man or pope is infallible (Gal. 2:11-14) and tradition must never suppress the authority of God’s word (Mark 7:7-13; Col. 2:8).

3. Define Terms Biblically

Term	RCC Teaching	Evangelical Doctrine
Born Again	Water Baptism	Impartation of a new nature
Receive Christ	At weekly mass	Once at time of conversion
Saved by grace	Meriting favor with God via the sacraments	Reception of unmerited favor via faith in Christ
Faith	Believing in God and the RCC teaches	Believing and trusting the Word of God
Good Works	Activities meriting salvation	Activities done in the power of God’s Spirit that result from salvation
Why Christ died	Establish the RCC and the sacraments as the channel to receive grace	Penal substitutionary atonement for all believers
Deity of Christ	Son of Mary, Mother of God	Son of God
Forgiveness of sins	After partaking of all the sacraments (baptism, confirmation, regularly receiving the eucharist, confession and penance) and spending sufficient time in Purgatory	At moment of exercising saving faith in Christ
Justification	Gradual infusion of righteousness through participation in the sacraments	Point in time declaration of righteousness

4. Offer What Jesus Offers

There are three promises Jesus offers to repentant sinners that are totally foreign to most Catholics. They are:

- 1) the complete forgiveness of sins;
- 2) the imputation of His perfect righteousness; and
- 3) the assurance of eternal life.

These promises are foreign to Catholics because their church opposes them with a vengeance. Any Catholic who believes these promises of God is condemned with anathema by his church councils (Trent and Vatican II).

The Council of Trent states, “If any one saith, that he will for certain, of an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance unto the end, -unless he have learned this by special revelation; let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Sixth Session, Cannon 16).

5. Use the Bible Regularly

Catholics accept the Word of God as authoritative. When the Bible disagrees with their authority structure it creates doubt. Doubt can be used by the Holy Spirit to convict them of sin. Use the Bible liberally, but avoid books and tracts that appear to be decidedly Protestant or anti-Catholic (unless you know they are searching for answers and are open to reading literature). Encourage them to read the Bible. Tell them the Catholic Catechism says “The Church forcefully and specifically exhorts all the

Christian faithful . . . to learn the ‘surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ,’ by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’ ” (CCC, 133). They actually get a plenary indulgence if they read with veneration for at least one hour! When the RC person decides the Bible is right and the Church is wrong, a key milestone in the conversion process has been reached.

6. Make Much of the Death of Jesus Christ

Along with the authority of God’s Word, focus on the complete sufficiency of Christ’s atonement for all sin, past, present, and future. Jesus didn’t just die to open the door or to give you access to the sacraments so you can save yourself, He died to save you completely and directly by grace through faith alone.

7. Stick to the Main Issue of Salvation

Avoid direct confrontation or blasting the RCC. This will make them defensive. Stick to the main issues when talking about doctrine—authority of God’s Word and salvation by faith alone. Avoid lengthy discussions about transubstantiation, Purgatory, Mary, etc.

8. Recognize the mini-decisions in the conversion process:

- Has positive attitude toward the Bible.
- Chooses to investigate the Bible.
- Chooses to believe the Bible and accept it as final authority.
- Decides the RCC is wrong in some doctrines.
- Decides the RCC is not the way or the only way to heaven.
- Understands and accepts the biblical teaching of the gospel, particularly the sufficiency of Christ.
- Understands the concepts of works and grace from a biblical view.
- Decides to break with the RCC and join a biblical body of believers.

Conclusion:

Roman Catholic Theology is clearly a works-based system as opposed the grace-based gospel the Bible teaches. The following contrasts help distinguish the two views of salvation.

Man’s Traditions	God’s Word
Salvation is by attainment.	Salvation is by atonement.
Salvation is through human merit.	Salvation is through divine mercy.
Salvation is based on what you do.	Salvation is based on what Christ has done.