

# The Rise of Roman Catholicism

Historical Theology

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## INTRODUCTION:

? Have you attended a Roman Catholic Church service?

? How should we assess their practices?

So much of our disapproval of other denominations is because they seem so different from us. Often, we want to say something is wrong with how others practice, but we can't really articulate why is wrong other than to acknowledge it is different and that makes us uncomfortable.

? What are the differences between the Roman Church and The New Testament Church?

? How did these differences come about?

? How should we think about these differences?

To be fair, one must always be careful when he critiques a group from the outside. Many resources made connections between Roman Catholicism and Paganism that didn't seem to hold water. Connections must be clearly connected and/or historically validated.

## I. CENTURIES OF DEVELOPMENT

The Roman Catholic Church doesn't have an official start date. They would say that they begin with Peter, yet even the staunchest Catholic would have to admit that the 1<sup>st</sup> century church looks nothing like the Roman Church today. The Roman Church uses different terminology, practices different rituals, and espouses different doctrines than can be reasonably defended from the New Testament. Much of Roman Catholicism came about over time

as different theologians used different methods of Bible interpretation.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century the term priest became synonymous with pastor. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, bishops began to be called popes and a sort of hierarchy developed. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, with the legalizing and then endorsing of Christianity, many people came to Christ, and many more claimed Christ, though their faith was nominal.

Accommodations for these uncatechized Christians resulted in a wider separation of clergy and laity. The influx of pagans into the church brought in pagan influences and practices. While we would like to say it isn't so, the fact is that as the church engages with culture, culture often influences the church as much as the church influences the culture.

If pressed, I would put the start date of Roman Catholicism as we know it today in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and more specifically with Gregory the Great who canonized many of the liturgies and practices of the Church.

## II. THE CHURCH'S CONNECTION TO ROMAN CULTURE

### A. THE OFFICES AND POSITIONS

Pontiff (Pontifex Maximus):

A pontiff in Roman religion was a priest. The pontifex maximus was the highest priest elected by a college of pontiffs.

Vicar:

A Roman vicar was a representative sent to engage in business or politics from a higher authority. They might carry instructions or simply act with the authority of the one who sent them.

Priest:

The term priest, though found in the Old Testament, has no biblical connection to the Bible. Some Christian pastors began to take the title priest sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century with the rise of sacerdotalism. The Roman Catholic priest has more in common with Roman paganism than any biblical idea of priest.

## B. TRADITIONS AND PRACTICES

Hierarchy:

Roman religion and political power were directly connected. One could not become a priest unless he was wealthy, prestigious, powerful, or connected to powerful people. Those who were political leaders were given the responsibility of being religious leaders. We notice already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century that those who became bishops were often landowners or wealthy.

Sacerdotalism:

Roman paganism didn't have faith, but a sacrificial system. You didn't trust in the gods, but appeased them in order to derive benefits from them.

Feast Days and Venerating Ancestors:

Certain calendar days in paganism were set apart as holy days. These were associated with seasonal events such as solstices and the new year. Romans would mark the death of important figures, such as ancestors and celebrate their feast days.

Pageantry, Relics, Statues and Icons:

German pagans had idols as objects of worship. Each Roman house would have objects, shrines to ancestors and lesser deities. Temples were not places of fellowship, but locations where sacrifices were offered, the focal point of a deity's presence. In ancient Rome, there were religious processions and much pageantry.

? Do you act differently in a church building than you would elsewhere?

Vestal Virgins:

These were young girls who swore an oath of celibacy for 30 years to observe and lead rituals that were not appropriate for male priests.

Syncretism:

Syncretism is different than contextualization or inculturation. These attempt to show the relevance of Christ to a people group. Syncretism is the practice of allowing an unconverted people group to retain some of their pagan practices as long as they adhere to the essentials of Christianity.

This is a carryover from the Roman philosophy in conquering and subjugating other nations. They would take their major gods and try to identify them with Roman gods. They would then allow them to retain their minor gods. The goal of Rome was not accommodation, but subjugation.

Sometimes Rome would give indulgences to cities, allowing them to forgo some obligation to Rome as long as they would ultimately submit to Rome as Master.

? Where do we see syncretism most clearly, today?

The date of Christmas was established by Constantine in 336AD specifically to combat other pagan festivals at that time of year.

### III. BEYOND ROME

Rome cannot account for all the unbiblical or nonbiblical practices within the Roman Church. Allegorical interpretation, monasticism, infant baptism, sacramentalism, semi-pelagianism, celibacy of priests, etc. don't have direct pagan roots as far as I can see, yet they are a part of Roman Catholicism as it developed over the first 6 centuries.

Much of what the Roman Church does is biblical. They rightly call leaders bishops and deacons, though the hierarchy is unknown to Scripture. The Roman Church has developed doctrines and creeds and goes to the Bible for support, however thin that support may be. They do hold to ancient truths and for centuries they were the home of true believers.

### CONCLUSION

? How has our culture affected how we practice Christianity?

