
Roman Catholics

Origins

In the third century A.D. Roman bishops began to claim doctrinal primacy, using the supposed prominence of Peter amongst the apostles as a basis for this. In 312 Constantine became emperor of Rome, and the Edict of Milan which followed declared that Christianity was a legal religion. Under Constantine many practices became a standard part of the Roman Church, such as the symbol of the cross and the celebration of Easter on a specified date. Constantine had a basilica constructed in Rome, which was later replaced by St Peter's Basilica, completed in 1615. Constantine convened the First Council of Nicea in 325, at which the Nicene Creed was formulated. This creed was a response to the teaching of Arius, who claimed that Christ had not pre-existed. The Roman bishops increasingly claimed primacy of doctrine and also jurisdiction, not least as a reaction to the competing claims of the see of Constantinople. The First Council of Constantinople in 381 ruled that the bishop of Constantinople should have precedence over all other bishops except the bishop of Rome, but stated that Constantinople was "the new Rome".

Pope Leo I, who was pope from 440 to 461, is credited with significantly strengthening the primacy of the Roman bishop. He emphasised the importance of orthodox teachings, confronted Attila the Hun, and persuaded the Vandals to spare the inhabitants of Rome. In 533 Justinian proclaimed the pope Universal Bishop. In 607-8 the Decree of Phocas helped to establish the Church by confirming the Bishop of Rome as the head of all churches.

Today

There are over a billion Catholics worldwide. In the developing world, congregations have grown, but they have decreased in Europe and the Americas, due partly to scandals involving Vatican finances and also paedophile priests. Some Catholic schools and hospitals have had to close due to lack of clergy and nuns. The Church has been outspoken in opposing artificial contraception, abortion and homosexuality. It continues to promote social principles based on human rights.

What the mainstream says

- God is a Holy Trinity.
- Those who accept God will enjoy an eternity of bliss in heaven.
- Those who reject God will suffer in hell for ever.
- To enter heaven, souls must be completely purified in a place called Purgatory.
- Jesus had two natures at the same time; he was fully man and fully God.
- Mary is a spiritual Mother who can be sought for help.
- Mary was born perfect, without Original Sin.
- Jesus gave Peter the authority to lead, teach and govern the Catholic community, and this authority has been passed on to Peter's successors, from pope to pope.

(Source: <http://www.life4seekers.co.uk>)

Suggested initial Scriptural approach

The words of Isaiah, "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (8:20), should be used to show that the Bible is the authoritative source for truth, against which all teachings, including papal bulls, should be tested. At an early stage, the teaching of Scripture with regard to the falling away from the Truth, including the "man of sin" passage in 2 Thessalonians 2, needs to be addressed and matched against the realities of papal history.