

Roman Catholicism 101 - Doctrines & Devotions

This is the final part of the Roman Catholicism series. In this part, we will briefly look at and discuss some of the distinctly Roman Catholic doctrines and devotions.

Eucharist

Roman Catholic View:

- The Eucharist is the “source and summit” of the Catholic faith
- Doctrine of Transubstantiation: at the consecration, the bread and wine become the literal Body and Blood of Christ, though their appearances remain. (CCC 1333)
- It is viewed as both a sacrament and a sacrifice (a re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, made present at every Mass, but not redone or re-sacrificed.)

Reformed Response:

- Generally rejects transubstantiation. Division within whether there is true presence or not.
- The Lord’s Supper is a means of grace and memorial — a real spiritual communion with Christ and other believers, but not a re-sacrifice of Christ.
- Focus is on Christ’s finished work, not on an ongoing sacrificial system.

Doctrines of Mary

Roman Catholic View:

- **4 Doctrines of Mary**
 - **1. Divine Motherhood:** Mary is the Mother of God – Theotokos. (*Council of Ephesus in 431*)
 - **2. Immaculate Conception:** Mary was conceived without original sin (*Papal Declaration in 1854*)
 - **3. Perpetual Virginity:** Mary remained a virgin before, during, and after Christ’s birth.
 - **4. Assumption:** At the end of her earthly life, Mary was taken body and soul into heaven (*Papal Declaration in 1950*).
- **Marian apparitions – encounters believers have with the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Reformed Response:

- Affirms Mary’s unique role as the Mother of God and her example of humble faith.
- (Traditionally) affirms the teaching that Mary was a perpetual virgin.
- (Generally) rejects doctrines not clearly displayed or taught in Scripture (e.g., immaculate conception, assumption)
- Divided culture and differences between the reformers, modern reformed believers, and traditional reformed believers.

Praying to Saints

Roman Catholic View:

- Catholics do not claim to “worship” saints, but to ask for their intercession, much as one might ask a friend to pray for them.
- Saints are believed to be alive in Christ and able to hear prayers by God’s grace.

Reformed Response:

- Scripture teaches prayer is directed to God alone (Matt. 6:9; Phil. 4:6). Christ Himself is our intercessor (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34).
- While we may ask living believers on earth to pray for us, nowhere in Scripture are we taught to address the dead. Contacting or appealing to the dead is consistently forbidden in Scripture (Deut. 18:10–12; Isa. 8:19).

Types of Prayers & Devotions

Roman Catholic View:

- Some of the most common prayers and devotions within the Roman tradition are:
 - **The Holy Rosary:** meditative prayer involving reflection on the “mysteries” of Christ's life and the Gospel.
 - **Stations of the Cross:** devotion reflecting on Christ's suffering and crucifixion.
 - **Litanys, Novenas, & Chaplets:** structured prayers repeated over set times or in specific formats, for specific intentions.

Reformed View:

- There is value in structured prayer and meditation, especially when grounded in Scripture. Helpful aids to spiritual life. Encourages prayer modeled after Christ (the Lord's Prayer)
- Cautions against empty repetition (Matt. 6:7) and practices that elevate Mary or saints beyond biblical warrant.

Use of Images & Relics

Roman Catholic View:

- Christian/Biblical imagery is designed to invoke awe and adoration for what it represents. The purpose is not to worship the images or statues themselves. Veneration of images is distinct from worship.
- Relics are honored/venerated as reminders of the saints and channels of blessing, sometimes tied to miracles. (Acts 19:11–12)

Reformed View:

- rejects any **devotional use** of images or relics because it either 1) violates the second commandment, 2) confuses worship, and/or distracts from Christ as the only Mediator.

Sacramentals

Roman Catholic View:

- Signs and tools instituted by the Church that prepare the faithful to receive grace and sanctify different circumstances of life. (Despite the name, sacramentals confer actual grace, not sacramental grace)
- Some of the common sacramentals are: Holy water, medals, blessed oils, blessed crucifixes...

Reformed View:

- Scripture doesn't command these; they can shift focus away from the sufficiency of Christ and His ordained and ordinary means of grace (Word, Spirit & Church)
- Sacramentals may encourage superstition by attributing spiritual benefit to objects/rituals not instituted by Christ in the scriptures.