

SALVATION ACCORDING TO ROME

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE III

Edited and compiled by Keith Green (with footnotes)

"...the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord!" - Rom. 6:23

How blessed it is to know Jesus! His love, His mercy, His righteousness, His forgiveness! He has promised to "cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19) and to separate us from our sins "as far as the east is from the west!" (Ps. 103:12). This is the good news! (That's the literal meaning of the word "gospel" - good news!) That is what the true church of our God has the privilege of proclaiming... "liberty to the captives!!" (Lk. 4:18).

The reason I begin this article on the Roman Catholic view of salvation with such rejoicing in my Saviour, is because I have just finished reading a mountain of official (Roman) church literature on the subject, and I can honestly say, I have never had such joy in my heart of hearts about the finished work of Christ. As I scoured each page and read of penance, confession, venial and mortal sins, indulgences, purgatory, etc., I then had the infinite pleasure of searching the Scriptures to see what they had to say on these fundamental Catholic doctrines.

Oh what relief my soul found in the Scriptures! What holy joy! What clarity of light I saw, as the simple brilliance of God's mercy shown into my mind. If there is anything more beautiful than God's love and patience with man, it has never been revealed to mortals!

All this to say that I am bogged down with the information I have accumulated, and I will probably have to cover it all in this, Chronicle III, briefly touching on each subject, while always coming back to the main question: "According to Rome, how can a man or woman be saved from the consequences of his sinful nature and actions, and how can they gain assurance that they are in a right standing before God?"

The Catholic Teaching On Sin

Before we can understand what Catholics are taught about salvation, we must first see what they are taught they need to be saved from. In Matt. 1, the angel of the Lord speaks to Joseph in a dream about his betrothed, Mary, saying "she will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (vs. 21).

Today, many evangelicals toss around the term "saved" without much thought. "When did you get saved?" someone might ask. It's almost like a title, or a badge that a person wears to prove that he's become part of the club - the "saved" club.

Others are under the impression that when a person talks of being "saved", they are talking about being saved from many different things - sickness, death, the devil, hell, etc. But when the angel of the Lord used that precious word to prophesy that Jesus would fulfill all the predictions of the prophets, he made very clear what Jesus was coming to save His people from...their sins!

In official Roman Catholic theology, this too is the main thing that people are taught they need to be saved from - their sins. But the only thing that Catholic and evangelical teachings have in common on the subject of sin...is the spelling! For when a Catholic talks about his "sins", you must find out first if he is talking about "mortal" sins, or "venial" sins. And then you must ask him "how do you get rid of them?" The answer given will likely confound a non-Catholic. For words like "faith", "repentance", even "Jesus" will usually be missing in the answer. Instead, a whole new list of other words will have to be learned, defined, and understood before the evangelical can fully grasp how a Catholic is taught his sins (and the penalty due them) can be canceled out.

Mortal and Venial Sins

The first of these unfamiliar words are the names of the two groups Rome has separated all sins into. Now if you're a Catholic, you might be wondering why I'm making such a big deal - for the dividing of sins into two distinct categories (each with their own set of consequences and remedies) has been part of Catholic doctrine for a long, long time.

According to Rome's definition, mortal sin is described as "any great offense against the law of God" and is so named because "it is deadly, killing the soul and subjecting it to eternal punishment." Venial (1) sins, on the other hand, are "small and pardonable offenses against God, and our neighbor." Unlike mortal sins, venial sins are not thought to damn a soul to hell, but with the committing of each venial sin, a person increase his need for a longer stay in the purifying fires of a place called "purgatory." (Look that word up in your Bible dictionary - you'll find it right next to "venial"!)

Now, there is no agreement among the priests as to which sins are mortal and which are venial, but they all proceed on the assumption that such a distinction does exist. The method of classification is purely arbitrary. What is venial according to one may be mortal according to another.

According to Rome, the pope is infallible in matters of faith and doctrine. He should then be able to settle this important matter by accurately cataloging those sins which are mortal as distinguished from those which are venial. However, there are some definites in the "mortal" category: blatantly breaking one of the ten commandments, practically all sexual offenses (whether in word, thought or deed) and a long list of transgressions which have changed throughout the centuries.

For instance, until Vatican II it was a mortal sin to attend a Protestant church, to own or read a Protestant Bible, or to eat meat on Friday! Oh, and it's still a mortal

sin to "miss Mass on Sunday morning (2) without a good excuse" (which means that considerably more than half of the claimed Roman Catholic membership throughout the world is constantly in mortal sin!) Venial sins include things like thinking bad thoughts, having wrong motives, losing your temper, etc. - things that do not necessarily "lead into actual sin" but still, nevertheless, are sins that need to be eradicated in some way.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible makes no distinction between mortal and venial sins. There is in fact, no such thing as a venial sin. ALL SIN IS MORTAL! It is true that some sin are worse than others, but it is also true that all sins if not forgiven bring death to the soul. The Bible simply says: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). And Ezekial says: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (18:4).

James says that "whosoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (2:10). He meant, not that the person who commits one sin is guilty of all other kinds of sin, but that even one sin unatoned for, shuts a person completely out of heaven and subjects him to punishment, just as surely as one misstep by the mountain climber plunges him to destruction in the canyon below.

We know how quick human nature is to grasp at any excuse for sin. Rome seems to be saying "these sins are really bad! But those? Well...you can get away with a few of them and not really suffer too much." Speaking of "getting away" with something, let's get right down to how Rome teaches you can "get rid of" your sins.

Confession

The Catholic system starts to get real complicated when we begin to look at the ways one can erase both their mortal and venial sins. "Two kinds of punishment are due to mortal sin: eternal (in hell forever), and temporal (in purgatory). Eternal punishment is canceled by either baptism (3) or confession to a priest." (4)

The Baltimore Catechism defines confession as follows: "Confession is the telling of our sins to an authorized priest for the purpose of attaining forgiveness." The important words here are "authorized priest." And to be genuine, a confession must be heard, judged, and followed by obedience to the authorized priest as he assigns a penance, such as good works, prayers, fastings, abstinence from certain pleasures, et. A penance may be defined as "a punishment undergone in token of repentance for sin, as assigned by the priest" - usually a very light penalty.

The New York Catechism says, "I must tell my sins to the priest so that he will give me absolution. (5) A person who knowingly keeps back a mortal sin in confession commits a dreadful sacrilege, and he must repeat his confession."

The Priest's Role

Canon law 888 says: "The priest has to remember that in hearing confession he is a judge." And the book, Instructions for Non-Catholics (6) says: "A priest does not have to ask God to forgive your sins. The priest himself has the power to do so in Christ's name. Your sins are forgiven by the priest the same as if you knelt before Jesus Christ and told them to Christ Himself." (7)

"The priest forgives the guilt of mortal sins which save the penitent from going to hell, but he cannot remit the penalty due for those sins, and so the penitent must atone for them by performance of good works which he prescribes. The penitent may be, and usually is, interrogated by the priest so that he or she may make a full and proper confession. Stress is placed on the fact that any sin not confessed is not forgiven, any mortal sin not confessed in detail is not forgiven, and that the omission of even one sin (mortal) may invalidate the whole confession. Every loyal Roman Catholic is required under pain of mortal sin to go to confession at least once a year, although monthly confession is said to be more satisfactory. But even after a penitent has received pardon, a large, but unknown amount of punishment remains to be suffered in purgatory." (8) The doctrine of purgatory rests on the assumption that, while God forgives sin, His justice nevertheless demands that the sinner must suffer the full punishment due to him for his sin before he will be allowed to enter heaven.

Technically, venial sins need not be confessed since they are comparatively light and can be canceled by good works, prayers, extreme unction. (9) etc., but the terms are quite elastic and permit considerable leeway on the part of the priest. It is generally advised that it is safer to confess supposed venial sins also since the priest alone is able to judge accurately which are mortal and which are mortal and which are venial. The Baltimore Catechism says: "When we have committed no mortal sins since our last confession, we should confess our venial sins or some sin told in a previous confession for which we are again sorry, in order that the priest may give us absolution. (10) What chance has a poor sinner against such a system as that?

As an example, a minister friend of mine who was brought up in the Catholic Church, tells the story of how his older brother went to confession every single week and confessed the same sin to the same priest and was given the same penance in order to receive absolution. This went on week after week, year after year. One day, while on a trip from home, he decided that he would not break his pattern of going to weekly confession, so he went to another Catholic Church in the city he was visiting. He went into the confession box and confessed the same sin to a different priest. He began with "forgive me Father for I have sinned," and then began confessing the sin once again, but this time he was shocked when the priest said: "But my son, that's not a sin!" My friend's brother got up, and hurried out the door, and from that day on he has never stepped foot in any church again.

Historical Development

We search in vain in the Bible for any word supporting the doctrine of "auricular confession." (11) It is equally impossible to find any authorization or general practice of it during the first 1000 years of the Christian era. Not a word is found in the writings of the early church fathers about confessing sins to a priest or to anyone except God alone. Auricular confession is not mentioned once in the writings of Augustine, Origen, Nestorius, Tertullian, Jerome, Chrysostem, or Athanasius - all of these and many others apparently lived and died without ever thinking of going to confession. No one other than God was thought to be worthy to hear confessions or to grant forgiveness.

Confession was first introduced into the church on a voluntary basis in the fifth century by the authority of Leo the Great. But it was not until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 under Pope Innocent III that private auricular confession was made compulsory and all Roman Catholic people were required to confess and to seek absolution from a priest at least once a year. If they did not obey this command, they were pronounced guilty of mortal sin and damned for eternity to hell. (12)

Can A Priest Forgive Sins?

The Scriptures teach that "only God can forgive sins" (Mark 2:7). "The Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Matt. 9:6). Dr. Joseph Zachello tells of his experience as a priest in the confessional before leaving the Roman Church, in these words: "Where my doubts were really troubling me was inside the confessional box. People coming to me, kneeling down in front of me, confessing their sins to me. And I, with the sign of the cross, was promising that I had the power to forgive their sins. I, a sinner, a man, was taking God's place. It was God's laws they were breaking, not mine. To God, therefore, they must make confession; and to God alone they must pray for forgiveness." (13)

In fact, the only word in the Bible about confessing sins to anyone other than God, is found in James: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (5:16). It is obvious that the Lord meant what He says in Revelation, chapter 1, that "He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father" (vs. 6), and Peter calls the church "a chosen race, a royal priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9). Believe it or not, the only mention of New Testament believers being priests is used in a context where all true believers are included, not just a select few. That is why James could say that we should confess our sins "to one another".

Catholics love to quote the verse in John 20:23 to prove that priests do have the power to "forgive and retain" sins. "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." The powers of forgiving and retaining sins, were given to the apostles as proclaimers of the Word of God, not as priests. As we have just pointed out, there are no christian "priests" in New Testament teaching and doctrine. Pastors, yes. Deacons, yes. Apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, yes. Priests, no!

Jesus was telling His followers that by preaching the gospel, they were being given the power to declare that a person's sins were forgiven them by God! And if an individual, or group did not receive them and the forgiveness they offered in the name of Jesus, than they were instructed to "shake the dust off their feet" as a protest against them, and warn them that it would be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for them (Matt. 10:14-15). In other words, if a person rejected the apostles' preaching of the gospel, they had the right to tell that person that his sins were not forgiven, because they had rejected God's only provision for atonement of sins. "The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me" (Luke 10:16). This power to forgive and retain sins, contrary to Rome's teaching, belongs to everyone who preaches the true gospel of salvation.

Penance

In the Roman system, penance is one of the seven sacraments. (14) The Baltimore Catechism defines penance as "the sacrament by which sins committed after baptism are forgiven through the absolution of the priest." (15) Another catechism published in New York says, "the priest gives penance to help me to make up for the temporal punishment does not always make full satisfaction for my sins. I should therefore do other acts of penance...and try to gain indulgences." And in Instructions for Non- Catholics, we read: "After confession some temporal punishment due to sin generally remains. You should therefore perform other acts of penance also so that you may make up for these punishments, and avoid a long stay in purgatory." (16)

Penance as a System of Works

Here indeed is salvation by works. For penance, as the catechism says, involves confession on one's sins to a priest and the doing of good works as the only way by which sins committed after baptism can be forgiven. The Church of Rome thus demands acts of penance before She grants forgiveness, inferring that the sacrifice of Christ was not sufficient to atone fully for sin and that it must be supplemented to some extent by these good works.

But what God demands is not acts of penance but repentance, which means turning from sin.

"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7).

The easy way in which the Church of Rome deals with sin is seen in this doctrine of penance. The penitent receives pardon on comparatively easy terms. He is assigned some task to perform, usually not too hard, sometimes merely the recital of a given number of "Hail Mary's." the result is that he has no qualms about resuming his evil course. It shocked Martin Luther when he read the Greek New

Testament edited by Erasmus, that Jesus did not say "do penance" as had been translated by the Roman Church, but "repent."

Penance versus Repentance

Penance is a wholly different thing from gospel repentance. Penance is an outward act. Repentance is of the heart. Penance is imposed by a Roman priest. Repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit. What God desires in the sinner is not a punishment of oneself for sins, but a change of heart, a real forsaking of sin, shown by a new life of obedience to God's commands.

In short, penance is a counterfeit repentance. It is the work of man on his body; true repentance is the work of God in the soul. The Divine Word commands, "Rend your heart and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). Penance is "rending the garments" - an outward form without inward reality.

While Romanism does teach that Christ died for our sins, it also teaches that His sacrifice alone was not sufficient, and that our sufferings must be added to make it effective. In accordance with this, many have tried to earn salvation by fastings, rituals, flagellations and good works of various kinds. But those who attempt such a course always find that it is impossible to do enough to earn salvation.

Dr. C.D. Cole says, "Romanism is a complicated system of salvation by works. It offers salvation on the installment plan, then sees to it that the poor sinner is always behind in his payments, so that when he dies there is a large unpaid balance, and he must continue payments by sufferings in purgatory, or until the debt is paid by the prayers, alms, and sufferings of his living relatives and friends. The whole system and plan calls for merit and money from the cradle to the grave and even beyond. Surely the wisdom that drew such a plan of salvation is not from above." (17)

The Biblical Teaching on Good Works

Good works, of course, are pleasing to God and they have an important and necessary place in the life of the Christian. they naturally follow if one has true faith, and they are performed out of love and gratitude to God for the great salvation that He has bestowed. Good works, in other words, are not the cause and basis of salvation, but rather the fruits and proof of salvation - "Not by works done in righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to His mercy He saved us through the washing of regeneration and the renewing the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). The born-again Christian produces good works as naturally as the grapevine produces grapes. They are a part of his very nature. He performs them not to get saved, but because he is saved.

Salvation by Grace

Grace, just because it is grace, is not given on the basis of proceeding merits. By no stretch of the imagination can a man's good works in this life be considered a

just equivalent for the blessings of eternal life. But all men because of pride, naturally feel that they should earn their salvation, and a system which makes some provision in that regard readily appeals to them. But Paul lays the axe to such reasoning then he says: "If a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (Gal. 3:21). Time and again the Scriptures repeat that salvation is of grace, as if anticipating the difficulty that men would have in accepting the fact that they would not be able to earn it.

The Council of Trent, in its opposition to the reformer's doctrine of justification by faith, and in defense of its doctrine of penance, declared: "Whosoever shall affirm that men are justified solely by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ...let him be accursed". (18) And the Catholic Almanac says, "Penance is necessary for salvation...and was instituted by Christ for the forgiveness of sins". (19)

The modern church teachings completely concur: "Many things are necessary for salvation. All these things work together - faith, baptism, the Eucharist, the doing of good works, and others as well. Redemption is one thing, salvation is quite another. There is nothing lacking on Christ's part; there is much to be done on ours." (20) Also, in a booklet published in 1967, under the sub-heading, "We Must Atone Too", it says that "even though the satisfaction of Christ was complete and universal, nevertheless all adult Christians are obliged to imitate their suffering Master and make personal satisfaction for their sins by good works. (21) But the apostle Paul in his masterpiece on justification by faith says, "Having now been justified by His blood we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (22) (Rom.5:9).

"And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, the reward is not reckoned as grace, but as debt. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3-5).

What a significant coincidence it is that this doctrine of justification by faith is given such prominence in the epistle to the Romans, since Rome later became the seat of the papacy! It seems to be written there as if intended as a strong and permanent protest against the errors of the Roman Church.

Assurance of Salvation?

The first consequence of the doctrine of penance (as well as the doctrines of purgatory and indulgences) is that the Roman Catholic, though baptized and confirmed, can never have that assurance of his salvation and that sense of spiritual security which is such a blessing to the true Christian. In proportion as he is spiritually sensitive, the person who holds to a works religion knows that he has not suffered as much as his sins deserve, and that he can never do as much as he should in order to be worthy of salvation.

A dying Roman Catholic, after he has done all that he can do and after the last rites have been given to him, is told that he still must go to purgatory. There he will suffer unknown torture, with no assurance as to how long it will continue, but with the assurance that if his relatives pray for his soul, and pay with sufficient generosity to have candles lit and have special Masses said for him, that his sufferings will be shortened somewhat.

Oh what a contrast with all of that, is the death of the true believer who has the assurance that he goes straight to heaven into the immediate presence of Christ! (Phil. 1:23). What a marvelous blessing is the true faith of the Christian, both in life and especially at the time of death!

The Council of Trent even pronounced a curse upon anyone who presumed to say that he had assurance of salvation, or that the whole punishment for sin is forgiven along with that sin. (23) Such assurance is pronounced a delusion and a result of sinful pride. Rome keeps her subjects in constant fear and insecurity. Even at death, after extreme unction has been administered and after thousands of rosary prayers have been said "for the repose of the soul", the priest still cannot give assurance of salvation. The person is never "good enough" but must serve in purgatory prison to be purified of venial sins before he can be admitted to the celestial city. No one can be truly happy or truly at peace. And particularly in spiritual matters, a state of doubt and uncertainty continues for one's whole life, and right into the grave.

But God wants us to be saved, and according to the Bible the Holy Spirit can give us the assurance that we have salvation when we have a true, intimate relationship with the Son of God (I John 5:9-12). But in Romanism, one must work hard for it and must pay dearly for it, and after he has done all the the priest has prescribed, he still cannot know whether he has it or not. And through it all, there stands the anathema of the Council of Trent against all who affirm the certainty of their salvation. Hence, there cannot truly be found anywhere a Roman Catholic, consistent to what his church teaches, who enjoys the true assurance of eternal life.

Conclusion

It is obvious by even this brief glimpse into the doctrines of mortal and venial sins, confession, penance, and purgatory, that the Roman Catholic Church has constructed one of the most unbiblical doctrinal systems that has ever been considered "Christian". The fear, anguish, and religious bondage that such a system of "reward and punishment" creates, has tormented millions of lives for centuries, and continues to prey on those who are ignorant of the biblical way of salvation.

The Roman Church is an Empire with its own ruler, its own laws, and its own subjects. It calls the members of other faiths "separated brethren" (24) and has as its goal the eventual bringing together of everyone under its flag.

I know that many will not be convinced or moved by this article to make such a conclusion. They are impressed by what they've heard about recent stirrings among the Catholics in the "Charismatic renewal". Many evangelicals (especially charismatics) have been thrilled by the reports of Catholics speaking in tongues, dancing in the Spirit, having nights of joy and praise, even attending "charismatic Masses".

Mouths that used to speak out boldly against the Church of Rome have been quieted by the times. It no longer is in vogue to speak out against such error (25). Now Protestants unwittingly believe that "our differences are not so great".

I've never completely understood why God led me to write these articles. But it becomes more clear with each day of study and each page of research that the truth of Scripture must be defended for the glory of our Lord Jesus and for those who desperately need to be set free.

Footnotes

- 1) Venial - easily excused or forgiven; pardonable - American Heritage Dictionary.
- 2) "Sunday obligation" can also be fulfilled by attending a Saturday evening Mass
- 3) Which is only allowed once in a person's life - and if a person were to die immediately after baptism, Rome says he will go "straight to heaven." Otherwise, the only other conditions by which a Catholic may be assured he will go directly to heaven immediately upon death, is to die a "saint" (a completely perfect and sanctified person), or to die a martyr's death. All others must do some time in purgatory.
- 4) Baptism is also the only case where all sin is washed away, and both the eternal and temporal punishments due to sin are canceled.
- 5) Absolution - release from punishment; acquittal; remission of sins declared officially by a priest - Webster's Dictionary.
- 6) Primarily for use by those who are joining the Roman Catholic Church.
- 7) Instructions for Non-Catholics, p.93.
- 8) Roman Catholicism, pps. 197-199 (from here on referred to as "R.C.").
- 9) Unction - one of the seven sacraments also known as "anointing of the sick" or "the last rites," and administered when a person is near death.
- 10) The Baltimore Catechism, p. 329.
- 11) The official title for confession to an authorized priest in a confession box. It is called "auricular" because it is spoken secretly, into the ear of the priests.

12) RC p. 199.

13) RC p. 203.

14) The seven sacraments are: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction.

15) The Baltimore Catechism, p. 300

16) Instructions for Non-Catholics, p. 95.

17) RC 257-258.

18) Council of Trent, section 6.

19) The Catholic Almanac, pps. 269, 559.

20) "The Apostles Creed" published by the Knights of Columbus, pps. 18-19.

21) "You Shall Rise Again" published by the Knights of Columbus, p. 3.

22) See also: Eph. 2:8-10, Rom. 1:17, 3:21, 22, 28, 5:1, 18-19, 11:6, John 3:36, Gal. 2:21, 3:11.

23) RC p. 267.

24) The term used by Vatican II to describe the members of Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant churches.

25) Although the following people unhesitatingly did: Martin Luther, John Bunyan, John Huss, John Wycliffe, John Calvin, William Tyndale, John Knox, Thomas Becon, John Wesley, Samuel Cooper, John Cotton, and Jonathan Edwards.