

The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages

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Reformation Men and Theology, Lesson 1 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. From 590 to 1517, the Roman Church dominated the western world. The Roman Catholic Church controlled religion, philosophy, morals, politics, art and education. This was the dark ages for true Christianity. The vital doctrines of Biblical Christianity had almost disappeared, and with the neglect of true doctrine came the passing of life and light that constitutes the worship of the One True God as declared in Christ.
- B. The Roman Catholic Church was theologically sick and its theology led to atrocious corruptions. It was spiritually exhausted, enfeebled and almost lifeless. Rome had seriously departed from the teaching of the Bible and was engrossed in real heresy.
- C. There can be no appreciation for the Reformation until one sees the great spiritual need of the western world in the 16th century. No Christian, Roman Catholic, Protestant or Independent can gloss over the period of history from 590 to 1517. This period is a “black spot” to all who name the name of Christ, but it is Christian history.

II. ROME'S THEOLOGY BEFORE THE REFORMATION

A. **Infallibility of the Pope.** While this was not an officially declared dogma of the Roman Church (it became official dogma in 1870), it was an assumed fact. As early as 590, Gregory the Great called himself “the servant of servants,” believing that he was supreme among all bishops. Another pope, Hildebrand or Gregory VII (11th century), held that, as vicar of Christ and representative of Peter, he could give or take empires. Everyone from the lowest peasant to the highest ruler was to recognize him as Christ’s representative on earth and supreme ruler over all religious and political matters. Another pope (14th century) Boniface VIII, said,

“We declare, state, define and pronounce that for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pope is altogether necessary for salvation” (Casper, *The Church in History*).

B. **Salvation in the Roman Church Only.** Rome taught that all who did not acknowledge the pope as God’s representative on earth and the Roman Catholic Church as the only true church were damned. Salvation was confined within the teachings of the Roman Church. Every person who disagreed with the Roman Church was in line for a heresy trial and perhaps excommunication. Excommunication meant the loss of one’s soul.

C. **Salvation by Works.** By the 14th century, Augustinian theology was lost or badly neglected. Rome had accepted almost in totality the freewill teaching of Pelagius (5th century) that it had formerly repudiated. Salvation was not caused by God’s grace through a supernatural new birth, but by assent to Roman Catholic dogma and practice. Faith was not trust in

Christ for salvation, but submission to the church. Salvation was not by grace through faith in Christ alone, but by faith in the church and good works prescribed by the church. Practically speaking, “good works” consisted of mere external obedience to the church, and did not necessarily flow from a life of faith in Christ. The Roman Catholic Church stressed external actions, legal observance and penitential works. Man actually gained heaven by his works.

- D. **Complete Sanctification.** Rome taught sinless perfectionism. They confused justification and sanctification, teaching that men were justified by God’s work in their own hearts and experience. Justification became subjective rather than objective. God was said to infuse grace and transform the sinful nature. By this transforming change within him, the believer was said to be made just in God’s sight. As the Christian received more grace, he was said to become less sinful and therefore more just in God’s sight.

“Rome held out to men the possibility of becoming pure and sinless saints (ontological perfection), and those who attained this perfection reached sainthood and were qualified to enter heaven at the hour of death. Those who did not become perfect and absolutely sinless in the flesh would need to go to purgatory after death and thus be made completely just and qualified to enter heaven” (“The Great Issues of the Reformation,” *Present Truth*).

- E. **Worshiping of Saints.** The more a person practiced external works, the more saintlike he became and the closer he came to heaven. Some men, who were good enough to be called saints, lived lives advanced in holiness beyond what was required of them. They were made saints by the church. Many of these

saints were worshiped by the Roman Catholic Church and became mediators between God and man.

“When Pelagianism laid down the doctrine that man could attain a state of perfect sanctification, it affirmed also that the merits of saints and martyrs might be applied to the Church. A peculiar power was attributed to their intercession. Prayers were made to them; their aid was invoked in all the sorrows of life; and a real idolatry thus supplanted the adoration of the living and true God” (J. H. Merle D’aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 1848).

- F. **Exaltation of the Clergy.** The doctrine of sinless perfectionism strengthened the position of the Roman hierarchy. The clergy were thought to be more holy than the average people. Being more holy, they were special channels of the grace of God. Thus, the clergy had the authority from God to dispense God’s grace.

“Salvation, taken from the hands of God, fell into those of the priests, who set themselves in the place of our Lord. Souls thirsting for pardon were no more to look to heaven, but to the Church, and above all to its pretended head. To these blinded souls the Roman pontiff was God. Hence the greatness of the popes — hence unutterable abuses” (D’aubigne).

III. ROME’S PRACTICE

- A. **System of Penance.** From a “works” theology flowed the idea of penance. Men had to do certain external acts to prove the reality of their faith. At first penance consisted of certain public expressions of repentance for people involved in scandal, but

it was soon extended to every sin, even to the most secret. Penance was considered as sort of a punishment to which it was necessary to submit in order to obtain the forgiveness of God through the priest's absolution. Instead of looking to Christ alone for forgiveness, it was sought in the church principally through penitential works.

“Great importance was soon attached to external marks of repentance — to tears, fasting, and mortification of the flesh; and inward regeneration of the heart, which alone constitutes a real conversion, was forgotten.

“As confession and penance are easier than the extirpation of sin and the abandonment of vice, many ceased contending against the lusts of the flesh, and preferred gratifying them at the expense of a few mortifications.

“The penitential works, thus substituted for the salvation of God, were multiplied in the Church from Tertullian down to the thirteenth century. Men were required to fast, to go barefoot, to wear no linen, etc.; to quit their homes and their native land for distant countries; or to renounce the world and embrace a monastic life.

“In the eleventh century voluntary flagellations were superadded to these practices; somewhat later they become quite a mania in Italy, which was then in a very disturbed state. Nobles and peasants, old and young, even children of five years of age, whose only covering was a cloth tied round the middle, went in pairs, by hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands, through the towns and villages, visiting the churches in the depth of winter. Armed with scourges, they flogged each other without

pity, and the streets resounded with cries and groans that drew tears from all who heard them” (D’aubigne).

- B. **System of Indulgences.** Indulgences were a system of exchange whereby the priests employed their special rapport with God to perform certain religious acts for laymen. For a price, Clergy would pray, fast and read scripture for a person. In other words, priestly services were bought. This was later developed into buying up time one might have to spend in purgatory.

“Incest, if not detected, was to cost five groats; and six, if it was known. There was a stated price for murder, infanticide, adultery, perjury, burglary, etc. ‘O disgrace of Rome!’ exclaims Claude d’Espence, a Roman divine: and we may add, O disgrace of human nature! for we can utter no reproach against Rome that does not recoil on man himself. Rome is human nature exalted in some of its worst propensities” (D’aubigne).

- C. **System of Confession.** Since the clergy through the church were dispensers of God’s grace, they also had the authority to forgive sins. Private confession was abandoned for auricular confession to the priest.

IV. ROME’S SCANDALS

- A. **Immorality of the Clergy.** Celibacy for clergy became Roman Church law in 1079. This mandate tempted all kinds of immorality. The abodes of the clergy were often dens of corruption. It was a common sight to see priests frequenting the taverns, gambling, and having orgies with quarrels and blasphemy. Many of the clergy kept mistresses, and convents became houses of ill fame. In many places the people were

delighted at seeing a priest keep a mistress, that the married women might be safe from his seductions.

“In many places the priest paid the bishop a regular tax for the women with whom he lived, and for each child he had by her. A German bishop said publically one day, at a great entertainment, that in one year eleven thousand priests had presented themselves before him for that purpose. It is Erasmus who relates this” (D’aubigne).

- B. **Immorality of the People.** Morality declined with the decline of faith. Take away supernatural salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and you take away sanctification and good works. Indulgences were looked upon by the common man as a license to sin, for men could buy their forgiveness.
- C. **Ignorance of Clergy.** Many of the clergy had come to their offices through political maneuvering. In a country parish one person called the clergy “miserable wretches . . . previously raised from beggary, and who had been cooks, musicians, huntsmen, stable boys and even worse.” Clergy no longer had to learn and teach the Scriptures, for the church told them what to do. Even the superior clergymen were sunk in great ignorance in spiritual matters. They had secular learning, but knew very little of the Bible.

“A bishop of Dunfeld congratulated himself on having never learnt either Greek or Hebrew. The monks asserted that all heresies arose from those two languages, and particularly from the Greek. ‘The New Testament,’ said one of them, ‘is a book full of serpents and thorns. Greek,’ continued he, ‘is a new and recently invented language, and we must be upon our guard against it. As

for Hebrew, my dear brethren, it is certain that all who learn it immediately become Jews.'

“Even the faculty of theology at Paris scrupled not to declare to the parliament: ‘Religion is ruined, if you permit the study of Greek and Hebrew’” (D’aubigne).

- D. **Inquisition.** This organization was designed to inquire into the spread of heresy and to call before its tribunal Catholics suspected of heresy with a view to securing their repentance. The accused were sometimes tortured and even put to death. The Inquisition was a disgrace to men who call themselves followers of God.
- E. **The Papal Schism.** From 1378-1417 there were three simultaneous popes, each claiming to be the true pope: Urban VII, an Italian; Clement VII, a Frenchman; and a third pope elected by the Council of Pisa. For several years there were three popes anathematizing and excommunicating one another.
- F. **The Practice of Simony.** Simony was the sinful practice of giving or obtaining an appointment to a church office for money. This was a common practice in the Middle Ages, even in the obtaining of the office of pope.
- G. **Relics.** Rome, playing on the ignorance of people, held all kinds of relics in veneration.

“In the church of All Saints at Wittenberg was shown a fragment of Noah’s ark, some soot from the furnace of the Three Children, a piece of wood from the cradle of Jesus Christ, some hair from the beard of St. Christopher, and nineteen thousand other relics of greater or less value” (D’aubigne).

V. ROME'S CHURCH TRADITION

A. Some Roman Catholic Heresies and Inventions, and the Dates of their Adoption:

1. Prayers for the dead; about 300
2. Making the sign of the cross; 300
3. Wax candles; about 320
4. Veneration of angels and dead saints, and use of images; 375
5. The Mass as a daily celebration; 394
6. Beginning of the exaltation of Mary, the term "Mother of God" first applied to her by the Council of Ephesus; 431
7. Priests began to dress differently from laymen; 500
8. Extreme Unction; 526
9. The doctrine of Purgatory, established by Gregory I; 593
10. Latin Language, used in prayer and worship, imposed by Gregory I; 600
11. Prayers directed to Mary, dead saints and angels; about 600
12. Title of pope, or universal bishop, given to Boniface III by emperor Phocas; 610
13. Kissing the pope's foot, began with pope Constantine; 709
14. Temporal power of the popes, conferred by Pepin, king of France; 750
15. Worship of the cross, images and relics, authorized in; 786
16. Holy water, mixed with a pinch of salt and blessed by a priest; 850
17. Worship of St. Joseph; 890
18. College of Cardinals established; 927
19. Baptism of bells, instituted by pope John XIV; 965
20. Canonization of dead saints, first by pope John XV; 995

21. Fasting of Fridays and during lent; 998
22. The Mass, developed gradually as a sacrifice, attendance made obligatory in the 11th century
23. Celibacy of the priesthood, decreed by pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand); 1079
24. The Rosary, mechanical praying with beads, invented by Peter the Hermit; 1090
25. The Inquisition, instituted by the Council of Verona; 1184
26. Sale of Indulgences; 1190
27. Transubstantiation, proclaimed by pope Innocent III; 1215
28. Auricular Confession of sins to a priest instead of to God, instituted by pope Innocent III, in Lateran Council; 1215
29. Adoration of the wafer (Host), decreed by pope Honorius III; 1220
30. Bible forbidden to laymen, placed on the Index of Forbidden Books by the Council of Valencia; 1229
31. The Scapular, invented by Simon Stock, an English monk; 1287
32. Cup forbidden to the people at communion by Council of Constance; 1414
33. Purgatory proclaimed as a dogma by the Council of Florence; 1438
34. The doctrine of Seven Sacraments affirmed; 1439
35. The Ave Maria (part of the last half was completed 50 years later and approved by pope Sixtus V at the end of the 16th century); 1508
36. Jesuit order founded by Loyola; 1534
37. Tradition declared of equal authority with the Bible by the Council of Trent; 1545
38. Apocryphal books added to the Bible by the Council of Trent; 1546
39. Creed of pope Pius IV imposed as the official creed; 1560

40. Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, proclaimed by pope Pius IX; 1854
 41. Syllabus of Errors, proclaimed by pope Pius IX, and ratified by the Vatican Council; condemned freedom of religion, conscience, speech, press, and scientific discoveries which are disapproved by the Roman Church; asserted the pope's temporal authority over all civil rulers; 1864
 42. Infallibility of the pope in matters of faith and morals, proclaimed by the Vatican Council; 1870
 43. Public Schools condemned by Pope Pius XI; 1930
 44. Assumption of the Virgin Mary (bodily ascension into heaven shortly after her death), proclaimed by Pope Pius XII; 1950
- B. Add to these many others: monks, nuns, monasteries, convents, forty days lent, holy week, Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, All Saints Day, Candlemas, fish day, meat days, incense, holy oil, holy palms, Christopher medals, charms, novenas, and others.