Staying in the Catholic Church ?

Millions of Roman Catholics are finding Christ and leaving the Catholic Church. Some evangelicals, however, think leaving is a mistake. “Work within the system,” they advise. “Share with others what you have found. If everyone leaves, how is the Catholic Church ever going to change?”

Such advice is both misinformed and unbiblical.

1. Born-again Catholics staying within the Church are not going to change it. Rome’s history over the past 500 years shows that it is moving away from the truth, not toward it. When in the sixteenth century several of the Church’s theologians and priests called for reform, the Church responded with the sword and the stake. At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Rome’s bishops turned errors into unchangeable dogmas, and pronounced solemn judgment upon anyone who taught otherwise. Most significantly, Trent formally rejected the doctrine of salvation through faith in Christ alone.[i] Since then the Church has been steadily moving further from the truth. In 1870, 533 Roman Catholic bishops proclaimed that the pope was infallible, immune to error in His official teaching. This placed the words of a man on the same level as the words of God in inspired Scripture. In 1854 the Vatican formally declared the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception and in 1950 her Assumption into Heaven. These two doctrines fueled the modern Marian movement in which many Catholics have come to regard Mary almost as a goddess. Catholicism is getting worse, not better.

Some point to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal that began in 1967 as evidence that the Church is changing for the better. They claim that over the past 40 years the Catholic Church has become increasingly evangelical in its outlook.

But what has really changed? The goal of Vatican II was to update the Church, not to reform it. The Council modernized some practices; refocused the goals of the clergy and laity; refreshed the liturgy, making room for the language of the people to replace Latin at the Mass; and formally expressed the Church’s new openness toward both other Christians and non-Christians. Vatican II did not change a single doctrine of Roman Catholicism. To the contrary, the Council reemphasized the Church’s traditional teachings, repeatedly citing in its documents the teaching of the previous 20 councils, and stating:

> **This sacred council accepts loyally the venerable faith our ancestors… it proposes again the decrees of the Second Council of Nicea, of the Council of Florence, and of the Council of Trent. —Second Vatican Council** [ii]

In 1994 the Catholic Church again restated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* its commitment to the traditional teachings of Roman Catholicism. The *Catechism,* the Church’s first official summary of the faith in some 400 years, cited the Council of Trent 100 times.

While Vatican II did nothing to bring the Catholic Church back to biblical Christianity, some good did come out of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, as the large numbers of born-again former Catholics now in evangelical churches attest. In its early days in the late sixties, the Renewal was largely a lay movement. As Catholics began to seek God and read the Scriptures, the Renewal spread quickly through the Catholic Church.

The experience of former priest Bob Bush, a Jesuit serving in California at the time, is typical of the era. He began a charismatic prayer meeting at the high school where he

taught in 1970. It quickly grew to over 1000 people and had to move to a larger facility. "When it began," Bob told me recently, "people were hungry for God. The focus was on prayer directly to God and the reading of Scripture. Many people were touched by God and by the power of His Word.

That all changed by the late seventies. Bishops began to issue directives that brought the movement firmly under Church control. They assigned liaisons to each group to keep watch and help guarantee Catholic orthodoxy. Teaching from Church-authorized books began to replace the Scriptures. Clergy became more visible at the meetings and the praying of the Rosary prominent. Devotion to Mary and the celebration of the Mass became the focus.

"What happened," Bob Bush recounts, "was that everything got watered down and compromised. There was no longer any power in the movement. People stopped hearing from the Holy Spirit. They weren't having the radical changes in their lives as before. The Renewal became just another form of Catholicism." A more traditional priest was assigned to lead Bob's prayer group in 1978. Within a few years, it had dwindled down to nothing. Bob left the Church a short time later.

2. Rome is not changing.

The recent emergence of an evangelical-looking form of Catholicism in certain countries is presently spawning new claims that Rome is becoming more biblical. But once again the change is only external. As will be discussed later in this book, the new look is nothing more than old-time Catholicism repackaged to capitalize on the success of the modern evangelical movement.

Others think that Rome must be changing because they have heard of a particular parish where the priest, supposedly having been born again, is preaching the gospel each week at Mass. I have never, however, been able to verify such a case. Occasionally a priest does get saved, but he will not be wearing a Roman collar for long if he starts preaching the gospel, refuses to perform the Sacrifice of the Mass, stops leading prayers to Mary, and ceases to hear confession. Even if a number of such born-again priests could be found, with over 400,000 Roman Catholic priests in the world, what 10, 20, or even 100 priests do would hardly be a trend. The opposition that these men would be sure to experience from the Church would be a better indicator of the true course on which Rome is heading.

The Roman Catholic Church has not changed and it is not about to change. Consequently, counseling a newly born-again Catholic to remain within the system and make a difference is foolish. Practically speaking, what's the person supposed to do? Talk to a few of his friends? Go see the priest? Write a letter to Rome? Do such things really have the potential of reforming the Church?

The truth is that neither priests nor parishioners have any significant say in the direction of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church is not a democracy, but a hierarchical monarchy. Bishops, some 3250 in number, lead it. The seat of power is the Vatican. From there the pope rules as the supposed Vicar of Christ and head of the bishops. Aiding the pope are his top advisers and administrators, known as *cardinals*. These oversee the *Roman Curia*, the powerful administrative and judicial offices of the Vatican.

This structure leaves no room for democratic change or for a grassroots coalition seizing power. It is a top-down organization. The most the average Catholic can hope to do is influence the thinking of the hierarchy through means such as letters, petitions, and protest. None of these are encouraged or welcomed by the Church.

Even if a significant mechanism for popular change existed, think for a moment what would have to change in order for the Roman Catholic Church to become a biblical church.

The pope would have to resign, acknowledging that Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). The bishops would have to drop their claim to sole teaching authority, recognizing the Holy Spirit as the church's only infallible and authoritative teacher (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 John 2:27). The Catholic priesthood would have to disband, confessing that the Sacrifice of the Mass is an insult to the finished work of Christ and that no one can forgive sin but God alone (Mark 2:7; Hebrews 10:18). Altars would need to be torn down, confession booths removed, statues destroyed (Exodus 20:4). Veneration and prayer to Mary and the saints would have to stop, so that Catholics might know that there is "one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). The Church would have to confess that it has been preaching a false gospel, leading countless millions down the wide path that leads to destruction. It would have to acknowledge that baptism is not the instrument of justification, that its sacraments cannot dispense the grace of God, that eternal life is not a merited reward, and that venial sin, acts of penance, purgatory, and indulgences are all the inventions of men. Finally, the Church would have to begin proclaiming salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and, forsaking all dependence upon Tradition, begin using the Scriptures alone as its guide to truth.

3. Change will never happen.

Clearly there is no indication that any of this is likely to happen. Neither should we expect God to step in at this late date and revamp the Church of Rome. God is in the business of saving people, not restructuring man-made institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church.

God's instruction to those who find themselves in apostate churches teaching a false gospel is to get out.

> **Come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins and that you may not receive of her plagues; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. —Revelation 18:4-5**

For anyone, therefore, to advise a born-again Catholic to remain in the Church and try to change it is to exhibit an appalling lack of understanding of the commands of God, the nature of the Roman Catholic Church, and the needs of a new believer. Newly born-again Christians need nurturing and the "pure milk of the word" (1 Peter 2:2), not the half-truths, lies, and the confusion of Roman Catholicism. They need the fellowship of like-minded believers. They need to be part of a church in which they can worship God free of idolatry and false sacrifice.

Adapted from *Conversations with Catholics* by James G. McCarthy (Harvest House Publishers: Eugene, 1997)

Notes:

i. "If anyone says that a person is absolved from sins and is justified by the fact that he certainly believes he is absolved and justified; or that no one is truly justified except one who believes that he is justified, and that by that faith alone are forgiven and justification effected: let him be anathema" (Council of Trent, "Canons Concerning Justification," session 6, no. 14).

"If anyone says that justice once received is neither preserved nor increased in the sight of God by good works, but that the works themselves are no more than the effects and signs of the justification obtained, and not also a cause of its increase: let him be anathema" (Council of Trent, "Canons Concerning Justification," session 6, no. 24).

ii. Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," no. 51.