

Comparison between Roman Catholicism and Sophian Christian Tradition

What is Roman Catholicism?

Roman Catholicism is a blanket term to describe the religion that grew up out of the Jesus movement in the first several centuries AD. Meaning “universal”, the Roman Catholic Church was meant to be all-inclusive. However, as time wore on, things changed.

Originally a renegade religion that was not sanctioned by the Roman state, the Catholic Church grew to become a very powerful political and social force. By the high middle ages, the ‘Church’ had far-reaching effects across Europe and eventually the New World.

One of the most popular religions worldwide even today, Catholics base the majority of their beliefs on the books from the New Testament. These were decided upon at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD and include the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), The Apocrypha and the various Letters of Paul.

The Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism split in 1054 over theological issues concerning Western additions to the creed (the filioque clause) as well as the issue of Roman primacy.

Focusing heavily on the concepts of sin and redemption, the modern Catholic Church has come under fire for various abuses of power, privilege and more.

*** It should be noted that this paper is written based on global Catholicism. Each Parish (especially in the US) can be very different so this is a generality for the entire Roman Catholic church. ***

Structure of the Catholic Church:

- Pope – He is the ‘heir’ of St. Peter, the “Rock” of the Roman Church. He is also titled the Vicar of Christ. This means he is Jesus’ representative on earth. This is the basis of papal infallibility, which states that the pope’s interpretation in spiritual matters are perfect.
- College of Cardinals - They advise and appoint pope.
- Archbishops – They oversee several dioceses or a region of Churches
- Bishop – They oversee one diocese of Churches or several within a diocese.
- Monsignor – An honorary title of the Church conferred upon priests of certain distinction.
- Priest – minister of divine worship who is able to perform certain ceremonies and sacraments. (Note: a priest is almost always a man except in some splinter groups which are NOT recognized by the papacy.)
- Brother – A title usually reserved for a seminarian who has not completed his studies and/or taken Holy Orders yet.
- Deacon – A lay person who provides ministerial services and assistance to a Church.

What Do Catholics Believe?

Holy Trinity – The union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as three persons in one “Godhead”. The Catholic God is triune, existing as three separate entities. Each entity has separate characteristics and natures.

Virgin Birth – Catholics believe that Jesus was born of a Virgin. His mother, Mary, had not ‘known’ man before she conceived him and he was conceived of the “Holy Spirit”. This is also referred to as the Immaculate Conception.

Sin – From <http://www.catholic-pages.com/morality/sin.asp>:

Sin is an offence against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods.... It has been defined [by St Augustine] as "an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law."

Sin is an offence against God.... Sin sets itself against God's love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become "like gods," knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus "love of oneself even to the contempt of God."

There are two main types of sin, mortal and venial.

Mortal sin by a baptized person removes the person from the State of Grace and therefore denies them the reward of Heaven. A baptized person who dies with mortal sin on their soul will go to Hell.

Venial sin, on the other hand, while it requires us to do satisfaction for our sin and is deserving of punishment, does not bring us eternal punishment.

For a sin to be a mortal sin, three things are required:

- *the matter must be "grave";*
- *the sin must be committed with full knowledge; and*
- *the sin must be committed deliberately.*

Original Sin – All human beings are born with the stain of original sin because of Eve’s ‘folly’ in the Garden of Eden. It is only through baptism, a sacrament of the Church, that original sin is washed away.

Transubstantiation – is the alteration of the bread and wine during the Eucharistic portion of the liturgy (mass) into Jesus’ Body and Blood as Catholic believe occurred at the Last Supper.

Crucifixion – literally refers to being affixed to a cross, a common Roman method of capital punishment, The Crucifixion is specific to the events surrounding the death of Jesus Christ.

Resurrection – Relates to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday after being crucified, died and buried, the Resurrection is a cornerstone of the Catholic faith.

Ascension – delineates the belief that Jesus went to Heaven with His body and spirit intact.

Seven Deadly Sins – These are the capital vices or cardinal sins, the most ‘objectionable’ activities in which one can engage. They are used to teach Catholics about man’s tendency to sin and include:

- Lust – excessive thoughts or desires of a sexual nature.
- Gluttony – over-indulgence and/or over-consumption of anything to the point of waste. Usually relates to food and drink.
- Greed – applied to the acquisition of wealth.

- Sloth – used to be referred to as the sin of sadness and/or despair, it refers to laziness.
- Wrath – describes feelings of uncontrollable and/or unwarranted anger or rage.
- Envy – an insatiable desire to have something that someone else does, usually not relating to material possessions, however.
- Pride – excessive love of self or the belief that or desire for one to become more important and/or attractive than others.

Apostolic Succession – belief that the succession of bishops stems from the Twelve Apostles and the Pope himself is a successor to St. Peter, the “rock of the church.”

Veneration of Mary and the Saints – Catholic belief that the saints and the Virgin Mother are worthy of adoration and respect. Many Catholics pray to special saints or Mary, the Mother of Jesus, for certain reasons and in certain situations. During the Middle Ages, the relics of the saints were especially prized and, in some cases, cults of worship grew up around them.

Catholic Sacraments

Baptism – usually performed on babies, Catholic baptism requires the sprinkling of holy water in a ritual manner on the forehead of the person seeking entry into the Church. One is not considered a ‘Catholic’ without Baptism.

Reconciliation – also known as Penance or Confession, Reconciliation refers to the act of confessing one’s sins to an ordained minister of the Church. Usually, after Confession, one is given a penance by saying certain prayers or making reparations for the sinful behavior.

Communion – The act of receiving the bread and wine during the Mass. The first time one receives the sacrament there is a special ceremony involved.

Confirmation – Third of the rites of initiation in the Catholic Church (Baptism and First Communion are the other two) in which one reaffirms his or her commitment to the Catholic Church. The “Gifts of the Holy Spirit” are given to the person who is being confirmed.

Those Gifts are, according to Romans 12:6-8:

- Prophecy
- Ministry
- Teaching
- Exhortation
- Giving
- Leading
- Showing Mercy (Compassion)

The one being confirmed takes a new name, known as the ‘Confirmation’ name, based on a Saint or Apostle, to showcase their acceptance of these gifts.

Matrimony – is marriage. It takes place between two baptized individuals, a man and a woman, who establish themselves in a lifelong partnership which is for their ‘mutual good and for the procreation and education of children.’ A sacrament of ‘vocation’, the married couple is called to share their lives together and to build a family in service to the Lord.

Holy Orders – is the other right of vocation. In this sacrament, a man, as put forth in Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter [Ordinatio Sacerdotalis](#) which declares that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful,

receives the right to perform the sacraments on others. There are three levels of ordination – deacon, priest or bishop. The sacrament is supposed to ‘impart an indelible mark on a man’s soul.’

Anointing of the Sick – used to be called Last Rites or Extreme Unction. Ordained priests are the only ones able to administer this officially within the Church. The sacrament is meant to bring spiritual and physical strength during an illness specifically near the time of death.

How Sophian Tradition is Similar

- Yeshua/Jesus is a central figure.
- Some similar practices such as prayer, meditation, and Eucharist (Wedding Feast in Sophian tradition).
- More feminine influence than in protestant traditions as is with Sophian tradition – Mother Mary.
- Some Scriptures in Common (although Sophians use many more texts).
- Both give some weight to apocryphal texts (Sophians more than catholic).
- Both give some weight to knowledge of God leading to salvation, however Sophians emphasize spiritual knowledge is the key to salvation (enlightenment), while Roman Catholics argue that knowledge of God should be obedience to God or faith as well as good works for a soul to be saved.
- Both groups are Hellenistic. Specifically, both have ancient Greek philosophy integrated into their belief system.
- Both believe in the immortality of the soul.
- Neither looks to the Bible as the only logos of God. Catholics (at least in theory) look to the pope as the earthly interpreter of God’s Logos, while Sophians link self reflection to interpretation of God’s Logos.
- Both emphasize individual choices.

How Sophian Tradition is Different

- Concept of sin (eternal damnation in Catholic tradition and “missing the mark” in Sophian tradition). Sophians tend to view sin as being derived from a state of ignorance, specifically we commit sin because we don’t know any better by acting through ego, which leads to a spiritual death, compared to Catholics who view the act of sin separating themselves of God, which leads to eternal damnation. It’s not so much their concept of sin rather its their concept of damnation, specifically Catholics view damnation as eternal and they believed we are damned by dying in a state of mortal sin, while Sophians view we are spiritually dead, but through knowledge of the mysteries of the universe we are redeemed.
- Women allowed in leadership positions.
- Roman Catholics have an extensive and centralized hierarchy, while Sophians tend to be disorganized in terms of divisions and beliefs.
- Mary Magdalene’s status.
- Enlightenment instead of Salvation. Salvation in Catholicism and most orthodox Christianity is based upon an external God, while in Sophian tradition it comes from within.
- All initiates are in control of their own path and do not need a priest to intercede.
- The concept of a soul differs between groups. In Catholicism souls begin at conception and it never ends. In Sophian tradition, the soul reflects more of an eternal spirit that lost its state of grace and it seeks to regain that state through enlightenment.
- Catholics ‘faith’ depends heavily on earthly evidence of Christ. Specifically it looks to the Bible, the succession of the papacy, the existence of saints and religious artifacts, and the history of the church to justify its faith. Sophians base their ‘faith’ on internal reflections and experiential knowledge.
- The Catholic concept of God (like ancient pagan Gods) is an external Creator that created and constantly intervenes in human history (Monotheism). The Sophian concept of God varies greatly as God is consciousness force that acts outside and inside of individuals.

- Catholics theology has been influenced by Aristotelian thought (mainly due to Thomas Aquinas), while Sophian thought has traditionally been more based on Plato (though not always).
- Catholics have a very specific dogma, which Catholics are supposed to follow. Sophians have radically different views of dogma, further they tend to place emphasis on the individuals interpretation of dogma, rather than the church's interpretation of dogma.