

# A SYSTEM TESTED BY ITS FRUITS

by

**Loraine Boettner D.D.\***

(taken from his book “Roman Catholicism” first published 1962)

## Chapter 19.

*1. A Fixed Pattern. 2. The Present Problem. 3. Is the Roman Catholic Church a True Church?*

### 1. A FIXED PATTERN

The Roman Church has long boasted that she never changes. *Semper Idem*—‘Always the Same’—is her motto. We accept that motto at face value, not that she has not changed or added to the Christian faith which she inherited from the apostolic church, for she certainly has done that, but that the Roman Church has now been frozen into a definite pattern from which she cannot change and which is basically the same today as it was in the days of the Inquisition. What sometimes looks like change is merely a policy of caution which she has been forced to adopt because of public opinion. She changes her methods, but not her spirit. Her Canon Law has not undergone any essential change, nor has her ancient policy of suppressing or persecuting those who differ with her. No pope has ever declared himself in favour of freedom of religion or issued a decree to that effect, nor has the Roman Church ever established a free society anywhere. In view of what the Roman Church teaches her children in her schools concerning her mission as the only true church, her right to suppress all other religions by force if necessary, together with her political and economic policies in those lands where she is in control, why should anyone doubt that a new Inquisition merely awaits the supremacy of Roman power, when it will again imprison and pillage and slaughter the ‘heretics’—all in the name of religion as it did in the earlier ages? Her position is that that which opposes her, that which she terms ‘error,’ has no rights, and that its mere existence is a crime against the Catholic state. There is far too much history behind the Roman Catholic Church for us to believe otherwise.

It is hard to believe that Christianity actually has in its record the dark chapters of persecution of which we read. But the facts cannot be denied. How much better and how much more in the real spirit of Christianity it would be if the Roman Church, instead of opposing the evangelical faith with the base methods of intolerance, bigotry, and persecution, would bend her efforts co-operatively to instruct her people, and unbelievers as well, in the basic truths of the Christian faith! But no matter how sincerely and Scripturally Protestants preach the Gospel, Romanists force them to desist if they have the power to do so.

The Christian method of promoting the faith is persuasive, kindly, and peaceable. It seeks to win people by love and by the power of truth. As Dr. Woods has said:

‘Persecution on account of religious belief is both foolish and wicked. It is foolish because the use of force never makes an honest man change his beliefs. His convictions are really deepened by suffering for conscience sake. Only weak men yield to persecution, and are made hypocrites by it; they profess to change their faith merely to escape torture. It is wicked because it is unjust and cruel. Torture, imprisonment, confiscation of property, disgrace and death, not only cause suffering to the individual, but also to his innocent family and friends’ (Our Priceless Heritage, p. 181),

Most Roman Catholic people, in the United States and Britain at least, show no animosity towards their Protestant neighbours and have no desire to persecute them. Most of the people know little about the traditional policy and practice of their church. And they know practically nothing of the 2414 statutes embodied in their Canon Law. Unfortunately they have no part in determining policy. Policy is imposed on them and they are indoctrinated by the hierarchy as the occasion arises. Since they have been taught from childhood that their salvation is dependent on obedience to the church, it is extremely difficult for any organized resistance to develop within the Roman Church. Some may become indifferent or even leave their church when policies which violate their consciences are put into effect. But it is a rare thing for Roman Catholics to organize and resist their church openly.

Protestantism does not fear competition. It does not need to persecute. It believes that true religion is too strong to be shaken by the attacks of atheists, doubters, or advocates of rival religions. It asks no special aid from the state, either to suppress its rivals or to pay its bills, but desires only to be left free, that it may present its case openly and fairly. That there are instances in which Protestants have persecuted Roman Catholics is not to be denied. Romanists point to these and attempt to make much of them in their own defence. But such persecutions have been comparatively few and comparatively mild, and in most instances in retaliation for wrongs inflicted by the Roman Church. But most important of all, such persecutions have been in violation of basic Protestant principles. No Protestant persecutions have even remotely approached those of the Inquisition in Spain, the extermination of the Waldensians in Italy, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in France, or the recent slaughter in Yugoslavia, to mention only a few.

There is scarcely anything more destructive of national unity than religious intolerance. National unity flourishes in an atmosphere of peace, fraternity, and tolerance. In the 186 years since the founding of the United States governmental changes have never been brought about by force. The British, Dutch, and Scandinavian governments, too, have been very stable, continuing over periods of centuries. But what a contrast these governments present with the unstable governments of the Latin American countries, where in almost every state such changes occur repeatedly! At the basis of political stability and freedom, and giving permanence to it, is religious faith and religious freedom.

The unity and prosperity of a country depends upon the freedom with which its religious, economic, educational, and cultural life in all its diversity is allowed to develop. The United States, Protestant and free, has the highest standard of living of any nation in the world and has brought more of the good things of life to the rank and file of its people than has any other nation. At the opposite extreme is Spain, steeped in Roman Catholicism, with the least religious freedom, and the lowest standard of living in Europe. Spain is held together only by a military dictatorship, and is really one of the most disunited nations in the world. Even Roman Catholicism prospers most and is at its best in Protestant lands. What further proof is needed to show the superiority of religious freedom overreligious bigotry and intolerance?

## 2. THE PRESENT PROBLEM

We have now examined the distinctive features of Roman Catholicism and have found that each one of them is false and truly formidable in its capacity to lead people astray from the Gospel. These things have been shown to be not peripheral but to concern the very heart of the Christian message as set forth in the New Testament. To

an unbelievable extent Rome has apostatized from the faith. While she has been so quick to hurl the epithet 'heretic' at others, she herself is honeycombed with heresies.

All of this constitutes a strong indictment of the Roman system. But it is no stronger than the facts justify. How incredible that a religious system, so obviously false as judged by the standard of Scripture, should attain such power, hold that power for centuries, and be so widespread as the Roman system is today!

We have attempted to show that the Achilles heel of Romanism is the false theological basis on which the system rests, and that the strength of evangelical Protestantism is its rigid adherence to what the Scriptures teach. Protestantism can never defeat Romanism, nor even defend itself against Romanism, merely by pointing out the latter's corrupt political alliances, its inordinate greed for money, and its suppression of political and religious liberties. All of these things are true and should be exposed. But they relate only to external methods and practices. Romanism is basically a religious system and must be challenged to defend its doctrines on the basis of Scripture. This method, and this method alone, can bring victory to the evangelical faith.

We have shown that Romanism, in distinction from other churches, is a dual system, a church and a political state. Its appeal to the rank and file of its members is religious in nature. On that basis it asks for their loyalty and their financial support. But the hierarchy is primarily a political organization, constantly trying to exert its power through civil agencies at the national, provincial and local level. It wants the state to support its churches, schools, hospitals, and other institutions. It also wants the state to help enforce its religious principles by restricting and suppressing all opposition.

The time has come to put aside false tolerance and to let the world know the facts about Romanism. The public has been duped too long, and it must be given the facts that it may know what is true Christianity and what is falsely so called. Before the true Christian doctrines of the evangelical faith can be fully understood and accepted, the false and unscriptural doctrines of Romanism must be bluntly exposed and its superstitions destroyed. Protestants must be made to see the great danger that threatens them.

Many Protestants have been misled into a form of Modernism or Liberalism which stresses a social gospel and tends to ignore the supernatural. Christians in all the churches should return to and confess their faith in the basic doctrines of the Scriptures, as set forth, for instance, in the Apostles' Creed, and reassert their belief in the Bible as the uniquely inspired and authoritative Word of God. A sceptical Protestantism can be no match for a dogmatic Romanism. We need a return to Bible study, to catechism instruction, and to faithful ministers of the Gospel who preach individual regeneration by the grace of God through faith in the vicarious, substitutionary atonement of Christ, men who will meet an infallible church with an infallible Bible, the sacramentarianism of Rome with the free and sovereign grace of the Gospel, and the political machinations of Rome with an enlightened and aroused Christian church.

The fantastic claim of the Roman Church that it has a world membership of some 400 to 500 million is arrived at by counting practically en masse the populations of the Southern European and Latin American countries while actually not more than '5 to 20 per cent of the populations of those countries are practising Roman Catholics. About a third of the total number claimed are illiterate, and hardly should be counted; and of the remainder considerably more than half by Rome's own definition are in mortal sin, not having gone to mass or to confession within the prescribed time limits, having eaten meat on Fridays, or attended Protestant church services, and so on. Many others have simply left the Roman Church without formal announcement. In any event an honest count would reduce the number drastically.

We have a suggestion to offer which we believe will prove very helpful to the Protestant churches if it is followed, namely, that these churches should send missionaries and Christian workers of all kinds to Italy and to the other Roman Catholic nations of Europe. Italy, the home of the pope and the seat of the papacy, is today one of the most forgotten mission fields, yet one with very great possibilities. Says one Italian evangelical:

‘The people of Italy live in an unbelievable spiritual ignorance. Most of them have never read the Bible; many do not even know that such a book exists. Besides this, they live in indescribable superstition as it is taught and practised by the Church of Rome. People worship images, carry them on their shoulders, and pay great sums of money for the privilege. There are those who make pilgrimages, walking hundreds of miles to special shrines. The Virgin Mary is the central object of the teaching of the priests and the worship of the people’ (Michele Tancredi, booklet. *The Burden for Italy*, p. 3; 1957).

For many decades Protestants have been establishing mission centres and founding Bible schools among the primitive tribes of Africa, South America, and the Orient. How much more reason there is for such work in Italy, among people of our own white race who are in such need and with whom we have so much more in common! Most of the people in Italy can read and write, hence they can read the Word of God for themselves and find the truth if it is presented to them. They have a language that is comparatively easy to master; and a knowledge of that one language makes it possible to reach the entire 50 million of the population, while throughout most of the other mission fields each tribe speaks a different language or dialect. And throughout most of Italy a favourable disposition on the part of the people welcomes evangelical work. Opposition can certainly be expected from the Roman clergy; but since Italian priests and nuns are allowed to operate freely in the United States and in Britain we should insist firmly that we have a right to the same freedom in operating there. The Roman Church in Italy, despite the great need for Christian and educational work in that land, has sent tens of thousands of missionaries, priests and nuns to the United States and to Britain. On the other hand the great mass of our missionaries have gone to India, China, Japan, and Africa, to people of other races and with languages which are very difficult to master and customs so different from ours. Only the merest trickle of our missionaries have gone to Italy and to the other Roman Catholic countries of Europe, and only a tiny fraction of our money has been invested in evangelical work in those countries. The result is that Roman Catholicism is conquering the United States and Britain while Protestantism is not conquering the Roman Catholic countries. Let us redress this situation and, beginning with Italy, send a substantial number of missionaries to that country which in reality is almost as needy as are the outright pagan nations of the Orient.

As regards the church in her world-wide mission, we cannot match Rome’s political scheming, her propaganda machines, nor her appeals to prejudice and greed and intolerance; but we have something much more effective. We have the truth as set forth in the Word of God. And that truth, if fairly and sympathetically presented, will break down the walls of prejudice and greed and intolerance. We also have a definite superiority in the spiritual intangibles which give depth and stability to Christian endeavour. If we can but reach the free, inquiring mind and present the truth we may expect the Lord to bless and prosper our efforts.

### 3. IS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH A TRUE CHURCH?

The elaborate system of doctrine and ritual that has been developed by the Roman Catholic Church apart from or even contrary to the Bible, together with her policy of persecution and her failure to raise the spiritual and economic standards in countries where she has long been in control, has caused many people to ask: Is the Roman Catholic Church a true church?

That the Roman Church has within herself much of truth is not to be denied. She teaches the inspiration of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the miracles, the resurrection of the body, a future judgment, heaven and hell, and many other Scripture truths. In every instance, however, she nullifies these truths to a considerable extent by adding to or subtracting from what the Bible teaches.

In regard to the inspiration of the Scriptures, the Roman Church accepts the Bible as the Word of God but adds to it a great body of tradition as of equal authority, although in many instances tradition contradicts the Bible and in any event largely supplants it. Tradition is in fact made superior to the Bible since it gives the official interpretation of the Bible. Whereas evangelical Christianity accepts the Bible as its one and only authoritative standard of faith and practice, a standard which consistently calls it back to a true norm when it is inclined to go astray, the Roman Church gives the Bible only a secondary place and in actual practice is governed by a pope who allegedly is infallible in his pronouncements concerning faith and morals, and by a rigid system of Canon Law. Coupled with this is Rome's traditional policy of withholding the Bible from the people; or if under pressure from Protestantism she must give the Bible to the people, only those editions which contain her interpretative notes are allowed.

The Roman Church teaches the deity of Christ. But she places Mary and the priest as mediators between Him and the believer, so that there is no way of access to Him except through them. He is usually presented either as a helpless babe in His mother's arms or as a dead Christ upon a cross. In either case He is effectively removed as a strong, virile, living personality, or as a daily companion or Saviour who hears and answers prayer. He has little to do with the problems of everyday life. All are urged to pray to Mary and the saints, who in turn present the prayers to Christ or to the Father and intercede for them.

The Roman Church teaches the forgiveness of sin, but only as it is confessed to a priest and absolution is received from him. She places a human priesthood between the people and God, while the Bible teaches that the sacrifice of Christ ended forever the work of the priests, that Christ alone is now our High Priest, and that we are to go directly to God in prayer through Him. The complete dependence of the Roman Church upon the priesthood as the heart of the system, whereas the New Testament teaches that the sacrificing priesthood was abolished and that the universal priesthood of believers was established in its place, means that the system is false at its very centre. Though some liberal churchmen talk of an eventual union of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, this point alone, apart from that of acknowledging the authority of the pope, which is the one point that Romanists insist upon above all others, should be sufficient to show how impossible is any such union.

Instead of the Scripture doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone, the Roman Church substitutes a system of grace plus works, in which works have a larger place than faith, and in which a man has to work long and hard for his salvation. In actual practice the Roman Church has become a system of absolutism, claiming to admit souls to or exclude them from heaven as they meet or fail to meet her demands for confession and penance. Her saving truths are covered over with a mass of human inventions and throughout most of her ritual and practice they are not savingly presented. She gives such false and misleading answers to the crucial questions about the

way of salvation that the large proportion of those who trust themselves to her fail to show by their lives that they have undergone a true spiritual change.

The Roman Church teaches that Christ established the church, but she places a man, the pope, at her head and invests him with absolute power. She develops the mass and an elaborate ritualism which had no counterpart in the apostolic church, and makes salvation dependent on obedience to the church. And since the Vatican is itself a union of church and state, it seeks to promote that kind of organization wherever possible.

And finally, the Roman Church teaches a final judgment, with rewards and punishments. But her promise of rewards in heaven for the righteous is largely overshadowed with other teaching concerning a hideous place of torment called purgatory, which is of much more immediate concern, as throughout his life the person tries to alleviate or shorten his sufferings there through the purchase of indulgences and the performance of works of penance. The Bible does not contain even the slightest evidence for the existence of purgatory, but instead teaches that the redeemed soul goes straight to heaven when death occurs.

The condition of the present-day Roman Church would seem to be in many ways similar to that of Judaism at the time of Christ. There was much truth in Judaism and there were many sincere believers among the people. But the priesthood was largely indifferent to the needs of the people, as were the ruling classes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Like the Roman priests, the Jewish priests withheld the Word of God from the people, and their chief concern was their own advancement. The primary opposition that Christ encountered came from the priests, and it was they whom He denounced most severely, as it was also they who were primarily responsible for having him put to death. Similarly in the Roman Church the priesthood has departed so seriously from the simplicity of the Gospel, and the teachings of the Bible have been so thoroughly covered over with man-made rituals and canon laws that the features of the apostolic church are hardly recognizable. The record shows that in those countries where Romanism has been dominant and unopposed for long periods of time it has not advanced but instead has become corrupt and a source of grave weakness. That was most clearly shown in the first place during the Middle Ages, from about A.D. 500, until the Protestant Reformation, a period of roughly one thousand years when darkness covered the land and the people were largely helpless under the rule of a corrupt, tyrannical church that was more concerned to secure political power and vast wealth for itself than it was to promote the spiritual and moral welfare of the people. Those conditions of poverty, ignorance, superstition, and illiteracy have continued to some extent until the present time in Rome-dominated Italy, Spain, Portugal, Southern Ireland, and Latin America. Wherever Rome rules, the people become enslaved to the priest. Where it is dominant it establishes but few schools, and in many places none at all unless spurred on to that work by competition from Protestantism. Rather it allows ignorance and superstition to continue among the people as a means of controlling them, and so promotes an anti-Christian way of life.

This is the stinging rebuke to Romanism, which it cannot deny or evade: That in four centuries of undisputed control in Latin America it has utterly failed to raise the spiritual, moral, social, and economic standards of the people, and that most of the progress that has been made during the past two generations has been the direct or indirect result of evangelical missions and of economic aid given to those countries by the Protestant United States. At the present time the United States government is engaged in a vast aid programme to those countries which for the most part simply by-passes the Roman Catholic Church.

We have said that Romanism carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. This has been shown in one European country after another where, after gaining complete control, it has proved morally defective and has degenerated. Unrestrained by the power of strong civil governments, it perpetrated the horrors of the Inquisition in Spain and Italy. The excesses of the French Revolution were the end result of a long period of degeneration, and the hatred of the people was directed as much against the Roman Catholic Church as against the oppressive state, for hundreds of priests were killed and hundreds of churches were burned. At the close of the Second World War the Roman Catholic Church in Italy found itself very unpopular because it had supported Mussolini's fascist policies, and today one-third of the Italians vote Communist. Although present-day Spain is quiet under dictator Franco, the situation there is by no means healthy. We have cited the report of cardinal Spellman concerning the remark of a well-informed Spaniard some eight years ago to the effect that if police protection in Spain were withdrawn the life of every priest and nun would be in danger. What a tragedy that an organization professing to be the church of Christ should be guilty of such flagrant abuse that the people would want to kill its clergy and destroy its edifices! What a tragedy that the church should be the principal source of strength for a clerical-fascist police state! And what a tragedy that in one country after another its actions have incited anticlericalism!

In most of the Latin American countries today the Roman Church has lost her hold with the rank and file of the people indifferent toward her, and the intellectuals openly opposed to her. A few years ago the government of Mexico confiscated the vast properties of the Roman Church in that land and put serious restrictions on her clergy, particularly on the foreign priests who were living in luxury at the expense of the people. Even today the government retains ownership of the churches. So strong was the resentment of the people that they made it illegal for the priests to appear on the streets in clerical garb—many did not want to see a priest anywhere.

The Roman Church thus has such serious inherent defects that over the broad course of history she cannot possibly emerge successful. Clearly she has lost her power to evangelize the world, and instead has become so confirmed in her present course that she cannot be reformed either from within or from without. In the main she is as antagonistic and as much an obstacle to evangelical Christianity as are the pagan religions. Admittedly there have been many high-minded and saintly souls in the Roman Church, as on the other hand many in the evangelical churches have not been true to their profession. In every church some are better and some are worse than their creed. But a church must be judged, not by individuals, but as a system.

We have pointed out that the early church had no priests. We have also pointed out that during the fourth and fifth centuries great masses of people pushed into what had then become the official church, in order to obtain the benefits that such membership bestowed. The pagan priesthood, which was losing the battle in behalf of the old religion, readily sensed the trend of affairs and began to scheme as to how it too could share in those benefits. The result was that it began to push into or infiltrate into the church, at first cautiously, and then more openly and boldly. Some of the pagan temples were rededicated as Christian churches. This crafty, invading priesthood gathered to itself more and more power until it completely displaced the apostolic Christian ministry. It usurped the right of the people to direct the affairs of the church and centered that power in itself. Naturally it could not tolerate the Christian Scriptures, for they contradicted practically everything that it taught. Hence it sought to do the only expedient thing possible, which was to keep the Bible from the people. Then followed an age-long struggle as the people sought access to the Bible while the priesthood used

every stratagem to keep it from them, and finally resorted to the expediency of placing it on an Index of Forbidden Books where it remained for centuries. But so basic was the Bible to the life of the church, and so deeply had it embedded itself in the writings of the early church fathers, that it could not be entirely displaced. That struggle continued for more than a thousand years, or roughly from the fall of Rome in A.D. 476 until the dawn of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 at which time a large part of Christendom threw off the yoke of the priesthood and its elaborate ritual and returned to the simplicity of the first century apostolic church. The Roman Catholic priesthood was, therefore, in its origin neither more nor less than the pagan priesthood of ancient Rome which by skilful subterfuge had foisted itself upon the Christian church.

Nor should it be thought strange that an event such as that just described should have occurred. In our own twentieth century, with its much richer store of theological knowledge and its much wider circulation of the Bible, a quite similar event has taken place in several Protestant denominations. What we term 'Liberalism' or 'Modernism' in those churches has quite effectively displaced the evangelical Christian faith by a non-doctrinal 'social gospel' which tends to discard the supernatural and which, for the historic Christian doctrine of salvation through a crucified and risen Redeemer, substitutes a naturalistic religion in which man, by his own good works, supposedly raises himself to a higher economic and social level and so saves himself and builds a better world. When such a development takes place it makes little difference whether it is accomplished through the work of a usurping priesthood or through the promotion of a false philosophy, for the result is the same.

The admonition in Scripture is: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' Surely the fruits of Romanism as they have been manifested throughout history and in the various parts of the world are sufficient to disprove its arrogant claim that it is 'the only true church.' Indeed, when seen at its best it is a badly deformed type of Christianity, and when seen as it more often manifests itself in lands where it has long been dominant, it is primarily not a church at all but a gigantic business and political organization that merely uses religion as a cloak. In those lands it makes little effort to hide its greed for power and its avarice for wealth. It victimizes first of all its own people and then all others who come under its sway. In general it has sought to weaken or destroy free governments. Its traditional policy towards other churches and other Christians who do not acknowledge its authority has been one of bitter opposition, oppression, and, when expedient, persecution, with tens of thousands having been put to death for their faith, and millions more subjected to unspeakable physical torture and mental anguish. Such actions are contrary to the teachings of the Bible and they certainly are not the marks of the true church. Its interpretation of the Scriptures is so erroneous and its practices are so persistently unchristian that over the long period of time its influence for good is outweighed by its influence for evil. *It must, therefore, as a system, be judged to be a false church.*

#### FOOTNOTES

\*A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.B., 1928; Th.M., 1929), where he studied Systematic Theology under Dr. C. W. Hodge, his books include: *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, *Roman Catholicism*, *Studies In Theology*, *Immortality*, *The Millennium* and *A Harmony of the Gospels*.