

# ROMAN CATHOLICISM

## In the Light of Scripture

by

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### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### FORMS FOR WORSHIP

THE CHURCH OF ROME makes much of large and magnificent places of worship, and in its forms of worship many things are found which had no place in the church of the apostolic time, such as the use of vestments, elaborate ritual, lighted lamps and candles, incense, holy water, prayers and litanies in the Latin tongue, crosses and images, genuflections and prostrations, processions not only in the churches but also outside in the streets, pilgrimages to shrines and holy places.

**The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father . . . But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth** (John 4:21, 23, 24).

That which really matters in our worship, as our Lord's words to the Samaritan woman indicate, is that it be in spirit and in truth. It is easy for men today to worship Him with their lips in outward form, while their hearts are far from Him. It is not surprising therefore that so little is said in the New Testament concerning forms of worship. It would seem as if this was of divine purpose, that there should be scope within the unity of the one universal church for a variety of developments in the form of worship. We see this same diversity in unity in much of God's handiwork, such as a great tree with thousands of leaves which all have the same characteristics and yet no two of them are exactly alike. God's pattern for His church is evidently:

“In things essential, unity;  
In things non-essential, liberty;  
In all things, charity.”

This principle is seen in Paul's letters to the churches at Corinth and Rome.

**Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is I nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God** (I Corinthians 7:18, 19).

**But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, I if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse** (I Corinthians 8:8).

**One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.**

**He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks . . . But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way (Romans 14:5, 6, 10, 13).**

Concerning the rite of circumcision, the eating of meats (condemned by some and allowed by others), and our deciding which things are right and which are not, we must bring them all to the test of the Word of God. Things allowed in Scripture we must allow, even though they may not appeal to us individually; things that the Scriptures disallow we must likewise refuse. We give this liberty to others and we claim the same liberty for ourselves.

There is one scriptural rule concerning corporate worship which is quite plain.

**For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints . . . Let all things be done decently and in order (I Corinthians 14:33, 40).**

This command is binding upon Christians of whatever name or place. In its worship the Roman Catholic Church is monolithic in its unity, with strict rules applicable to all within its community. One must either submit to the order, or go out, as many have done through the centuries. Protestant churches, because of the greater ecclesiastical freedom they enjoy, manifest various differences in their church order and forms of worship. Rome presents an unbroken uniformity of form, the Protestant churches a diversity of form with a unity of faith. There is an essential unity among all evangelical Christians beneath the surface diversity.

Let us examine some of the characteristics of Roman Catholic worship in the light of Scripture.

1. *Vestments*. In the Roman Church these are compulsory, and every ordained person must wear the vestments appointed for his particular office. Some of these, particularly for the higher orders of the clergy, are very costly. To many people the ornate robes worn by the priest when ministering make a strong appeal, having a certain parallel to the robes worn in the courts of kings, marking the wearers as men of authority. They tend to exalt the priest as an object of veneration.

It is hardly necessary to say that these vestments find no place in the New Testament record of the early church. Our Lord Himself moved among men and performed all His mighty work clothed in simple peasant garments. His pitifully meager wardrobe is exhibited to us in the story of the crucifixion. Peter wore ordinary fishermen's clothes (John 21: 7).

Paul became all things to all men, that he might by all means save some (I Corinthians 9:22). His description of his frequent condition of cold and nakedness for the Gospel's sake (II Corinthians 11:27), and his request to Timothy to bring the cloak he had left at Troas when he came to Rome (II Timothy 4:13), certainly do not suggest a lot of vestments, but rather the same simplicity which had characterized his Lord.

According to the *Question Box*, p. 273, the vestments worn today by the priest at Mass, with the one exception of the amice, represents the ordinary daily dress of the second-century Roman, the toga being the only garment that has disappeared, and it was not until the ninth century that they were said to symbolize priestly virtues.

2. *Ritual*. There is a fixed ritual for every act of worship in the Church of Rome, but this was not so with the Lord. He rebuked the Jews of His day because they added unimportant ceremonies to the divine law (Mark 7:2-13). And He ordained only two sacraments, both of them simple and unadorned. All the ritual of the old Jewish temple, with its altar and censers, its outer courts and holy place, its ark of the covenant and the mercy seat set upon it, have passed away, having been fulfilled in Christ, and have no place in Christian worship.

3. *Lamps and Candles*. The use of these was borrowed from the ancient rites of sun worship, and down to the present day many heathen religions use lighted candles in their daylight worship. For the first four centuries candles had no place in Christian worship. A Christian writer of the fourth century made a jest of the worship of ancient pagan Rome, saying that they must have used lamps and candles because their gods were born in darkness. Had the church of his day used candles in their worship, he would hardly have laughed at the heathen for doing it.

4. *Incense*. The incense used in Jewish temple worship foreshadowed the merits of our Lord, by virtue of which our worship and prayers find acceptance before God (Revelation 8:3, 4). It has now found its fulfillment in Christ's mediatorial work for us in Heaven itself, and, as other symbolic things, has no true place in Christian worship, nor does it have any scriptural authority.

5. *Holy Water*. The holy water found in Roman Catholic churches today into which worshipers dip their fingers before making the sign of the cross, is ordinary water to which a little salt has been added prior to its being blessed by the priest. Neither the New Testament nor any writings of the early church fathers countenances this. Nor is there any scriptural warrant for taking some of the holy water home, as is done in some places, to sprinkle the house and land and even the cattle and crops to protect them from evil influences. This is just as superstitious as was the holy water placed outside the heathen temples of pagan Rome, and used for the same purpose.

6. *The Sign of the Cross*. Beginning in the third century Romanists have used the finger of the right hand to make the sign of the cross on the forehead and breast, saying as they did so, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," as a form of benediction. The sign of the cross is used over and over again in Roman Catholic worship—for example, ten times or more in each Mass. But as an act of worship it is not divinely appointed, nor has it any intrinsic spiritual value.

7. *The Latin Service*. Latin was of course the language of ancient Rome, but for many, many years it has been a dead language, and it is not spoken in any country in the world today. While Greek was the language of commerce in our Lord's time, Latin was the language of government, and it gradually spread through Europe as the universal means of communication. In course of time, however, the national languages came into more common use, and in the ninth century, when missionaries reached the Slavonic countries, and great numbers embraced Christianity, the pope was petitioned to allow them to use their language in worship. This was granted at first, but permission was withdrawn two hundred years later, and Latin has been the compulsory language for Roman liturgical services ever since.

The Council of 1562 decreed that all Masses must be in Latin. This facilitated control of the churches and of the doctrines being taught. The result has been to shut the door of knowledge to countless millions. The Holy Scriptures make it quite clear that our prayers and worship should be spiritual, intelligent, and sincere, and not merely emotional. So the language used should be readily understood.

**For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful (I Corinthians 14:14).**

Paul repeatedly says that everything done in the church should be for edification.

**How shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? . . . Let all things be done unto edifying . . . Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken?** (See I Corinthians 14.)

If the worshipers cannot understand what the priest is saying, how can they be edified? When a priest says Mass, he not only speaks in Latin, but stands with his back to the people so that even though he intones loudly, no one can hear clearly what he is saying, much less understand what is being said. Rome says that it is not important that the communicant should understand what the priest is saying or doing: it is sufficient if he sees it, since the words uttered are not spoken to men, but to God.

Not so does the Apostle Paul teach, for he says, “**The cup of blessing which we bless.**” The implication is that those who receive communion also take part in the thanksgiving, which they cannot do if the thanksgiving is spoken in an unknown language, too far off for them to hear.

8. *Processions.* Rome makes much of processions, both within the walls of her churches and without, with display of crosses and banners, incense burners and images, together with the host, before which the thronging multitudes kneel and worship. There is nothing wrong with processions as such. Indeed, our Lord was the central figure of one when He presented Himself to the Jewish nation as their Messiah, riding on an ass into Jerusalem in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy. But there is no ordained place for them in Christian worship. When, as with Romish practice, they are mixed up with so much that is forbidden in Scripture and idolatrous in its nature, they are completely alien to any worship that God can accept.

9. *Pilgrimages.* To secure some Romish indulgence, to pray before some shrine contrary to God's express command, how can the pilgrimages of Rome be a means of grace? How foreign is this method of acquiring God's favor from the simple worship “**in spirit and in truth**” which the Lord Jesus Himself enjoined?

~ end of chapter 31 ~

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