

# Is Catholicism Rational?

Although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is – for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know  
-Socrates

It pains me to ask this question, but once it was asked it seemed to take a life of its own. The short answer is most definitely "yes," yet it often seems hard to believe. Skeptics attack Christianity as a whole as being superstitious nonsense. The Protestants claim they are rational, that it's the Catholics that believe in non-Biblical superstition and man-made traditions. And the Catholics seem to sit content in their beliefs and ignore whatever anyone else says. It's like a perverted game of "hot-potato," with the Catholics all too happy to get burned. And while it is certainly Christ-like to suffer for the sake of one's beliefs, somehow the truth of what really goes on seems to be lost. Jesus called Himself the truth (John 14:6). Can we really say we have found Jesus in one manner if we ignore Him in another?

It doesn't matter if Christians are superstitious; it matters if the superstitions work. It doesn't matter if Catholics follow traditions; it matters if they lead us to Jesus. So, what really is the truth?

I would like to start with the Bible. Many non-Christians do look at Jesus as a philosopher. They often fail to appreciate just how different a philosopher Jesus really was, but they recognize His greatness nonetheless. No other philosopher ever dared to claim they knew what truth was. The Western philosophers decided truth was a journey without end, something sought for and perhaps even glimpsed at, but never reached. The Eastern philosophers decided truth existed outside this reality, that what we live in is only an illusion. So even if Jesus only claimed that He knew what truth was, then He would have been so far beyond any other philosopher that no comparisons between Him and them would be meaningful. But He went even further still. He claimed He was truth incarnate.

So Jesus really can't even be described as a philosopher, because He wasn't searching for the truth. We never see Jesus trying to come to terms with Himself. Instead, we see Him trying to get everyone, from the evil tax collector to the educated pharisee to the common peasant, to come to terms with Him! We see Jesus attempting to turn everyone He came across into a philosopher. And since then, the study of Jesus has never stopped. Indeed, almost the entirety of the Epistles are dedicated to this. Skeptics, Jews and pagans study Jesus as well as Christians. So the Bible itself is a collection of philosophical work, as are many other works created by the early disciples that never made it into the Bible. These works, or traditions as some would say, are entrusted to the *magisterium*, the successors of the apostles (at least three of which are identified by name in the Bible: James the Just (his importance is implied in Galatians 1:19), Timothy and Titus). These successors are called "bishops" today.

But the Catholic *corpus* of Christian thought includes some of the greatest minds in philosophical history, including Saints Anselm, Jerome, Augustine and Augustus. The Fathers of Protestantism did not deny these teachings; they looked up to them (Saint Augustine in particular). "Christianity was great until the Popes messed it up," is not far from what the Fathers of Protestantism thought. The contributions of these and many other Doctors of the Church are so embedded in Christian thought that it is almost impossible to think of a Church as being "Christian" without it accepting the more important ideas they came up with. These Doctors laid the groundwork for what

C.S. Lewis called "mere Christianity," what it is that nearly all Christians have in common. And "mere Christianity" is the concept that is the most underappreciated in all of theology. What Christians have in common with each other is massively greater than what is not held in common. It is not like one could talk about "mere Hinduism," "mere Islam," "mere paganism," or even "mere atheism" and have much to say. So, what happened between the era of the Doctors of the Church and the Protestant Reformation?

For understanding on this, I think it best to fast-forward *past* the Reformation to the 19th century when cooler heads looked back on what had happened. I want to talk about the life and trials of Saint John Henry Cardinal Newman, as he found himself at odds with the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, and Protestants in general for writing a single document. Raised a Protestant but converted and ordained in the Anglican Church, he was initially an outspoken defender of the Anglican faith. He wrote a sermon that only the students from the small college he worked at heard, yet whose transcript made its way into the public domain and into Anglican history. He observed that the Protestants believe in truth over purity and the Catholics believed in purity over truth. To Saint Newman, this argument was meant to show that the Anglican Church was the best defender of Christ's message, as they balanced truth with purity. The Anglicans, he reasoned, retained the apostolic traditions that the Protestants rejected, but would not let obedience to one man (the Pope) blind them to reality. Or so Saint Newman thought at the time.

As it turned out, a major debate broke out within the Anglican Church and his works became major points of contention. Saint Newman became an important voice in the Oxford Movement, which tried to defend this "middle ground" between Protestantism and Catholicism. It did have some success, but Saint Newman became a pariah within the Anglican Church, and, more importantly, he became disillusioned by the betrayal of the ideals of the Fathers of the Anglican Church. His faith that the Anglican Church could balance truth and purity without recognizing the authority of the Pope was proven to be not only wrong, but very much unwelcome. After some years of self-reflection and discovery, he eventually converted to the Catholic Church as a priest and soon became a personal adviser to the Popes as a Cardinal. His autobiography *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Apology for My Life) details this long journey to Catholicism and his ultimate conclusion that "There are but two alternatives, the way to Rome, and the way to atheism." Saint Newman observed with his own eyes that if one can doubt purity in the only political office Jesus endorsed (Matthew 16:18), then one will soon doubt that purity can exist within the Church at all.

Before I go on, let me briefly explain how truth and purity are in "conflict" by using a specific example from the famous debate between Saint Newman and Mr. Charles Kingsley that inspired the aforementioned book -- the miraculous oil of Saint Walburga in Eichstatt, Germany. There is a cave with a statue of the saint, and between the days of October 12 to February 25 (her holy days), oil seeps out of the rocks near her statue and this oil is said to have miraculous curing powers (personally attested to by Saint Newman). This belief is still held by many today. Those that seek the truth more than purity rationalize the oil out of its miraculous properties. They are skeptical it can cure at all, or attribute whatever healing it does accomplish to minerals it picked up in the rock formation before being harvested. They don't question that God *could* do this miracle, but they question *why* He would want to do such a thing. Unfortunately, this very same logic is applied to the Bible by skeptics, therefore any denial of purity must lead to atheism as Saint Newman pointed out. Those that seek the purity more than truth don't care why the oil can heal, or (in a certain sense) if it will heal at all. Instead, they see it as an Earthly example of God's power being manifested through a saint. The healing itself is secondary, the idea of being able to share a connection with one who has the beatific vision is what they really crave. Unfortunately, unquestioning loyalty to purity is what led to the

infamous Jonestown Massacre. It is only when the two are balanced that we have the Christian faith that we are supposed to have.

So, now that we have this understanding of truth and purity, let me go back to my "hot potato" game. I will propose that, in a simplistic yet meaningful way, skeptics deny both the truth and the purity of Christianity. Protestants will insist on the truth of Christianity, but will deny the need for purity. Catholics will insist on the purity of the Church, yet rarely debate the truthfulness of it. Who is right? The serious skeptic certainly has a hot potato in his hands in denying truth and purity. Since purity is also an issue with the Protestants, I'll focus first on truth.

At the risk of sounding flippant, how can anyone who is serious about finding the truth ignore the only man in history who claimed to be truth incarnate? The historical existence of Jesus is beyond any reasonable doubt, and no serious student of history will deny He lived. And since He came in the form of a slave, His teachings were the only Earthly thing He could leave as a legacy. The Fathers of Atheism did not deny Jesus the man, His teachings, or the impact His teachings had on the world. Yet no small part of His teachings show that Jesus was divine. In practice, the only way for skeptics to deny Jesus as God is to be selective above the teachings they pay attention to.

The Fathers of Atheism assumed that the moral teachings of Jesus were bound to happen sooner or later, and that some illegitimate son of a manual laborer from the "backwaters" of Israel without formal education just happened to be the first philosopher to put everything together. This coincidence of history, they also admit, did more to influence mankind than any other person or event in the history of the world. Even Richard Dawkins, who claims that all religion by its very nature is evil, admires Jesus the philosopher. This admiration is the foundation for his "Jesus for Atheists" movement and his frequent comment that "if Jesus was alive today, he would be an atheist." But now they have the problem of trying to determine what Jesus said that was right and what He said that was wrong. To assume anything that did not deal with religion was "truth" and anything that had to deal with "God" is "not truth" is a rather arbitrary line to draw. While there are many fallacies in making this arbitrary line, perhaps the most obvious is, how did Jesus get everything else so absolutely right while being so horribly wrong about being God *at the same time*? Little wonder skeptics want to pass this potato so quickly, their analysis is too simple to stand up to even a cursory scrutiny.

So now we get to the Protestants, who claim that there is no purity in Christianity, or at least that purity is secondary at best. But while this potato is not as hot as it was before, it is still warm enough to want to pass it on. As I claimed in my Saint Walburga example, the real draw to the cave is being able to connect to one who succeeded in reaching Heaven. Anyone who ever collected an autograph of a celebrity, or went to a lecture to hear someone speak instead of simply reading one of their books, can understand this. Man has a natural attraction to greatness. By having a connection to greatness, no matter how obscure or vague the connection is, one's own self-worth grows. And can any Christian really fault another for trying to connect with God? Of course, idolatry is a real concern here. Without an observance to rituals that say what is acceptable and what is not, idolatry is unquestioningly the destination one finds. Creating such rituals with the specific purpose of separating acceptable veneration of the "greats" from heretical idol worship is proof that some rational thought has gone into this practice. And it works. Catholics do not confuse a saint with a god anymore than an American will confuse a government official with the president. So the Protestants want to pass this potato rather than deal with the reality that Catholics are not idolaters, as it would otherwise prove that there actually *is* a solid, rational reason behind the things Catholics do.

So now we come to the Catholic Church, who can hold onto the potato because they believe

there is no conflict. If one values truth over purity, then truth gets corrupted by man's desires. If one values purity over truth, then one is walking blind. In both cases, we can substitute Jesus for "truth," and still find that neither state is desirable. To seek Jesus without seeing His beauty is a fool's errand, as is seeking His beauty but ignoring what He says. It is only when the two are balanced that one can be both passionate and sure of one's belief in Christ. But this does not get the Catholic Church completely off the hook.

While the Church itself is comfortable with this balance of truth and purity, many of its members are not. Eighty percent of Catholic young adults leave the church, and most never return. Protestants do better, with only sixty-six percent leaving. Meanwhile, skepticism is steadily growing in numbers and power. If the Catholic Church has the right balance, what is happening?

I would propose that the skeptics and Protestants see better than the leaders of the Catholic Church on what is going from the laity's point of view. I propose that too many Catholics only see the purity. Now, the truth of Catholicism is out there if one wants it, but one must make the effort to find it. We have Father Ratzinger (better known as Pope Benedictine XVI), whom I find similar in style to Lewis (although with a better grounding in facts at the expense of Lewis's wit). We also have Father Karol Wojtyla (better known as Saint Pope John Paul II), but he writes at a level beyond almost everyone. If one can understand him, one need not fear debating with anyone in the world on those topics.

But for the common man, finding a good Catholic apologist is hard to find. For most of the Church's history, the apologist was the local priest. Vatican II decided to get the people more involved and reduce the burden of the priest. The fact that the number of people leaving the Catholic Church also noticeably increased at this time does not prove there is causation going on here, but one should be very curious about it. I believe it is at least worth considering the idea that perhaps the Catholic Church has failed to ensure that the apologizing necessary to keep a strong faith failed to happen with the change of priestly roles. Putting this burden on the laity was not unrealistic, but it did need guidance and encouragement. As it is, even today there seems to be very little endorsement for laity within a congregation to step forward, and very little oversight on those who have created national platforms. When priests are able to endorse homosexual lifestyles and publicly challenge bishops who are fighting to stop abortion, what message is the world supposed to understand about Catholic "truth"?

Besides the Fathers of Protestantism, evangelists such as Jonathan Edwards (of the "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" fame), John Bunyan (*Pilgrim's Progress*), the more contemporary Reverend Billy Graham and Dr. Jordan Peterson have all stepped forward in telling their audiences not just what to do, but why they should do it. And the Anglicans seem to dominate this skill, as not only do we have Saint Newman, but also George MacDonald and the aforementioned Lewis providing steady fare for the common man between the years 1824 and 1963. Peterson is arguably the greatest apologist since Lewis, and almost all of Peterson's work was done when he was still an agnostic. It is truly sad when the world's leading religion is best explained by a non-believer. In contrast, the only significant Catholic apologists since the Protestant Reformation until just a few years ago were Saint Newman and G.K. Chesterton (and both were former Anglicans).

In doing research for this paper, I was shocked to learn that in the 1980's and early 1990's, there was an "explosion" of Catholic apologetics. I was in a Catholic High School during the beginning of this time, and I don't recall ever being made aware of this effort. I do admit my lack of concern at the time may mean I was told about it but didn't pay attention. But the fact is, unless one is a Catholic Theologian, none of them are known. During this time frame, the name Reverend Graham is what

stands out in Christian apologetics. I am sure there are those who would remind me that Saint Teresa of Calcutta and Pope Saint John Paul II were also from this time, but I would argue that they did more to demonstrate purity than truth (in more common terms, they evangelized, not apologized).

In contrast to not remembering how the Catholic Church was apologizing during this era, I do remember the pedophile scandals of 1984. If there ever was a time for the Catholic Church to put truth before purity, this was it. Instead, the Church continued to flaunt its horribly stained purity like a banner over a castle. Almost 40 years later, many people still think this is typical behavior for Catholic clergy. Things were much different with the more recent pedophile scandal of 2009, when the Vatican took prompt and effective action against the monsters, and people like Bishop Barron (his "Letter to a Suffering Church" in particular) gave the laity the means to talk rationally about what happened and what was being done so others could put things in perspective. While the damage still has a long way to go to be healed, I believe people like Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, and Bishop Barron did more to heal the Church in a few months of action than four decades of denial.

I also remember that in 1999, the Catholic Church humbly apologized (as in saying one is sorry) for not helping more Jews during World War II. I admit there is a certain amount of righteous and appropriate purity for the Catholic Church to do so, but this was also done while ignoring the truth. The Vatican *saved* more than *twice* as many Jewish lives than all the rest of the world's governments put together, and these actions were not unnoticed by the Nazis. Catholic priests represented the second largest group of clergy sent to concentration camps (Jewish rabbis being the largest), and declassified German documents show that the "Final Solution" was soon going to go after Catholics once the Jews were finished off. Yet today, many people still accuse Pope Pius XII of being in collusion with Adolph Hitler. This formal apology to Jews did not make the Catholic Church look like a leader admitting he was wrong (a position of strength). Instead, it made the Church look like it reluctantly gave in after 50 years of "global outrage," suggesting its power is waning (a position of weakness). Personally, I don't care if the world thinks the Catholic Church is strong or weak. But I do care if what they believe is based on a lie.

While there is an increasing number of Catholic apologists now, we are clearly going through growing pains. I would judge Bishop Barron as the best Catholicism has right now. He lacks the wit that Chesterton and Lewis had, but his style is an otherwise great blending of contemporary issues (a strength of Chesterton and Lewis) with MacDonald's gentle but firm lessons, and the high ideals of Fathers Wojtyla and Ratzinger. Furthermore, as Bishop Barron lives in a time when all the socialist experiments proved to be disastrous failures, he can speak with confidence on these issues whereas Chesterton and Lewis had to use reason and faith to predict their downfalls. I am also familiar with Trent Horn (whose work can be found all over the Catholic Answers web page). While all his works are very understandable, they also seem to be hit or miss. Some are very insightful, some are too simplistic. While I do not doubt his experience in debating non-believers, I find some of his literature more inspirational than practical.

The single best Catholic apologetics book I have read is *Rediscover Catholicism* by Matthew Kelly, but unfortunately I have not seen another book like that from him. While all his works are good, that is the standard I feel all Catholic apologetics need to aspire to. Scott Hahn is another good Catholic apologist, but his style is very different. While most authors cover a wide variety of topics at a level suitable for debating most skeptics, Hahn tends to explore a narrow topic and discuss it to a tremendous degree. One could use his information to debate most specialists. A new (2022) release by Word on Fire Institute called *The New Apologetics* is an excellent read, containing 41 essays from current apologists. There are many other Catholic apologetics web pages as well.

But despite all this new energy, it seems to me that most of them are still struggling to break out of the purity mode. There is a certain power found in Protestant and Anglican apologists that gives one a sense of confidence. They speak as knowing the truth and will not accept anything less than the truth. When they call a sin out, there is no suggesting that it is understandable, much less okay. And yet they seem to know where to draw the line and not come across as being cruel. Their anger is just and spot on, and then their humility draws the chastised into the loving arms of God's comfort. Catholic apologists seem to want to first make sure the audience is not upset, and then worry about the truth. The result is a timid message, one that sometimes lacks conviction no matter how factual the message is.

I reject the idea that Catholicism lacks a rational foundation (referred to here as truth), but I feel the rest of the world is quite justified in assuming Catholics only concern ourselves with the ritual (referred to here as purity) -- doing things because we are told to do them as opposed to really understanding the truth behind it. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as MacDonald pointed out that obedience must come before understanding. But where the Protestant seeks to put understanding before obedience, the Catholic prefers obedience to the point of ignoring understanding. Neither formula is working, as the large numbers leaving Christianity prove.

I don't know the long-term effects this new Catholic movement towards apologetics will have, but if the Catholic Church is to present itself as the most perfect balance of truth and purity one can find, then it needs to improve its image concerning truth. It is not enough that a few elite deal with the truth of the Catholic faith, the whole Church needs to embrace it.

Raymond Mulholland  
Original Publication Date: 15 September 2022