**Catholic versus Orthodox**

# Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church have a long history and many shared doctrines and traditions. However, both churches have significant differences with each other and even greater differences with evangelical churches.

# History

Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox were originally one church, claiming the “apostolic line of succession” from Peter down through the bishops (or popes). The church was led by five patriarchs in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Rome’s patriarch (or pope) held authority over the other four patriarchs.

Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem all fell to Muslim conquest in the early 600s, leaving Constantinople and Rome as the two main leaders of Christianity, with a rivalry between the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope of Rome.

The Eastern church (Constantinople) and the Western church (Rome) disagreed on doctrinal issues. Rome said unleavened bread (like Passover bread) must be used for communion, but the East used leavened bread to represent the risen Christ. They disputed changes to the wording of the Nicene Creed and whether priests should be unmarried and celibate.

## The Great Schism of AD 1054

This dissension and rivalry led to the Pope of Rome excommunicating the Patriarch of Constantinople, followed by the Patriarch promptly excommunicating the Pope. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church split in 1054. The Eastern Orthodox Church no longer recognized the authority of the Roman Pope to rule them.

# Hierarchy of the Two Churches

## Eastern Orthodox (Orthodox Catholic Church) Hierarchy

Most people belonging to the Eastern Orthodox churches live in eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and northern Africa, with 220 million baptized members. They are divided into regional groups (patriarchates), which are either *autocephalous* – having their own leader, or *autonomous* – self-governing. They all share the same basic doctrine.

The largest regional group is the **Greek Orthodox Church**, which includes Greece, the Balkans, Albania, the Middle East, and the Greek diaspora in North America, Europe, and Australia. The **Russian Orthodox Church** includes the former Soviet Union, China, and Japan (although the Orthodox Church in some former Soviet countries, like Ukraine, now consider themselves independent).

The **Oriental Orthodox Church** is separate from the Eastern Orthodox Church due to theological differences, although they have much in common.

The Eastern Orthodox church does not have one authority (like the Roman Pope) who has governing power over them. Each regional group has its own bishop and holy synod, which provides administrative leadership and preserves the practices and traditions of the Orthodox Church. Each bishop is equal in authority with bishops in other synods (territories). The Orthodox church is like a confederacy of regional groups without a central ruling person or organization.

## Roman Catholic Hierarchy

The Roman Catholic church has 1.3 billion baptized members around the world, predominantly in South America, North America, southern Europe, and southern Africa. The church also has a large presence in Asia and Australia.

The Roman Catholic church has a worldwide hierarchy, with the pope in Rome as the supreme leader. Under the pope is the College of Cardinals, who advise the pope and elect a new pope whenever the current one dies.

Next are archbishops who govern regions around the world, and under them are local bishops who are over the parish priests in each community.

## Pope (and Papal Primacy) versus Patriarch

The **Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople** is the bishop of Constantinople, equal to all the other bishops in the Orthodox Church but given the honorific title of *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The Eastern Orthodox Church believes Jesus Christ is the head of their church.

Roman Catholics consider the **Bishop of Rome (Pope)** as having ***Papal Primacy***– all the cardinals, archbishops, and bishops give him respect as the supreme authority in church government and doctrine.

# Doctrinal Differences and Similarities

## The Doctrine of Justification

Both the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church reject the Protestant doctrine of justification through faith alone. Catholic and Orthodox churches believe salvation is a process.

**Roman Catholics** believe salvation begins with baptism (usually in infancy, by pouring or sprinkling water on the head) and continues by cooperating with grace through faith, good works, and receiving the sacraments of the church (especially confirmation at around age eight, confession of sins and penance, and Holy Eucharist or communion).

**Eastern Orthodox** believe that salvation comes when a person entirely conforms his will and actions with God. The ultimate goal is to achieve ***theosis*** – conformity and union with God. “God became man so man could become god.”

The Eastern Orthodox Church believes water baptism (immersing three times in water) is a precondition for salvation. Infants are baptized to cleanse them from sin inherited from their parents and to give them spiritual rebirth. As with Catholics, the Orthodox church believes salvation comes through faith *plus works.* Water baptism of small children begins the journey of salvation. Repentance, Holy Confession and Holy Communion – along with works of mercy, prayer, and faith – renew salvation throughout the person’s life.

## Holy Spirit (and Filioque Controversy)

Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches believe that the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. However, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes that the Holy Spirit originates from God the Father *alone.* Catholics believe the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *together with* Jesus the Son.

The *Nicene Creed*, when first written in AD 325, stated “I believe . . . in the Holy Spirit.” In AD 381, it was changed to “the Holy Spirit *proceeding from the Father*.” Later, in AD 1014, Pope Benedict VIII had the Nicene Creed with the phrase “the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father *and the Son*” sung at mass in Rome.

The Roman Catholics accepted this version of the creed, but the Eastern Orthodox Church believed “*proceeding from the Son”* implied that the Holy Spirit was created by the Jesus. This became known as ***The Filioque Controversy.*** In Latin, *filioque* means child, so the controversy was whether the Jesus was an originator of the Holy Spirit. The Filioque Controversy was a chief cause of the **1054 Schism** between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

## Grace

**The Eastern Orthodox Church** **has a mystical approach to grace,** believing God’s nature is distinct from His “energies” in the sense that the sun is distinct from the energy it produces. This distinction between the nature of God and His energies is fundamental to the Orthodox concept of grace.

Orthodox believe being “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) means that by grace we have union with God in His energies, but our nature does *not* become God’s nature – our nature remains human.

Orthodox believe grace is the very energies of God Himself. Before baptism, God’s grace moves a person toward good by external influence, while Satan is in the heart. After baptism, “baptismal grace” (the Holy Spirit) enters the heart, influencing from within, while the devil hovers outside.

Grace can work *upon* a person not baptized in the Orthodox church, as well as *within* a person who is baptized in the Orthodox church. They would say someone like Mother Theresa was deeply motivated by her love for God coming from the Spirit’s external influence. Because she was not baptized in the Eastern Orthodox Church, they would say the Holy Spirit’s grace was influencing her externally, not from within.

**The Roman Catholic Church definition of grace,** according to the Catholic catechism is, "favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to His call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.”

Catholics believe grace is received as they participate in the sacraments, prayers, good works, and the teachings of God’s Word. Grace heals of sin and sanctifies. The catechism teaches that God initiates grace, then collaborates with a man’s free will to produce good works. Grace unites us to Christ in active love.

When drawn by the Holy Spirit’s ministry of grace, people can cooperate with God and receive the grace of justification. However, grace can be resisted because of free will.

Catholics believe *sanctifying grace* is an ongoing outpouring of grace that makes the person receiving it pleasing to God by enabling one’s actions to be driven by God’s love. Sanctifying grace is permanent unless a Catholic willfully and knowingly commits a mortal sin and loses their adopted sonship. A Catholic can be restored to grace through confession of mortal sins to a priest and doing penance.

## The One True Church of Christ

**The Eastern Orthodox Church** believes it is **the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church**, established by Christ and His apostles. They reject the idea that the Orthodox Church is simply one branch or expression of Christianity. “Orthodox” means “true worship” and the Orthodox church believes they have maintained the true faith of the undivided church as the one remnant of the true church. The Eastern Orthodox church believe they continued as the “true church” at the Great Schism of 1054.

**The Roman Catholic Church** likewise believes it is the **one true church** – the only church founded by Christ and the continuing presence of Jesus on earth. The Fourth Lateran Council of AD 1215 declared, “There is one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation.”

However, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) recognized that the Catholic church is “linked with” baptized Christians (Orthodox or Protestant), which they call “separated brethren,” “though they do not profess the faith in its entirety.” They consider the Eastern Orthodox Church members to be “imperfectly, though not fully”, members of the Catholic Church.[[1]](#endnote-1)

## Confessing sins

**Roman Catholics** go to their priest to confess sins and receive “absolution” or forgiveness of their sins. The priest will often assign a “penance” to help internalize repentance and forgiveness – such as repeating the “Hail Mary” prayer or doing kind acts for someone they sinned against. Confession and penance is a sacrament in the Catholic church, necessary for one to continue in the faith. Catholics are encouraged to go to confession often – if they die without confessing a “mortal sin,” they will go to hell.

**Greek Orthodox** also believe they need to confess their sins to God before a “spiritual guide” (usually a priest but can be any male or female carefully chosen and given a blessing to hear confessions). After confession, the repentant person will have the parish priest say the prayer of absolution over them. Sin is not considered a stain on the soul requiring punishment, but a mistake that provides opportunity to grow as a person and in the faith. Sometimes an act of penance is required, but it is meant to establish a deeper understanding of the mistake and how to cure it.

## The doctrine of the immaculate conception

**Roman Catholics believe in the Immaculate conception:** the idea that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was free of original sin when she was conceived. They also believe she remained a virgin and sinless throughout her life. The idea of immaculate conception is a relatively new theology, becoming official dogma in 1854.

**The Eastern Orthodox Church doesn’t believe in the immaculate conception,** calling it a “Roman novelty,” as it was a Catholic teaching that gained traction after the split between the Catholics and Orthodox. The Eastern Orthodox Church does believe Mary remained a virgin through her life. They revere her and refer to her as *Theotokos* – the birth-giver of God.

# Scriptures and Books

**Both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have the Apocrypha books** in their Old Testaments: 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom, and Baruch. These seven books are not in the Bibles that most Protestants use. Eastern Orthodox also have a small number of writings from the Septuagint that aren’t in the Catholic Bibles, but that is not considered a big issue between the churches.

**The Eastern Orthodox Church** believes the Bible is a verbal icon of Christ, containing the foundational truths of faith. They believe these truths were revealed by Christ and the Holy Spirit to divinely inspired human writers. The Bible is the primary and authoritative source for holy tradition and the basis for teaching and belief.

**The Roman Catholic Church** believes the Bible was written by men inspired by the Holy Spirit and is without error and authoritative for life and doctrine.

**Neither the Orthodox nor the Roman Catholic Church believe that the Bible is the *only* authority for faith and practice**. Catholics and Orthodox believe the traditions and teachings and creeds of the church, handed down by church fathers and saints, are equal in authority to the Bible.

# Celibacy

In the **Roman Catholic Church** only unmarried, celibate men can be ordained as priests. The church believes celibacy is a special gift from God, following the example of Jesus, and that being unmarried allows the priest to give his full focus to God and the ministry.

The **Eastern Orthodox Church** will ordain married men as priests. However, if a priest is single when he is ordained, he is expected to remain that way. Most Orthodox priests are married.

# The Dangers of Catholicism and Orthodox

## Their teaching on salvation is unbiblical.

Both Catholics and Orthodox believe that salvation begins when a baby is baptized and is an ongoing process throughout one’s life, requiring a person to follow the sacraments and do good works.

This conflicts with what the Bible says in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Romans 10:9-10 says, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”

The Bible is clear that salvation comes from a person believing in their heart and confessing their faith with their mouth.

Good works do not save a person. Taking communion does not save a person. These are things we are commanded to do, but we don’t do them to *be* saved, we do them because we *are* saved! Baptism and communion are symbols of what Christ did for us and what we believe in our hearts. Good works are the natural outcome of true faith.

Salvation is not a process, but the Christian life *is* a process. Once we are saved, we are to mature in our faith, pursuing greater holiness. We are to be faithful in daily prayer and Bible reading and confession of sin, in fellowship with other believers and receiving teaching and communion in the church and using our gifts to minister in the church. We don’t do these things to be saved, but because we want to mature in our faith.

## They give the teachings of men equal authority with Holy Scripture.

Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox feel the Bible alone cannot provide certainty about all revealed truth, and that “Sacred Tradition” handed down by church leaders over the ages must be given equal authority.

Both Catholics and Orthodox believe the Bible is inspired by God, totally accurate, and totally authoritative, and rightly so! However, they give equal authority to teachings of the church fathers and traditions of the church, which are *not* inspired, arguing that their traditions and teachings are based on the Bible.

But here’s the thing. The Bible is inspired and infallible, without error. No man, no matter how godly or knowledgeable in Scripture, is without error. Men make mistakes. God cannot. It is dangerous to put men’s teaching as equal with the Bible.

You’ll notice both Catholic and Orthodox have changed their mind on several doctrines over the centuries. How can traditions and teachings be authoritative if they are subject to change? Relying on man’s teachings over Scripture leads to serious error, such as believing that salvation is based on baptism and works rather than faith alone.

Furthermore, many teachings and traditions have no basis in Scripture whatsoever – such as praying to Mary and the saints as interceders. This flies in the face of the Bible’s clear teaching, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Catholics and Orthodox have allowed tradition to take precedence over God’s holy, inspired, and eternal Word.

Another example is venerating the icons and images of Mary and the saints, in direct disobedience to God’s command: “Do not act corruptly and make a carved image for yourselves in the form of any figure, a representation of male or female” (Deuteronomy 4:16).

# Why Become a Christian?

In short, your life – your eternal life – depends on becoming a true Christian. This begins with understanding we are all sinners deserving of death. Jesus died, taking our sins on His sinless body, taking our punishment. Jesus redeemed us from hell. He resurrected so we can have the hope of resurrection and immortality in His presence.

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Becoming a true Christian provides us with escape from hell and the firm assurance that we will go to heaven when we die. But there’s so much more to experience as a true Christian!

As Christians, we experience indescribable joy walking in relationship with God, for the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. As children of God, we can cry out to Him, “Abba! (Daddy!) Father.” God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. God is for us! Nothing can separate us from the love of God! (Romans 8:6-39)

Why wait? Take that step right now! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!

1. [Aidan Nichols, *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (Liturgical Press 1992), p. 41](https://books.google.com/books?id=Hje62q52XNsC&pg=PA41&dq=Nichols+Rome+and+the+Eastern+Churches+%22sin+of+schism%22&hl=en&ei=m_yeTMyoI4bgON_VrJsL&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)[ISBN](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISBN_%28identifier%29) [978-1-58617-282-4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special%3ABookSources/978-1-58617-282-4) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)