
Roman Catholic teachings on heresy

Roman Catholic teachings on heresy first began in 380 AD with the Edict of Thessalonica. Later in the thirteenth century heresy was defined by Thomas Aquinas as "a species of infidelity in men who, having professed the faith of Christ, corrupt its dogmas." The Catholic Church asserts and teaches that its doctrines are the authoritative understandings of the faith taught by Christ and that the Holy Spirit protects the Church from falling into error when teaching these doctrines. To deny one or more of those doctrines, therefore, is to deny the faith of Christ. Heresy is both the non orthodox belief itself, and the act of holding to that belief.

While the term is often used by laymen to indicate any non orthodox belief such as Paganism, by definition heresy can only be committed by someone who considers himself a Christian, but rejects the teachings of the Catholic Church. A person who completely renounces Christianity is not considered a heretic, but an apostate, and a person who renounces the authority of the Church but not its teachings is a schismatic.

The Church makes several distinctions as to the seriousness of an individual heterodoxy and its closeness to true heresy. Only a belief that directly contravenes an Article of Faith, or that has been explicitly rejected by the Church, is labelled as actual "heresy."

Canon 751 of the Catholic Church's Code of Canon law promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983 (abbreviated "C.I.C." for Codex Iuris Canonici), the juridical systematization of ancient law currently binding the world's one billion Catholics, defines heresy as the following: "Heresy is the obstinate denial or doubt after the reception of baptism of some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith." The essential elements of canonical heresy therefore technically comprise 1) obstinacy, or continuation in time; 2) denial (a proposition contrary or contradictory in formal logic to a dogma) or doubt (a posited opinion, not being a firm denial, of the contrary or contradictory proposition to a dogma); 3) after reception of valid baptism; 4) of a truth categorized as being of "Divine and Catholic Faith," meaning contained directly within either Sacred Scripture or Sacred Tradition per Can. 750 par. 1 C.I.C. ("de fide divina") AND proposed as 'de fide divina' by either a Pope having spoken solemnly "ex cathedra" on his own (example: dogmatic definition of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950), or defined solemnly by an Ecumenical Council in unison with a Pope (ex: the definition of the Divinity of Christ in the Council of Chalcedon) ("de fide catholica").

An important distinction is that between *formal* and *material heresy*. The difference is one of the heretic's subjective belief about his opinion. The heretic who is aware that his belief is at odds with Catholic teaching and yet continues to cling to his belief pertinaciously is a formal heretic. This sort of heresy is sinful because in this case the heretic knowingly holds an opinion that, in the words of the first edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "is destructive of the virtue of Christian faith . . . disturbs the unity, and challenges the Divine authority, of the Church" and "strikes at the very source of faith." Material heresy, on the other hand, means that the individual is unaware that his heretical opinion denies, in the words of Canon 751, "some truth which is to be believed by divine and Catholic faith." The opinion of a material heretic is still heresy, and it produces the same objective results as formal heresy, but because of his ignorance he commits no sin by holding it. Wikipedia:Citation needed

The penalty for a baptised Catholic above the age of 18 who obstinately, publicly, and voluntarily manifests his or her adherence to an objective heresy is automatic excommunication ("latae sententiae") according to Can. 1364 par.1 C.I.C..

A belief that the church has not directly rejected, or that is at variance with less important church teachings, is given the label, *sententia haeresi proxima*, meaning "opinion approaching heresy." A theological argument, belief, or theory that does not constitute heresy in itself, but which leads to conclusions which might be held to do so, is termed *propositio theologice erronea*, or "erroneous theological proposition." Finally, if the theological position only suggests but does not necessarily lead to a doctrinal conflict, it might be given the even milder label of *sententia de haeresi suspecta, haeresim sapiens*, meaning "opinion suspected, or savoring, of heresy." Wikipedia:Citation needed

Some significant controversies of doctrine have risen over the course of history. At times there have been many heresies over single points of doctrine, particularly in regard to the nature of the Trinity, the doctrine of transubstantiation and the immaculate conception.

The Church has always fought in favour of orthodoxy and the Pope's authority. At various times in history, it has had varying degrees of power to resist or punish heretics, once it had defined them.

References

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