

Gregg R. Allison

Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment

Wheaton, Illinois USA, Crossway, 2014, 496.

Roman Catholic Theology and Practice is a new book by an accomplished evangelical scholar Gregg R. Allison, written “to note with fascination and appreciation the commonalities between Catholic and evangelical theology” and “to examine the differences between the two” (18). This book offers a fresh perspective that assesses Catholic theology as a coherent, all-encompassing system, rather than only specific albeit crucial topics. The author’s material focus is the official document of the Catholic church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which he follows throughout the book. He basically covers the first three parts of the *Catechism*, while omitting only the fourth part on “Christian Prayer.”

In the first chapter the author presents how and why he became interested in the topic of Roman Catholicism in the first place and his qualifications to write this book. He is not only a theologian and a church historian, but took classes on Catholicism during his MDiv and PhD studies, and is teaching about it on a seminary level. One of the more interesting credentials is his invaluable experience in ministering to Roman Catholics both in the USA and Italy. The author enlists a modified PhD dissertation of an Italian pastor and professor Leonardo De Chirico as a valuable resource in his studies.

In the second chapter the author deals with Scripture and its interpretation, explaining the differences between the two systems’ approaches to Scripture. Then he reviews mainstream evangelical theology, which the author calls “an evangelical vision of life with God and human flourishing” (11). The most important part of this chapter is the author’s examination of Catholic theology as a system. To accomplish this endeavour, the author submits that it is important to understand two axioms or tenets upon which the Catholic doctrinal system is built: “the nature-grace interdependence and the Christ-Church interconnection” (42).

The first of these two, *the nature-grace interdependence*, stems from the Catholic understanding of nature as possessing a capacity “to receive, transmit, and cooperate with grace” (47), and grace as God’s providential activity in sustaining and directing nature, as well as his redemptive activity of rescuing it from its state of fallenness due to sin. These two are interdependent because they exist in a state of continuity, as they were designed to cooperate with each other in such a way that nature channels grace, as it is also elevated by it. This theology is very optimistic with regard to nature’s “openness to and capacity for grace” (49). Nature is considered to be everything, from water to human conscience, and even pagan religion and culture.

This axiom works itself out in many Catholic theological doctrines and practices. For example, in the doctrine of salvation Catholic theology views it as a synergistic venture between divine grace and human effort, which is aided by grace, in meriting salvation.

Several objections to this axiom are indeed offered. First of all, it owes more to philosophical traditions than to Scripture. Second, it does not find biblical support. As a matter of fact, the author writes that the fall brought dire consequences to human beings and divine damnation to the rest of creation, quoting Genesis 3:17-19.

The second axiom, *the Christ-Church interconnection*, means that the Catholic system understands “itself as the continuation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ” (56). This continuation is in place because the orders of nature and grace need a mediating subject. Jesus Christ was the “first and primary manifestation of this principle” as He mediated grace to nature. The Catholic Church sees itself acting as “*altera persona Christi*” (57), standing between God and the world. This is supported by three considerations: “the Christological analogy, the concept of the Church as the mystical body of ‘the whole Christ,’ and the notion of the Church as sacrament.” The Catholic Church does not see itself as an *ontological* continuation of Christ’s incarnation, but it does so as a sacrament “of communion with God and the unity among all men” (60) as it mediates grace to nature.

This axiom also permeates Catholic doctrines and practices. For example, in its claim that it “grants faith to human beings” (61) and that the sacraments are “administered in the Church, Christ himself is the one who baptizes... celebrates the Eucharist... and so forth” (62). In the main section of his book the author aptly explains when and how these axioms affect Catholic thought, while pointing the readers to objections he wrote in this, his second chapter.

Evangelical objections to this axiom are related to the understanding of the incarnation of Christ as a unique event, so that there “can be no continuation of the incarnation, nor any derivative, secondary instance of it, with respects to the church” (63). Furthermore, evangelical theology considers this axiom “a misunderstanding of Paul’s body imagery, interpreting a metaphor in realistic terms,” because Paul uses an analogy while he underscores “that the church, which is ‘in Christ,’ stands in intimate *relationship* to Christ but is not a prolongation of his ascended being – the *ontological* interpretation” (64).

Positively, evangelical theology points to the implications of Christ’s ascension, as it “tends to view the ascension in more abrupt, radical ways in that it conceives it as the coming to an end of the earthly ministry of Jesus” (64). Christ is present and the fullness of Christ fills his ecclesiastical Body, but he does this through his divine omnipresence and spiritual presence, and not bodily. In fact, it is the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who was sent by the Father and

the Son to do this important role as another Helper, *alter persona Christi*, to take the place of the bodily absent and ascended Christ (61-62).

In the main section of the book, chapters 3-13, the author undertakes to review the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* part by part, and then to assess it through the lens of evangelical theology in terms of commonalities and differences. Since it is beyond the scope of this review to walk its readers through the whole book, we will attempt to underscore the points this book is making, with the hope that the reader will be able to discern whether or not this is a book he or she would like to read.

These chapters are divided into three parts, corresponding to the first three parts of the *Catechism*. The first part deals with “The Profession of Faith” and is an assessment of what we could call Catholic systematic theology as presented in the first part of the *Catechism*, which follows the *Apostle’s Creed* as its summary form. The second part is about “The Celebration of Christian Mystery,” and is therefore an assessment of Catholic liturgy and the seven sacraments. The third and final part of this main section again follows the *Catechism* as it assesses the “Life in Christ.” This portion of the book deals specifically with the most disputed elements of Catholic theology, namely salvation, law, grace and merit.

The last chapter is reserved for reflections on “Evangelical Ministry with Catholics.” It has some valuable points to make. Those converting from Catholicism to evangelicalism, and vice versa, need to understand the commonalities and divergences between the two systems. Those ministering with Catholics need to underscore to them the depth of sin and the desperate need for spiritual re-creation (first axiom). They also need to stress the sovereign rulership of the God-man who has ascended to heaven (second axiom), while at the same time emphasizing that the church is important! On the other hand evangelicals themselves need to be involved in robust churches that are empowered by the Spirit and focused on the gospel, instead of programs. Lastly, a question that evangelicals can use while ministering to Catholics with the gospel reads: “Have you ceased to rely on all of your own efforts to earn God’s love and forgiveness?”

While assessing the quality of this book, it is important to note its fair and balanced style. There are no hits below the belt, but at the same time the author pulls no punches. He lets the *Catechism* speak for itself and then engages it at face value both in agreement and criticism.

Several examples are noteworthy. When considering the Catholic view of the Eucharist, he is fast to acknowledge that it does not teach “that Christ is re-sacrificed each and every time the sacrament of the Eucharist is celebrated” (213), but that it teaches the “*re-presentation* of that once-for-all sacrifice.” Then he disproves this belief with sound arguments. Furthermore, the author is capable of commending the developments in Catholic theology that are moving toward a

more biblical stance, as is the case with the baptismal or common priesthood “approaching one of the key doctrines of the Protestant Reformation: the priesthood of all believers” (346).

The book is also balanced in presenting a wider evangelical variety of views. This makes it a valuable resource for evangelicals of all persuasions. For example, in his treatment of baptism the author knowingly describes both the paedobaptist and the credobaptist view. While clearly not leaning toward an Arminian theology in his views of salvation, he does present the view accurately.

Nevertheless, the author meticulously goes over those points of divergence between Catholic and evangelical theology, offers a critique of the Catholic view and then explains evangelical belief, proving it from Scripture and even historical theology. For example, while noting that Catholic theology does not hold to a purely meritorious view of salvation, since there is no merit that can be deserved without the grace of God, he does show why even this “graced” view of merit is incongruous with the Scriptures’ sharp denial of works as a basis of salvation, even in this “grace/faith plus works” construct.

Overall, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice* is an encouraging and instructive book, refreshing in its rich theological polemic and solid biblical exegesis. From a literary aspect, it was easy to read and understand. The only thing that was not very clear is whether the first axiom of Catholic theology, “the nature-grace interdependence,” is an axiom that Catholic theologians themselves would acknowledge, or is more of an inference made by the author. Nevertheless, even if this is not as clear as one would like it to be, a reader will clearly see those two axioms stemming from the Catholic theological construct and likely remember and be aware of them while reading Catholic material or ministering to Catholics. This was also clearly the author’s intent, and it was achieved masterfully.

Miroslav Balint-Feudvarski

Damir Šićko Alić

Katolička vjera u crkvenoj predaji (The Catholic Faith in Church Tradition)

Obiteljska kršćanska knjižara, Zagreb, 2015, 210 pages.

In March 2015 a book called *Katolička vjera u crkvenoj predaji (Catholic Faith in Church Tradition)* by Damir Šićko Alić was published by “Obiteljska kršćanska knjižara” in Zagreb. As an author of eighteen books dealing with popular Christian subjects, this is the first time he enters the realm of church history, using primary sources as the basis for reconstruction of what he refers to as “the Catholic