

CATHOLICISM'S CONTRIBUTION TO GOD'S PLAN

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TTrue principles must sometimes be balanced against contrasting principles that are equally important and equally true. An obvious example is justice and mercy. Parents and leaders must balance both. Some situations require mercy, others justice, and still others a mix of the two. Other contrasting principles include liberty against responsibility, belief against faithful questioning, self-reliance against Christian charity, and optimism against realistic honesty; all need proper applications at the right times in the right way. Too much of a good principle can, like too much of a medicine, be as much a spiritual poison as a bad and foolish concept. In a world of opposites, seeking healthy balances of correct principles, as inspired by the Holy Ghost, is the wise course.

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One of the balancing acts for Latter-day Saints is to stay strong in the knowledge and testimony of the Restoration, and at the same time appreciate, associate, and work with good people from other faiths. President Hinckley encourages us to strike this balance in these terms:

We must not only be tolerant, but we must cultivate a spirit of affirmative gratitude for those who do not see things quite as we see them. We do not in any way have to compromise our theology, our convictions, our knowledge of eternal truth as it has been revealed by the God of Heaven. We can offer our own witness of the truth, quietly, sincerely, honestly, but never in a manner that will give offense to others.¹

President Hinckley provided a good example of “affirmative gratitude” while serving as a counselor in the First Presidency, in 1993 general conference, when he commended Pope John Paul II and the Baptists for their stands on moral issues.²

We can learn to better emulate President Hinckley’s gracious approach by taking the view that God uses many people and many agents to bring about His purposes, this in addition to the doctrine that all are His children and of great worth in His sight. In this essay, I will suggest that Catholicism was an agent for preserving and disseminating light after the time of the great apostasy—that Catholicism invited people to learn of Christ and follow Him, that it lifted people to higher levels of spiritual understanding and moral behavior than they otherwise knew, and that for the good it does and has done Catholicism deserves greater thanks than it customarily receives in some quarters. I do not imply judgment—positive or negative—about any historical figure’s ultimate reward; rather, I am interested in general conditions in ancient Europe and situations outside Catholicism but proximate to it. I will summarize

some cultural conditions surrounding early Christianity to show the good effects of Catholicism on Europe after the death of the Apostles as well as the history of anti-Catholicism in America to show that anti-Catholic biases are sometimes inherited and unmerited. By reviewing these two widely separated epochs I hope to show an alternate view—one of “affirmative gratitude”—to the often promoted negative stereotypes of Catholicism.

A PREPARATORY CHURCH FOR EUROPE

As Stephen Robinson points out, the Catholic Church is the *result*, not the *cause*³ of the apostasy. The true Church of Jesus Christ died when those who held the keys, the Apostles, died in the late first century. No keys meant that the Church could not be continued. The members who remained after the keys were lost had received true ordinances, but without priesthood keys to give permission to use priesthood authority, authorized ordinances could not be performed from that time forward. God allowed these losses. We can assume He could have done differently if He had wanted. He could have continued the ordination of Apostles, but He did not. He allowed Catholicism to be, more or less, the only form of Christianity available.⁴

For fourteen hundred years Christianity meant Catholicism; then, three centuries into the Protestant Reformation, prophetic revelation was resumed and priesthood keys restored. We could assume that God waited idly for 1700 years until humanity prepared itself for a full restoration. But it may be more reasonable to assume, given God’s love for His children, that the Catholic Church was a purveyor of truth appropriate to historical conditions. Rather than blame Catholicism for *causing* the apostasy following the Apostles’ deaths, we could think of it as a means of spreading Christian teachings following the apostasy and promoting standards of Christianity among peoples not culturally ready for a fullness of the gospel. While we acknowledge that the reestablishment of priesthood fullness by Joseph Smith could not have happened without the Protestant Reformation, maybe we should also acknowledge that the establishment of Christianity as the dominant religion of the western world, accomplished through the conversion of pagan Europe to Catholicism, was likewise crucial to the Restoration.

The world in which Christ established his church was culturally and theologically foreign to Christianity and generally hostile to it. Such conditions had historically often led to a loss of a fullness of truth. Even Moses, who had forty years to work with Israel, did not succeed in institutionalizing the higher priesthood, and by the dawn of the Christian era the Hebrews had undergone more than a millennium of cyclical apostasies and religious fragmentation since their Sinai Lawgiver. Indeed,

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the Biblical history back to Abraham, thence to the deluge, thence to the expulsion from Eden, tends to contain only sparse and exceptional groups of disciples in a generally fallen world. As we consider the Christian history of Europe, it is well to remember that those who followed Christ in Old Testament times and received priesthood covenants were cultural minorities, even isolated bands—the City of Enoch being a startling exception. It is also well to remember that God works with His children incrementally—as evidenced by the Law of Moses—within their own cultural and historical context, always preparing them to receive more.

A review of three monumental challenges that early Christianity faced can help us understand the cultural context of the early church, how difficult it was for a Christianity without Apostles to maintain doctrinal purity, and provide possible insights into why Christianity developed as it did. These three great challenges—the theological gap between polytheism and Christianity; Roman persecution; and integration into Roman culture (along with doctrinal transformations and the end of the apostleship)—resulted in the form Christianity took, as the demise of the western Roman Empire brought Christianity into contact with pagan Europe.

The first challenge—the wide theological gap between the gospel of Christ and the polytheism of the Roman Empire with its pantheon of deities—made Christians peculiar. The foundation of Roman religious belief was the *numina*, or divine powers. According to the Romans almost everything—deities, humans, things, places, and functions—had *numen*, or supernatural power, which could be enhanced by sacrifices and propitiated by performance of magical acts, festivals, and ceremonial rituals.⁵ The earliest forms of worship among the Romans were individual acts, which as time went on were adopted and institutionalized by the state.⁶ Romans built temples to their gods throughout their city and empire. From the time of the Republic onward, there were colleges of priests divided according to their duties—*sacerdos* to officiate at sacrificial rites, *flamen* to light the altar fires, the *augur* to interpret omens—appointed by the chief religious official of the government, the Pontifex Maximus.⁷ The Pontifex Maximus also compiled the list from which the Vestal Virgins were chosen.⁸ These women remained celibate on pain of death for thirty years, serving the goddess Vesta by keeping the fire burning in Rome’s sacred hearth.⁹ The duties of these colleges of priests and priestesses were to be done with perfect exactness.

As time went on, Romans adopted religious cults and ideas from their own conquered lands. Some of the foreign adoptions were ecstatic, even extreme, compared with the conservative old practices. For example, according to S. A. Nigosian, on the second day of the spring festival of the Phrygian cult of Cybele, imported after 205 BC:

A procession of mourners followed the statue of the goddess Cybele through the streets. They screamed, whirled, leaped, and slashed themselves with knives and swords. On the third day...the novitiates sacrificed their virility by emasculation, so they could share Attis's resurrection. The severed organs were offered on the altar of the goddess Cybele. The effigy was then removed and laid in a tomb, while the castrated initiates watched and fasted until the next morning. Early at dawn on the fourth day, the tomb was opened and the crowds of worshipers shouted in joy, because the god Attis was resurrected and the tomb was empty. The festival ended with a huge and joyous procession carrying the black meteorite stone (representing Cybele) to the river, where it was ceremonially bathed, after which it was returned to its sacred place in the temple.¹⁰

Another example of an adopted cult comes from the highly mystical Mithraism, imported from Persia. The members of this religion "passed through seven orders or degrees, including an initiation ritual, in which the outline of a cross was branded on their foreheads. Newly inducted members, like their counterparts in Cybelian *tauroboli*, stood under a grating on which a sacred bull was ceremonially slain, drenching them in the bull's blood."¹¹

The theological gap between Christ's gospel and the religions typical of the Roman Empire was double-edged. On the one hand, as we have just seen, monotheistic Christianity was too different from the polytheism that surrounded it to be easily accepted. On the other hand, familiar concepts (in a strange polytheistic way) like resurrecting gods such as Attis, baptisms by blood, priesthoods, and temples would have made Christianity, in the minds of many, just another of many cults a Roman could choose to follow or assimilate.

A second challenge was the Roman official persecutions, occurring off and on over three centuries. Occasionally, the Romans reacted negatively to foreign practices perceived as threatening to their institutions. Generally, however, Rome tolerated the religions of peoples they conquered as long as the conquered were willing to support the official religion of Rome and the cult of the emperor. For a polytheist it was not a problem to worship Roman gods alongside his local gods. Christians, of course, could not do both. Christian unwillingness to honor the state gods offended the Romans. In the minds of the Romans, keeping Rome great required keeping the Roman deities happy. Supporting Roman religious institutions was, therefore, more than just a question of personal conscience; it was a matter of loyalty and patriotism. There was no separation of church and state; the very idea would have seemed strange. There was not a separate priestly class. Those who held the priesthood were also civic leaders. After Augustus, the emperors also assumed the role of Pontifex Maximus.¹²

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H. A. Drake explains that most Romans of the first three centuries viewed Christians as antisocial:

As a result of this basis in religion, virtually all the public activities and celebrations of the ancient state which Christians in a modern state would not hesitate to join were taboo to ancient Christians—holidays and festivals, obviously, but also such seemingly innocuous procedures as suing in court, where justice was administered in the name of the gods, or buying meat from the butcher, who was likely to have gotten it from a temple that had just performed a sacrifice. Doubtless it was this tendency to stand aloof from so many activities and public celebrations which earned Christians the reputation for “antisocial tendencies” with which Tacitus branded them.¹³

A third challenge to Christianity, almost opposite to that of persecution, particularly in maintaining doctrinal purity, was the temptation for Christians, who are supposed to be peculiar (1 Peter 2:9), to give in to culture creep or assimilation. Early Christian apologists discussed this issue often. Tertullian, for example, believed that Christians should have nothing to do with Greco-Roman culture.¹⁴ Justin Martyr believed that whatever was said well, by pagan or Christian, could be accepted as coming from God.¹⁵ As Christianity’s status changed from a strange, persecuted sect to an accepted religion in 313 AD, eventually becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD, the temptation to assimilate pagan beliefs increased dynamically. The apostasy being already complete with regard to apostolic keys and far advanced with regard to teaching, the Christian institution was defenseless against being adopted as an instrument of state and having its doctrine further contaminated. As Robert Markus recounts:

So far as the artistic, literary, and intellectual culture of the Roman world is concerned, that was rapidly, and on the whole smoothly, absorbed by late Roman Christianity. The Christian church had never set up its own system of education to rival or to parallel the available secular educational provision. If Christians wished to be educated, as some always had, and as more and more inevitably did after Constantine, they shared the education received by their non-Christian fellows. By the middle of the fourth century, Christianity had gone a long way towards assimilating the dominant culture of pagan Romans.¹⁶

With no Apostles after the beginning of the second century, it is a wonder that Christianity survived in any form at all, even in the hybrid form that Markus describes.

This Christian-Roman synthesis obviously diluted and transformed the gospel taught in the New Testament. However, importantly, nascent Catholicism also happily raised Roman moral standards and went on to

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enlighten Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic tribes of medieval Europe. Robert Markus describes this process in these terms:

Within the orbit of the late Roman world, Christianity was primarily receptive; it inherited a set of institutions ready-made, conformed to a social and political structure which developed over a long period, and learned to live with a culture which it had little part in creating. Among the Western barbarian nations, however, Christianity could play a more creative role. Though it still needed to learn to live with the ways of the new peoples, it had its own mature traditions, and cultural and institutional development, encapsulating much of the Roman civilization and fitting it to play a decisive role in shaping the new Germanic societies. If the characteristic stance of Christianity in the Roman world was that of learning, its characteristic stance in the Germanic West was that of teaching.¹⁷

The Germanic tribes¹⁸ of northern Europe converted to Catholicism over a period of centuries. These tribes were never united, and pagan practices had varied from one to the other. But the Germans were generally polytheistic and shamanistic, practicing divination by various means including, for example, the flight of birds, the movement of horses, or “reading” strips of wood cut from nut-bearing trees marked with signs.¹⁹ They made sacrifices to their deities. Sacred places were marked with hill-figures, piled stones, maypoles, and labyrinths and included waterfalls, caves, sacred hills,²⁰ groves, and springs.²¹ Gwyn Jones gives these summary comments about Germanic religion:

It accounted for the creation of the world and charted the doom to come. It provided mysteries as transcendent as Odinn hanged nine nights on the windswept tree as a sacrifice of himself, and objects of veneration as crude as the embalmed penis of a horse. Like other religions it rejoiced the devout with hidden truth, and contented mere conformers with its sacral and convivial occasions. There was a god for those who lived by wisdom and statecraft, war and plunder, trade and seafaring, or the land’s increase. Poet, rune-maker, blacksmith, leech, rye-grower, cattle-breeder, king, brewer, each had a god with whom he felt secure; warlocks, men on skis, barren women, brides, all had a deity to turn to.²²

As did the Romans, the Germanic tribes had their own extreme, superstitious practices. One example concerns the tribes living in the region of the Elbe River who worshipped Nerthus, or Mother Earth. At sacred times, a consecrated chariot, believed to contain the presence of this goddess, was paraded through the land. All warfare stopped during this time. At the end of the journey, the wagon and its contents were washed in a lake by slaves, who were then drowned because no one was allowed to see the goddess.²³

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The process of converting these Germanic peoples, as well as Slavs and Celts, began as early as the fourth century, with Christians moving outside the boundaries of the Roman empire and asking the Church for bishops to be sent to them.²⁴ The conversion of Europe continued and accelerated because of missionary-minded monks and the establishment of monasteries. Sometimes conversion to Catholicism was coerced; medieval kings in particular used force, threats, and violence. For them, the matter was political as well as spiritual. The best-known case is Charlemagne's slaughter, in 782 AD, of 4,500 Saxon prisoners who refused to convert.²⁵ Sometimes ecclesiastical leaders condoned the use of force. But often, as in the case of Alcuin's criticism of Charlemagne's treatment of the Saxons,²⁶ ecclesiastical leaders condemned it, encouraging and promoting higher ethical standards.

Proselytizing abuses and doctrinal impurities conceded, through the Early and Late Middle Ages the Catholic Church replaced polytheistic paganism with belief in Christ and Christian moral teachings, a movement that filled the European continent and produced a critical mass of believers in Christianity. This diverse and tumultuous culture became the eventual and distant backdrop of the nineteenth century setting for the Restoration, distant because it preceded the Renaissance, and the Protestant Reformation. We should remember that the precedent, possibly even the necessary, condition of all of these things was the common and Christ-centered religion of the times, which happened to be in the form of Catholicism. Catholic Christianity provided a source of light and moral order to the very un-Christian, post-New Testament Europe.²⁷

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THINKING ABOUT CATHOLICISM IN TIMES OF FULLNESS

The American colonies were settled by Protestants who were mostly wary, to state it mildly, of the Roman Church. Before there was a United States of America or a church for Latter-day Saints, there was a strong American tradition of animosity toward Catholics. I mention this tradition to suggest that it need not be perpetuated in our time.

In 1776 there were about 25,000 Catholics in the United States, fewer than one percent of the population of the time.²⁸ In the American Colonial period, Catholics often faced prejudice. In some instances this prejudice even broke out in violence, as in 1654 in Maryland when the repeal of the toleration act of 1649 by a Puritan-controlled colonial assembly led to several deaths from attacks on Catholics.²⁹ The status of Catholics in America has slowly improved since then, but not without occasional setbacks. In the 1850s, for instance, there was a political party, the Know-Nothings (later the American Party), that was officially anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic. They won the governorships of New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island in 1855, and their candidate for the Presidency in 1856

was former U.S. President Millard Fillmore.³⁰ In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan influenced millions of Americans to believe that the Catholic Church was un-American.³¹ WWI and WWII helped change some of this prejudice as millions of Catholic men fought alongside Protestants against common enemies. For many Catholics, the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960—America’s first and only Catholic President—signaled an easing of the long-standing suspicion of Catholicism in America. Today Catholicism is accepted, for the most part, as a mainstream American religion. Currently, about 58 million Americans³² (about 20 percent of the population) are Catholic. Worldwide there are a billion Catholics, and the number is growing.³³

Many Americans have inherited some level of anti-Catholic bias. Mark Twain admitted, “I have been educated to enmity toward everything that is Catholic, and sometimes, in consequence of this, I find it much easier to discover Catholic faults than Catholic merits.”³⁴ As a youth I too learned prejudice against Catholicism. But surveying the history of the Christian era, I find it unreasonable and needless to continue a negative disposition toward it.

Rather, I have come to think of Catholicism as analogous, in some respects, to the Mosaic order. Inasmuch as Catholicism encouraged faith in Christ and taught hope for salvation, it brought its adherents out of gross darkness and prepared them for greater light. As under the law of Moses, some believers individually chose wickedness and self-gratification. Also as under the law of Moses, some believers yearned toward the light and devoted themselves to Christian faith and works.

That God should work with His children incrementally—giving to them truth line upon line, precept upon precept—should not surprise us. The scriptures and the prophets teach that a merciful Heavenly Father gives His mortal children different levels of truth, according to their capacities, working always to prepare them for more. Alma said, “For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8). In 1980 President James E. Faust quoted the First Presidency echoing the same thought:

We claim that God’s inspiration is not limited to the members of this church. The First Presidency has stated: “The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals...We believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation.”³⁵

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A comparison of the Law of Moses and Catholicism provides at least five ways how lesser portions of truth can prepare God’s children. First, as in Catholicism, exaltation is not possible solely through the Law of Moses, no matter how well it is lived. Though the Torah was given by the Lord, salvation could not come by it alone. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the Law of Moses was only a preparatory schoolmaster (Romans 3:1-33, Galatians 3:1-29, Hebrews 9:1-28). Nephi taught this point with even greater clarity: “Notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the Law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled. For, for this end was the law given; wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith” (2 Nephi 25:24-25). All men and women, no matter how moral and generous, must accept the fullness of the gospel, either in mortality or in the Spirit World, to attain exaltation. This general rule applies to both the Mosaic order and Catholicism.

Second, in both orders there was little access to priesthood. Few Israelites, mostly the prophets, held the Melchizedek priesthood. The priests of the lesser priesthood came only from Aaron’s family. The Levites, or priests’ helpers, came from only one of the twelve tribes. No one else among the vast majority of Israelites had any priesthood. In Catholicism, the priesthood gave direction and organization and often performed sincere service for God. However, it had no divine authority to offer any of the ordinances of salvation. I agree that ancient Israel had more access to priesthood than modern Catholicism, but that is not my point of comparison. Rather, I am pointing out that neither system operated in priesthood fullness, where general members could hold and receive the Melchizedek priesthood and the ordinances of exaltation.

Third, both orders contain a concept of salvation that, though incomplete, motivates toward doing good. The Old Testament indicates that doctrines of the plan of salvation were not widespread among the people of ancient Israel. However, the basic plan of heavenly reward and punishment that was taught motivated many to learn the doctrines of justice and mercy. Similarly, the Catholic plan of salvation is missing certain components and has picked up some unfortunate additions, but it has also retained enough of the plan to encourage millions of people over many centuries to live better lives and to motivate many to sacrifice for good and great causes.

Fourth, both use ritual to remind the people to remember God. There were many ordinances, sacrifices, and sabbaths to remind Israel of its duty to God, but these were mostly symbolic, often vicarious, and—most telling—they could not exalt anyone. Catholicism does similarly. Its practices and sacraments cannot exalt, but there are nevertheless daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly reminders that the faithful must exercise

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self control, love God, and esteem their neighbors as themselves. In fact, many remnants of true ordinances exist in Catholic sacraments. For a thoughtful Latter-day Saint, these can provide valuable insights into our own religious experience.³⁶

Fifth, while the law of Moses could not exalt, it did establish a strong moral code that lifted the people and taught Israel on an ethical level, preparatory to receiving a fullness of the gospel. Likewise, for hundreds of years, Catholicism was the standard and disseminator of moral standards in Europe and other parts of the world. Sometimes in both the Law of Moses and the Catholic system, the ethical code was culturally influenced. Often both codes were violated. But the standard was still preached and the core of both codes was still love of God and humanity.

I consider that the light and truth transmitted to the world by Catholicism has inspired many spectacular achievements. I acknowledge and am grateful that Catholicism and its sister faith, Eastern Orthodoxy, have kept alive for 2,000 years the idea of Jesus as the Savior of the world. There are living today approximately two billion people who owe their belief in Jesus directly or indirectly to the preservation of this idea by the Roman and Eastern Churches. This momentous contribution elicits my gratitude. The New Testament is another significant contribution.³⁷ It would likely not exist without the Catholic Church.³⁸ There are other noteworthy accomplishments. Music as we know it in the West began its development in the Catholic mass.³⁹ Art in the West was kept alive and developed—until the most recent centuries—mostly through the Church. Universities were essentially a Catholic invention.⁴⁰ Rodney Stark argues persuasively that Catholicism engendered a mindset that made modern science possible.⁴¹

There have been dynamic popes like Gregory I (590-604), who provided a measure of order in chaotic times. There were pre-Reformation reformer popes like Silvester II (999-1003). There were missionary monks like Patrick (389?-461?), Boniface (675-754), and Anskar (801-865), monks that created alphabets, such as Ulfilas (311-382 or 383), Cyril (827-869), and Methodius (826-884), and reforming monks like Odo of Cluny (879-942). All tried to do good in difficult times and places. Many other Catholics lived and did good and died anonymously—monks created beautiful manuscripts out of scripture, copied books, and kept learning alive during times of illiteracy. Priests worked with people and preached the gospel as they knew it, nuns cared for the poor and afflicted, and laity sought to know God in the best way they could. Catholicism motivated them to do good works during difficult times and in difficult circumstances.

These individuals and the religion that inspired them should be commended for serving God according to the light that they received

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and for furthering God’s purposes. Elder Orson F. Whitney taught this principle beautifully in the following terms:

All down the ages men bearing the authority of the Holy Priesthood—Patriarchs, prophets, apostles and others, have officiated in the name of the Lord, doing the things that he required of them; and outside the pale of their activities other good and great men, not bearing the Priesthood, but possessing profundity of thought, great wisdom, and a desire to uplift their fellows, have been sent by the Almighty into many nations, to give them, not the fullness of the Gospel, but that portion of truth that they were able to receive and wisely use.... They were servants of the Lord in a lesser sense, and were sent to those pagan or heathen nations to give them the measure of truth that a wise Providence had allotted to them.⁴²

Much more could be said about Catholic contributions to Western culture, how the Church directly or indirectly produced the world in which we are comfortable and enjoy the light of the Restoration. But these few examples suffice to illustrate why I have grown to whole-heartedly agree with B. H. Robert’s statement that the Catholic Church has had much influence for good, that it is not what it has been called in the worst cases. He said:

So far as the Catholic church is concerned, I believe that there is just as much truth, nay, personally I believe it has retained even more truth than other divisions of so-called Christendom; and there is just as much virtue, and I am sure there is more strength in the Roman Catholic church than there is in Protestant Christendom. I would not like, therefore, to designate the Catholic church as the church of the devil. Neither would I like to designate any one or all of the various divisions and subdivisions of Protestant Christendom combined as such church.⁴³

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It seems to me appropriate to apply the principle of Christian charity to Catholicism. To the extent that Catholicism’s chronicle contains examples of error, it is like the history of mankind in groups and as individuals. But Catholic history also contains popes who preached high standards of morality and sought reform, selfless monks and priests who promoted discipleship of Christ, nuns who spent their lives in selfless service, and lay members who contributed to the good of humanity in a variety of ways. Rodney Stark puts the dichotomy of good and evil in Catholic history in terms of “the church of power and the church of piety.”⁴⁴ I perceive, as he does, that often the church of power, the part committing wrongs in the name of God, dominated the church of piety. However, the fact that the church of piety, the part leading individuals to do good and live virtuous lives, continued among reformist popes, monks, and lay members means that Catholicism served God’s purpose, providing in

its teachings and ideals an ethical standard for Europe for at least 1,400 years. From an LDS perspective, I believe these standards helped prepare God’s children to accept a greater measure of truth, for which we should respond with gratitude rather than stereotypical condemnation.⁴⁵ ∞

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Out of Your Experience Here,” *BYU Today* (March 1991): 37.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Bring Up a Child in the Way He Should Go,” *Ensign* (November 1993): 59.
3. Stephen E. Robinson, “Nephi’s ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, No. 1 (1998): 38.
4. I ignore here the modern distinction between Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The official split was not until 1054, so for much of this fourteen hundred-year period the two modern churches were technically the same church.
5. S. A. Nigosian, *World Religions* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000), 203-204.
6. Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1999), 40.
7. *Ibid.*, 205.
8. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 158.
9. Philip Matyzak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 209.
11. *Ibid.*, 210-212.
12. H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 91-92.
13. *Ibid.*, 91-92.
14. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 246.
15. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 191.
16. Robert Markus, “From Rome to the Barbarian Kingdoms,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 66.
17. *Ibid.*, 62.
18. We could also talk about the conversion to Christianity of Celtic and Slavic tribes in this context. However, the conversion of the Germanic tribes will suffice for our purpose and provide the appropriate paradigm. The Celts and Slavs were also polytheistic peoples similar in belief and worldview to the Germans who converted to the Catholic form of Christianity. The argument that the Romans and Germans were not ready for the full gospel of Jesus Christ also applies to Celts and Slavs.
19. Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 115.
20. *Ibid.*, 119.
21. Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 327.
22. *Ibid.*, 316.

23. Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 117-118.
24. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 66.
25. Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 127.
26. Henry Mayr-Harting, "The Age of Conversion," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98.
27. According to Stark, Catholic bishops often protected Jews from injury in the face of mobs and over-zealous crusaders (Rodney Stark, *One True God*, 140-141, 154). Strong Catholic ecclesiastical control in a particular area during the witch-hunt era generally meant fewer people were executed, in contrast to areas that didn't have strong church or government control. Catholic officials often sought to protect the native Americans from European colonials. And the Catholic Church spoke out against African slavery as early as 1435 (Stark, 251-255; 329-338).
28. Richard P. McBrien, ed., *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 1285.
29. Timothy Walch, *Catholicism in America* (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1989), 20.
30. "Know-nothingism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*; www.newadvent.org/cathen/08677a.htm. (accessed 12 January 2003).
31. *Ibid.*, 67.
32. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.
33. *Ibid.*, 58, 61.
34. Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1911), 349.
35. James E. Faust, "Communion with the Holy Spirit," *Ensign* (May 1980): 12.
36. For an excellent introduction on similarities between Catholic and Mormon ordinances see, Marcus Von Wellnitz, "The Catholic Liturgy and the Mormon Temple," *BYU Studies* 21, no.1 (Winter 1981): 3-35.
37. The 27 books of today's New Testament were listed together for the first time in 367 AD in a letter by Bishop Athanasius. For a brief account of the process by which those books came to be selected as the New Testament, see Lenet Read, *How We Got the Bible* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1985), 37-42.
38. My good friend and colleague, Phil Allred, expresses this concept insightfully by paraphrasing 2 Nephi 29:4: "What thank we the Catholics for the New Testament?" I am indebted to him for this insight and for the many fine discussions shared on the issues presented in this paper.
39. Roger Kamien, *Music: An Appreciation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 56-64.
40. Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 62.
41. *Ibid.*, 121-199.
42. Orson F. Whitney, *Conference Report* (April 1921): 33.
43. B.H. Roberts, *Conference Report* (April 1906): 15. I believe that the abominable church is the same as the great and spacious building—a symbol for wickedness, a symbol for those who desire "gold and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and . . . harlots" (1 Nephi 13:7). The abominable church is anyone who

fighters against Zion—be they Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, and, I would add, Mormon or non-Mormon (2 Nephi 10:16). This definition does not allow Latter-day Saints to rest comfortably in spiritual complacency, firing cheap shots at an organization whose members have done both good and bad; this definition, rather, requires constant introspection of everyone’s own life, as well as, ongoing repentance.

Stephen E. Robinson has written an excellent article on the issue of the great and abominable church, “Nephi’s ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, No. 1, (1998): 34-39. I agree with most of what Robinson argues in this piece. He makes an excellent case that the great and abominable church in 1 Nephi 14 should be read figuratively as a metaphor for anyone who fights against Zion. However, I take exception to his insistence that the great and abominable church in 1 Nephi 13 must be seen historically as hellenized Christianity, which he says “had its origins in the second half of the first century and would have done much of its work by the middle of the second century.” Hellenized Christianity, particularly in the first and second centuries, does not meet Robinson’s own criteria that he, himself, sets forth as attributes of the great and abominable church: “It must have formed among the Gentiles; it must have edited and controlled the distribution of the scriptures; it must have slain the Saints of God, including the apostles and prophets; it must be in league with civil governments and use their police power to enforce its religious views; it must have dominion over all the earth; it must last until close to the end of the world.”

In my opinion, a figurative reading of the great and abominable church as wickedness among humans still makes better sense than a literal reading. It was wicked people, not an organization, that took from the scriptures plain and precious truths. This wicked “church” seems to be a perfect counterpoint to the righteous “church” in Doctrine and Covenants 10:52-55, 67 made up of anyone who “cometh unto Christ.” For more on this, see Robert Millet, “Outreach: Opening the Door or Giving Away the Store,” *The Religious Educator*, 4 no. 1 (2003): 55-73.

44. Rodney Stark, *One True God* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 159-160.

45. Robert Millet argues that the roots of the tree in the allegory of Zenos in Jacob 5:31-34 might be the “pieces and parts and principles of the original gospel of Jesus Christ that have survived the centuries through the teachings or practices of both Protestant and Catholic churches” (“Outreach: Opening the Door or Giving Away the Store,” *The Religious Educator* 4, no. 1 (2003): 64).