

Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest body of Christians with more than 1.2 billion members worldwide. The term ‘Catholic’ (from Greek καθολικισμός, meaning ‘throughout the whole’) applies broadly to the beliefs and practices of particular churches that claim continuity with the apostles. The term ‘Roman’ designates those Catholics who are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, widely known as the Pope.

The Pope (Latin *papa* for ‘father’) is the jurisdictional head of the Catholic Church in Rome, an authority that the Church claims has been handed down in unbroken succession from apostolic times. The Gospel of Matthew (16:19) asserts that Jesus entrusted St Peter with ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven,’ thereby designating him the chief apostle who would eventually become the first Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics accept the supremacy of the Pope on all matters of faith and doctrine.

However, the doctrine of papal supremacy has been vigorously contested over the course of its history, leading to conflicts, schisms, and harsh measures to contain dissent. Not surprisingly, any claim to universal authority is bound to draw the ire of conflicting interests, whether in the religious sphere or the political. Historically, the papacy has fostered a climate that allowed the Church to amass considerable power and form unsavoury alliances with monarchs, tyrants and oppressive institutions. In effect, the Roman Catholic Church has perpetuated the culture of imperial Rome, from which it acquired its institutional character.

In modern times, the power that the Church once wielded has been sharply reduced. Even still, its image as a powerful and influential institution persists, whether real or perceived. In fact, the ‘Holy See’ (*Sancta Sedes* in Latin) functions as a sovereign state, maintains diplomatic relations with other states and is recognised as a sovereign entity under international law. This has been problematic for governments that host Roman Catholics in their countries and view loyalty to the Holy See as incompatible with loyalty to the state.

Teachings

The principal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are shared by other Catholic traditions, which are summarised in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. These include a belief in one God, the Holy Trinity, and the centrality of Christ, the Son of God and Redeemer of the world.

The Church also shares with other Catholic traditions a liturgical and sacramental approach to its common worship, allowing for wide variances in its cultural expression. The central celebration of all Catholics is the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament in which believers are said to share in the very life of Christ, who is present in the bread and the wine that is shared.

Catholic social teaching places great emphasis on works of mercy and justice, which finds lively and diverse expression in many countries throughout the world. The Roman Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education and medical services in the world.

However, the most clearly definable difference between Roman Catholicism and all other Christian traditions is one of authority. The Church maintains that Christ gave authority to his apostles and their successors to defend ‘the deposit of faith,’ which circumscribes matters of doctrine and practice for the faithful.

Controversies

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the world and has played a prominent role in the history of Western civilisation. This alone has drawn suspicion of the Church being an agent of Western influence and, consequently, a target for suppression. Moreover, the Church acts as a sovereign state entity in the form of the Holy See, having a centralised government, keeping diplomatic relations with other states, and even having its own sovereign territory, officially known as the Vatican City State.

It is the Church’s position as a sovereign state in international affairs that has provoked friction with some other states in the modern era. Notably, the government in **China** established in 1957 the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* (CCPA), a group which seeks to place all Catholic Church structures under the sole authority of the Chinese state. The following year Pope Pius XII condemned the activities of the CCPA and declared that Roman Catholic bishops participating in the consecration of CCPA-appointed bishops would be excommunicated.

Religious associations in China must be registered with the government or else face the possibility of suppression. The Religious Affairs Bureau exercises supervision over the activities of the CCPA. All Catholic structures that remain loyal to Rome are under ‘foreign influence’ and, therefore, outlawed. The Chinese authorities only recognise those clerics who openly declare their independence from the Vatican and swear allegiance to the communist regime. As a result, all other Roman Catholic churches and clerics have been forced underground.

In **Pakistan**, Roman Catholics are also victims, alongside other Christians and Muslims, of the social abuse of the blasphemy laws.

Roman Catholics in Prison

China

In **China**, most Catholic clerics, priests and bishops who were arrested have been missing for many years. There were no official charges and no trial. Their whereabouts are unknown. They had prioritized their loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and the Pope and/or refused to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* controlled by the Communist Party.

Fr. CUI Tai, an underground priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei), disappeared while in police custody on 22nd June 2011 after members of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau dragged him away from home. Since that time there has been no information on his whereabouts.

Fr. GAO Jiangping was arrested on 31st January 2012. He is the diocesan administrator of the Diocese of Suiyuan (Inner Mongolia), a structure of the Catholic Church that refuses to join the state-sanctioned *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. He has been missing since his arrest. The charges are unknown.

Msgr. James Su ZHIMIN (85), an underground bishop of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in Baoding (Hebei Province) in 1997. The charges remain unknown, but he was considered a 'counter-revolutionary.' Since the 1950s he has refused to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. In all he has already spent 40 years in captivity. He was last seen by his relatives in 2003 in a hospital surrounded by police.

Fr. LIU Honggen, an underground priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei), was arrested in December 2006 for refusing to join the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*. He was released in August 2015 after spending eight years in prison without trial. He was reportedly arrested again later on and has not been seen since.

Thaddeus MA Daqin (Bishop of Shanghai), former vice-chair of the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*, has been under house arrest at the Sheshan Regional Seminary in a Shanghai suburb since 7th July 2012 after resigning from the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*.

TIAN Dalong was arrested in October 2013 for organizing catechism classes for adults in Qinyuan county, Baoding municipality, Hebei province. He has been missing since his arrest.

Shao ZHUMIN Peter (54) from Wenzhou (Zhejiang) disappeared on 18th May 2017 after being invited to the office for religious affairs in the city. His whereabouts remain unknown.

Pakistan

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

Conclusions

Over the centuries Roman Catholics have had a long history of suffering and repression for multiple reasons. In our times it is especially in China that they are officially restricted in their activities for their purely religious activities. According to Chinese officials, these restrictions are necessary to contain the potential threat which Catholics remaining loyal to Rome pose to the ideology and authority of the state. It is extremely doubtful that the Roman Catholic Church or the Vatican City State could mount a significant challenge to China; however, Chinese policy is sometimes more strongly shaped by political paranoia than it is by good sense. More than half century on from the hardening of government restrictions on religion, a review of China's position toward such groups is long overdue.