

'Roman' Catholic or just 'Catholic'?

Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Some Christians make a point of referring to all Catholics who are in union with the Bishop of Rome as "Roman" Catholics. They object when we drop the adjective "Roman" and call ourselves simply "Catholics," because they, too, claim the title "Catholic."

They insist that the basic difference between their catholicity and ours is the bond of unity we have with the Bishop of Rome. Thus, their insistence on the adjective "Roman."

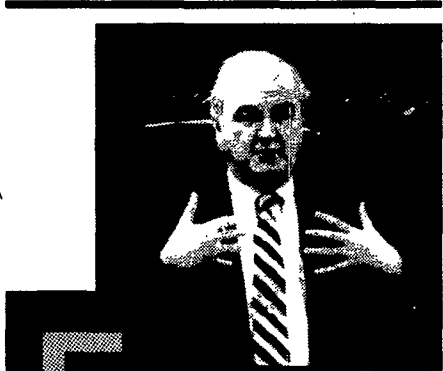
Occasionally, these fellow Christians will use an even shorter descriptive form. We become for them simply "Romans," and our church, the "Roman Church."

On the other hand, highly conservative Catholics, especially in England, glory in the adjective "Roman" — and even in the term "papist" — and strongly resist any attempt to suppress it.

For them the word "Roman" is a badge of honor, a reminder of those brave defenders of the faith, such as St. Thomas More, who suffered martyrdom rather than renounce their allegiance to Rome.

History and theology, however, are weighted in favor of those who prefer the unadorned title "Catholic" to "Roman" Catholic when speaking of the worldwide Catholic Church.

The church's history begins with



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Jesus' gathering of his disciples and with his post-Resurrection commissioning of Peter to be the church's chief shepherd and foundation. But these occurred in Jerusalem and in Caesarea Philippi, not in Rome.

Consequently, it is not the Roman primacy that gives Catholicism its distinctive ecclesiastical identity, but the Petrine primacy.

Moreover, before the 16th century the universal church was simply the Catholic Church. The term "Catholic" had its origin in St. Ignatius of Antioch (early 2nd century) and was found also in the writings of the church's fathers and in the creeds.

When the authority of the pope — that is, the Bishop of Rome — became a source of contention between

West and East in the 11th century, and especially between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th, the adjective "Roman" began to serve as a basis of distinction between Christians who remained in union with Rome and those who did not.

But we are now centuries beyond those disruptive events. It is no longer appropriate in this ecumenical age to define our differences solely in terms of union with — or separation from — Rome.

Theologically, the adjective "Roman" and the term "Roman Church" apply more properly to the diocese of Rome than to the worldwide church, which is in union with the Bishop of Rome.

Indeed, it seems contradictory to call the church "Catholic" and "Roman" at one and the same time. The one word denotes universality; the other, particularity.

But the use of "Roman" to describe the worldwide Catholic Church becomes even more problematical when one takes into account the millions of Eastern-rite Catholics, sometimes pejoratively called "Uniates" because of their union with the Bishop of Rome.

These Eastern-rite Catholics prefer to speak of themselves simply as "Catholic" and then to distinguish particular ecclesial traditions, including their own, within the worldwide Catholic communion.

That worldwide communion of churches encompasses eight distinct Catholic traditions: Armenian,

Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian, East Syrian (Chaldean), Maronite, Roman, and West Syrian. (The use of the term "Roman Catholic" could be justified if applied exclusively to Catholics of the Roman, or Latin, rite, by contrast with Catholics of the seven other traditions.)

Some of these traditions, in turn, have more than one local expression. The Chaldean and Syro-Malabar churches, for example, are both expressions of the East Syrian tradition, and the Ukrainian and Melkite churches are expressions of the Byzantine tradition.

None of these Eastern-rite churches would call itself "Roman" Catholic, because "Roman" is only one — albeit the largest — of the eight distinct traditions within the Catholic communion of churches. The other seven are non-Roman, but equally Catholic.

If some of our fellow Christians also wish to embrace the title "Catholic," those of us who are in union with the Bishop of Rome and the Vicar of Peter should gladly and wholeheartedly acquiesce, in a spirit of ecumenical harmony.

Indeed, the very word "Catholic" suggests there is room for everybody.

But if these fellow Christians should also insist that the worldwide Catholic Church never describe itself without the adjective "Roman," ecumenical honesty requires us to refuse to do so and to explain why.

Parents can learn a lot from children

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

My mother-in-law, Stephanie, died recently in a nursing home after a painful illness, and my 4-year-old son Nathaniel helped me better understand what a child needs from a father.

Stephanie had lived with our family for more than five years, which encompassed all of Nate's lifetime. She and my son had developed an especially close relationship.

Nate has always had a tough time falling asleep, and there were hundreds of times when the only way he could do so was on his grandmother's lap. They would sit and sleep for hours together on her rocking chair, developing a very special bond between them.

When Stephanie finally went into the nursing home a few months ago, Nate asked most often to visit her and wanted to know when she



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was coming home. And when she died unexpectedly one night, it was Nate — not his twin sister or younger brother — who reacted most strongly.

The day Stephanie died, I sat on the back stoop with Nate and asked

him how he felt about his grandmother dying.

"Does this mean we won't be able to have apple time anymore?" he asked plaintively. (Stephanie had given the kids apples at the same time every afternoon when she lived with us.)

"No, Nate," I said gently. "We can still have apples everyday and remember Grandma when we do."

He seemed comforted by that, so I asked him again how he felt.

"I don't want Grandma to die anymore," he said simply, fighting back his tears.

"It's OK to cry when someone dies, Nate," I told him. And with my permission, Nate put his head in my chest and let loose.

My son's example allowed me to express my own grief for the first time, too. So father and son walked around the back yard, mourning the loss of their loved one.

When we went to the funeral home for the first time, I tried to

make the kids wait until the rest of Stephanie's family arrived. Nate, however, insisted on peeking into the room to see his late grandmother. When we finally went up to the casket, Nate couldn't stop looking at and touching her body. Time and again he returned to try to make sense of his young emotions.

"Why did Grandma have to die?" he asked over and over. After trying several unacceptable explanations, I told Nate that maybe God wanted Stephanie to come to heaven and be with him.

"So he killed her?" he asked incredulously. All I could do was smile at my boy's wisdom and logic.

That was the end of my effort to explain death to my son. Instead I allowed him to mourn his loss without trying to understand it. I finally realized that Nate did not need his father to ease his pain. He just needed me to be there with and for him in his sorrow.

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