

HARMFUL CARICATURES OF CATHOLICS
IN *THE GREAT CONTROVERSY*

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Adventists attempt to rehabilitate the anti-Catholicism of Ellen White by noting she was careful to distinguish between Catholics as individuals and the Catholicism as a religious system. Some of her statements are, indeed, positive towards Catholics as individuals:

It is true that there are real Christians in the Roman Catholic communion. Thousands in that church are serving God according to the best light they have. They are not allowed access to His word, and therefore they do not discern the truth. They have never seen the contrast between a living heart service and a round of mere forms and ceremonies. God looks with pitying tenderness upon these souls, educated as they are in a faith that is delusive and unsatisfying. He will cause rays of light to penetrate the dense darkness that surrounds them. He will reveal to them the truth as it is in Jesus, and many will yet take their position with His people.¹

However, her assertion that “thousands” of “real Christians” exist in the Catholic communion is hardly generous: the Church numbered nearly 300 million in 1911. Numbers notwithstanding, the passage clearly implies they are exceptions among the masse of Catholics, who, by comparison, are not “serving God.”

White facilitates this limited positive rhetoric by a careful shift in blame. She reserves her harshest criticisms for clerics, rather than laymen:

Conscientious souls are kept in constant terror fearing the wrath of an offended God, while many of the dignitaries of the church are living in luxury and sensual pleasure.²

1. White, Ellen G., *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Nampa ID: Pacific Press, 1950), 565.

2. White, 568.

White's consistent condemnation of the plans and operations of "Rome" and "the Roman Church" clearly concern the leaders of the Catholic Church. In other passages, White appraises "the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church" as worse than "the bigoted Jews" of Christ's day.³ She perpetuates stereotypes of priests, describing them as "too often corrupted with wine and licentiousness."⁴

Her rhetoric worsens when she indiscriminately vilifies the Jesuits as "cruel" and "unscrupulous," entirely abandoned to "deception" and "crime."⁵ In this instance, she slanders the character of an entire class of individuals within the Catholic system at length, without suggesting exceptions.

Nevertheless, White occasionally criticizes Catholic laymen in her censures of the activities of "papists" and "romanists." Who comprises these parties but individual Catholics? For instance, she freely ascribes negative character traits to Catholics:

The church's claim to the right to pardon leads the Romanist to feel at liberty to sin. . . to him who loves self-indulgence it is more pleasing to confess to a fellow mortal than to open the soul to God. . . . Heavy is the yoke which the carnal heart is willing to bear. . . .⁶

[Romanists] exalt the symbol of Christ's sufferings, while in their lives they deny Him whom it represents.⁷

Undoubtedly, Catholics consider these caricatures offensive; they accuse the typical Catholic of insincerity, self-indulgence, and sin.⁸

3. White, 568.

4. White, 567.

5. White, 234.

6. White, 567-8.

7. White, 568.

8. White also adopts the nativist rhetoric of the 19th Century, suggesting Catholics are unreliable citizens: "Whatever their nationality or their government, they are to regard the authority of the church as above all other. Though they may take the oath pledging their loyalty to the state, yet back of this lies the vow of obedience to Rome, absolving them from every pledge inimical to her interests" (White, 580). Still, this statement, however facilitatory to the paranoia related in *The Great Controversy*, approximates an actual commitment Catholics share.

Despite assertions to the contrary, then, White not only criticizes the religious system of Catholicism, but also the members of that system. She stereotypes Catholic leaders and believers throughout *The Great Controversy*, depicting them in a negative light. The book thereby embodies many of the worst elements of nineteenth-century anti-Catholic rhetoric, and remains a source of the harmful anti-Catholic prejudices prevalent among Seventh-day Adventists to this day. Catholics, insulted by the book's contents, would hope their brothers and sisters in the Adventist Church reconsider their commitments to its views.

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