

The Essential Key to Catholic Theology: BOTH/AND

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The proper Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question is always “both/and” rather than “either/or.”

At first glance, this statement might seem ridiculous or contradictory. Isn't God absolute? Isn't there just one truth, as opposed to error? Indeed, this proposal does *not* imply that a statement and its *direct negation* are both true (“A is B” and “A is not B”). It would be wrong, for example, to claim both “God is Love” and “God is not Love,” or to say both “Jesus is divine” and “Jesus is not divine.”

However, just as every coin has *both heads and tails* sides, just as every battery has *both positive and negative* terminals, and just as the earth has *both a North Pole and a South Pole*, so also the Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question always has (at least) two “sides” or “poles.” These opposite poles may often *seem* far apart and difficult to hold together. It is rarely easy to understand and balance both sides of an issue, just as we can't easily see both sides of a coin at the same time (without a mirror, at least!). Yet the “opposite” sides are seldom real “contradictions,” even if there may be some strong differences and tensions between them.

For example, Christians believe that Jesus is *both God and human*. To a non-Christian, this might seem ridiculous. Even for a Christian, it is hard to understand or explain. How can anyone be *both divine and mortal*? Or how can God be *both transcendent and immanent*? Or how can the Bible be *both the Word of God and human literature*? Can *both creation and evolution* be true somehow? Can *both science and religion* be reconciled? The Catholic answer to all these questions is YES, *both* the one side *and* its opposite not only can, but *must* be held together in tension, even if they seem to be contradictory, in order to understand the whole truth, the whole of the complex reality.

Rather than overemphasizing one pole and neglecting the other, the challenge in Christian theology is always to hold the two poles together, to maintain a proper balance between both seemingly opposite sides of the truth. Another way of phrasing the Catholic position would be to say, “*Not Only..., But Also...*” Here is a list of only some theological issues and the Catholic-Christian answers, which include both poles:

God is	<i>both</i>	Transcendent (beyond)	<i>and</i>	Immanent (within)
God is	<i>both</i>	One Divine Nature	<i>and</i>	Three Divine Persons (Trinity)
God is	<i>both</i>	Almighty Creator	<i>and</i>	Loving Father
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Fully Human	<i>and</i>	Fully Divine
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Son of Mary	<i>and</i>	Son of God
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Messiah of the Jews	<i>and</i>	Savior of All Nations
Mary is	<i>both</i>	Mother of God	<i>and</i>	Mother of (the human) Jesus
Christian life is based on	<i>both</i>	Scripture	<i>and</i>	Tradition
The Bible is	<i>both</i>	Word of God	<i>and</i>	Authored by Humans
The Bible contains	<i>both</i>	Old Testament	<i>and</i>	New Testament
The Bible must be	<i>both</i>	Read Literally	<i>and</i>	Interpreted Spiritually
The Bible should be	<i>both</i>	Meditated Prayerfully	<i>and</i>	Studied Academically
The Church is	<i>both</i>	a Divine Mystery	<i>and</i>	a Human Institution
The Eucharist is	<i>both</i>	the Sacrifice of Christ	<i>and</i>	a Communal Meal of Thanksgiving
Humans can encounter God in	<i>both</i>	Prayer (meditation)	<i>and</i>	Action (work, service)
To be saved we must	<i>both</i>	Believe (have faith)	<i>and</i>	Put Faith into Practice (good works)
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Individual persons	<i>and</i>	Members of families & communities
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Free to make choices	<i>and</i>	Responsible for choosing the good

The list could go on and on, but I hope you get the point. Just as every coin has two sides, so the best Catholic response to any theological question is not satisfied with either/or choices, with answers that consider only one side. An authentic Catholic-Christian theology always attempts to understand both sides of a reality in all its complexity, and tries to avoid overemphasizing one side while neglecting the other, which leads not only to distortions of the truth but also to unfortunate consequences in practice.