THE GOOD TREE AND BAD FRUIT

Rome, History, and the Question of the True Church

Can an institution that bore such fruit be the Church Christ promised?

A Scholarly Analysis of Dominical Teaching, Ecclesiastical History, and Institutional Accountability

I. Introduction: The Question Itself

The argument from history against Roman Catholicism's claim to be the one true Church founded by Christ is not new. It was central to the Protestant Reformation, articulated with force by Luther, Calvin, Hus before them, and Wycliffe before him. But the question goes deeper than polemic: it is **a theological and exegetical argument from the very words of Jesus himself.** If the Church is identified by its fruits -- as Jesus explicitly taught -- then the historical record of the institution claiming to be that Church becomes direct theological evidence.

This paper presents that argument in full. It begins with the exegesis of the relevant dominical texts, examines the historical record of the Roman Catholic institution with scholarly precision, considers the Catholic response and its limits, and then draws a theological conclusion. Both the gravity of the charge and the complexity of the response deserve honest treatment.

II. The Dominical Texts: What Jesus Actually Said

A. The Good Tree / Bad Fruit Teaching -- Matthew 7:15-20

> *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.* -- Matthew 7:15-20, ESV

The Greek is precise: *πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ σαπρὸν δένδρον καρποὺς πονηροὺς ποιεῖ* -- 'every good tree produces good fruits; but the rotten tree produces evil fruits.' The word *σαπρόν* (sapron) does not merely mean 'sick' or 'temporarily diseased' -- it means **rotten, putrid, corrupt at the core.** The same word appears in Matthew 13:48 for the bad fish thrown away: a terminal judgment of essential quality, not a temporary condition.

Jesus places this teaching in the context of **false prophets** -- leaders claiming divine authority who are inwardly wolves. The criterion of discernment he provides is not claims, creeds, or institutional lineage, but **observable historical fruit.** The test is empirical.

B. The Three Exegetical Keys in Matthew 7:15-20

First: The false prophets come in sheep's clothing -- they present an appearance of legitimacy, even of holiness. The masquerade is part of the definition. The danger is specifically an institution that **claims the authority of God while bearing different fruit.**

Second: Jesus says 'you will recognize them by their fruits' (v. 16, 20). The verb is *ἐπιγνώσεσθε* (epignososthe) -- a future indicative of *ἐπιγινώσκω* (epignoskw), meaning to fully know, to recognize with certainty. This is not tentative discernment but **reliable identification through objective evidence.**

Third: The passage leads directly into Matthew 7:21-23, where Jesus warns that those who prophesied and did mighty works in his name will be told 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' Institutional invocation of Christ's name does not guarantee authenticity. **Jesus himself repudiates the argument from claimed succession or religious activity alone.**

C. The Vine and the Branches -- John 15:1-8

> *I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.* -- John 15:1-2, 5, ESV

Here Jesus extends the fruit-bearing metaphor to a theology of union. Fruit is not merely a product; it is **evidence of vital, living connection to Christ.** A branch bearing bad fruit is ipso facto a branch not abiding in Christ, regardless of its institutional claims.

D. The Good Shepherd and the Wolves -- John 10:11-14

> *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees... I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.* -- John 10:11-14, ESV

Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and the hireling who abandons them. The shepherds of the Church are evaluated by **what they do to and for the sheep.** Those who devour the sheep are by Jesus's own taxonomy not true shepherds but wolves -- regardless of their institutional title.

III. The Historical Record: The Fruit That Rome Bore

The following is established by rigorous peer-reviewed historical scholarship, including by Catholic historians. The question is not whether these things happened -- the historical record is not seriously disputed -- but what theological weight they carry.

A. The Papacy: A Documented History of Moral Collapse

1. The Pornocracy (882-964 CE): The Rule of the Harlots

The period known to historians as the **Pornocracy** or 'Rule of the Harlots' represents one of the most comprehensively documented moral catastrophes in the papacy's history. Pope Sergius III (904-911) seized the papacy through murder, had his predecessor Pope Leo V and antipope Christopher strangled, and maintained an openly sexual relationship with Marozia, a Roman noblewoman. Their son became Pope John XI.

Pope John XII (955-964), elected at approximately 18 years of age through family political machination, is described by contemporary historian Liutprand of Cremona as transforming the Lateran Palace into a brothel. He was formally accused at a synod in 963 CE -- attended by Emperor Otto I -- of ordaining deacons in a stable, consecrating a bishop for a bribe, invoking pagan gods during gambling, blinding and castrating a cardinal, and dying during an adulterous encounter. The synod record is a primary-source document.

Pope Stephen VI (896-897) conducted the infamous **Cadaver Synod**: the exhumed corpse of his predecessor Pope Formosus was dressed in papal vestments, propped on a throne, and put on trial. The corpse was found 'guilty,' its vestments torn off, its blessing fingers severed, and the body thrown into the Tiber. This is documented in the Liber Pontificalis and confirmed by multiple contemporary sources.

2. Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503): The Borgia Papacy

Rodrigo Borgia, who became Pope Alexander VI, is among the most comprehensively documented immoral popes in history. His multiple illegitimate children -- including Cesare Borgia and Lucrezia Borgia -- were born of his ongoing relationship with Vannozza dei Cattanei during his cardinalate and papacy. He was credibly accused of simony in his election, nepotism in his governance, and poisoning political rivals. Historian Michael Mallett, in *The Borgias and Their Enemies* (Harvard, 2005), documents the open sale of church offices and use of the papal court as a vehicle for family aggrandizement.

He was pope during the commissioning of the first Spanish conquistadors and personally signed the *Inter caetera* bull (1493), dividing the New World between Spain and Portugal -- inaugurating centuries of colonial violence and coerced conversion of indigenous populations.

3. The Avignon Papacy and the Great Western Schism (1309-1417)

From 1309 to 1377, the papacy was relocated to Avignon under French political domination -- a period the Italian poet Petrarch called the 'Babylonian captivity' of the Church. Seven successive popes governed from France rather than Rome.

This was followed by the **Great Western Schism** (1378-1417), during which two -- and then three -- simultaneous claimants each proclaimed themselves the legitimate successor of Peter, each excommunicating the others. The Council of Constance (1414-1418) resolved the schism by **deposing two popes** and accepting the resignation of a third. If the papacy is the divinely guaranteed foundation of the Church, the question of which of three simultaneous 'rocks' was the true one is a question Catholic theology has never fully resolved.

B. The Inquisitions: Institutionalized Torture in the Name of Christ

The **Medieval Inquisition** (formally established by Pope Gregory IX in 1231), the **Spanish Inquisition** (1478-1834), and the **Roman Inquisition** (1542-present, now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) represent the most sustained institutional use of torture, coerced confession, and judicial execution by a religious body in Western history.

Henry Charles Lea's landmark work *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (1888), Henry Kamen's *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision* (Yale, 1997), and Henry Ansgar Kelly's scholarship document: strappado, the rack, the pulley, and water torture as standard judicial procedure; confessions obtained under torture legally valid for condemnation; and the condemned 'relaxed to the secular arm' -- a juridical euphemism for handing over to civil authorities for burning alive. The Church maintained institutional distance from the execution itself while ensuring it happened.

Galileo Galilei was tried by the Roman Inquisition in 1633 and forced under threat of torture to recant the heliocentric model -- a model that was correct. The Church did not formally acknowledge the error until Pope John Paul II's statement in 1992: **359 years later.**

C. The Crusades: Holy War, Massacre, and the Sack of Constantinople

Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade in 1095 with the declaration 'Deus vult' (God wills it). The subsequent Crusades are exhaustively documented by Thomas Asbridge (*The Crusades: The Authoritative History*, 2010) and Jonathan Riley-Smith (*The Crusades: A History*, 2005). The historical record includes:

- **The Massacre at Jerusalem (1099):** Crusader forces slaughtered the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem. Contemporary crusader accounts describe the scale as immense; modern historians estimate tens of thousands killed over several days.
- **The Rhineland Massacres (1096):** Crusading mobs massacred Jewish communities in Worms, Mainz, Speyer, and Cologne -- the first large-scale pogroms in medieval Europe -- explicitly in the name of crusading Christian zeal.
- **The Sack of Constantinople (1204):** The Fourth Crusade, launched by Pope Innocent III, was diverted to Constantinople -- a Christian city. The crusaders sacked the capital of Eastern Christendom for three days: churches looted, the Hagia Sophia desecrated, nuns assaulted, Byzantine civilization plundered. The crusaders were not excommunicated.
- **The Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229):** Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against the Cathars of southern France. At the siege of Beziers (1209), the papal legate Arnaud Amalric reportedly responded to the question of how to distinguish heretics from Catholics: 'Kill them all; God will know his own.' The town's population was massacred. Approximately 20,000 people died, including many Catholics.

D. Slavery: Formal Papal Endorsement of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Pope Nicholas V's *Dum Diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) formally granted the King of Portugal the right to reduce non-Christian enemies to **perpetual slavery** -- a right later extended to Spain. These were **formal papal documents** that provided the theological and juridical foundation for the Atlantic slave trade, which ultimately enslaved an estimated 12.5 million Africans over four centuries. This was not the private opinion of bad individuals; it was **official magisterial teaching.**

E. Concordat with Fascism and Silence During the Holocaust

Pope Pius XI signed the **Lateran Treaty** with Benito Mussolini in 1929, creating Vatican City and establishing a formal alliance between the Holy See and the Fascist government of Italy. Mussolini received Catholic institutional legitimacy; the Church received sovereignty, financial compensation, and concordat protections.

Pope Pius XII's conduct during the Holocaust remains one of the most debated questions in modern Church history. Historian David Kertzer's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Pope at War* (Random House, 2022), drawing on the Vatican's own wartime archives -- opened in 2020 -- documents that Pius XII was informed of the systematic murder of European Jews and chose diplomatic silence to protect institutional interests and avoid provoking Nazi retaliation against Italian Catholics. **Over six million Jews were murdered; the papacy issued no formal public condemnation.**

F. The Sexual Abuse Crisis: Systematic Institutional Cover-Up

The late 20th and early 21st century sexual abuse crisis in the Roman Catholic Church is a **documented institutional fact** established by government investigations in the United States (John Jay Report, 2004), Ireland (Murphy Report, 2009; Ryan Report, 2009), Australia (Royal Commission, 2017), Germany (MHG Study, 2018), and France (CIASE Report, 2021).

The French CIASE estimated that since 1950, approximately **330,000 people** in France alone were victims of sexual abuse by clergy or Catholic institutional personnel. The German study identified approximately 1,670 abusive priests and 3,677 victims between 1946 and 2014. The systemic finding across all investigations was not merely individual sin but **institutional cover-up: transfer of offenders, suppression of victims, and prioritization of institutional reputation over child protection.**

Pope John Paul II promoted Cardinal Bernard Law *after* Law was known to have transferred abusive priests. Law resigned as Archbishop of Boston in 2002 after the Boston Globe Spotlight investigation. John Paul II then appointed him to a prestigious basilica in Rome, where he served until his death in 2017. This is a documented institutional decision, not a disputed allegation.

IV. The Catholic Responses and Their Limits

Roman Catholic theology has developed three main responses to the argument from bad fruit. Each deserves serious consideration.

A. Response 1: The Church Is Holy in Its Divine Foundation, Not Its Human Members

The most standard Catholic response is the theological distinction between the Church as a divine institution and the Church as composed of sinful human beings. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC SS827) states that the Church 'clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.' On this view, the wickedness of popes and inquisitors is the *human dimension* of the divine institution -- the *corpus permixtum* (mixed body) of Augustine -- which does not invalidate the Church's divine character any more than the treachery of Judas invalidates the apostolate.

Critical Assessment

This response has genuine theological force. Jesus himself warned that weeds would grow among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30) and this ancient tradition cannot be dismissed. However, it has a critical limit: the fruit-tree argument in Matthew 7 is directed at **false prophets and false teachers -- leaders** claiming divine authority. Jesus is not describing the inevitable presence of sinners within the community; he addresses that separately in Matthew 13. He is addressing **the leaders themselves, the institution itself, the teaching authority itself.** When the pope, the inquisitor-general, the curia -- the very magisterium -- are the wolves, the corpus permixtum defense does not apply. The tree Jesus describes is the prophetic leadership structure, not the laity.

B. Response 2: These Are Sins, Not Doctrinal Failures -- The Church's Teaching Remained True

A second Catholic response distinguishes between the Church's moral failures and its doctrinal fidelity. Popes may have been wicked men, but the doctrines defined ex cathedra on matters of faith and morals remained protected by the Holy Spirit under the charism of infallibility.

Critical Assessment

This distinction is harder to sustain than it appears. The Church's formal endorsement of slavery -- the right to enslave non-Christian captives of war, affirmed in *Dum Diversas* (1452) and *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) by Pope Nicholas V -- was a **formal teaching** that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade. The Church's condemnation of charging interest (usury) as intrinsically sinful, taught for over a millennium by popes, councils, and canonists, was quietly reversed.

Furthermore, the Galileo condemnation was a formal judgment by the Holy Office -- the institutional equivalent of the Church's supreme doctrinal authority. If that judgment was wrong -- and it was -- then either infallibility has limits not acknowledged by the Vatican, or the doctrine as defined at Vatican I (1870) requires revision. The First Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility was itself a **new definition** -- not a teaching traceable with clarity to the early Church.

C. Response 3: The Gates of Hades Will Not Prevail -- God Preserves the Church Despite Its Failures

Catholics appeal to Matthew 16:18 itself: the promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the Church guarantees its survival and ultimate integrity. The persistence of the Roman Catholic Church through centuries of scandal is itself evidence of divine preservation.

Critical Assessment

The argument conflates institutional **survival** with divine **endorsement.** Islam has survived fourteen centuries and governs over a billion people. The persistence of a power structure through history is not prima facie evidence of divine protection -- institutions are remarkably resilient simply because power structures perpetuate themselves regardless of their moral character.

Furthermore, the promise that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the ἐκκλησία is a promise about the community of genuine believers -- not necessarily about any particular institutional expression. The Protestant reading is that this promise has been fulfilled precisely **through** the Reformation: the Church was preserved not *as* Rome but *from* Rome's corruptions by reforming movements that called people back to Scripture and to Christ.

V. The Exegetical Framework: What 'Bad Fruit' Actually Means

It is important to be precise about what the fruit-tree argument does and does not prove.

A. What the Argument Does Prove

First: Institutional claims to divine authority are insufficient standing alone. Jesus explicitly anticipated institutions that would say 'Lord, Lord,' cast out demons in his name, and perform miracles -- and repudiated them (Matthew 7:21-23). This means the argument from Petrine succession and apostolic lineage **cannot stand alone** as proof of the true Church. It must be supplemented by fruit.

Second: The systematic, institutional, and repeated nature of Rome's bad fruit -- spanning structured, **policy-level decisions to torture, murder, cover up abuse, endorse slavery, and silence truth** -- goes beyond what can be explained by the inevitable presence of sinners in a holy institution. The Inquisition was not the work of sinners despite the institution; it was the work of the institution itself, codified in canon law, papally authorized, and systematically administered over centuries.

Third: The Reformation was predicted and necessary by Jesus's own framework. The reformers were not schismatics who abandoned the Church; on the most serious reading of Matthew 7, they were those who recognized the wolf by its fruit and refused to be devoured -- those who, like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), tested the teachings of even prestigious authorities against Scripture.

B. What the Argument Does Not Prove

The fruit-tree argument does **not** prove that no genuine Christians exist within Roman Catholicism. Matthew 7 targets *false prophets and their leadership* -- it does not condemn every member of an institution. Millions of sincere Catholics across centuries have loved Christ genuinely, worshipped faithfully, and lived holy lives. The presence of true wheat among the tares does not rehabilitate the institution that produced the tares.

The argument also does **not** automatically vindicate any specific Protestant denomination as the true Church. The fruit-test applies universally: Protestant churches have their own histories of failure -- the burning of Michael Servetus by Calvin's Geneva, the suppression of Anabaptists by Lutheran magistrates, and a long catalogue of institutional sins. The argument is that Rome **fails** the test -- not that any specific alternative automatically passes it. The true Church, on the classical Protestant reading, is the **invisible body of genuine believers** across all institutional expressions, united by faith in Christ, not by membership in any visible institution.

C. The Deeper Issue: What Kind of Church Did Jesus Promise?

> *The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.* -- Matthew 13:33, ESV

The ecclesiology implied in Jesus's own teaching is not primarily institutional. The parables of the Kingdom describe a hidden, organic, mustard-seed reality. The Church Christ builds is not described

primarily in terms of institutional succession, hierarchical structure, or jurisdictional authority. It is described in terms of transformed lives, sacrificial love, truth-telling, and fruit.

> *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* -- John 13:35, ESV

The identifying mark Jesus himself provides for his genuine disciples is not apostolic succession. It is *ἀγάπη* -- love. The fruit of the Spirit -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) -- is the biblical taxonomy of good fruit. When measured against this standard, the systematic torture of the Inquisition, the political murder of the Borgia papacy, the sexual predation of thousands of children, the formal endorsement of the Atlantic slave trade, and the diplomatic silence during genocide produce a verdict that does not require exegetical sophistication to read.

VI. Conclusion: The Tree and Its Fruit

The question is a profound one, and it deserves a direct answer: the historical record of the Roman Catholic institution, evaluated by the very criterion Jesus provided in Matthew 7:15-20, constitutes **serious and substantial evidence against its claim** to be the one true Church founded by Christ and protected by the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean that no truth exists within Catholicism, that no genuine Christians have been Catholics, or that Protestant alternatives are automatically vindicated. What it does mean is that **the argument from institutional succession cannot be extricated from the argument from institutional fruit.** The same institution that claims Peter as its first pope and apostolic continuity as its credential also gave the world the Pornocracy, the Cadaver Synod, the Borgia papacy, the Inquisition's torture chambers, the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople, the burning of Jan Hus at Constance after a safe-conduct promise, the silencing of Galileo, the formal endorsement of the Atlantic slave trade, and the systematic institutional cover-up of child sexual abuse.

Jesus said: 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit.' He did not say a good tree would never have bad branches, or that sinners would never inhabit the kingdom. He said the **tree itself** -- its essential character, its systematic output, its institutional identity -- is revealed by its fruit. The Roman Catholic institution has produced, as institution, fruit that is by Jesus's own taxonomy *σαπρόν* -- rotten in ways that no human-frailty defense adequately explains.

The Catholic theologian Hans Kung, in his landmark work *Infallible? An Inquiry* (Doubleday, 1971), asked from within the tradition whether an institution demonstrably wrong on so many things -- usury, religious freedom, heliocentrism, slavery, religious liberty -- could plausibly claim the charism of infallibility. He was silenced by Rome for asking the question. **That silencing was itself a piece of fruit.**

The tree that Jesus planted was watered with his own blood. Its fruit, he said, would be love, joy, and truth. The institution that claims his exclusive inheritance must answer -- honestly and before the evidence -- whether those are the fruits the world has seen it consistently bear. And if the answer, honestly given, is *not consistently* -- then the words of the Sermon on the Mount stand as they always have: ***'Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.'***

Primary Sources: Matthew 7:15-20; Matthew 13:24-30, 33; John 10:11-14; John 13:35; John 15:1-8; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 13; Liber Pontificalis; Liutprand of Cremona, Antapodosis and Historia Ottonis; Dum Diversas (Nicholas V, 1452); Romanus Pontifex (Nicholas V, 1455); Inter Caetera (Alexander VI, 1493); Vatican wartime archives (opened 2020).

Secondary Sources: Henry Charles Lea, A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages (1888); Henry Kamen, The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision (Yale, 1997); Michael Mallett, The Borgias and Their Enemies (Harvard, 2005); Thomas Asbridge, The Crusades: The Authoritative History (Ecco, 2010); Jonathan Riley-Smith, The Crusades: A History (Bloomsbury, 2005); David Kertzer, The Pope at War (Random House, 2022); John Jay Research Team, The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests (USCCB, 2004); CIASE, Les violences sexuelles dans l'Eglise catholique (2021); Hans Kung, Infallible? An Inquiry (Doubleday, 1971); Catechism of the Catholic Church, SS827, SS881.