

Does the Catholic Church Accept Evolution?

Does the Catholic Church accept the validity of the theory of evolution? The answer is both yes and no. While there has been no binding statement of faith issued by the magisterium on this question, several popes and cardinals have addressed the subject. And, their teachings have several common themes.

First, there is no inherent opposition between faith and the scientific evidence that life evolved from lower forms to higher forms over many millions of years. Pope Benedict XVI stated in his address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 2008, “My predecessors Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II noted that there is no opposition between faith’s understanding of creation and the evidence of the empirical sciences.”

That’s because the Catholic Church does not hold to a strictly literal interpretation of the Genesis story of creation. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (337), the book of Genesis “symbolically” presents God’s work of creation. In other words, the story of creation is like a parable in that the plot does not have to be literally true (e.g., creation in six “days”) in order for the story to convey profound religious

truths (e.g., the sequential and increasingly complex nature of God’s creative activity). In fact, the idea of evolution is supported by Genesis 1:24, which states, “Let *the earth* bring forth every kind of living creature.” Genesis does not say that God directly created plants and animals in their final form, only that they came forth from “the earth.”

Second, even though our material bodies may be the product of evolution, the Church holds that our immaterial and immortal soul, which makes us truly human, is directly imparted by God. Pope John Paul II stated in his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, “If the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God.”

Third, the atheistic and materialistic ideology and naturalistic worldview inherent in much of evolutionary theory is to be exposed and opposed. Materialism denies the existence of anything that is immaterial and spiritual. Therefore, this philosophy refuses to accept the possibility of God’s creative action in the evolution of life. As Pope John Paul II stated in a 1986 General Audience, “It is clear that the truth of faith about creation is radically opposed to the theories of materialistic philosophy. These view the cosmos as the result of an evolution of matter reducible to pure chance and necessity.”

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, General Editor of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, wrote in a July 2005 letter in the *New York Times*, “Any system of thought that denies or seeks to explain away the overwhelming evidence for design in biology is ideology, not science.” He also wrote in a 2007 article in *First Things*, “We must reexamine the genuine science at work in Darwin’s theory and its developments, and begin to separate it from ideological and worldview-oriented elements that are

foreign to science. Darwin must be disentangled from Darwinism; modern evolutionary theory must be freed from its ideological shackles.” And, according to the 2004 statement of the Church’s International Theological Commission, “An unguided evolutionary process—one that falls outside the bounds of divine providence—simply cannot exist.”

Furthermore, YOUCAT, the new *Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*, states (q. 42), “Natural science cannot dogmatically rule out the possibility that there are purposeful designs in creation.” YOUCAT goes on to say, “A Christian can accept the theory of evolution... provided he does not fall into the heresy of evolutionism, which views man as the random product of biological processes.”

The Church, therefore, basically accepts the idea of evolutionary creation or theistic evolution. For as Cardinal Christoph Schönborn states in the book *Creation and Evolution*, “The possibility that the Creator also makes use of the instrument of evolution is admissible for the Catholic faith.” And, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (308) states, “God is the first cause who operates in and through secondary causes.”

In short, as Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed at his papal installation ceremony, “We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.”