

# Surprised by Truth



# Surprised by Truth

Eleven Converts Give the  
Biblical and Historical Reasons  
for Becoming Catholic

Patrick Madrid  
Editor

Basilica Press

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*“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*

*(John 8:31–32)*

I dedicate this book to the glory and honor of Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Catholic Church; and with love and gratitude to my parents, Bernard and Gretchen Madrid, who gave me the greatest gifts of all: life and the Catholic faith. May God reward you.

To my wife, Nancy, our children, Jonathon, Bridget, Timothy, Hillary, Maximilian, Madeline, Judith, and Baby Number Eight (due in early 1995), and to Sr. Judith, O.C.D. Thanks for your patience and encouragement. I love you.

I thank the contributors for being willing to share the details of their conversions with me and with the world. I pray that their testimonies to the truth will help many come to Christ. My thanks to Scott and Kimberly Hahn; to Mark and Martha Matia, Gerry and Nell Hackbarth, and Patrick and Rosemary Trask, for their efforts to see this book to completion; to Gerry Gawronski and John Gecik, for their vital technical assistance; and special thanks to my colleague Karl Keating.



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# Foreword

The practice of telling the story of one's conversion has been around as long as Christianity has. Since Paul's testimony in Galatians 2 (cf. Acts 9:1–9) of his experience with Christ on the Road to Damascus, to Augustine's *Confessions*, to our own day, thousands have recounted their journey to Christ and his Church. Yet, we seem always to be asking for more. "So, what made *you* decide to become Catholic?" is a question I never tire of asking. And from every convert I hear a different story.

None of the conversion testimonies you're about to read is like another. These people come from different backgrounds. They're scholars, pastors, teachers, preachers, and writers. They have different personalities. They followed different roads to Rome. Yet, the title of this book, *Surprised by Truth*, sums up every one of these stories, because each relates the earnest quests of persons seeking the whole truth about Christ, and each describes the surprise discovery that the truth of Christ—in scripture, history, and logic—lies in the Catholic Church.

When C. S. Lewis wrote of his personal passage from atheism to Christianity, the title, *Surprised by Joy*, reflected his emotion at finding himself a Christian. As he mentions in the preface to that book, he wrote his conversion testimony partly in response to the frequent experience of people asking him his reasons for converting. They'd listen and then say, "What! Have you felt that too? I always thought I was the only one!" As I read this book you now hold, I kept having the same sense of "What! You too?"

I've often thought of my own journey to Rome as a mystery story, a horror story, and a love story. Sometimes being surprised by truth is initially being horrified by truth. The *Catholic* Church has the truth? The *fullness* of the truth? Confronting this fact is a gut-wrenching agony for staunch, Bible-based Evangelical Protestants who've thought and taught, largely because of misunderstandings and prejudice, that Catholics are not even Christians. And beyond the interior struggles are the external obstacles: career derailment; loss of salary, benefits, pension, and financial security; alienation from family, friends, and colleagues. Conversion to Catholicism means hardship, sacrifice, and often loneliness. It means following Jesus all the way to the Cross.

And for what? Once someone snidely remarked to Steve Wood that he became Catholic "for the money."

"No, not for the money," Steve replied. "But I did do it for the riches."

We converts have been made so rich. We have been given wealth beyond our wildest dreams! What words can express the sense of the child who, after passing through a series of orphanages and foster homes, finds himself standing in the doorway of an unfamiliar mansion staring into the loving faces of long-forgotten family members? He is reintroduced to his Father, Almighty God, and to Mary, his mother and queen, who is standing, arms outstretched in welcome, next to his elder brother, King Jesus—in the midst of that glorious company of angelic and saintly siblings who stretch forth from heaven to earth and under the earth. Can you imagine a holier homecoming or a more royal reunion? Few joys surpass the ones related here by these former theological stepchildren who have finally come home.

The anguish endured is not worth comparing to the riches gained: the Holy Eucharist, the pope, the magisterium, the sacraments, Mary, the saints—the splendor of Christ mirrored in his Church. "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8).

Then the horror turns to surprise, and surprise turns to delight, and bliss, and fire, and a desire to share all this with others. Loneliness fades away as one discovers more and more people who have also been surprised by truth.

While reading each of these incredible journeys, I laughed, cried, grunted affirmations, and basically relived my own journey into the Catholic Church. I heard echoes of my own struggles in their words. I relived the anguish I experienced on that lonely and sometimes frightening path of conversion, and I relived the deep, abiding joy of coming home.

But enough. Read these stories. They're prayerful, heavy-on-doctrine, evangelical, scriptural witnesses of people who discovered that what they had once thought was the most "unbiblical" church is really the Church of the Bible.

Scott Hahn



# Introduction

Conversion is a form of martyrdom. It involves the surrender of oneself—body, mind, intellect, and faith to Christ. It requires docility and a willingness to be led to the truth, and for many, the truth lies in a direction “where you do not want to go” (John 21:18–19).

Each of us is called to embrace this martyrdom. Catholics, who have been given the great privilege of membership in Christ’s Church, are called to the daily surrender of living its teachings and striving, by God’s grace, to grow in virtue and holiness. Non-Catholics are called to this also, but they must first heed Jesus Christ’s invitation to enter into the fullness of his truth—the Catholic Church. For some, this particular act of surrender to Christ—becoming Catholic—is joyful and easy. For others, it is frightening and difficult. For many, it is abhorrent.

But martyrdom is also joyful. The Lord Jesus promised, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:24–26).

The following allegory, an ancient Chinese parable, is a favorite of mine. It paints a vivid picture of what it means to surrender oneself

to Christ. Each of the converts in this book went through this on his journey into the Catholic Church:

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful Garden. There in the cool of the day the Master of the Garden would walk. Of all the denizens of the Garden, the most beloved was a gracious and noble Bamboo. Year after year, Bamboo grew yet more noble and gracious, conscious of his Master's love and watchful delight, but he was always modest and gentle.

Often, when Wind came to revel in the Garden, Bamboo would cast aside his grave stateliness, to dance and play merrily, tossing and swaying and leaping and bowing in joyous abandon, leading the Garden in the Great Dance which most delighted the Master's heart.

Now one day, the Master drew near to contemplate his Bamboo with eyes of curious expectancy. Bamboo, in a passion of adoration, bowed his great head to the ground in loving greeting. The Master spoke:

"Bamboo, I wish to use you."

Bamboo flung his head to the sky in utter delight. The day had come, the day for which he had been made, the day to which he had been growing hour by hour, the day in which he would find his completion and his destiny. His voice became low. "Master, I am ready. Use me as you will."

"Bamboo," the Master's voice was grave, "I will have to take you and cut you down."

A trembling of a great horror shook Bamboo. "Cut me down? Me, whom you have made the most beautiful in all your Garden? Cut me down? Oh, not that! Use me for your joy, Master, but please do not cut me down."

“Beloved Bamboo,” the Master’s voice grew even graver, “If I do not cut you down, I cannot use you.”

The Garden grew still. Wind held his breath. Bamboo slowly bent his proud and glorious head, and he whispered, “Master, if you can’t use me unless you cut me down, then do your will and cut.”

“Bamboo, beloved Bamboo, I will have to cut your leaves and branches from you also.”

“Master, spare me. Cut me down and lay my beauty in the dust, but would you also take from me my leaves and branches?”

“If I do not cut them away, I cannot use you.”

The Sun hid his face. A listening Butterfly glided fearfully away. Bamboo shivered in terrible expectancy, whispering low, “Master, cut away.”

“I will also have to cleave you in two and cut out your heart, for if I do not cut so, I cannot use you.”

Bamboo bowed to the ground in sorrow. “Master,” he whispered, “then cut and cleave.”

So the Master of the Garden took Bamboo and cut him down and hacked off his branches and stripped him of his leaves and clove him in two and cut out his heart, and, lifting him gently, carried him to where there was a spring of fresh, sparkling water in the midst of his dry fields. Then, putting one end of broken Bamboo in the spring and the other end into the water channel in his field, the Master laid down gently his beloved Bamboo. The Spring sang welcome, and the clear, sparkling waters raced joyously down the channel of Bamboo’s torn body into the waiting fields.

Then the rice was planted, and the days went by, and the shoots grew, and the harvest came.

In that day, Bamboo, once so glorious in his stately beauty, was yet more glorious in his brokenness and humility. For in his beauty he was life abundant, but in his brokenness he became a channel of abundant life to his Master's world.

If you're a non-Catholic, I pray that this book will help you come to the realization that the Catholic Church is the Church established by Jesus Christ and that he is calling you to enter into it. We will welcome you with open arms!

If you're a Catholic, it's my hope that this book will inspire you to a greater zeal and love for our Holy Catholic faith and that it will help equip you to share that faith with others. Let us rejoice at God's mercy and kindness as we read and reflect upon these testimonies, keeping ever in our prayers all those who have yet to be surprised by truth.

Patrick Madrid



# His Open Arms Welcomed Me



Paul Thigpen

I was Quite young the first time I saw him, so I don't remember where it happened. But I do remember being terrified by the sight: that tortured man, thorn-crowned, blood-bathed, forsaken. The sculptor had spared no crease of agony; the painter, no crimson stroke. He was a nightmare in wood.

Yet, I was strangely drawn to him as well. His open arms welcomed me; his uncovered breast stretched out like a refuge. I wanted to touch him.

Of course, I knew who he was. After all, I'd won the big prize—a Hershey Bar—for being the first kindergartner in our little Southern Presbyterian church to memorize the books of the Bible. And my parents had busted with pride on the morning when I stood before the congregation to recite the grand old affirmations of the Westminster Confession: “Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever..”

But in our church the cross on the wall was empty and clean. We read about the blood, we sang about the blood, but we didn't splash it on our walls and doorposts.

In the years to follow, the man on the cross haunted me. When I found out that a schoolmate wore a crucifix around his neck, I asked my father to get me one. But he shook his head and said, "That's just for Catholics." There was no malice in his words; he simply spoke matter-of-factly, in the same way he might have observed that yarmulkes were just for Jews.

One day my aunt from New York came south to visit. She was always inheriting odd items from boarders in the residential motel where she worked, and this time she shared them with us. In a box of assorted old treasures calculated to fascinate a little boy for hours, I found him.

He was plaster of Paris, unfinished, maybe a foot long, cross and all. I ran my fingers over the smooth surface. The details were remarkable for so humble a work, though he had a flaw in his right foot. He was beautiful. But he was too white, too clean. So I found some old watercolors and painted every detail lovingly, with crimson dominating the whole. Then I kept him under my bed and took him out regularly so I could look at him, touch him, and wonder why he should be in some Catholic home instead of mine.

I don't remember when I lost that plaster body, but it must have been sometime after I became an arrogant little atheist at the age of twelve. Some schoolteacher I've long forgotten encouraged me to read Voltaire, the Enlightenment rationalist, who convinced me that all religion was delusion. At the time I didn't need much convincing; the adolescent season of rebellion against my parents had begun, and skepticism was for me the weapon of choice. No doubt I tossed out the man on the Cross in the same trash can with the Westminster Confession.

For six years, I ran from him, though I thought I was running to truth. I had no choice about attending the Presbyterian church with my family, but every week I repeated a quiet, private act of defiance: Whenever the congregation said the Apostles' Creed, I remained silent.

My heart was hungry, but my head turned away from anything that could have nourished my spirit. So I began to feed on spiritual

garbage instead. A science fair project on parapsychology introduced me to supernatural forces. But I thought they were only unexamined natural powers of the human mind.

Before long, I was trafficking in spirits, though I would never have dreamed they were anything other than my own psychic energies. They would sometimes tell me what others were thinking or whisper of events that were taking place at a distance. The more power they gave me, the hungrier I became for it. I began to experiment with séances, levitation, and other occult practices—all, of course, in the name of “science.” I wanted to become an expert in parapsychology.

From time to time, I saw him again, usually hanging beyond the altar in the church of my Catholic girlfriend. His open arms still welcomed me. But since I was convinced there was no God, the most he could represent to me was a suffering humanity. And in those heady days of the '60s, when American youth were so certain they could transform the world, I didn't want a reminder of human brokenness.

We were out to forge our own bright destiny in the new Age of Aquarius, and the crucifix was an unwelcome relic of the old order. Like some child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, born just a few centuries too late, I was convinced humanity could perfect itself through education. So I set out to prove the thesis in the human laboratory of my high school.

Our particular campus was an odd mix of peril and promise. As a first step in fully desegregating the public schools of our Southern city, the school board by fiat turned an all-black high school into a racially mixed one. Amazingly, those of us with a vision for racial harmony were able to build more of it than many critics had expected: Out of the chaos of a totally new student body gathered from utterly different social and racial backgrounds, we forged well-oiled student organizations that helped smooth the process of integration.

In a short time, blacks and whites were becoming friends and working hard to build a community. We became the city's first model of a school that had been forced to desegregate totally, yet had come

out of the process racially integrated as well—and all without violence. As student body president and a central actor in the drama, I felt as if my “Enlightenment” strategy for changing the world had been validated.

Nevertheless, reality at last bumped up against my carefully crafted visions. First to go was the Aquarian illusion. After a massive transfer of students citywide in my senior year to complete the desegregation process in all the high schools, the makeup of our student population was radically altered. Some of the new students were militant racists and troublemakers, both black and white. When other campuses in the city began closing down because of rioting, we were put on alert that angry students from other schools were planning to infiltrate our student body and provoke violence there as well.

One lovely fall afternoon, after our homecoming rally, it happened. A riot broke out on campus as I watched helplessly. Black and white friends who had once shared my hopes for a new, peaceful world attacked one another with knives, chains, and tire irons. I naïvely ran around campus from one little mob to another, trying to break up fights and restore calm. My watch was knocked off my wrist in the struggle, but I was miraculously spared injury—to my body, that is. My soul was quite another matter.

The sight of one young man in particular was branded on my memory. He lay sprawled cruciform in the dust, his arms extended, his face bloody. The wooden nightmare of my childhood had become flesh and blood, and I wept bitterly for the death of a dream. The idol I had made of humanity was shattered, and nothing could put it back together.

Next to die were my delusions about psychic powers. One starless summer night a chilling demonic force, grown tired of its human plaything, commandeered my body. It physically pushed me toward the edge of a nearby river to throw me in. I’ve never learned to swim, so if a couple of muscular friends who were with me hadn’t pinned me down, it would have drowned me.

The next morning, I told my English teacher, a Christian who had been praying for me, what had happened. She said I'd had a brush with the devil.

I laughed at her and scoffed: "Don't be so medieval." Even so, I had to admit something was out there, and it wasn't a friendly ghost. My teacher gave me C. S. Lewis to read—at last, an antidote for the poison of Voltaire—who, in turn, sent me back to the scriptures.

It was there that I learned about angels, fallen and unfallen. I found dark references to the powers that had tormented me and the evil mastermind behind them, the "god of this world." In the Bible, I rediscovered a multitiered model of the universe, of nature and supernature, that fit the realities of my recent experience in ways that parapsychology and the Enlightenment never could.

These were my first faltering steps back toward reality, and with a sobering irony, I came to believe in the devil before I believed in God. Yet, that inverted order of my emerging creed had its purpose in the divine intention: So devoid was I of the fear of God that I had to work my way into it by stages, starting with a fear of demons. The pleasure I'd taken in declaring myself an atheist, unfettered by the rules of any creator, began to crumble: If there was indeed a devil but no God to save me from him, I was in deep trouble.

Yet, scripture was teaching me much more than fear. In the Gospels especially, I encountered a man whose wisdom and compassion arrested me. He was the same man I'd sung hymns about as a child, the man on the cross who had stirred me with his suffering; but he was becoming real in a way I'd never imagined possible.

Years before, he'd been much like the hero of a fairy tale: a bright legend that embodied the noblest human traits, but only a legend after all. Now, he was entering history for me, breathing the air and walking the soil of a planet where I also breathed and walked. I was still scandalized by the thought that he could actually have been more than a man. But the possibilities were opening up. After all, once you grant the existence of supernature, you can't rule out

God; and if there's a God, what's there to stop him from invading nature? If there's a God, I knew, then the rest of the story, however shocking—Virgin Birth, miracles, the Resurrection—surely becomes possible.

Meanwhile, I began trying prayer as an experiment. My requests were concrete and specific; so were the swift, undeniable answers that came. The evidence was mounting, and though I felt threatened by the prospect of having to submit to the will of Another, a part of me also longed for that submission.

Soon, I was getting to know believers whose lives convincingly enfolded the gospel—or, to use Merton's haunting line, "People whose every action told me something of the country that was my home." When one of them invited me to a small prayer meeting, I came, however awkwardly, and sat silently for most of the evening. But I came back the next week, and the next, because I sensed that these people genuinely loved me, and I was hungry for their love.

A fresh, new breeze was blowing through my mind, sweeping out the cobwebs and debris that had accumulated through six years of darkness. The light of Christ was dawning inside, and all the frayed old arguments of the skeptics soon rotted in its brilliance. The more I knew of the world and myself, the more I found that Christian faith made sense of it all, and the more I longed to meet this man whose followers I had come to love.

Just after my high school graduation, at a massive nationwide rally of evangelical Christians in Dallas sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, he came to me—not in a vision or even a dream, but in a quiet, unshakable confidence that he was alive and knocking at the door of my heart. I repented of my unbelief and all its devastating consequences. I confessed to God that Jesus Christ was his Son, and asked him to become my Savior and Lord. My mind at last had given my heart permission to believe, to obey, and to adore.

When I took up scripture again to read, the centuries were suddenly compressed, and the historical Figure that had replaced the

noble Legend was himself now replaced with a living Friend. In my hands were letters he had addressed personally to me, written two millennia ago, yet delivered to my home at this moment, so fresh that it seemed the ink should still be wet. He read my thoughts, nailed my sins, told my story, plumbed the depths of my pain.

Overwhelmed, I asked him to fill me with himself.

Two months later, I was sitting alone in our Presbyterian church's sanctuary, late in the evening after a service had ended. I'd opened my Bible to the book of Acts—no one had warned me that it was an incendiary tract—and I read about the day of Pentecost. I'd never been taught about the baptism of the Holy Spirit or his gifts. But I told God that if what happened to those first believers on that day long ago could happen to me this evening, I wanted it. And I was willing to sit there all night until it happened.

I didn't have to wait long. Suddenly, a flood of words in a tongue I'd never studied came bursting out of me, followed by a flood of joy that washed over me for a week. The Holy Spirit baptism was for me a baptism in laughter; I giggled like a fool for days over this sweet joke of God. It was a liberation from the chains of the Enlightenment. This irrational—or perhaps I should say pararational—experience opened my eyes to realms that soared beyond my understanding, and left me face-to-face with mystery. For years, reason had masqueraded as a god in my life, but now I saw it for what it truly was: only a servant, however brilliantly attired.

That realization served me well in the following years when I majored in religious studies at Yale. That school's great, Neo-Gothic library best illustrates the spirit I encountered there: Painted on the wall high above the altar of its massive circulation desk is an awesome icon of Knowledge—or perhaps Wisdom, though I rarely heard her voice in the classrooms of that campus. She was personified as a queen enthroned above us lowly student mortals, and though we freshmen were tempted to genuflect, I owed my first allegiance to another sovereign.

In the twenty years that came after, faith grew, establishing itself as the heart of the vocations that consumed me: I went on to a graduate school program in religion, and I served as a missionary evangelist in Europe, an associate pastor of a charismatic congregation, and a writer and editor for several Christian publishers.

Those were good years, years of settling into a deep relationship with the God I'd once abandoned. He gave me a beloved Christian wife and two children who learned to seek his face from a tender age. But at last the time came for yet another conversion in my life—and another baptism of joy.

## A PERENNIAL LONGING

I had found the Lord, or rather the Lord had found me, in the Evangelical Christian community. I'd been trained to think in that community's categories, to speak its language, to hold its assumptions, to cherish its traditions. It had been for me a life-giving stream, a place of awesome grace and glory: There, I learned to feed on scripture, to celebrate the Lord's presence, to seek the way of holiness, to enjoy the fellowship of those who are devoted to him.

But in quiet moments, I sometimes felt a longing sweep over me. It washed across my heart whenever I heard a recording of tranquil Gregorian chant or Schubert's aching "Ave Maria."

It erupted inside me when I visited the great cathedrals of Europe—humbled by the grandeur of their architecture and the sweaty devotion of all the forgotten saints who had labored to raise those stones to the sky.

I felt it when I read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, St. Catherine's *Dialogue*, and St. John's *Dark Night of the Soul*. These were more than books—they were doorways into a communion with the saints who had written them. I felt their presence as I read; I even found myself talking to them, though my theological training told me that such conversations weren't permitted.



Most of all, I ached when I knelt quietly in the sanctuaries of Catholic churches. I felt drawn to the tabernacle and the altar. And I sometimes wept at the longing I felt as I lifted my gaze to behold him, hanging there, broken and bloody. After so many years, his open arms still welcomed me.

But my mind rebelled against the attraction. Those matter-of-fact words from so long ago always returned to dampen my desire: “That’s just for Catholics.”

The result was a long, thirsty wandering from one Protestant tradition to another: Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, classical Pentecostal, independent charismatic. Each had something solid to offer, each taught me critical lessons in walking with God. But sooner or later, I had to admit that none of them was home.

I’d had healthy encounters with the Catholic Church, of course. My childhood girlfriend and her family, and other friends as well, had earned my respect for Catholic faith. The charismatic renewal had shown me how much in common I could have with Catholic believers; I’d even written my senior essay in college on a Catholic charismatic community in Rhode Island. Two good friends, evangelicals from Inter Varsity, a college group I’d belonged to, had themselves entered the Church, challenging me to consider why.

But Protestant ways of thinking were so deeply engrained in my mind that I found it impossible to reason my way out of them. The legacy of Voltaire and the Enlightenment was farther-reaching than I’d ever imagined: I was so confident of all that can be verbally communicated, so suspicious of all that cannot. I knew that the truth of God could be revealed through a book. But could the power of God really reside in a dusty relic, the presence of God in a fragile wafer, the authority of God in a human pope?

Once again, my heart and head were at war.

Even so, my baptism in the Holy Spirit had planted in me the seed of a sacramental vision of the world—a vision, I believe, that most charismatics share, if they only knew it. My encounter with

pararational tongues and unexplainable miracles had suddenly introduced me to the mystery of God and chastened my tendency to rely solely on rational understanding in the search for truth.

The Pentecostal experience had also affirmed that to be human is to have a body and emotions as well as an intellect: that God's grace can be communicated through physical and emotional healing, and that worship involves not just minds, but feelings, physical postures, and pageantry as well. As a charismatic I even discovered that God could work powerfully through the spoken prayer, the anointing oil, the laying on of hands, the prayer cloth (cf. 2 Kings 13:20–21; Luke 8:43–44; Acts 19:11–12; James 5:13–15).

All these experiences convinced me that it was God's way to invest the physical with the spiritual, the human with the divine, the natural with the supernatural, the ordinary with mystery. In short, I came to see that Pentecost was a matter of spirit made flesh; a charismatic faith was inescapably a sacramental faith. But I needed more than sacramental experience, more even than that perennial longing, to take me over the intellectual mountain range that stood between me and the Catholic Church.

God knew what I needed. So he put me in a Ph.D. program in historical theology where I would find maps to help me scale those treacherous heights—maps drawn by those who had made the journey before.

The names of the mapmakers will come as no surprise: St. Augustine, John Cardinal Newman, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Merton, many others as well. A few who never fully made it over those theological mountains themselves nevertheless stood like Moses at the peak, pointing me in the right direction—men like John Williamson Nevin and, above all, C. S. Lewis.

Lewis once wrote that, long before his reason was converted to Christian faith, his imagination had been baptized by the writings of the Scottish novelist George MacDonald. In my case, long before my reason was converted to Catholic truth, my imagination had been sacramentalized by Lewis's writings.

St. Augustine's contribution to my conversion caught me by surprise. Years ago, I'd been ravished by his *Confessions*; the cries of my heart seemed like so many distant, feeble echoes of his longings from centuries before. But once he had my trust, he had me trapped: Sometime later, innocently reading his polemics against the Donatists on the evils of schism, I suddenly realized that I was a modern-day, Protestant Donatist—and he was rebuking me for remaining separated from Rome.

One by one, each question I had about the Catholic faith found an answer. Like most converts to the Church who have first had to overcome doctrinal hurdles, I found that many problems were resolved when I finally understood the truly Catholic position on a disputed matter, rather than the Protestant misconception of it. Those discoveries are familiar to former Protestants: We all had to learn, I suppose, that devotion to Mary is not worship; that the pope is not held to be infallible in every casual statement he makes.

At the same time, I began to identify and move beyond the Protestant filters through which I was reading scripture. No longer could I insist on adhering to the “plain sense” of the biblical text yet interpret Jesus' own words about his Body and Blood “figuratively.” Nor could I ignore his clear announcement that he would build his Church on St. Peter and give him the keys of the kingdom.

Some puzzles were solved, not by the writings of great Christian teachers or a new approach to scripture, but by the outcome of great Christian dramas of the past. Church history, I found, was theology teaching by example.

For some, the study of Christian behavior over the centuries, with all its horrors, has led to doubt, cynicism, even atheism. They see church councils bickering over petty jealousies, popes amassing wealth, bishops fathering children, monks living in dissipation; and at that dismaying sight, they lose faith. For me, however, Church history became one long confirmation of two realities: the universality of sin and the sovereignty of grace.

One stumbling block in my way had been the all-too-obvious flaws of contemporary Catholicism. Some modern “Catholic” theologians I’d read, for example, had more in common with Marx or Freud than with Augustine or Aquinas. I met monks who talked like Buddhists and nuns becoming “self-empowered” through pagan goddess worship.

But the scandal was overcome when I finally admitted that no Christian community has ever even come close to being perfect. In fact, I saw the Catholic Church’s problems repeated in the history of all the groups that repudiated her, that vowed they would never be like her. They reminded me of the adolescent daughter who swears she’ll never be like the mother she resents—yet ends up becoming just like her in spite of her vow.

It was simply historical proof of the Pauline judgment that my Protestant mentors had always been so fond of quoting Romans 3:23, “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Each breakaway group, I learned, inexorably retraced the missteps of the Catholic tradition to one degree or another because whatever problems the Church has, they are not exclusively Roman; they are universally human.

In taking the long view, I also came to marvel at the sovereign grace of God. Those same bickering councils that Protestants have disparaged nevertheless demonstrated the most astonishing wisdom in crafting creeds that would stand the test of time. Those avaricious popes gave their blessing to men and women of blessed poverty whose explosive holiness shamed their lax brothers and sisters and turned the Church upside down. In John Paul II, in the heroism of the Church in Eastern Europe, in the charismatic renewal and other life-giving movements, I could see signs of God’s grace with us yet, despite the serious attacks on the Church both within and without.

At the same time, I saw how Rome has remained the spiritual center of gravity for the churches that have separated from her. However much they try to distance themselves, they keep finding their

way back: When the arid, rigid predestinationism of Calvin grew at last intolerable, they turned to Wesley for a more human—and more Catholic—view. In the Holiness movement, they recaptured something of the Catholic traditions of asceticism and works of mercy; in the Pentecostal movement, they recovered a sense of sacrament and mystery.

Meanwhile, even our now-secular society—itself spawned in many ways by the logical conclusions of Protestant views—still attempts to make up for the useful Catholic traditions it has repudiated. As G. K. Chesterton once noted, whatever Catholic elements the Protestants threw out of their churches, the modern world eventually reintroduced because they couldn't live without them. But they always brought those elements back in a lower form. Instead of the confessional, for example, we now have the psychoanalyst's couch, with none of the safeguards of the confessional. Instead of a glorious communion with saints who help us on our pilgrimage to heaven, we now have spiritualists who frolic with demons that seduce us into hell.

Yet, through all the confusion, I came to see, Rome remains the solid theological standard for those who have separated from her. As even the oldest denominations have succumbed to the spirit of the age on one critical issue after another, the Catholic Church has remained firm—on the sanctity of life, on the nature of sexuality, on the supernatural foundations of faith, on the essence of God and the identity of Christ. Today as yesterday, *Veritatis Splendor*—the splendor of truth, as the Holy Father has so aptly called it, blazes forth from Rome. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Perhaps most importantly, my reading of Erasmus and Newman and my study of the history of liturgy helped me to see that the primitivist assumption underlying Protestant views of the Church was seriously mistaken in at least two ways. First, Erasmus and Newman taught me that the Church is a maturing organism whose life

span stretches across the centuries—not an archaeological expedition always searching for fossils to help it reconstruct a primitive campsite. They challenged me to defend the Protestant notion that we should desire the embryo over the mature organism; and having studied church history, I found such a defense impossible.

Second, when I studied the history of Jewish and Christian liturgy, I found that even if we could return to the “primitive” Christian experience, that experience would not resemble most of the Protestant, especially the charismatic, churches of today. The congregations I’d been part of were for the most part assuming that they had recovered a “New Testament” model of strictly spontaneous worship, local government, and “Bible-only” teaching. But the early Church, I found, was, in reality, liturgical in worship; translocal and hierarchical in government; and dependent on a body of sacred tradition that included the scripture, yet stretched far beyond it as well.

In short, all the knotted highways and byways of Church history led at long last to the same seven-hilled city. By the time I’d finished my doctoral exams, I knew I had to enter the Church. My heart and mind were already Catholic; if I turned away from Rome, I would wander, forever thirsty, the rest of my days.

## ANOTHER BAPTISM OF JOY

The clincher came one morning when I heard about the terminal illness of an old acquaintance. I asked myself, “If you discovered that you were dying, what would you do?” The answer that leapt to mind surprised me with its suddenness and certainty: “I’d enter the Catholic Church right away.” It was time to take action.

Even so, the road forward wasn’t all smooth. My extended family and a number of friends found the whole matter confusing, though they were graciously supportive. I lost some important business relationships with colleagues in the evangelical publishing world who thought I’d been “deceived.” I gave up my pastoral ordination and my

association with a ministry network on whose board of governors I was serving.

Much more sensitive was the situation at home. Despite many conversations with me about the matter, my wife still found the notion of becoming Catholic a strange one. We finally reached an agreement: If she would come with me to RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes and support me in doing what I knew I must do, then I would exert no pressure on her, and I would respect her final decision about the Church. I entrusted her to the grace of God and the intercession of St. Ann, her patron as a homemaker and the patron of the parish where we lived.

When we went to St. Ann's Church to find out what to do next, we were met by a priest who embodied all the best of what it means to be Christian and Catholic. A Christ-centered, Christ-reflecting man of great joy and gentleness, Father Gerald Conmey won over my family immediately. His high regard for the scripture permeated our instruction, assuring my wife that we weren't off on some dangerous theological tangent.

Not long after, my family joined me in my decision. My wife and I would be confirmed, my daughter would receive her first Communion, my son would be baptized, and all of us would be embraced at last by the Catholic Church—all on the same day. Rejoicing, I rushed out to buy them each a crucifix for the occasion.

On the afternoon before that unforgettable day, I was driving home alone from a business errand, my mind on some editing project, when suddenly a flood of joy washed over me. I threw back my head and began to laugh. It was a profound, tear-soaked laughter; a laughter of liberation and relief, the kind I hadn't experienced since that day, twenty years before, when the Holy Spirit had washed me clean inside.

"St. Augustine!" I shouted out the car window. "I'm coming home! St. Thomas! I'm coming home! St. Catherine! I'm coming home!" And I laughed till my sides hurt, wept till my eyes ached.

Perhaps God let me undergo that new baptism at such an odd moment to spare my family the embarrassment they would have felt had I exploded in the next day's ceremony instead. In any case, when the time came to go forward for that blessed oil's anointing, I was still joyous, but composed. As I stood, I looked beyond the altar at the man on the cross.

And his open arms welcomed me.