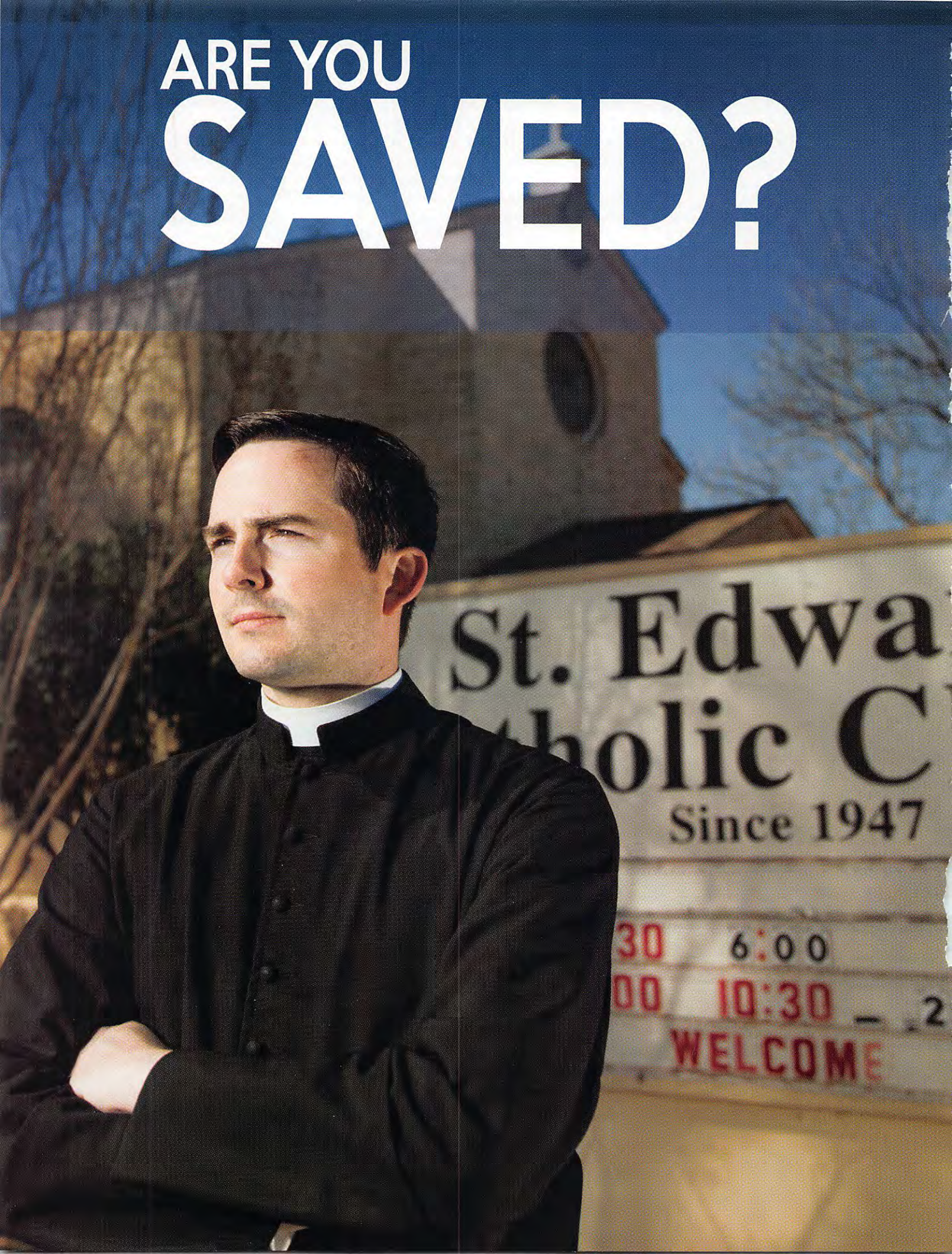
ARE YOU SAVED?



Father Nolan Lowry, a convert to the Catholic Faith, helps Catholics answer this vexing question.

How did you get interested in the theology of salvation?

Well, I'm a convert myself. I was a Baptist kid in Gilmer, Texas. My dad had become a Catholic in 1996, and my stepmother was already a committed Catholic, but I was still living how I was raised before, as a Baptist who believed in a very Baptist way that I had been "saved." The only theology I knew was that salvation comes to a person in one moment, when they accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and that salvation can never be lost, no matter what a person does.

Gilmer is a very evangelical place; everyone is very concerned about where you go to Church and you get asked, a lot, if you have been saved. Having moved from Tyler to Gilmer, I was sort of overwhelmed by this.

My parents were of course going to Mass, and although they allowed me to continue to attend Baptist services with my friends, I was also to attend Mass with them. Even at my young age of 13, I could see a real difference in the emphasis of the Catholic Church.

How did 13-year old you understand this difference?

There was a subtlety to Catholicism; it wasn't "in your face." The emphasis appeared to be on worship, and on living the faith, not just talking about it. The Protestant churches I knew and the Protestant culture I was used to seemed to be largely about judging someone's status as "saved" or "unsaved," whereas Catholics seemed to be extending an invitation.

When I joined the RCIA class, this sense of invitation was present there, too. Definitely, the Church wanted me to learn as much as possible, because it's not a one-time event, but a life-long, life-changing commitment. What I saw the Catholics proposing was, "Get ready, because if you enter into this life, God is going to work within you, and He's going to do things with you, and you have to be prepared for it."

There was nothing bombastic about this understanding of Christianity; it was fundamentally humble. In contrast to the innumerable questions and assertions about who was saved I had heard in my previous life, the Catholics weren't claiming anything about themselves; they were just pointing the way to Christ. They gave me a Catechism which I was intrigued with. I had been to a lot of Bible studies in my life, but the Catechism was about how to concretely put these Christian principles into practice in your life. It explained so much about the Church.

What are some things you remember learning in RCIA?

Well, for one, as a kid I thought the altar servers were the priest's children! I was really intrigued to learn that priests were celibate; that was a surprise. As a Protestant, you would just connect any kids helping around the church with being "the preacher's kids." I remember my first thought about the Catholic priesthood afterwards being, "for those men to live like that, they must have a direct line to God."

Being 14, I was the youngest person in the RCIA class where I attended in Longview. Father Gavin Vaverek was the pastor, and he came in to teach classes. This was my first chance to get to know a priest, and it made a big impression on me. Starting to see the Church in terms of relationship, I could see that the priest must have that relationship in a really deep way. Even then, I was wondering what that must be like.

On Easter Vigil (April 11, 1998), I was baptized, confirmed and received first Holy Communion, It seems like a blur now, but I was so proud to be a Catholic. I told everyone at school. However, I did not really get challenged for being Catholic until high school.

What happened in high school?

Well, as I was reaching the end of high school, I had a fairly serious girlfriend who was a faithful Catholic. I think I can say that I was "in love" with her. I certainly could see myself marrying her. To be in love, however, gives you an idea of divine love, as St. Augustine taught so well.

Looking back on the job I had at the time working for Brookshire's grocery, I could see a path forward. It would have been a great career. I could see the family life, and how good it could be. I had a plan to get an MBA, I really had it all worked out.

Then, I took the opportunity to participate in a Baptist Bible study with some of my friends. As a Catholic, I figured it was still good to participate in such things with my peers, and it pretty quickly turned into a Catholicism-bashing session. I found I was unable to answer the objections and accusations leveled against the Church. Although I loved the Catholic faith, I couldn't defend it. Then, I met the Gonzales family from Tyler, and they gave me a copy of *Beginning Catholic Apologetics.*

Learning from that book, I was able to give answers to the questions like "why do you go to confession to a priest?" and "do you worship Mary?"

> In the process of learning and teaching this, I realized I needed to examine my own life. I was talking about salvation and good works and a life of grace...but what was I doing about it?

Did you learn to defend the Catholic teaching on salvation?

I sure did. I learned that the feeling I had, that Catholicism is about living the life, really is the teaching of the Church and is the actual plan of salvation taught in the Bible. It's inescapable. Matthew chapter 25 is about the judgement we will all undergo at the end of time, and Christ says plainly that we will all be judged on the content of our lives. I saw really clearly, then, how silly it is to speak of human beings as "saved" or "not saved" when Christ shows us that He is the judge, and He tells us exactly how and when He will do the judging.

As I learned, and as I explained to my friends in the Bible study, our faith in Christ must be expressed in our lives, in our works. This is the clear teaching of Jesus and the Apostles. We have to live as Christians, in relation to Christ and His Church, and salvation is something that happens during our lives, not at one moment. I started to learn about grace, and how the grace of God brings about changes in our lives. My eyes were really opened to the richness of Catholic teaching.

What I came to realize is that the theology associated with "are you saved?" left out a big part of Christianity: the Church. In Scripture, the Church is called "the body of Christ," and being part of

that body is of supreme importance to salvation. Catholics are often attacked as lacking a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," but in reality being part of the Church is a basic building block of exactly that relationship.

It is within the Church that we receive the sacraments, starting with Baptism which scripture clearly says "saves us" (1 Peter 3:21). We also receive the Eucharist without which "you do not have life within you" (John 6:53). All of the sacraments act to move us along the path of salvation by fostering our relationship with Christ.

I also learned that the Bible teaches that salvation can be lost through sin and unbelief. St. Paul himself writes that he must guard himself against sin lest "after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:27). Our Lord tells us that "the one who perseveres to the end will be saved." (Matthew 24:13)

How did your friends react to you defending the Catholic Church?

Really well. Defending the Church has to be done with kindness and respect, and that's what I tried to do. I think they respected me more for being able to defend my faith, and do it as a Christian should.

In the process of learning and teaching this, I realized I needed to examine my own life. I was talking about salvation and good works and a life of grace…but what was I doing about it? What was I doing about my own relationship with Christ? What was I attached to? I began to go to daily Mass before school each day, pray the rosary, and go to weekly confession. My whole life felt renewed, and I started to feel a pull to the priesthood.

How did that pull become a vocation?

Well, I was feeling this pull to really go as far in my relationship with Christ as I could and to be a conduit for other people to experience God, and it seemed like I should try to discern this. I contacted the Bishop in Tyler, who at the time was Álvaro Corrada del Rio, and asked for his advice. Shortly after, he came to the parish in Gilmer, and I met him and he knew that I had written to him. We talked for a long time about the priesthood. In retrospect I didn't know much at all, but he was kind, patient and encouraging. I prayed and discerned and the rest of history. I went to seminary and became a priest of the Diocese of Tyler.

Did you maintain your interest in the theology of salvation?

Yes, indeed. I studied it whenever I got the chance and even wrote my thesis on St. Paul's theology of faith and works, and modern Protestant understanding of the issue. I'm still interested in it today.

How does all of this affect your ministry as a priest?

It's in every homily I preach. When I preach, I am conscious that God wants to invite everyone into this relationship, a continuing, lifelong relationship, because He loves them. This continuing relationship calls each person to conversion, and not just one time. As Catholics, our entire lives are to be constantly turning toward God.

It's in my ministry to bring the sacraments to the people of God. As I administer the sacraments, I know that God is acting to foster His relationship with each of the people who receive.

I also love to discuss the topic of salvation as part of ecumenical efforts. I strive to maintain a good, friendly relationship with the other Christian pastors in the towns where I am assigned, and they're always interested to discuss this theology.

So, how should a Catholic answer the question, "have you been saved?"

I think a good, Catholic response to "have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" or, "have you been saved?" is:

"Yes, I have. I have also accepted Jesus as the Lord and Savior of the Catholic Church, which He founded (Matthew 16:18-19). I have also accepted the sacraments, which He instituted as the means of grace to work out my salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Have you? And kindly tell me where it is found in the Bible that all one must do to be saved is accept Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. He seems to say that that is not enough: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."(Matthew 7:21)

Thanks, Father. Any final thoughts?

My prayer, as a priest serving in a parish, is that the Lord will help me to bring many souls to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in the Church, to teach them how to live this faith in turbulent times, and to give them the spiritual and sacramental support to help them to keep up the good fight and persevere to the end. That's the biblical way to be saved, and it's the Catholic way. And of course, I need everyone to pray for me that the Lord will keep me faithful and help me to persevere to the end as well. Blessed and praised be the Name of Jesus now and forever. Amen.❑

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