

PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN FAITH

Imagine that you discover a diamond mine, no ordinary diamond mine but an extraordinary one, an inexhaustible one: the more you dig, the more there is left to discover; the more you share with others, the more you have for yourself. So it has been with my discovery of Catholicism. The beauty and spiritual richness of this ancient Church, established by Christ Himself, is the inexhaustible mine of wisdom, spiritual riches, and blessing from God. I share my story in hopes that it will invite you to come and share in His bounty, too.

At the very least, I hope my story will relieve the worries of my friends and family who fear for the safety of my soul since my decision to convert. The late Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen once said that not one hundred people in America hate what the Catholic Church is, but millions of Americans hate what they mistakenly believe she is. I pray both that this effort will bring you increased peace of mind about this decision I have made, and also that, as you read it, you will find many misconceptions about the Church corrected, leaving you with a kinder and friendlier regard to this ancient and truly Christian Church.

Of course, if you want to come collect some diamonds...

PRELUDE

I suppose the proper place to begin is to share how I became a Christian, because my conversion to Christ is the beginning of my conversion to Catholicism. I grew up in a family that was sporadic in church attendance (Methodist). Nevertheless, I was taught to revere God, and when I was a very little girl, my mother would take me on her lap and teach me songs about God and bits of the Bible. Mother taught me the Lord's Prayer (the Our Father), the 23d and 100th Psalms, the Apostle's Creed that was recited every Sunday in the Methodist Church.

When I was in high school, I began to attend the MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship) at our church in Aberdeen. I began to see that the Christian faith is relevant to our lives today, not at all archaic as was being claimed in popular culture. Because my parents had neglected to have me baptized as a baby, and because I had not been interested in attending confirmation classes as a fifth grader (when such things are "required"), I spoke to the pastor and was soon baptized and confirmed into membership in the church.

After I graduated from high school in 1975, some events occurred which altered my life forever. One night, alone in my room, while I was stewing over something, I heard the voice.

“Before the beginning.”

I knew I was alone in my bedroom, but I sat up from my bed and looked around the room, anyway. The voice seemed very close.

“Before the beginning.” Well... I knew enough of the Bible to recognize “the beginning:” “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” (Gen. 1:1), and “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1)
“Before the beginning – “ the Voice again – “I knew you.”

And I saw – I cannot tell you whether it was an image given to my imagination or something more physical, I can only tell you I saw – two figures in very bright light, looking down a corridor into a room – a room with dingy green walls, an antique four-poster bed, and a teenage girl crying on the bed. My room. And me in it. I was given to understand that the corridor signified Time, and that the two figures I could distinguish were Father and Son; the brightness surrounding them was to signify the Holy Spirit. One turned to the other and said, “I’ll take care of it.”

And then I saw Christ on the Cross. You must understand that at that time, my sole familiarity with the appearance of the Crucifixion was from classical art representations I had seen in books and in the museum on a school tour. Very clean, very sterile. Very polite.

But the Jesus I saw on that cross – from His chest up – was beaten to a bloody pulp. No part of His body that I could see was without the varied discolorations of bruising, from yellow to angry purple. There were cuts and scratches and deep lacerations – even places where part of His flesh gapped open in deep angry holes, skin and muscle hanging loose from His shoulders. His hair and beard were matted with blood and gore. The crown of thorns was larger than anything I had ever seen in any painting – before or since – and the inner spikes of the crown were gouged deeply into the flesh of His forehead, creating still more deep lacerations.

I was horrified. Only years later I would hear of the nature of Roman scourging, of the cat o’ nine tails with the bits of nails and metal that would catch an gash and tear a man’s flesh open from his body. Only years later I would find the verse in Isaiah 52, the chapter before the better-known “suffering servant” passage, which states that He would be “marred beyond the appearance of a man” (v. 14). But that night, I saw with my own eyes the naked reality of Christ’s Passion.

He lifted His head and looked at me, and He said, “Sweetheart, don’t you understand? If you had been the only person in all of human history who needed to be reconciled to the Father, I would have done all this... just for you.”

My concept of the generic salvation of the “world” of John 3:16 as I had previously understood it was shattered. It was my sin, my despair that had put Him on the cross, damned Him Who did no wrong to such unspeakable, obscene suffering. I began to weep, and to say out loud, “Yes Yes ” (My parents never said anything, but they must have thought I was totally nuts.) “Oh, yes ”

After that night, I became very dissatisfied with the Methodist Church. So little passion for the Lord! And the order of worship we followed, with its watered-down liturgy – I thought the problem, the spiritual complacency I observed, had developed because people were reading the responses without thinking what they were thinking and saying and affirming, in the prayers and in the Creed. I blamed the liturgy; I wanted something better.

I gravitated toward fundamentalist churches. I spent several months attending Calvary Memorial Church, an independent fundamentalist church with a great deal of zeal and strong Bible teaching. I learned to love the Scriptures and to rely on them for doctrine and life instruction through that church. There were problems, though, and I wasn’t there long. Danny and I were dating by then, and I attended his home church in Southern Pines; together we participated in services at other friends’ churches, most frequently the Pentecostal Holiness church in Aberdeen, where a friend’s father was pastor and one of our friends was preparing to enter the ministry.

For years I jumped from church to church. It seemed I couldn’t be happy anywhere for long. This church seemed to be filled with people who had no real care for religion, beyond habit and “duty.” This church was exuberant and excited about sharing the Gospel... but there were no opportunities for deepening the faith beyond “spiritual infancy.” This church was too insular, ignoring the needs of people outside its doors. This church was negligent in matters of mission work. This church saw no need for evangelism. That one was superficially vibrant and enthusiastic, but was trapped in emotionalism as a gauge for “grace.” I was looking for perfection – in my church, and for myself.

We were at a Christian and Missionary Alliance church for several years, happy ones for me. They had a strong family program, AWANA, women’s Bible studies, a wonderful women’s mission union. Every February the church sponsored a missions conference, in which missionaries home on furlough from all around the globe would come and share stories of their work with us. The C&MA is a much larger denomination overseas than in the U.S. as a result of its deep commitment to foreign mission work. I loved the stories we heard, and the people we met through the missionaries’ stories and slides. A choir was begun while we were there, and I became choir accompanist. This is a job I held until Dan and I separated, and it was my favorite and deepest mode of worship and prayer.

Ironically, though, after the separation, it was not from my church that I received my

strongest spiritual or emotional support, but rather from the academic community at Guilford College, where I was working on my bachelor's degree. The gentle but strong Quaker influence over the campus allowed me a lot of room to go through the faith crisis that was inevitable with the end of my marriage.

I had been taught, indoctrinated, from my earliest days as a Christian, that if one “plays the game right” – if one attends church, reads the Bible studiously, prays, gives to the Church, abstains from all immoral practices – if one has enough faith – then God will perform miracles and bad things will not happen to the faithful believer. But I had played the game right, and Dan had still left me. Suddenly, a lot of the things I had been taught I had to believe as a Christian – and I confess, that I had obnoxiously passed on to other people as well – were invalidated. They didn't hold water. The surface upon which my religious life had been built for more than a decade shattered.

If it hadn't been for the still-vivid memory of the vision of Christ on the Cross, that profound revelation of God's love for me, I believe I would have done what a lot of other severely disappointed Christians do in an unanticipated crisis and abandoned Christianity altogether. But somehow the memory of that vision assured me that God's love for me was real, even if His ways had been misrepresented to me through human religious institutions.

The Quakers gave me plenty of room to sort out the mess. Theirs is simultaneously a mystical yet bold confidence in God's ability – and desire – to lead His people to Himself. I felt as if I had to start all over again as a Christian, from the basic reality of “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior” and discover anew what it means to be a Christian. This did not frighten the Quakers as it did the evangelicals; rather, it excited those with whom I shared my thoughts on the matter.

It was while I was a Quaker that I began working for an attorney in Greensboro whom I had met while we both served as volunteers for a local pro-life ministry. Jim was a member of a large, upscale Methodist Church in downtown Greensboro... but he was also a great admirer of the Catholic Church who attended Mass regularly, prayed the rosary, and read Catholic writers by the truckloads. His enthusiasm for the Church intrigued me.

My first memories of exposure to the Church were as a child. The movie *The Sound of Music* comes immediately to mind. I thought it was wonderful that someone could choose to live life fully for God. Later I read Maria von Trapp's autobiography, and I realized that her Catholic Christian faith was a much more vibrant part of her personal and family life than the movie had portrayed. Of course, as I grew older and began hearing things about the Catholic Church, its superstitions and oppressive rules and regulations, I thought it was a pity that such devotion was tragically wasted on such an institution

I have never believed that the Catholic Church was the “whore of Babylon” like so many

fundamentalists have taught. I did believe some of the things I heard: that Catholics worshipped Mary, that they unquestioningly followed the Pope and even worshiped him; that they had superstitions about praying to dead people, that they didn't believe Jesus' sufferings and death were adequate to save others but needed "help" from suffering Christians, that married people could only have sex to make a baby and were paranoid about sex in all cases ... but I didn't think Catholics were bad people, just misguided and trapped in bad teaching.

And I'd even read some of the Catholic fathers in college, in a History of Christianity course. Frankly, I hadn't seen the pertinence of them. I wasn't mature enough as a student or as a Christian to appreciate what important works I was being exposed to; I had wanted to get dates, a time line of crucial developments in the physical structure of the church, not read a bunch of dense ideas by people I'd never heard of, people like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origin... Thomas Aquinas. I did enjoy Augustine's Confessions, a text appreciated by Christians of all denominations. But most of the Church fathers were sleepers, by my reckoning. Dead, outdated, outmoded... totally irrelevant to contemporary church life. If they weren't, we'd hear a lot more about them in the modern pulpit, wouldn't we? Well, wouldn't we? And I was content with that attitude.

But then I found a pamphlet. A fellow named John Barger, just five months after the death of his wife, Susan, had given a talk to a men's group about what it means to be a husband. "Do You Love Me?" had been reproduced in pamphlet form, and one day at the office, I picked up a copy from Jim's desk and sat down to read. I had tears in my eyes when I finished: here was a man who understood, who reaffirmed and validated, everything I had longed for in my marriage with Danny – ideals of heart-companionship and partnership – everything was laid out in black and white, right there in that pamphlet.

Something stirred in my heart. I knew Catholics were consistently faithful in their pro-life testimony, even though the mainstream Protestants were becoming increasingly accepting of abortion, of homosexuality, sexual license in all forms as well. I realized that the Catholic Church was the only large Christian group that had consistently held on to the old moral values. And I respected that. Admired it. And now, through this little pamphlet of John Barger's. I began to be aware of the great idealism with which the family is honored by the Church – and of the Catholicity of the ideal I'd thought unique to Quakerism: the sacramental quality of all of life.

FUGUE

One day, in early 1996, not long before I moved back to the farm, a situation arose in the middle of the week that left me feeling a very strong need to go sit in a church and pray. Well, the only act in town during the week is the Catholic Church's daily mass. I knew that Jim sometimes went to mass before coming in to the office, so I called the parish he attended and got the schedule. Then I called him, told him, I'd be late to work the next

morning, and where I was going. He got excited, he told me “You’re going to love it I just know you are ”

I got to the church a little before 7:30 the next morning. I had been inside Our Lady of Grace church once before, during a choral performance my older daughter had been involved in. But this felt different. Somehow I hadn’t really seen the church then. This time, I pushed open the heavy oak doors and walked into the sanctuary and – I froze. For the first time I was aware of the splendid architecture, the vaulted ceilings, the stained glass, the white marble altar area. For years and years, I’d been in Baptist churches, Christian and Missionary Alliance churches, Friends meetinghouses, all plain, and the Friends’ completely unadorned. This, then, was splendor, this was magnificence – and every bit of it pointed, not to the human designer but far beyond. A voice inside me proclaimed, “Behold the majesty and glory of Almighty God ”

I stood for several minutes before taking my seat in the back pew, and even then I continued looking around in curiosity and awe. I watched several people enter, genuflect and cross themselves before entering a pew, then move forward to kneel on one of the drop-down kneelers to pray before the service began. It was a demonstration of devotion I found strangely moving. I noticed carvings along the outer walls of the sanctuary – from literary allusions I’d encountered in college, I recognized them as the Stations of the Cross, a beautiful meditation and prayer on the sufferings of Christ. I saw statues. I saw the stained glass windows depicting the Life of Christ. My eye was regularly drawn to the white marble altar area up front, with all its splendid fixtures.

Particularly, my attention was riveted to a “gold box” in the front of the sanctuary. I didn’t know what it was, I didn’t know what it was called or anything about it. But I couldn’t take my eyes off that gold box. I knew, viscerally, by revelation, that my Lord and my God was in that box. I was electrified. And I knew just as surely that it was in the Communion Host, which until that moment I had thought was just one of many Catholic superstitions, that He was Present. The very word “Eucharist ” popped into my mind as clearly and succinctly as if someone had whispered it in my ear.

The mass itself is hardly memorable. All I could think was, He’s really there And Ooh, how gross! Because literal meant... well, literal. Like cannibalism. But I couldn’t escape it or ignore it: He was really there, in the Eucharist. I knew it. I didn’t know how to reconcile it with my prejudices or sensibilities, but I decided that day that if the Church was right about that one crucial point – and she must be – then if she were wrong about everything else, it wouldn’t really matter. I was going to have to become Catholic.

A couple weeks later I was able to speak with the director of religious education for that parish, a man who was also a convert and an acquaintance through our daughters. He laughed at my question about Catholics being cannibals. Evidently lots of people think it, but most are too polite to say anything about it. Not me

He explained that the term Transubstantiation dates back to the time of Thomas Aquinas, whom I remembered from my History of Christianity class at Guilford. Then it clicked for me.

Essentially, according to Aristotle, whose philosophical work was a major source for Aquinas as he undertook his great theological work, an object has two parts: its substance and its accident. The accident of the bread and wine (or the “species”), in the consecration, remain the same – that is, the physical nature of the host, if you were to examine them under a microscope, would still be bread (wheat flour, no yeast) and wine (grape, fermented). They retain the taste and other sensory elements of their original accidental nature. But the substance – that is-ness of the object, is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

It’s a hard concept to try to explain. But I’d heard of substance and accident before – not in my religion classes, but in a lit class. “Think of what makes a tree a tree,” said my professor. “The isness of the tree.” The particulars that make it recognizable as a pine or an oak, a willow or a poplar, those particulars are the accident. The essential “treeness” is the substance.

Aha. *Transubstantiation*. But, having been taught for nearly forty years that the Lord’s Supper, Communion, is merely a symbolic remembrance of the Last Supper, a commemoration of the sufferings He foretold at that last Passover, it was still a difficult concept to grasp.

Well, said my friend, let’s look at the Gospel of John, chapter 6. Starting at verse 26, Jesus begins His discourse on His identity as the Bread of Life. I’d always been taught this was a metaphorical reality, not literal. But look at v. 41:

“The Jews therefore were grumbling about Him, because He said ‘I am the bread that came down out of heaven.’”

Well, it was hard for them to accept that He was the Messiah, right? That’s what they were complaining about.. Wasn’t it? Look at v. 52:

The Jews therefore began to argue with one another, saying ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’”

Already they were beginning to take Him not metaphorically, but literally And verses 53-58:

...Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has

eternal life... for My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.. He who eats this bread shall live forever.

Now, Jesus taught this very publicly, in the synagogue in Capernaum. It wasn't some secret, cultic teaching shared only with the Twelve, it was something He had laid wide open before everyone following Him and thinking about following Him. And it was such a difficult idea for them, that "many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore." It wasn't just the Jewish officials who had difficulty with this, it was His disciples (remember, by this point He had many disciples, and the Twelve were distinguished from all the other followers). Some abandoned Him because of it.

If Jesus had been speaking only symbolically or metaphorically, nobody would have been offended. Instead, everyone – the Jews and the disciples – understood Jesus to be speaking literally. And He never corrected their literal understanding or offered any alternative explanation, as He did with parables and other difficult teachings His disciples did not understand.

I have since learned that the Church taught this essential doctrine, also known as the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, from its very earliest days. Even after the Reformation, the change to a symbolic interpretation of the Lord's supper came about well after the major splits of Lutheranism and Anglicanism and seems to have been developed to further distance these rebel groups from Rome – not as primary objections to the teachings of Rome. In fact, the Anglicans/Episcopalians and the Lutherans today teach a doctrine called consubstantiation, that the Real Presence of Christ co-exists side by side with the substances of bread and wine. With, but separate.

I knew that the Holy Spirit had revealed something powerful and totally unexpected into me in that first Mass about Christ's Real Presence, and this Scriptural evidence, unaddressed by my former Protestant pastors, was compelling. The historical evidence of the Church's adherence to this doctrine for more than 1500 years up to and including the early years of the Protestant Reformation was even more so. Again I thought: if the Catholic Church was right about that one, essential point, then I was willing to bet the farm that they were going to be right on the money about everything else. Or if not, it really didn't matter to me: I simply had to become Catholic.

Once I realized that Christ is truly Present in the Eucharist, I began to think of things that hadn't occurred to me before. Like, the fact that our definition of orthodoxy – the Trinity, the virgin birth, the full divinity and humanity of Christ, the physical death and resurrection of Christ... – all these things were identified and codified by the Catholic Church. Moreover, the Catholic Church remains faithful to those doctrinal essentials, and to the sanctity of life, even when mainstream Protestantism is now guilty of increasingly compromising them in a growing liberal movement away from orthodoxy.

I began to wonder why the evangelical tradition ignores the earliest Church teachers and Fathers. Why did we only quote contemporary theologians? It was as if Christianity were supposed to have suffered an 1800-year gap in its history, had somehow been abandoned after the completion of the Book of Acts until the last two hundred years or so. So often I had heard evangelical pastors boast of recapturing the essence of biblical Christianity, the heart and purity of the first century Church, when they patently ignored the writings available to us from those first Christians, who lived and worked alongside the apostles and their disciples and successors. I had accepted the omission without question; now it rankled.

I also began to ponder the source of the Bible. The collection that we now know as our New Testament was officially compiled about 300-400 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the work of... the catholic Church In fact, while I had actually been told once that the Catholics had added the deuterocanonical books we Protestants called the Apocrypha, I knew that the opposite was true, that the Protestants had eliminated them after the Reformation; in fact, the earliest King James translations were required by law to include those deuterocanonical books

It also began to seem clear to me that even while we evangelicals claimed that the Bible as our only authority for faith and practice, the Bible itself does not claim to be sufficient in and of itself. II Timothy 3:16 does not claim that the Scriptures are adequate or sufficient, only "useful" or "profitable." In fact, Paul wrote to Timothy that the Church is "the pillar and ground of the Truth" (I Tim. 3:15, NKJV). Moreover, Paul and the other New Testament writers made no claim to be writing Scripture; the authority of their writings was verified by the Church long after they had been disseminated through the Christian community. It seemed irrational to think of these simple servants of Jesus Christ seeking to add to what they knew already as the Scriptures; they were only recording what they know of the life and teachings of the Lord, or writing to give counsel and direction to the embryonic Church and its leaders.

It was startling to discover previously-overlooked passages in Scripture that promoted tradition and oral teaching. These include 1 Cor 11:2, II Tim 1:13-14, 2:1-2; II Thes 2:15. I had been indoctrinated to believe that, with the compilation of the New Testament, the oral traditions became moot. But the very fact that the New Testament was compiled by councils of the Church, established in large part through the traditions of their origins and prior use, seemed to set the New Testament as part and parcel of that Tradition. I realized, although all the traditions of the Church that I was encountering were solidly rooted in and supported by Scripture, the priority had become reversed: Tradition validates the Scriptures, not the other way around.

I was also amazed, in subsequent visits to Catholic parishes in Greensboro and in Southern Pines, to discover that the Mass is full of Scripture. On Sundays, there are four readings: Old Testament, Psalm (usually sung), New Testament and Gospel; on weekdays

there are three readings. And so much of the Mass itself, in the prayers and responses, is a recitation of Scripture I've never been in a Protestant church with a fourth as much.

So... why, in the midst of these wonderful discoveries, why did I go back to the Protestant Church? Because I did. When I moved back to my homeplace in '96, I went back to the Methodist Church where my father's family had been charter members and where I'd spent many Sundays of my own childhood. I told God, "If You ever relieve me of (duties I'd assumed when I moved back home), I'll go back to the Catholic Church." I didn't remember my promise very long. I was relieved of those duties, in less than two years, but by then I had forgotten the promise.

When my second husband's work took him to Louisiana, I began packing up belongings, expecting our furnishings to have to go into storage when I joined him. Books – I had so many books – are generally cheaper to replace than to store, so I began to sort out those books I would probably not read again. Many went to the just-beginning library of a church where I'd been playing piano for several months, but I also had Catholic writers whose works would not be well-accepted there. I decided to donate those books, three large boxes full, to the parish library at Sacred Heart Parish in Pinehurst.

When I walked into the parish office and announced my mission, the reaction of the women in the office was even warmer and brighter than the September day. A Protestant reading Catholic books! And they were thrilled when I told them how I had come to believe in the Real Presence. And when I assured them I was keeping more books than I was giving away – Thomas Merton, Msgr. Romano Guardini, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and more – they were delighted. We had a wonderful visit together. I felt I ought to come and worship there soon.

As I cranked up the old pickup, I heard The Voice again, this time with music and laughter: "Oh, Sweetheart..." and I immediately recalled my promise to return to the Catholic Church. I had to laugh – God does not allow us to forget our promises, but He can and does approach us with warmth and tenderness and even with humor.

Still, it was not easy to return to the Church. I knew that by returning I was making a commitment to live as a Catholic even though I couldn't be received into the Church, and I didn't know how long it would take until I could be Confirmed. I would be committed to honoring the obligations of mass attendance, of fasts and abstinences, a great challenge, even though I knew that these acts of self-denial and obedience would enrich my soul. I knew I would have to accept all the teachings of the Church, whether they made sense to me or not. These are disciplines alien to nearly all the Protestants of my acquaintance and even to my own strong-minded nature.

There was, in fact, only one final obstacle to my whole-hearted acceptance of all the Church's teachings, and it had become only a half-hearted objection: Mary.

I had long been dissatisfied with the Protestant habit of virtually ignoring Jesus' mother. It seems we brought her out only for our Nativity scenes at Christmas (after all, you can't have a birth without a mother), but as soon as we could, we would stuff her back into the storage shed and try to ignore her for the rest of the year.

But I also wasn't comfortable with what I perceived an inordinate emphasis on Mary among Catholics. Unfortunately, over the years I'd encountered people who'd been so enthusiastic in their devotion to Our Lady that they seemed to regard her as a fourth Person of the Godhead, seemed more excited about her than about her Son. I was very uncomfortable when I heard Catholics speak of praying to Mary, or refer to her as Mediatrix or as Queen of Heaven. I was uncomfortable with the Rosary, preferring instead the Chaplet of Divine Mercy which directly addresses "Eternal Father". I didn't know where the balance would be found, but I kept coming back to my original thought: if the Church is right about the Real Presence....

I had no trouble accepting her title "Mother of God" or Theotokos (literally, God-bearer) because it reflects Jesus' divinity, not her own.

And I learned soon thereafter that the Church makes a clear distinction between worship, which is due only to God, and veneration, which may be given to the saints, and the highest form of veneration, which is accorded Mary.

Shortly after the visit at the Sacred Heart parish office, I was watching tv when BBCAmerica was re-broadcasting their tribute to Elizabeth, the Queen Mother on her 100th birthday. That's when it clicked for me. The Queen Mother, was not the monarch, but her husband was king during WWII, and her daughter, Elizabeth II is now reigning monarch of Great Britain. The British people were simply wild about "the Queen Mum," she held a very precious place in their hearts. And it occurred to me, what a marvelous analogy this was Jesus is King of Kings; Mary, His mother, is like "Queen Mum" of Heaven.

We have three incidents where Mary is recorded to have spoken: at the Annunciation, when she responds to the angel's announcement with the humble Fiat, "Be it done to me according to thy word;" her song of praise, the Magnificat, sung when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth; and finally, at the wedding feast in Cana, when she tells the servants, "Whatever my son tells you, do it " But those three instances deserve more attention and honor than they've ever received in any Protestant church of my background. Those words, plus her faithfulness from the Annunciation to the Upper Room at Pentecost, make her a powerful model for any practicing Christian.

I came to realize that the Rosary, a Marian devotion which made me squirm for so long, is really a series of reflections on key events of Jesus' life. The "Hail, Mary," central

prayer of the Rosary, is taken from the Annunciation and from Elizabeth's greeting, both in Luke 2. We repeat and fulfill Scripture in praying the Rosary.

Then I heard a tape by Dr. Scott Hahn, a former Presbyterian minister and convert to Catholicism, in which he described Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant, having borne in her body the Messiah, the Covenant-Maker. This image struck me as profound, and it led to another realization: by receiving in her body the conception of the Lord Jesus, she becomes the Bride of the Holy Spirit, in a unique spousal relationship with God, making her worthy of greater respect and honor than I had ever been taught, as a Type of the Bride of Christ, the Church.

My grasping the truth and beauty of Mary's unique spousal relationship with God also brought into focus for me the Church's teaching of her perpetual virginity. I had thought this issue a hair-splitter until quite late in the process, but I have come to understand that it is crucial in the Church's covenant theology. The Protestant English translations indicate that Mary and Joseph had other children – at one point Jesus is told his mother and brothers are looking for Him. However, the scriptural evidence seems stronger to the contrary. For one thing, the ancient (and some modern) languages do not distinguish between close relatives – there is no separate word for cousin, for example, in either Greek or in modern Thai.

But also, if Mary were not perpetually virgin, an intended state from the time preceding her marriage to Joseph, her ability to conceive the Messiah would not have been such a puzzle to her in Luke 2; it might logically have been taken for granted that the Child would have been conceived after the impending marriage. Also, it seems unlikely that Mary could have traveled as extensively as the Gospels record, had she had other children to care for or to live with. Too, had Mary borne other children, it would have been unnecessary for Jesus to provide her with a home after His death; instead, He gives her to John, the beloved disciple. And through John He gives her to us, to take into our homes as His mother and now ours, for us also to become her son(s).

Most of all, because Mary accepted the role given to her by God as mother of His Son, it was necessary that she remain pure in body as His Spouse. Her constancy mirrors the purity of her heart and soul, provided from the time of her conception by the work of Christ even before His Incarnation (called, consequently, the Immaculate Conception). Mary bore in her body the New Covenant of God; her perpetual virginity reflects her spousal fidelity to God.

Then it became easier to recognize her as the Mother of the Church. In the Book of Romans, Paul speaks of our adoption as sons by God, so that we become joint-heirs with Christ, the true-born Son. It makes sense that, if Jesus is God's Son and Mary's Son, then when we receive our adoption as children of God, we also become her children. And in Revelation 12, every Protestant Church I've even attended admits that the woman and the

Child are Mary and Jesus – but none has ever acknowledged that the dragon goes in search of the woman’s other children, who must of necessity be us, the “sons of adoption.”

With those reflections in mind, it wasn’t hard to begin praying to her. After all, ever since my first commitment to Christ, back in the ‘70’s, I’d always been told “Prayer is simply talking to God.” Well, talking to someone isn’t worshipping them, so it didn’t make sense to treat “talking with” Mary as an act of worship. Moreover, whereas Protestants equate worship with the entire program of hymns, prayers, and sermons of the church service, Catholics view worship as the reverence with which we view the Consecration and receive Christ in the Eucharist; the reading of the Word, hymns and prayers are the preparation for worship. And I learned, too, that we don’t pray to Mary as we pray to God, with specific requests for her to grant; rather, we request her (and by the way, the saints’) intercession and help, much in the same manner as I’d done countless times when I’ve picked up the telephone and called a friend, “Hey Can you pray for so-and-so?” But because of who Mary is, her prayers, we assume, get special consideration from her Son, just as her request for His assistance at the wedding of Cana received His special consideration. This is why she is known by the Church as Mediatrix.

It all began to make beautiful, glorious sense. There could be no turning back, even though I couldn’t be brought into the Church right away – by having remarried after being divorced, and with Rusty also having been divorced, there would have to be a long process of resolving what the Church recognizes as an invalid marriage.

POSTLUDE

And then Rusty and I separated. It was unhappy, unwanted, and completely necessary. But out of that disappointment came the good: the conflict of my being in a marriage which could not be recognized by the Church was resolved. I got word in early September, 2002, that I could be received into the Church.

The first step was to go to Confession. You’ve got to appreciate the irony of this: As an Evangelical, the one sacrament I used to actively ridicule was that of Confession – it was wrong, it was superstitious, it was idolatrous to look to a man to forgive me from my sins. “For we have one mediator...” and now Confession was to be the first Sacrament I could receive as a Catholic

In the interim, I had come to understand the Sacraments – and the role of the priesthood – very differently than I had during my years as an evangelical. As an evangelical, the priesthood was so distant and remote a concept that it might have come from another planet. We didn’t have priests – we had pastors Shepherds of the flock, teachers and evangelists. But not priests. Of course, we couldn’t have priests. The primary function of the priest, in times ancient and modern, is to offer sacrifice. The Old Testament priests

offered the sacrifice of the burnt offerings; the Catholic priest offers the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

And it was the Twelve, not all followers, to whom Jesus gave authority to forgive sins on earth. He established the priesthood as well as the Eucharist in the Upper Room during the Last Supper; he reaffirmed the priesthood and authorized the Twelve and their successors to forgive sins before His ascension, in Matthew 28. This is a key source of the Tradition of what is now called Reconciliation, and the root of the teaching of Apostolic Succession.

I scheduled an appointment with a retired priest. We met one early autumn afternoon. I had an examination of conscience that I had gotten off my favorite web site. We took nearly two hours, but then, at almost 45 years of age, I had a lot to confess

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first Confession.” And I began to recite my sins, using the examination of conscience as my prompt.

That night, September 26, 2002, I wrote to my friend, the Director of Religious Education for the parish:

Tonight it has quite overpowered me – I have begun my active life as a Catholic and a sharer and recipient of the Sacraments, those glorious, power-filled Mysteries of our Savior... The weight and glory of what transpired today has come to me tonight with even greater impact than it did today. And earlier it was quite great. Some sins I confessed out of duty rather than actual remorse, because I knew the Church calls those things sins whether I had previously thought or felt them to be so, and yet once I had done, I felt so clean... Tonight, I see for the first time how terribly far I have to go. As an Evangelical, I was considered not only in pretty good shape, but downright exemplary despite my failings. Yet tonight I FEEL for the first time what it means to acknowledge myself a sinner, guilty of doing things which grieve the kind, good Lord Who has loved me enough to bring me down this road. I see for the first time how much I have to learn and to do in order to be, really BE, a good Christian, the thoughts and habits I have been so careless and comfortable with all these years but now must choose to address and fight and overcome, to “be transformed,” not as a careless eventuality but as a deliberate choice to be consciously exercised on a daily, hourly basis.

...the real work begins now. I’ve been so blessed, and been so excited by all the events of the past two years, all the openings of those floodgates of God’s blessings. But this is the real blessing, isn’t it? To be admitted into His presence through the Sacraments, to be touched and chosen to be His

own, to be allowed the opportunity to truly convert, not just as a formality of church membership, but that inward conversion of the heart which I need so greatly....

Two and a half years after writing those words, they still represent my experience, now. It is an amazing thing to be a Catholic. I first came to know Christ as a Protestant. I first came to appreciate His work on the Cross, the glory of His Resurrection and our hope of Eternal Life as a Protestant. I first came to love the Written Word of the Scriptures as a Protestant. I am grateful for those years and for the lessons I learned in them. But as a Catholic, I have been admitted to that Church which can not only trace its history in great detail all the way back to Peter and the Upper Room, but which also contains the very fullness of Truth. The inexhaustible depth of that Truth still leaves me in awe.

I love the liturgy, with its poetry and drama bringing not only emotions and intellect but also my body into the act of worship. In genuflecting, in standing for the Gospel reading and in kneeling for the Eucharistic prayers, I bring my body into physical gestures of reverence toward God; all my senses enter into the act of worship with the fragrance of incense, the sights and sounds of the hymns, the prayers, the taste of the Precious Body and Precious Blood.

I love the completeness of the Church – her historical continuity, her broad-reaching expressions of devotion that include the monastic, the contemplative, the mystical, the active; the care for conversions, the care for helping souls become mature in faith and devotion, for the development of social conscience.. All aspects of Christian life come together under the care and oversight of the Church; nothing is neglected.

I love the opportunities for worship in the Church. Not only the mass, but also in the Holy Hour, one has a chance to be physically close to Christ in the Holy Eucharist. There is not only the rosary, there is also the beautiful and profound Liturgy of the Hours, a series of prayers and psalms and readings which are arranged to be observed at different times during the day. Even before my Confirmation, I was able to participate in these devotions, as well as in the long-loved music of worship. They all help deepen my understanding of the teachings and the Reality of the Church, and were a great comfort to me while I awaited my Confirmation.

Two and a half years after my Confirmation, they continue to guide me closer to Christ.