Why Be Catholic?
Converts from the Diocese of Tyler tell their stories.
A couple of weeks ago, I stood in front of my bookshelves, combing through the titles, looking for two books to cover for this article. But after several minutes of searching, I found a couple of unkind words toward the bookcase, I realized that I no longer owned the books. As I placed an order on Amazon for new copies, I had a strange sense of déjà vu. I knew I had ordered these books several times before, but over the years they had changed. These two books were so helpful to me I can’t help but give them to others. So I’d like to review two books that probably won’t spend much time on my bookshelf before they are given away again.

In my later high school days, as I began to take the Catholic faith more seriously, Scott and Kimberly Hahn’s book *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism*, and *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church* by Stephen K. Ray played important roles. As a cradle Catholic, many of the truths of the faith took for granted. A nod of affirmation or a shrug was the extent of my understanding of the faith. In my senior year, after some persuasion from my best friend, I started attending faith formation classes. (I had been confirmed the year before and thought I was done with learning about the faith.) The catechists, a young married couple in the parish, began introducing me to the reasons we believe what we believe as Catholics. I’d never heard it presented as they presented it. I was hooked. As we continued the classes they lent me *Rome Sweet Home*. I poured through it and passed it on to others in my circle of friends. In the swapping of books in months following, I came across *Crossing the Tiber* as well. It took two books written by converts to show me the depth and beauty of the faith that I had grown up with.

In *Rome Sweet Home*, Scott and Kimberly Hahn share their conversion from being a Protestant minister to the Catholic faith. The book bounces back and forth between Scott and Kimberly as they tell of their earliest encounters with faith and misconceptions of Catholicism. Scott’s own beginning encounters with the Catholic faith were actually antagonistic. Early experiences convinced him that he needed to rescue Catholics from themselves and the Church. As he began his biblical studies he decided to use the notion of Covenant as the principle with which he understood the Bible. This fateful choice would bring a host of issues to the forefront and cause him to rethink his current understanding of Protestant theology and practice. The understanding of marriage as a covenant played a large role in their abandonment of the use of contraceptives in their marriage. To their chagrin the Catholic Church was the only Church to stand up for the biblical view of marriage as covenant and see contraceptives as opposed to marriage. The coincidence of their own study and the teaching of the Catholic Church wasn’t enough yet to bring them in. But the more Scott and Kimberly searched and learned, the more they realized that the Catholic Church was rooted firmly in the Scriptures. One by one, the misconceptions about what the Church teaches were unraveled: salvation by faith alone (sola fide), liturgy, sacraments, Eucharist. It was the encounter with the Mass that was the last piece of the puzzle for Scott in particular. In the Mass, he saw Scripture come alive. After all his study it was in the Mass and the Eucharist where it all hit home. His first experience with the Mass was so personally profound, that, as the priest raised the Consecrated Host, he whispered to himself, “My Lord and My God. That’s really you! And if that’s you, then I want full communion with you. I don’t want to hold anything back.”

*Rome Sweet Home* begins with a famous quote from Archbishop Fulton Sheen, “There are not over a hundred people in the United States who hate the Roman Catholic Church; there are millions, however, who hate what they wrongly believe to be the Catholic Church.” In reading Scott and Kimberly’s story, nearly 15 years ago, I realized that this quote applied to me. While I didn’t hate the Church, I certainly had many misconceptions about it. The clarity of their explanations as they interweave their narrative makes this a very easy and enjoyable read. I highly recommend this to life-long Catholics, to fallen away Catholics, to Protestant friends and family, to anyone looking for Truth.
book that helped me discover even more depth to my newfound love.

The title Crossing the Tiber is drawn from the geography of Rome. Just down the street from the Vatican is the Tiber River, or Tevere in Italian. The Vatican is on the west side of the river; classical Rome is on the east side. To become Catholic, then, is often described as crossing the Tiber to approach the Vatican. Steve Ray came from an Evangelical Protestant and Baptist background, worked in evangelization, and specialized in convincing Catholics to leave the Church in favor of "Biblical Christianity."

Eventually, however, he began to see a problem with non-Catholic Christianity. His own words express it perfectly:

"How do most Americans choose their church? The same way they choose their restaurant. At lunch time we drive down Main Street. On one side of the street is Burger King, McDonald’s, KFC and Pizza Hut. How do I choose? Easy! What do I feel like today?"

"Now it is Sunday morning and I drive down Main Street again. On the other side of the street I find Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Mormon.... How do I choose where to go? Again it is very simple. What do I feel like this morning? Do I want good preaching or a good children’s ministry? Do I want a pastor who meddles in my choices or someone who makes me feel good? Americans too often pick their church the way they pick their restaurant."

When a long-time friend and evangelical pastor, Al Kresta, decided to convert to Catholicism, Steve decided he had to convince him not to do it. Knowing that Kresta understood the Bible extremely well, Steve Ray decided that reasoning from Scripture would not be effective. So, he undertook a study of the early Church to prove that the earliest Christians were more like Protestants than Catholics. To his dismay, he discovered that the theology and practices of the early Church were entirely Catholic. Crossing the Tiber is the book which came out of this study.

You should buy both of these books and read them for your own faith knowledge. Once you own them, I expect you will find people who can use them, like I did. At first, I called it a "loan" and tried to retrieve them, but then I realized I wanted them to go. I want them passed from hand to hand, because that’s how we are intended to pass on the Catholic faith. Sometimes, I’m not as articulate as I’d like to be, and maybe I can’t call to mind a specific verse of Scripture, or remember which second century bishop preached on a certain topic, but I can always say, "Here is a book you would like. It answers a lot of the questions you are asking."