

Conversion Story of Marcus Grodi

What Is Truth? *by Marcus C. Grodi*

I am a former Protestant minister. Like so many others who have trodden the path that leads to Rome by way of that country known as Protestantism, I never imagined I would one day convert to Catholicism. By temperament and training I'm more of a pastor than a scholar, so the story of my conversion to the Catholic Church may lack the technical details in which theologians traffic and in which some readers delight. But I hope I will accurately explain why I did what I did, and why I believe with all my heart that all Protestants should do likewise.

I won't dwell on the details of my early years, except to say that I was raised by two loving parents in a nominally Protestant home, and I went through most of the experiences that make up the childhood and adolescence of the typical American baby-boomer. I was taught to love Jesus and go to church on Sunday. I also managed to blunder into most of the dumb mistakes that other kids in my generation made. But after a season of teenage rebellion, when I was twenty years old, I experienced a radical re-conversion to Jesus Christ. I turned away from the lures of the world and became serious about prayer and Bible study.

As a young adult, I made a recommitment to Christ, accepting him as my Lord and Savior, praying that he would help me fulfill the mission in life he had chosen for me. The more I sought through prayer and study to follow Jesus and conform my life to his will, the more I felt an aching sense of longing to devote my life entirely to serving him. Gradually, the way dawn's first faint rays peek over a dark horizon, the conviction that the Lord was calling me to be a minister began to grow.

That conviction grew steadily stronger while I was in college and then afterwards during my job as an engineer. Eventually I couldn't ignore the call. I was convinced the Lord wanted me to become a minister, so I quit my job and enrolled in Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in suburban Boston. I acquired a master of divinity degree and was shortly thereafter ordained to the Protestant ministry.

My six-year-old son, Jon-Marc, recently memorized the Cub Scouts' oath, which goes in part: "I promise to do my best, to do my duty to God and my country." This earnest boyhood vow rather neatly sums up my own reasons for giving up a career in engineering in order to serve the Lord with complete abandon in full-time ministry. I took my new pastoral duties seriously, and I wanted to perform them correctly and faithfully, so that at the end of my life, when I stood face-to-face before God, I could hear him speak those all-important words: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

As I settled down into the rather pleasant life of a Protestant minister, I felt happy and at peace with myself and God ? I finally felt that I had arrived.

I had not arrived. I soon found myself faced with a host of confusing theological and administrative questions. There were exegetical dilemmas over how to correctly interpret difficult biblical passages and also liturgical decisions that could easily divide a congregation. My seminary studies had not adequately prepared me to deal with this morass of options.

I just wanted to be a good pastor, but I couldn't find consistent answers to my questions from my fellow minister friends, nor from the "how to" books on my shelf, nor from the leaders of my Presbyterian denomination. It seemed that every pastor was expected to make up his own mind on these issues.

This "reinvent the wheel as often as you need to" mentality that is at the heart of Protestantism's pastoral ethos was deeply disturbing to me. "Why should I have to reinvent the wheel?" I asked myself in annoyance. "What about the Christian ministers down through the centuries who faced the same issues? What did they do?"

Protestantism's emancipation from Rome's "manmade" laws and dogmas and customs that had "shackled" Christians for centuries (that, of course, was how we were taught in seminary to view the "triumph" of the Reformation over Romanism) began to look a lot more like anarchy than genuine freedom.

I didn't receive the answers I needed, even though I prayed constantly for guidance. I felt I had exhausted my resources and didn't know where to turn. Ironically, this frustrating sense of being out of answers was providential. It set me up to be open to answers offered by the Roman Catholic Church. I'm sure that if I had felt that I had all the answers I wouldn't have been able or willing to investigate things at a deeper level.

A breach in my defense.

In the ancient world, cities were built on hilltops and ringed with stout walls that protected the inhabitants against invaders. When an invading army laid siege to a city, as when Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem in 2 Kings 25:1-7, the inhabitants were safe as long as their food and water held out and for as long as their walls could withstand the onslaught of the catapult's missile and the sapper's pick. But if the wall was breached, the city was lost.

My willingness to consider the claims of the Catholic Church began as a result of a breach in the wall of the Reformed Protestant theology that encircled my soul. For nearly forty years I labored to construct that wall, stone-by-stone, to protect my Protestant convictions. The stones were formed from my personal experiences, seminary education, relationships, and my successes and failures in the ministry. The mortar that cemented the stones in place was my Protestant faith and philosophy. My wall was high and thick and, I thought, impregnable against anything that might intrude.

But as the mortar crumbled and the stones began to shift and slide, at first imperceptibly, but later on with an alarming rapidity, I became worried. I tried hard to discern the reason for my growing lack of confidence in the doctrines of Protestantism. I wasn't sure what I was seeking to replace my Calvinist beliefs, but I knew my theology was not invincible. I read more books and consulted with theologians in an effort to patch the wall, but I made no headway.

I reflected often on Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths." This exhortation both haunted and consoled me as I grappled with the doctrinal confusion and procedural chaos within Protestantism.

The Reformers had championed the notion of private interpretation of the Bible by the individual, a position I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable with, in light of Proverbs 3:5-6. Bible-believing Protestants claim they do follow the teaching in this passage by seeking the Lord's guidance. The problem is that there are thousands of different paths of doctrine down which Protestants feel the Lord is directing them to travel. And these doctrines vary widely according to denomination.

I struggled with the questions, "How do I know what God's will is for my life and for the people in my congregation? How can I be sure that what I'm preaching is correct? How do I know what truth is?" In light of the doctrinal mayhem that exists within Protestantism each denomination staking out for itself doctrine based on the interpretations of the man who founded it - the standard Protestant boast, "I believe only in what the Bible says," began to ring hollow. I professed to look to the Bible alone to determine truth, but the Reformed doctrines I inherited from John Calvin, John Knox and the Puritans clashed in many respects with those held by my Lutheran, Baptist, and Anglican friends.

In the Gospel Jesus explained what it means to be a true disciple (cf. Matt. 19:16-23). It's more than reading the Bible, or having your name in a church membership roster, or regularly attending Sunday services, or even praying a simple prayer of conversion to accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. These things, good though they are, by themselves don't make one a true disciple of Jesus. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means making a radical commitment to love and obey the Lord in every word, action, and attitude, and to strive to radiate his love to others. The true disciple, Jesus said, is willing to give up everything, even his own life, if necessary, to follow the Lord. I was deeply convinced of this fact, and as I tried to put it into practice in my own life (not always with much success) I also did my best to convince my congregation that this call to discipleship is not an option - it's something all Christians are called to strive for. The irony was that my Protestant theology made me impotent to call them to radical discipleship, and it made them impotent to hear and heed the call.

One might ask, "If all it takes to be saved is to confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead" (Rom. 10:9), then why must I change? Oh, sure, I should change my sinful ways. I should strive to please God. But if I don't, what does it really matter? My salvation is assured."

There's a story about a newspaper reporter in New York City who wanted to write an article on what people consider the most amazing invention of the twentieth century. He hit the streets, interviewing people at random, and received a variety of answers: the airplane, the telephone, the automobile, computers, nuclear energy, space travel, and antibiotic medicine. The answers went on along these lines until one fellow gave an unlikely answer: "It's obvious. The most amazing invention was the thermos." "The thermos?" queried the reporter, eyebrows raised.

"Of course. It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold."

The newspaperman blinked. "So what?"

"How does it know?" This anecdote had meaning for me. Since it was my duty and desire to teach the truth of Jesus Christ to my congregation, my growing concern was, "How do I know what is truth and what isn't?" Every Sunday I would stand in my pulpit and interpret Scripture for my flock, knowing that within a fifteen mile radius of my church there were dozens of other Protestant pastors - all of whom believed that the Bible alone is the sole authority for doctrine and practice - but each was teaching something different from what I was teaching. "Is my interpretation of Scripture the right one or not?" I'd wonder. "Maybe one of those other pastors is right, and I'm misleading these people who trust me."

There was also the knowledge - no, the gut-twisting certitude - that one day I would die and stand before the Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Judge, and I would be required to answer not just for my own actions but also for how I led the people he had given me to pastor. "Am I preaching truth or error?" I asked the Lord repeatedly. "I think I'm right, but how can I know for sure?"

This dilemma haunted me. I started questioning every aspect of my ministry and Reformed theology, from insignificant issues to important ones. I look back now with a certain embarrassed humor at how I fretted during those trying days of uncertainty. At one point I even wrangled with doubts over whether or not to wear a clerical collar. Since there is no mandatory clerical dress code for Presbyterian ministers some wear collars, some wear business suits, some robes, and others a combination of all. One minister friend kept a clerical collar in the glove compartment of his car, just in case donning it might bring some advantage to him, "like getting out of a speeding ticket!", he once confided with a conspiratorial grin. I decided not to wear a clerical collar. At Sunday services I wore a plain black choir robe over my business suit. When it came to the form and content of Sunday liturgy every church had its own views on how things should be done, and each pastor was free to do pretty much whatever he wanted within reason.

Without mandated denominational guidelines to steer me, I did what all the other pastors were doing: I improvised. Hymns, sermons, Scripture selections, congregational participation, and the administration of baptism, marriage, and the Lord's Supper were all fair game for experimentation. I shudder at the memory of one particular Sunday when, in an effort to make the youth service more interesting and "relevant," I spoke the Lord's words of consecration, "This is my Body, this is my Blood, do this in memory of me," over a pitcher of soda pop and a bowl of potato chips.

Theological questions vexed me the most. I remember standing beside the hospital bed of a man who was near death after suffering a heart attack. His distraught wife asked me, "Is my husband going to heaven?" All I could do was mouth some sort of pious but vague "we-must-trust-in-the-Lord" reassurance about her husband's salvation. She may have been comforted but I was tormented by her tearful plea. After all, as a Reformed pastor I believed John Calvin's doctrines of predestination and perseverance of the saints. This man had given his life to Christ, he had been regenerated, and was confident that he was one of God's elect. But was he?

I was deeply unsettled by the knowledge that no matter how earnestly he may have thought he was predestined for heaven (it's interesting that all who preach the doctrine of predestination firmly believe they themselves are one of the elect), and no matter how sincerely those around him believed he was, he may not have gone to heaven.

And what if he had secretly "backslidden" into serious sin and been living in a state of rebellion against God at the moment his heart attack caught him by surprise? Reformed theology told me that if that were the case, then the poor fellow had simply been deluded by a false security, thinking he was regenerated and predestined for heaven when in fact he had been unregenerated all along and on his way to hell. Calvin taught that the Lord's elect will - must - persevere in grace and election. If a person dies in a state of rebellion against God he proves he never was one of the elect. "What kind of absolute assurance was that?" I wondered.

I found it harder to give clear, confident answers to the "will my husband go to heaven?" kinds of questions my parishioners asked. Every Protestant pastor I knew had a different set of criteria that he listed as "necessary" for salvation. As a Calvinist I believed that if one publicly accepts Jesus as his Lord and Savior, one is saved by grace through faith. But even as I consoled others with these fine-sounding words, I was troubled by the worldly and sometimes grossly sinful lifestyles these now-deceased members of my congregation had lived. After just a few years of ministry I began to doubt whether I should continue.

Consider the sparrows.

I rose one morning before dawn and, taking a folding chair, my journal, and a Bible, went out into a quiet field beside my church. It was the time of day I most love, when the birds are singing the world awake. I often marvel at the exuberance of birds in the early morning. What wonderfully short memories they have! They begin each day of their simple existences with a symphony of praise to the Lord who created them, utterly unconcerned with cares or plans.

Sometimes, I'd "consider the sparrows" and meditate on the simplicity of their lives. Sitting quietly in the middle of the dew-covered field waiting for the sun to come up, I read Scripture and meditated on these questions that had been troubling me, placing my worries before the Lord. The Bible warned me not to "lean unto my own understanding," so I was determined to trust in God to guide me. I was contemplating leaving the pastorate, and I saw three options. One was to become the lead of youth ministry at a large Presbyterian Church that had offered

me the position. Another was to leave ministry altogether and go back to engineering. The other possibility was to return to school and round out my scientific education in an area that would open even more doors to me professionally. I had been accepted into a graduate program in molecular biology at Ohio State University. I mulled over these options, asking God to guide my steps. "An audible voice would be great," I smiled, as I closed my eyes and waited for the Lord's answer. I had no idea what form The Answer would take, but it was not long in coming.

My reveries ended abruptly when a merrily chirping sparrow flew past and pooped on my head! "What are you saying to me, Lord?" I cried out with the anguish of Job. The trilling of the birds was the only response. There was no voice from heaven (not even a snicker), just the sounds of nature waking from its slumber in an Ohio cornfield.

Was it a divine sign or merely Brother Bird's editorial comment on my worries? In disgust I folded up the chair, grabbed my bible, and went home. Later that day when I told my wife Marilyn about the three options I was considering and the messy incident with the bird, she laughed and exclaimed with her typical wisdom, "The meaning is clear, Marcus. God is saying 'None of the above!'"

Although I'd have preferred a less humiliating method of communication, I knew nothing occurs by accident, and that neither sparrows nor their droppings fall to earth without God's knowledge. I took this as at least a comical hint from God to remain in the ministry.

But I still knew my situation was not right. Maybe what I needed was a bigger church with a bigger budget and a bigger staff. Surely, then I'd be happy. So, I struck off in the direction of the "bigger-is-better" church that I thought would satisfy my restless heart. Within six-months I found one I liked and whose very large congregation seemed to like me. They offered me the post of senior pastor complete with an office staff and a budget ten times larger than the one I had at my previous church. Best of all this was a strong evangelical Church with many members who were actively interested in Scripture study and lay ministry. I enjoyed preaching before this large and largely approving congregation each Sunday.

At first I thought I had solved the problem, but after only one month, I realized that bigger was not better. My frustration merely grew proportionately larger. Polite smiles beamed up at me during each sermon, but I wasn't blind to the fact that for many in the congregation my passionate exhortations to live a virtuous life merely skittered across a veneer of religiosity like water droplets on a hot skillet. Many said, "Great sermon! It really blessed me!" But I sensed what they really thought was, "That's nice for other people, Pastor - for sinners. But I've already arrived. My name's already on the heavenly rolls. I don't need to worry about all this stuff, but I sure do agree with you, Pastor, that we've got to tell all the sinners to get right with God."

One day I found myself standing before the local presbytery as spokesman for a group of pastors and laymen who were defending the idea that when we use parental language for God in communal prayer, we should call him "Father", not "mother" or "parent." I defended this position by appealing to Scripture and Christian tradition. To my dismay I realized that the faction I represented was in the minority and that we were fighting a losing battle. This issue would be settled not by a well-reasoned appeal to Scripture or Church history, but by a vote - the majority of votes being pro-gender-neutral-language liberals. It was at this meeting that I first recognized the anarchistic principle that lies at the center of Protestantism.

These liberals (grievously wrong as they were in their scheme to reduce God to the mere functions of "creator," "redeemer," and "sanctifier," instead of the Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), were just being good Protestants. They were simply following the course of protest mapped out for them by their theological ancestors Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers. The Reformation maxim of "I will not abide by a teaching unless I believe it is correct and biblical" was being invoked by these liberal Protestants in favor of their protest against masculine names for God. All of a sudden it hit me that I was observing Protestantism in the full solipsistic glory of its natural habit: protest. "What kind of church am I in?" I asked myself dejectedly as the vote was taken and my side lost.

About this time my wife, Marilyn, who had been the director of a pro-life crisis pregnancy center, began challenging me to grapple with the inconsistency of our staunch pro-life convictions and the pro-choice stance of our Presbyterian denomination. "How can you be a minister in a denomination that sanctions the killing of unborn babies?" she asked.

The denominational leadership had bowed under the pressure from radical feminists, homosexual, pro-abortion, and other extremist pressure groups within the denomination and (though ostensibly members of individual congregations could hold pro-life views) imposed stringent liberal guidelines on the hiring process for new pastors.

When she woke me up to the fact that a portion of the donations my congregation forwarded to the Presbyterian General Assembly were most likely paying for abortions, and there was nothing I nor my congregation could do about it, I was stunned. Marilyn and I knew we had to leave the denomination, but where would we go? This question led to another: Where am I going to find a job as a minister? I purchased a book that listed the details of all major Christian denominations and began evaluating several of the denominations that interested me.

I'd read the doctrinal summaries and think, "This one is nice, but I don't like their view on baptism," or "This one is okay, but their view of the end times is a bit too panic-ridden," or "This one sounds exactly like what I'm looking for, but I'm uncomfortable with their style of worship." After examining every possibility and not finding one that I liked, I shut the book in frustration. I knew I was leaving Presbyterianism but I had no idea which was the "right" denomination I was to go into. There seemed to be something wrong with each of them. "Too bad I can't customize my 'perfect' church," I thought to myself wistfully.

Around this time a friend from Illinois called me on the phone. He, too, was a Presbyterian pastor and had heard through the grapevine that I was planning to leave the Presbyterian denomination.

"Marc, you can't leave the church!" he scolded. "You must never leave the church. You're committed to the church. It shouldn't matter that some theologians and pastors are off the wall. We've got to stick with the church, and work for renewal from within! We must preserve unity at all costs!"

"If that's true," I replied testily, "why did we Protestants break away from the church in the first place?" I don't know where those words came from. I had never in my life given even a passing thought as to whether or not the Reformers were right to break away from the Catholic Church. It was the essential nature of Protestantism to

attempt to bring renewal through division and fragmentation. The motto of the Presbyterian Church is "reformed, and always reforming." (It should add: "and reforming, and reforming, and reforming, and reforming, etc.")

I could leave for another denomination, knowing that eventually I might move to another when I become dissatisfied, or I could decide to stay where I was and take my lumps. But then how could I justify staying where I was? Why shouldn't I return to the previous denominational group we Presbyterians had defiantly broken away from? None of these options seemed right, so I decided that I would leave the ministry until I resolved the issue one way or the other.

Returning to school seemed to be the easiest way to take a breather from all of this, so I enrolled in a graduate program in molecular biology at Case Western Reserve University. My goal was to combine my scientific and theological backgrounds into a career in bio-ethics. I figured that a Ph.D. in molecular biology would win me a better hearing among scientists than would a degree in theology or ethics. Besides, earning a Ph.D. in theology or ethics required learning Latin and German, and at 39 I figured my brain cells were a little too far in decline for that type of mental rigor.

The commute to the Cleveland campus took over an hour each way, and for the next eight months I had plenty of quiet time for introspection and prayer. Soon I was deeply immersed in a genetic engineering research project, which involved the removal and reproduction of human DNA taken from homogenized male kidneys. The program was very challenging, but I loved it, although compared to the complexities of amino acids and biochemical cycles, wrestling with Latin conjugations and German declension endings suddenly seemed a lot easier.

The project fascinated and frightened me. I relished the intellectual stimulation of scientific research, but I also saw how dehumanizing the research lab can be. Genetic tissue harvested from the cadavers of deceased patients at the Cleveland Clinic were sent to our lab for DNA research. I was deeply moved by the fact that this tissue had come from people - moms and dads, children, and grandparents who had once lived and worked and laughed and loved, but who were now dead. In the lab these neatly numbered vials of tissue were just tubes of "stuff", experimental "material" that was utterly dissociated from the human person to whom it once belonged.

I wrote an essay on the ethical problems involved with fetal tissue transplantation and began speaking to Christian groups about the dangers and blessings of modern biological technology. Things seemed to be going according to plan, at least until I realized that the real reason for my return to school was not to get a degree. It was so that I might buy a copy of the local Cleveland newspaper.

One Friday morning, after a long drive into Cleveland, I was eating breakfast and killing time before class, trying to stay awake. Normally I'd squeeze a little study time, but this morning I did something unusual: I bought a copy of The Plain Dealer. As I slipped the quarter into the newspaper machine I had no way of knowing I had come to a momentous fork in the road and was about to start down a path that would lead me out of Protestantism and into the Catholic Church (I suppose if I had known where it would lead I would have gone the other way). Skimming through, with only nominal interest, I came across a small advertisement that jumped out at me: "Catholic theologian, Scott Hahn, to speak at local Catholic parish this Sunday afternoon."

I choked on my coffee. "Catholic theologian, Scott Hahn?" It couldn't be the Scott Hahn I used to know. We had attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary together back in the early 80's. Back then he was a staunch Calvinist anti-Catholic, the staunchest on campus! I'd been on the fringe of an intense Calvinist study group which Scott lead, but while Scott and others spent long hours scouring the Bible like detectives trying to uncover every angle of every theological implication, I played basketball.

Though I hadn't seen Scott since he graduated in 1982, I had heard the dark rumor floating around that he'd become Catholic. I hadn't thought much about it. Either the rumor was false, contrived by someone who was offended by (or jealous of) the intensity of Scott's conviction, or else Scott had flipped. I decided to make the hour and a half trip to find out. I was totally unprepared for what I discovered.

Much learning hath made you mad!

I was nervous as I pulled into the parking lot of the huge gothic structure. I had never been inside a Catholic Church, and I didn't know what to expect. I entered the church quickly, skirting the holy water fonts, and scuttled down the aisle, unsure of the correct protocol for getting into the pew. I knew Catholics bowed, or curtsied, or did some sort of jig-like obeisance toward the alter before entering the pew, but I just slipped in and scrunched down, happy not to have been recognized as a Protestant.

After a few minutes of no grim faced usher tapping me on the shoulder and jerking his thumb back toward the door - "Come on, pal, hit the road. We all know you're not Catholic" - I began to relax and gape at the strange but undeniably beautiful interior of the church.

A few moments later Scott strode to the podium and began his talk with a prayer. When he made the sign of the cross, I knew he had truly jumped ship. My heart sank. "Poor Scott." I groaned inwardly. "The Catholics got him with their clever arguments." I listened intently to his talk on the Last Supper entitled "The Fourth Cup," trying hard to detect the errors in his thinking. But I couldn't find any. (Scott's talk was so good I plagiarized most of it in my next communion sermon.)

As he spoke, using Scripture at each step to support Catholic teaching on the Mass and the Eucharist, I found myself mesmerized by what I heard. Catholicism was being explained in a way I had never imagined possible - from the Bible! As he explained them, the Mass and the Eucharist were not offensive or foreign to me. At the end of his talk, when Scott issued a stirring call to a radical conversion to Christ, I wondered if maybe he had only feigned conversion so he could infiltrate the Catholic Church to bring about renewal and conversion of spiritually-dead Catholics.

It didn't take long before I found out. After the audience's applause subsided I went up front to see if he would recognize me. He was surrounded by a throng of people with questions. I stood a few feet away and studied his face as he spoke with his typical charm and conviction to the large knot of people.

Yes, this was the same Scott I knew in seminary. He now sported a mustache and I a seasonal full beard (quite a change from our clean cut seminary days), but when he turned in my direction his eyes sparkled as he grinned a silent hello.

In a moment we stood together, clasped in a warm handshake, he apologizing if he had offended me in any way. "No, of course not!" I assured him as we laughed with the sheer delight of seeing each other again. After a few moments of obligatory "How's-your-wife-and-family?" chitchat, I blurted out the one thought on my mind. "I guess it's true what I heard. Why did you jump ship and become Catholic?"

Scott gave me a brief explanation of his struggle to find the truth about Catholicism (the throng of people listened intently as he gave his mini-conversion story), and suggested I pick up a copy of his conversion story tape, copies of which were being snapped up briskly at the literature table in the vestibule. We exchanged phone numbers and shook hands again, and I headed for the back of the church where I found a table covered with tapes on the Catholic faith done by Scott and his wife Kimberly, as well as tapes by Steve Wood, another convert to Catholicism who had studied at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. I bought a copy of each tape and a copy of a book Scott had recommended, Karl Keating's *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*.

Before I left, I stood in the back of the church, taking in for a moment the strange yet attractive hallmarks of Catholicism that surrounded me: icons and statues, ornate altar, candles, and dark confessional booths. I stood there for a moment wondering why God had called me to this place, then I stepped into the cold night air, my head dizzy with thought and my heart flooded with a confusing jumble of emotions.

I went to a fast food restaurant, got a burger for the long drive home, and slipped Scott's conversion tape into the player, planning to discover where he had gone wrong. I didn't get half way home before I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I had to pull off the highway so I could clear my head.

Even though Scott's journey to the Catholic Church was very different than mine, the questions he and I grappled with were essentially the same. And the answers he found which had so drastically changed his life were very compelling. His testimony convinced me that the reasons for my growing dissatisfaction with Protestantism couldn't be ignored. The answers to my questions, he claimed, were found in the Catholic Church. The idea pierced me to the core.

I was at once frightened and exhilarated by the thought that God might be calling me into the Catholic Church. I prayed for awhile, my head resting on the steering wheel, collecting my thoughts before I started the car again and drove home.

The next day, I opened *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, and read straight through, finishing the final chapter, that night. As I prepared to retire for the night, I knew I was in trouble! It was clear to me now that the two central dogmas of the Protestant Reformation, *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) and *sola fide* (justification by faith alone), were on very shaky biblical ground, and therefore so was I.

My appetite thus whetted, I began reading Catholic books, especially the early Church Fathers, whose writings helped me understand the truth about Catholic history prior to the Reformation. I spent countless hours debating with Catholics and Protestants, doing my best to subject Catholic claims to the toughest biblical arguments I could find. Marilyn, as you might guess, was not pleased when I told her about my struggle with the claims of the Catholic Church. Although at first she told me, "This too will pass," eventually she too became intrigued with the things I was learning, and began studying for herself.

As I waded through book after book, I shared with her the clear and common sense teachings of the Catholic Church I was discovering. More often than not we would conclude together how much more sense and how much truer to Scripture the views of the Catholic Church seemed than anything we had found in the wide range of Protestant opinions. There was depth, an historical strength, a philosophical consistency to the Catholic positions we encountered. The Lord worked an amazing transformation in both our lives, coaxing us along, side by side, step by step, together all the way.

But, with all these good things we were finding in the Catholic Church, we were also confronted by some confusing and disturbing issues. I encountered priests who thought me strange for considering the Catholic Church. They felt that conversion was unnecessary. We met Catholics who knew little about their faith, and whose life-styles conflicted with the moral teachings of their Church. When we attended masses we found ourselves unwelcomed and unassisted by anyone. But in spite of these obstacles blocking our path to the Church, we kept studying and praying for the Lord's guidance.

After listening to dozens of tapes and digesting several dozen books, I knew I could no longer remain a Protestant. It had become clear that the Protestant answer to church renewal was, of all things, unscriptural. Jesus had prayed for unity among his followers, and Paul and John both challenged their followers to hold fast to the truth they had received, not letting opinions divide them. As Protestants we had become infatuated by our freedom, placing personal opinion over the teaching authority of the Church. We believed that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is enough to lead any sincere seeker to the true meaning of Scripture.

The Catholic response to this view is that it is the mission of the Church to teach with infallible certitude. Christ promised the apostles and their successors, "He who listens to you listens to me. And he who rejects you rejects me and rejects the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16). The early Church believed this too. A very compelling passage leaped out at me one day while I was studying Church history:

The Apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ was sent from God. Christ, therefore, is from God, and the Apostles are from Christ. Both of these orderly arrangements, then, are by God's will. Receiving their instructions and being full of confidence on the account of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and confirmed in faith by the Word of God, they went forth in the complete assurance of the Holy Spirit, preaching the Good News that the kingdom of God is coming. Through countryside and city they preached; and they appointed their earliest converts, testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. Nor was this a novelty: for bishops and deacons had been

written about a long time earlier. Indeed, Scripture somewhere says: "I will set up their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith (Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians 42:1-5 [ca. A.D. 80]).

Another patristic quote that helped breach the wall of my Protestant presuppositions was this one from Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons:

When, therefore, we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek among others the truth which is easily obtained from the Church. For the apostles, like a rich man in a bank, deposited with her most copiously everything that pertains to the truth; and everyone whosoever wishes draws from her the drink of life. For she is the entrance to life, while all the rest are thieves and robbers. That is why it is surely necessary to avoid them, while cherishing with the utmost diligence the things pertaining to the Church, and to lay hold of the tradition of truth. What then? If there should be a dispute over some kind of question, ought we not have recourse to the most ancient churches in which the apostles were familiar, and draw from them what is clear and certain in regard to that question? What if the apostles had not in fact left writings for us? Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the Churches? (Against Heresies 3,4,1 [ca. A.D. 180]).

I studied the causes for the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church of that day was desperately in need of renewal but Martin Luther and the other Reformers chose the wrong, the unbiblical, method for dealing with the problems they saw in the Church. The correct route was and still is just what my Presbyterian friend had told me: Don't leave the Church; don't break the unity of faith. Work for genuine reform based on God's plan, not man's, achieving it through prayer, penance, and good example.

I could no longer remain Protestant. To do so meant I must deny Christ's promise to guide and protect his Church and to send the Holy Spirit to lead it into all truth (cf. Matt. 16:18-19, 18:18, 28:20; John 14:16, 25, 16:13). But I couldn't bear the thought of becoming a Catholic. I'd been taught for so long to despise "Romanism" that, even though intellectually I had discovered Catholicism to be true, I had a hard time shaking my emotional prejudice against the Church.

One key difficulty was the psychological adjustment to the complexity of Catholic theology. By contrast Protestantism is simple: admit you're a sinner, repent of your sins, accept Jesus as your personal Savior, trust in him to forgive you, and you're saved.

I continued studying Scripture and Catholic books and spent many hours debating with Protestant friends and colleagues over difficult issues like Mary, praying to the saints, indulgences, purgatory, priestly celibacy, and the Eucharist. Eventually I realized that the single most important issue was authority. All of this wrangling over how to interpret Scripture gets one nowhere if there is no way to know with infallible certitude that one's interpretation is the right one. The teaching authority of the Church in the magisterium centered around the seat of Peter. If I could accept this doctrine, I knew I could trust the Church on everything else.

I read Fr. Stanley Jaki's *The Keys to the Kingdom and Upon This Rock*, and the Documents of Vatican II and earlier councils, especially Trent. I carefully studied Scripture and the writings of Calvin, Luther, and the other Reformers to test the Catholic argument. Time after time I found the Protestant arguments against the primacy of Peter simply weren't biblical or historical. It became clear that the Catholic position was the biblical one.

The Holy Spirit delivered a literal coup de grace to my remaining anti-Catholic biases when I read John Henry Cardinal Newman's landmark book, *An Essay on the Development of the Christian Doctrine*. In fact, my objections evaporated when I read 12 pages in the middle of the book in which Newman explains the gradual development of papal authority. "It is less difficulty that the papal supremacy was not formally acknowledged in the second century, then that there was no formal acknowledgment on the part of the Church of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity till the fourth. No doctrine is defined till violated."

My study of Catholic claims took about a year and a half. During this period, Marilyn and I studied together, sharing together as a couple the fears, hopes, and challenges that accompanied us along the path to Rome. We attended Mass together weekly, making the drive to a parish far enough away from our home town (my former Presbyterian Church was less than a mile from our home) to avoid the controversy and confusion that would undoubtedly arise if my former parishioners knew that I was investigating Rome.

We gradually began to feel comfortable doing all the things Catholics did at Mass (except receiving Communion, of course). Doctrinally, emotionally, and spiritually, we felt ready to formally enter the Church, but there remained one barrier for us to surmount. Before Marilyn and I met and had fallen in love, she had been divorced after a brief marriage. Since we were Protestants when we met and married, this posed no problem, as far as we and our denomination were concerned. It wasn't until we felt we were ready to enter the Catholic Church that we were informed that we couldn't do so unless Marilyn could receive an annulment of her first marriage. At first, we felt like God was playing a joke on us! Then we moved from shock to anger. It seemed so unfair and ridiculously hypocritical: we could have committed almost any other sin, no matter how heinous, and with one confession been adequately cleansed for Church admission, yet because of this one mistake our entry into the Catholic Church had been stopped dead in the water.

But then we remembered what had brought us to this point in our spiritual pilgrimage: we were to trust God with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. We were to acknowledge him and trust that he would direct our paths. It became evident to us that this was a final test of perseverance sent by God.

So Marilyn began the difficult annulment investigation process, and we waited. We continued attending Mass, remaining seated in the pew, our hearts aching while those around us went forward to receive the Lord in the Holy Eucharist and we could not. It was by not being able to receive the Eucharist that we learned to appreciate the awesome privilege that Jesus bestows on his beloved of receiving him Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Blessed Sacrament. The Lord's promise in Scripture became real to us during those Masses: "The Lord chastises the son whom he loves" (Heb. 12:6).

After a nine-month wait, we learned that Marilyn's annulment had been granted. Without further delay our marriage was blessed, and we were received with great excitement and celebration into the Catholic Church. It felt so incredibly good to finally be home where we belonged. I wept quiet tears of joy and gratitude that first Mass when I was able to walk forward with the rest of my Catholic brothers and sisters and receive Jesus in Holy Communion.

I asked the Lord many times in prayer, "What is truth?" He answered me in Scripture by saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." I rejoice that now as a Catholic I can not only know the Truth but receive him in the Eucharist.

Apologia pro a final few words sua

I think that it is important that I mention one more of John Henry Cardinal Newman's insights that made a crucial difference in the process of my conversion to the Catholic Church. He wrote: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant." This one line summarizes a key reason why I abandoned Protestantism, bypassed the Orthodox Church, and became a Catholic. Newman was right. The more I read Church history and Scripture the less I could comfortably remain Protestant. I saw that it was the Catholic Church that was established by Jesus Christ, and all the other claimants to the title "true church" had to step aside. It was the Bible and Church history that made a Catholic out of me, against my will (at least at first) and to my immense surprise. I also learned that the flip side of Newman's adage is equally true: To cease to be deep in history is to become a Protestant. That's why we Catholics must know why we believe what the Church teaches as well as the history behind these truths of our salvation. We must prepare ourselves and our children to "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks for a reason for your hope" (1 Peter 3:15). By boldly living and proclaiming our faith many will hear Christ speaking through us and will be brought to a knowledge of the truth in all its fullness in the Catholic Church. God bless you!

(This article was originally published in "Surprised By Truth," Patrick Madrid, ed., Basilica Press, San Diego, 1994.)