

5 Essential Conversions for Every New (And Not-So-New) Catholic



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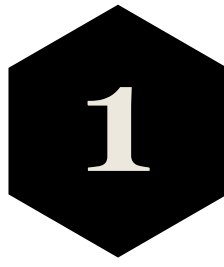
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❁ CHAPTER ONE ❁

FROM NOW TO THEN

Becoming a Catholic can be a difficult row to hoe. The process of conversion is a complex one that involves almost every aspect of a person's life. When people experience internal struggles of faith, marital discord because of possible conversion, the alienation of family members, or the loss of employment, the inherent obstacles of conversion hit them right in the face.

Yet, those who come as adults to the Catholic Church from another background do not have proprietary rights on the title of convert. The word "convert" derives from the Latin verb *convertere* and literally means "to turn to be with" (*con* = with, *vertere* = turn). It expresses the same meaning as the Greek word *metanoia*, the word used in the New Testament regularly translated as "repentance." Converts are people who have changed their life and have moved closer to God through faith and repentance. Conversion in the Catholic sense is a lifelong process of repentance (*metanoia*), faith, and good works that yields a profound

internal change of heart, ultimately leading to final union with God. In the final analysis, becoming Catholic is not about changing churches or adopting a new religion; it is a movement from Here to Eternity.

Whether one is a cradle Catholic or from outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church, conversion involves a process of change in one's worldview that reaches to the core of one's being. It is not for the faint of heart. Hidden beneath the process of conversion lie other more subtle obstacles that can be easily missed by those drawn to the Church. In their enthusiasm for a new-found faith or expression of the faith, potential converts can sometimes miss what a deep conversion really consists of. In this and the following chapters, I would like to point to five areas that are both stumbling blocks and stepping stones for converts to the Catholic Faith.

Many people who grow up in the West imbibe a philosophy of life that devalues history. It is not just that they do not know history, they often do not even think that the knowledge of history is valuable. Sometimes, the resistance to historical wisdom is submerged under misconceptions and distortions of history.

Becoming Catholic inevitably involves coming to appreciate and embrace the value of the history of the Church and the desire to be rooted in history. Of course, such a desire tends to be fostered in those who read the Bible because Scripture is dripping with a strong sense of the historical. The Old Testament constantly recounts the history of Israel so that the ancient people of God will see themselves as heirs of God's gifts and actors in God's ongoing project of salvation. The New Testament, too, repeatedly draws its readers back to the central events of salvation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, His suffering, death, and resurrection. Recall how Paul reminds the Romans that their baptisms united them with the Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:1ff) and how he reminds the Corinthians that the celebration of the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) is a proclamation of the historical death of Christ (1 Cor 11:26).

So it is not surprising that those who are immersed in the biblical history and who have cultivated a sense of history within themselves find Catholicism easier

to embrace. By contrast, those who are stuck in the Now of the Present find it difficult to move out of themselves and into the historical wisdom of the past.

Those who are willing to learn from biblical history often begin asking about the intervening time between the New Testament Church and their own day. They find themselves asking questions about the early centuries of Christian worship, piety, and doctrine which naturally leads to exploring the faith of the early Church Fathers. Contact with the writings of the Church Fathers raises the question of continuity and discontinuity. Which church, if any, stands in the closest relation to the faith of earlier generations? Some churches seem cut off from the past while others are seeking to be in union with the past. Nowhere is this difference more evident than in those mainline Protestant churches which have jettisoned cardinal doctrines and morals of past generations in favor of the current secular moral values. The abandonment of traditional Christian positions has driven historic believers to the margins. These believers, perceiving themselves on the outside of their own churches, have regularly asked where one might find a church faithful to the Christian past.

The desire to be in communion with the generations of Christians that have gone before is more than nostalgia. Continuity with the past is ultimately about *participation* in God's ongoing salvation of the human race. Those believers who become historically sensitized discover the centrality of the Church Fathers as a natural way to extend the biblical truths of salvation history. As salvation history in the Bible is more than historical fact, so that same biblical story is being lived out in the present day because the original events contain an eternal significance and meaning. Abraham's faith is as potent today as when he first heard God's promise. Peter's faith (cf. Matt 16:16-17) is still as relevant now as he when uttered that first profession of faith. Mary's fiat ("Let it be done to me according to your word" Lk 1:38) resounds down to our time as something worthy of escaping the lips of any believer. Paul's assurance that the Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20) reverberates still today as an indispensable bulwark of faith. To the historically aware believer, the past is a way of

participating in God's plan of salvation.

Swimming in or Jumping over the Stream?

Cardinal John Henry Newman, perhaps the most prominent English convert in the nineteenth century, employed the metaphor of a stream to describe the issue of history. Should one attempt to live in the stream of tradition flowing down through history from the original Church to our day? Or, should one attempt to jump over the stream of tradition intervening between early Christianity and re-establish a supposedly pristine Christianity based on one's own perceptions of the New Testament? The history of Protestantism is chock full of attempts to circumvent intervening Christian history in favor of reestablishing an imagined Church.

One of the most significant in the United States was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). It was predicated on the belief that the Church had gone off the rails at the Council of Nicaea by its affirmation of the Trinity. Though less radical and severe, thousands of other such movements sprang up in the history of Protestantism with the same desire to leap over established church traditions and to get back to "the New Testament church." The Restoration Movement of the nineteenth century, sometimes called the Stone-Campbell movement after its most prominent founders, reacted against what its founders perceived as the deadness of mainline Protestant churches with their minimal celebration of the sacraments. One of its hallmarks was the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in imitation of the churches of the New Testament. Of course, the Catholic Church had been celebrating the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) weekly for nineteen hundred years but this fact was either unknown to the founders of the Restoration movement or dismissed as irrelevant. These leaders rightly saw the centrality of the Eucharist in the worship of the early Church and its loss in the Protestantism of their day. What the Stone-Campbell movement missed, however, was that their own purely symbolist views of Baptism and the Lord's Supper were not the views of the early Church.

The American religious soil may have been fertile ground for upstart religious

movements but the water that nourished those innovative attempts flowed steadily from the Reformation itself. The original Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Cramner etc.) desired to be truly catholic — I think because they had grown up in a Catholic culture — but it did not take their followers long to splinter. By the mid-seventeenth century, Protestantism had witnessed hundreds of small sects of competing churches in England alone.

By contrast, the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century was involved in a reformation and restoration project of its own. Even at the time of the Lutheran and Calvinist reformations there were many *within* the Church who called and worked for reform. Desiderius Erasmus, Sts. Charles Borromeo, Robert Bellarmine, and Philip Neri all in their own way sought reforms within the Church. All these attempts and many more took a path very different from the Protestant Reformers. Their projects were one of realigning church structures according to their true inner meaning, a meaning that could be found in the previous history of the Church. Instead of jumping over the stream of tradition, they plumbed the depths of those traditions to place themselves and the Church squarely in the stream of the Church's best traditions. Their project was not one of jettisoning Tradition but of *understanding* it and *developing* it to live in continuity with those who had founded the Church (i.e. the Apostles) and with those who in the past had lived in conformity with those founders.

Today, the choice ultimately becomes whether to live the Christian life in continuity with the foundations of Truth or to live as if the history of the Church is irrelevant. In the next chapter we will explore how such a choice plays into the issue of private judgment versus corporate truth.



✿ CHAPTER TWO ✿

FROM PRIVATE JUDGMENT TO UNIVERSAL CONSENT

Remaining Catholic is as important as becoming Catholic. That's why it's so important to understand that conversion is not a one-time event in the life of a Catholic. In fact, every year the Church sets aside a six-week period where conversion is front and center. Lent is a time when every member of the Church is asked to acknowledge his or her need for deeper conversion.

Metanoia or true conversion begins in the mind. Even though the Bible tends to use the word heart as the center of human life, as that secret place where the battle for holiness is fought, the Scriptures are not speaking of the kind of romantic emotions that we associate with the word "heart." Call it the heart or the mind, the Catholic vision is one of being changed from the inside out. Conversion requires and brings about a profound alteration in the way we think.

In the first chapter, I stressed the high value the Church places on knowing his-

tory and living by its best lights. In the process of conversion from the present to the past, an emerging convert realizes that conversion to Catholicism is not about coming to agree with a list of doctrines that the Church teaches. It's about coming to believe that the Magisterium is the infallible guide that Christ gave to His flock. The task of determining proper Christian doctrine and morals was not given to me. It was given to the whole Church represented by the Apostles and passed on to their successors, the bishops of the Church. Embracing such a belief has a liberating effect on a person. He doesn't have to figure out every last theological issue; he can rely on the Church of the past.

Western Individualism & Catholic Universality

Becoming a Catholic represents a huge challenge for a person growing up in the West today because a Westerner imbibes the attitude that I can and should decide for myself what is right and wrong. Naturally, there is a kernel of truth in this statement in that every individual is the *agent* of his or her decisions but most everyone also takes this to mean that he or she is also the *criterion* of the decisions. It was not that long ago that this attitude was reflected in the justification for abortion, "It's my body so I get to decide. It's my choice." Of course, the pregnant woman is the one who decides; no one should dispute that. She is the agent of the decision making process. But the fact that she is the one who decides does not ensure that she will make that decision in accord with truth.

The individual convert to Catholicism is also the one who decides (i.e. the agent of the decision), but he is not the criterion of his decision. That is why it is so difficult to embrace Catholicism for a person who has become highly secularized, whether a Christian or not. Suppose a person takes a long time to study every aspect of the Catholic Faith. If this person tends to be the cautious type, such a process could last a long time. Suppose too that at the end of the process this person says, "I have studied every aspect of Catholicism inside and out and I have come to agree with every last item on the list. Now I am ready to become Catholic." Unfortunately, there is still one more vital step this person has missed. Becoming Catholic is not only a matter of agreement with the Church; it involves believing

that the Church is the one who decides in matters of faith and morals, not oneself.

Truth From Christ to Us Through the Church

Why is the Church the agent of decision making with regard to authoritative faith and morals? Very simply because it is Christ's truth which the Church must teach and which the individual Christian must follow. Jesus wrote nothing down and did not leave a book. He left His Apostles on earth to establish the Church He founded. Or, as Paul would later say, the Church "is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).

Those who take the New Testament seriously have ample evidence that Jesus intended to establish a Church that would teach His truth with His own authority. In the classic passage of Matthew 16:13-20 — the one where He names Peter as the rock on which He would build His Church — we find the startling promise, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven" (16:19). Jesus speaks in the second person singular, limiting this binding/releasing to Peter alone. Yet in Matthew 18:18 almost identical language occurs but in the plural, "Whatever you (pl) bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you release on earth will be released in heaven." Here Jesus gives the power of binding/releasing to all the Apostles for the maintenance of the Church. A natural question is why Jesus spoke in the singular in one instance and in the plural in the other. The most natural answer is that He intended both. The binding/releasing spoken of belongs to all the Apostles in union with Peter as the sign and instrument of unity.

Jesus explains His promise further in John chapters fourteen to sixteen. Here He speaks of the future ministry of the Holy Spirit as a teacher and guide:

The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of all I have said. (Jn 14:26)

Whenever the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you in all truth. He will not speak of his own (initiative) but (only) the things he hears will he declare to you

and he will declare the things to come. He will glorify me because he will take from what is mine and will declare it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that He takes from what is mine and will declare it to you. (Jn 16:13-15)

Perhaps it is these promises from Jesus' lips that prompted Luke to include the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts chapter fifteen. In that story we find the Apostles and presbyters (priests) gathering to decide whether the Gentiles must be circumcised according to the Mosaic custom to be saved. Underlying the story is a strong sense that such a question can only be decided in a universal (ecumenical) council. The role of the Holy Spirit in the final decision is mentioned in Acts 15:28, "It seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us that we should place on you no other burden than what was necessary." Here the whole Church decides the issue while being led by the Holy Spirit.

Subsequent history confirms the wisdom of this ancient idea that the whole Church is needed to decide what is the true teaching of Christ. When questions about true doctrine or even heresy arose, the Church had a strong sense that the universal Church should decide. This is why the early Church held ecumenical councils. One explanation of this belief in universality is found in the *Commonitorium* of Vincent, a fifth century monk on the island of Lérins off the coast of France:

In the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. That is truly and properly Catholic, as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally. We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, and consent. We shall follow universality if we acknowledge that one Faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is clear that our ancestors and fathers proclaimed; consent, if in antiquity itself we keep following the definitions and opinions of all, or certainly nearly all, bishops and doctors alike.

Careful reading of Vincent's words show the method of determining the content of faith and morals. The Church of the past informs present decisions (antiquity). The universal (catholic) teaching of the Church must be the basis of the decisions; and the consensus of the universal Church must be the agent of the decisions. In none of this is the notion of private judgment ever countenanced. And why? It is simply because private judgment might lead to disunity whereas corporate determinations will foster unity. And unity among His disciples is what Jesus desires for His Church (cf. Jn 17:20-21).

The Practical Value of Universal Truth

Realizing that the Church is God's chosen body of articulating Christian truth is liberating. The accent and burden no longer falls on me and my thinking but on how my thinking may be in align with the truth that the Church as a whole sees. Here a convert gradually comes to think with the Church. Whether a life-long Catholic or a new member of the Church, everyone should understand that the force of Catholicism is centripetal, i.e. towards the center of unity. The Holy Spirit is guiding the Church in its deliberations even if individuals do not always embrace the decisions.

This truth can be comforting in times when the Church and/or its leaders seem adrift from their moorings. There have been many times when the Church seemed to be adrift and there will be undoubtedly more as well in the future. But Jesus has entrusted His truth to the whole Church in union with Peter. Individuals may fail but the Church as a whole will not. We have Jesus' own promise, "I will build my Church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). The Church here and now moves in fits and starts but it will endure into eternity because the Church is God's great sacrament of love for the world.



✿ CHAPTER THREE ✿

A SACRAMENTAL WORLDVIEW

There's no denying it. The sacraments are the heart and soul of the Catholic Faith, so much so that when people speak of returning to the Catholic Church after being away for a long time, they often phrase it in terms of returning to the sacraments. The sacraments are God's answer to our human need for forgiveness, for transformation, and for holiness. Summing up a long tradition, St. Bonaventure spoke of the entire sacramental economy as a divine remedy for our original and actual sin.

The sacraments, however, are more than an answer and a remedy for sin. They are also a question. When properly understood, the sacraments ask us to live in a thought world different from the culture around us. They beg us to understand more of God and to delve more deeply into the mystical realities of heaven. They beckon us to see the Divine Presence all around us and to seek the things that are

above (Col 3:1). In short, the sacraments are part and parcel not only of a sacramental economy but of a sacramental mindset, a worldview that sees the universe differently from secular culture. A sacramental worldview involves seeing the divine in the human, the invisible in the visible, and the grace of God working through ordinary people and objects.

We have seen how being Catholic means a monumental shift from an obsession with the present and an individualistic mindset to a stance of listening to the wisdom of the ages and to a developing sense of truth greater than our personal judgments. When we recognize that we are neither the origin nor creators of truth, we begin to make our way into a much broader world of thinking and spirituality. To the docile of spirit the past can come alive by showing us the fundamental continuity of the Church throughout the ages. Those imbued with a teachable heart can also begin to accept truth as discovered by others and passed on to us. No one, however, should downplay the considerable obstacles to conversion for people who have mindlessly adopted the modern worldview. Late modern people, such as we are, tend not only to reject the past and to make themselves the criterion of truth, but even more problematically, they have built-in resistors to a sacramental view of things.

The Meaning of Sacrament

Our word “sacrament” comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, a word used prior to the spread of the gospel in the Latin-speaking world. For example, Pliny the Younger, the Governor of Bythinia in the early second century, uses the word in his famous letter to the Emperor Trajan. In briefly describing the worship of Christians, Pliny speaks of the *sacramentum* of the Christians, not in our later sense of “sacrament” — he hardly would have known that meaning — but in the sense of a “pledge” or “oath.” The early Christians chose *sacramentum* to translate the Greek *mysterion*, a word that St. Paul uses in Ephesians 3:3 and other places to describe God’s plan of redemption revealed in Christ. Because the whole plan of salvation that centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ was God’s *mysterion*, later Christians came to speak of the sacramental economy

which is extended through the sacraments. It is no wonder then that the Divine Mysteries would be called sacraments because they were the tangible means of conveying God's grace to the people of God.

Since God became flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ, Christ embodied the divine realities of the whole Trinity. The reality of God becoming Man (Incarnation) is what explains the presence of the sacraments in the Church. This truth changes everything in terms of how we view all reality, both material and immaterial. The early Church Fathers expressed this truth on many occasions and in many ways but none captured it as succinctly as St. Irenaeus in the late second century:

God instructed the people, who were prone to turn to idols, instructing them by repeated appeals to persevere and to serve God, calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real, by means of those that are typical; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual; and by the earthly to the heavenly (*Against Heresies*, bk 4, sec 3).

Here is the essence of a sacramental view of reality, the movement of the heart from things temporal to things eternal, from physical to spiritual reality, from earthly to heavenly truth. This means that the presence, love, and grace of God are not distant things but realities all around us every day. The material world is not brute fact for us; it is filled with divine presence. Chance meetings between people are not accidents, but divinely arranged encounters with the promise of grace. At the core of Catholicism is a different way of looking at the world, a view that involves seeing every natural and human thing as a manifestation of the Divine.

The Difference a Sacramental Mindset Makes

Sadly, not all Christians look at the world through sacramental eyes. Many American Protestants view the sacraments as pure symbols of an inward faith; that the faith of the individual is what makes any sacramental power possible.

“Christ alone forgives sin,” they would say, “No water in baptism or bread and wine can do that.” Thus, using water in baptism is only because it is what Christ commanded, not because baptismal water has any effect. Underlying this view is the assumption of many in the Protestant Reformation — brought to fullest expression in the English and Colonial Puritans — that God only deals directly with each human soul. The outward ordinances of the church are per se not instruments of grace. Even though John Calvin and the Calvinist tradition spoke of “means of grace,” those means were the *occasions* of God’s grace being given to the soul, not real instruments of grace.

A sacramental view of the physical world, however, sees God as choosing to use material reality as *conduits* of divine grace. Christ alone forgives sin — it is certainly true — but Christ has chosen to use the waters of baptism to convey His forgiveness and His regenerating power. The Catholic Church does not, as is sometimes ascribed to it, believe that water, bread, or wine have some inherent magical power in and of themselves. Rather, the Church believes that this divine arrangement is grace building on nature. The natural world embodies and conveys divine grace. And this is the real difference between a sacramental view of reality in Catholicism and the modern mindset of much of the West in which natural reality is just bare and brute fact.

The Church is More than Structure & Function

The difference between a flat modern worldview and a rich sacramental one becomes clear in the differing views of the church as an institution. The barren worldview of modernity views the church as just another human organization with arbitrary structures and societal functions. This is why the secular media always seems to be so uncomprehending of the Catholic Church: its doctrines, practices, and moral positions. Non-Catholic Christians in the West also tend to view the Church in this way as well, which explains why Catholic ways are so strange to them.

The sacramental view, on the other hand, sees the Church as the embodiment of Christ, priests as agents of Christ’s forgiving and life-giving grace, bishops as au-

thoritative representatives of Christ's authority, and the Pope as a real instrument of unity in the Church. The different aspects of the Church are all interrelated and interconnected. Doctrines are embodied in devotional practices (e.g., the Rosary), wisdom is mingled with moral judgments, and public prayers in the liturgy encapsulate biblical themes for everyone's benefit. The common denominator of Catholicism's diverse forms of work and worship is the enduring presence of Jesus Christ in His Mystical Body, the Church.

One of the best modern expressions of this truth came from the pen of Karl Adam in *The Spirit of Catholicism*. I must confess that I've never liked the English title of that book; in German the original was *Das Wesen des Katholizismus* or "The Essence of Catholicism." Adam was not trying to capture the "Spirit" of Catholicism in the way that post-Vatican II people talk about "spirit of Vatican II," which essentially means ignoring the details of Catholic teaching. Adam was rather attempting to get at the root of what made Catholicism tick. Among all its diverse forms and manifestations, what was the essence (*Wesen*) of Catholicism? Adam's book is full of truth and wisdom but he is at his best when he captures the meaning of this faith as wholeness:

The history of Catholicism is a bold, consistent, comprehensive affirmation of the whole full reality of revelation. Of the fullness of divinity revealed in Christ according to all the dimensions of its unfolding. It is the absolute, unconditional, and comprehensive affirmation of the whole full life of man, of the totality of his life-relations and life-sources. And it is the unconditional affirmation, above all else, of the deepest ground of our being, that is to say of the living God. (p.10)

As Adam proceeds to explain the implications of this wholeness, this catholicity (cf. *καθολικος*), he insists that Catholicism only wants "the whole Christ" and "the complete community, the *orbis terrarium*, as the medium wherein we grasp this Christ" (p. 10). In essence, the Church is more than its outward appearances, its structures and functions. It is the living Body of Christ.

The Church itself then is a mystery, a sacrament of God's presence and working in the world. Because the Church and her members are "hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3), she and they will always be, to some extent, incomprehensible to the outside world. As a sacramental reality, the Church appears ordinary and even pedestrian but within her visible structures lie an invisible, spiritual power to sanctify the world.

The Eternity of the Sacraments

When one develops a sacramental worldview, he realizes how unfathomable invisible reality is. With physical and finite things there is always a finite amount of knowledge that is to be had. Although in practical life we may not know all that is to be known of the material world, this is because of the limitations of time. Thus, in the sciences, given enough time, we could in principle know all of material reality because the objects known are physical, finite, and limited. It is quite otherwise with invisible realities; they possess an infinite depth that is forever beyond our knowledge. The deeper we pierce into the invisible realities of God, and the denizens of heaven, the more unfathomable they become. A sacramental view of reality sees the invisible in the visible and the divine presence in every physical creature. The spiritual is underneath, around, and within the physical although it is never to be fully possessed by us.

Becoming Catholic has never been easy but it may be more difficult now than ever. Seeing the world as flat, lifeless, and meaningless poses seemingly insurmountable obstacles to conversion but, once a person is willing to see physical reality as suffused with God's presence and a conduit of grace, he has taken the first step toward deep conversion. The eternity promised in the future becomes the eternity grasped in the present for eternal life is simply to know God and Jesus Christ whom He sent.

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❁ CHAPTER FOUR ❁

FROM A CHURCH TO THE CHURCH

Conversion to Catholicism often involves tough choices and a transformation in a person's thinking. This is nowhere more evident than in one's thinking about the Church. Even many lifelong Catholics have difficulty thinking about the Church properly, much less thinking *with the Church*. One reason is that they have adopted many secular ideas from the culture around them.

Ongoing conversion or *metanoia* requires facing truth over and over again. Yet, facing truth is difficult; it requires an inner disposition of humility. Humility is not self-deprecation, much less ill will toward oneself. True humility has a spirit of acceptance of the reality that stands in front of us.

What is the reality of the Church that every convert must face? In the last installment, we saw that the Church is more than an institution dispensing sacra-

ments; it is itself like a sacrament,¹ an embodiment of God's presence and life. This truth follows from Paul's rich teaching on the Church as the Body of Christ in the New Testament and it is expanded in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council (Lumen Gentium)*.

Since a sacrament makes the invisible grace of God visible and tangible, God's own life is made accessible to human beings through concrete objects like bread and wine, water, oil, human voices and gestures. If the Church is like a sacrament, the Church must be visible too. If this is true, where is that Church which is the Body of Christ, that embodiment of God's grace? What are the marks of the Church so that we recognize it when we see it? No one should ever doubt how heart wrenching this problem can be, especially for modern people. The problem of identifying the Church today is compounded by two modern facts: 1) the multiplicity of churches and 2) the doctrine of the "invisible church."

The Church Invisible?

While the idea of an invisible church has always been implicit throughout church history — it lies implicit in Paul's teaching and in the Church Fathers — the notion was developed with a new twist in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. One hundred and fifty years after the Reformation (ca. 1650), Europe could no longer be thought of as a *Corpus Christianum*. Now there were Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist churches, all claiming the name Christian and all having major conflicts of doctrine and practice among themselves. In the face of this startling diversity, some began to conceive of the church, not as identified with any one of them, but as consisting of true believers within all of them. The true church of Jesus Christ, so they said, was the body or collection of faithful Christians in churches with different creeds and different forms of worship (liturgy). The natural effect was to de-emphasize the visible church. Some went so far as to say that the visible forms of the church were manmade constructions or institutions. What really mattered to them was the body of believers scattered throughout the visible institutions. If the visible churches were man-made insti-

¹ Please see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 774-776 and *Lumen Gentium* 1.

tutions, then it was an easy step for individuals to start their own churches with their own personally formulated creeds. These people assumed without argument that the Bible authorized them to start new churches with no connection to anything preceding them. Drive down the street of almost any town in the United States and the evidence for this belief is all too evident. This “sufficiency of the invisible church” doctrine is an assumption that few ever question and which has led to the proliferation of multiple creeds, divergent moral positions, and forms of worship.

Not all forms of Protestantism equally embrace this invisible church idea. Two of the most influential Protestant theologies differed radically on this issue: the Lutheran and the Reformed. By and large, Lutheranism did and still does reject “the sufficiency of the invisible church” doctrine while the Reformed embraced it in a moderate form. Yet, it might not be an exaggeration to say that Calvinism (Reformed) was the most influential theology brought to the American colonies.

The Church Mystical

Today, there are two broad institutional bodies which reject “the sufficiency of the invisible church” doctrine: the Orthodox churches and those churches in communion with Rome (e.g. Roman or Latin, Byzantine, Maronite). While strongly affirming the invisible or mystical realities within the visible church, they also insist that the visible and the invisible cannot be separated or alienated. They are two aspects of one sacramental reality. Within the western (Roman) Catholic Church, there have been varying emphases at times. The greater emphasis has fallen on the visible with the last five hundred years, probably as a response to the Protestant tendency to emphasize the invisible church.

In the one hundred years or so prior to the Second Vatican Council, an awareness grew within Catholic circles of the need to return to the invisible, or better, the mystical dimension of the Church. Numerous articles and books on the mystical nature of the Church appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, culminating in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* of Pius XII (1943). This encyclical

cal is a treasure trove of good spirituality and theology of the Church.

The Lineaments of the New Testament Teaching

When questions and doubts abound, it is crucial that the conscientious Christian return to the sources of his faith and that means returning to the New Testament for a fresh look. A survey of different theologies of the Church (ecclesiology) shows clearly that the Catholic view differs fundamentally from other views common in western Christianity. The Catholic view involves at least five claims:

- 1) Jesus Christ established one Church, not many (the uniqueness claim).
- 2) The one Church of Christ must teach true doctrine of Christ Himself and His official representatives, the Apostles (the veridical claim).
- 3) God intended the Church to be populated with a wide diversity of peoples who bring distinctive gifts and ministries to the one Church (the diversity claim).
- 4) All diversity within the Church serves the greater purpose of unity (the centripetal claim).
- 5) The deepest and most pervasive law of the Church must be the law of love (the animating claim).

It is impossible to provide the basis of these claims in the short compass of this chapter but everyone must understand these five if his conversion is to be real and lasting. The first claim (uniqueness) says that there is ultimately only one Church on the earth and that it was established by Jesus Christ Himself. Matthew 16:18 has always been taken as the foundation of this belief, “I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” Jesus, of course, spoke in the singular (church, not churches) but He also asserted that this Church is indestructible. It will never vanish from the earth nor be eradicated by demonic influence.

The Acts of the Apostles records the ministries of Peter and especially of Paul in founding churches throughout the Roman Empire. But the whole narrative of Acts attests that the churches scattered throughout the Empire were considered one Church. This is what makes sense of the Jerusalem council where “the

apostles and the presbyters” met to determine what was necessary for the whole Church (Acts 15). The Ecumenical Councils of the ancient Church (e.g., Nicaea, Chalcedon) are further proof of the belief that the various churches strung throughout the world must be unified in doctrine. Ancient Christians embraced an idea which many modern Christians may find hard to accept. They accepted as unproblematic the idea that there is only one Church and that this Church should always be unified in the Faith.

Passages like 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and Ephesians 4:13 show that unity of doctrine or teaching is essential to the Church. Extended passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:1-30 show that God intended the Church to be populated with a diversity of people, ministries, and gifts but also that those diverse expressions of service were all intended to serve a greater unity of doctrine and love. In other words, the force of the Spirit’s work is centripetal, not centrifugal. The work of the Holy Spirit pulls all toward unity.

The only power sufficient for building a universal yet unified Church is the presence of the Holy Spirit, called by many Church Fathers “the soul of the Church.” As the soul and body can only be separated except by death, so the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the Body of Christ (the Church) except by the dissolution of the Church. And that is what Christ promised would not happen. It is the supreme law of love that Christ commanded for the Church and which the Holy Spirit infuses into the hearts of believers (see Rom 5:5). On a human level, it is the Christ-like love of the Spirit that allows the Church to be one and to present a unified witness to the world.

The Problem of the One and the Many

Ancient philosophers posed a perplexing problem that is still with us today, the problem of the One and the Many. Christians have their own problem of the One and the Many as well. Amid the dazzling varieties of the Christian Faith, Christians often fall into one of two unhappy solutions. The first is to insist that their own church is the true one while all others are false, opting for unity without

any diversity. Some see the Catholic Church in this category but this is not really accurate. The underlying question is how we know which church has a rightful claim to be the original Church that Christ founded. The opposite approach is to affirm diversity without little or no unity. Different creeds, different forms of worship, and divergent positions on moral issues are all accepted as legitimate forms of the Christian Faith. Yet, both these solutions carry with them innumerable problems.

A Christian in the twenty-first century who takes his faith and the Bible seriously is faced with a daunting challenge. The Bible teaches rather clearly that every baptized disciple of Jesus Christ is a member of the Church, but the modern Christian may have a formidable problem in knowing which church is the one Jesus established. Should he consider all churches the same, as legitimate expressions of Jesus' desire? Or is there one or a few churches which have a greater claim to Jesus' words? Every convert to Christ must eventually face this question.

5



❁ CHAPTER FIVE ❁

CONVERSION FROM NOW TO ETERNITY

When I was a boy growing up on the west coast of Florida, I used to stand on the beach looking west across the Gulf of Mexico, knowing that Mexico lay on the other side even though I had never seen it. All I could see was the line of the horizon on the water. Our expectation of heaven and being with God is much like that experience. We cannot see heaven and the horizon of our expectations is limited to the line of this world that we can see.

Just as I had it on good authority that Mexico did exist beyond the horizon, so we have it on the highest authority (God) that heaven exists. And, even more, heaven is the goal of our life. The Germans have two rhyming words which capture the essence of the Christian's hope: *diesseits* and *jenseits*. Literally, these words mean "this side" and "that side" but the latter word is often understood to refer to eternity or the life beyond this life. Few words capture more succinctly

the heart of the Christian's hope and desire. If the horizon of our expectations is limited to this world, we will be sadly disappointed for it is only in the *jenseits* of eternity that the full flowering of our conversion is realized. Conversion is only about this world in preparation for the world to come. It is the movement from here to eternity.

In past chapters, I have discussed four essential elements of conversion to Catholicism, all of which involve more than meets the eye. Becoming Catholic is not about changing churches or a system of theology, even though those are involved. Becoming Catholic is more about moving out of oneself into the wisdom of past Christian thinkers, drawing on their experience and knowledge in coming to know truth. It entails the acceptance of the Church as the teaching authority (*Magisterium*) to which every earnest Christian should gladly submit. It is about seeing the world through sacramental eyes, about divine realities under the guise of human realities. And most of all, it is about being a member of a worldwide society of people who, despite cultural and linguistic differences, are one in that Mystical Body of Christ. Yet even these four themes, as essential as they are, do not attain to the goal of conversion or *metanoia*. Without the hope of eternal life, these four essentials mean nothing. The ultimate reason to become Catholic far transcends anything in this world.

Eyes on the Prize

Eternity with God is the goal of the Christian life. But what does it mean to be with God for eternity? When people come to understand Catholicism, they begin to realize that heaven is more than simply a place for being in God's presence. Paul describes eternity in the beautiful phrase, "knowing even as we are known" (1 Cor 13:12). Paul, in describing love in 1 Corinthians 13, arrives at the perfection of love. To be loved, in short, is to be known and to love is to know for one cannot love what one does not know. But here Paul is not using know in a purely cognitive sense as if one knows that $2+2=4$. Rather, he is using it in the same sense that Genesis 4:1 has, "Adam knew Eve his wife." This is the knowledge of intimate love. If someday we are to know and love God as He knows and loves us, then this

is the perfection of our human nature.

Heaven then is not a place for being with God. It is God Himself. Being with God means being in God and therefore sharing in His life that is by its very nature eternal. This requires a purity of heart, as our Lord told us, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Mt 5:7). The language of seeing God was developed by the early and medieval theologians into the doctrine of the Beatific Vision. Based on the Latin word for happiness (*beatus*), the Beatific Vision (*beata visio*) consists of the Vision of God (*visio Dei*). And it is a blessed seeing or vision because it is the state of perfect happiness for which human beings were made. Since God is love, the Beatific Vision is to be absorbed in love.

Being absorbed in God’s Being, our human nature becomes completely divinized or deified, not to cease being human, but to find its human fulfillment in the Divine Nature. To some, no doubt, this will seem impossible or even irrational, but perhaps this is because we conceive of heaven as a place which is just a little higher version of our earthly life. We may rightly wonder how two beings, God and man, can both occupy the same space. In the physical world, it is certainly true that two beings cannot occupy the same space. But heaven is precisely that place where God’s presence not only surrounds us as the air does on earth. Rather, in the *jenseits*, the heaven of our highest horizon, God’s nature and presence penetrates as well as surrounds us. Heaven is a not specific place but a state of being in which every place is filled with God.

From There to Here: The Mystical John

If heaven is as we have said, then the practical question becomes how to get there. It is natural to think of the things we must do or the practices we must follow to arrive finally in heaven. But the real answer — and the most profound one — is not how to get from here to there but how to bring there to here for the message of the gospel is not man in search of God — that is natural religion — but God in search of man. How does the eternity of Heaven, God Himself, come from

there and *then* to the *here* and *now*? The answer lies closer than we may imagine.

Turning afresh to the Gospel of John, we begin to glimpse the pervasive message of what is probably the most mystical book of the New Testament. The Prologue to the Gospel (Jn 1:1-18) is an explanation of the origins of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, unlike Matthew and Luke who begin with Jesus' earthly life, John reaches back into the eons of eternity, to the very beginning of time. Modeling his language on Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning"), John peers into the time before time, into the invisible, intangible world for it is in that world, the world of the *Jenseits* that the true rationale (λογος) lies in explaining the origins of this world and of Jesus.

When John speaks of the Logos, he implies much more than the common translation of "Word." He is referring to the rationale or explanation of the universe and all created reality. He is pointing to the source of illumination and the life-giving reality of God as the principle and foundation of all. It is this fuller meaning that makes John 1:14 so astounding, "The Logos became flesh and dwelt among us." In John's world, the idea of the ultimate Reality of God actually becoming man, of taking on flesh, is unheard of and absurd. The Jews could not countenance the idea and the Greeks would have thought it stupidity. This is proved by how many times in the history of the Church either the humanity (e.g., Docetists) or the divinity (e.g., Arians) of Jesus was denied. But this Enfleshment, this Incarnation, is at the heart of the gospel. If it is not true, then all Christianity is a farce. The message of Christ is that the *there* and *then* of heaven has come to the *here* and *now* of earth.

John's theme of the Logos becoming flesh makes sense of the unique contribution of John to understanding Jesus of Nazareth. The presence of the divine Son of God, the Logos, in our world implies the sanctification of all physical reality. The entire universe becomes a kind of sacrament because physical things now embody spiritual realities. All the specific parts of the world can become holy, conveyors of God's grace. This is the background that makes sense of Baptism in John 3 and the Eucharist in John 6.

All the Church Fathers tell us that when Jesus said, “a man must be born of the water and of the Spirit,” He was speaking about Baptism. The perplexity of Nicodemus over this enigmatic saying prompts Jesus to bring in the perspective of eternity, “Unless a man is born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5). Nicodemus was incredulous partly because he did not understand or believe that such a ritual as Baptism could actually open up the doors of heaven. Yet, in a worldview defined by the Incarnation, and from a perspective of spiritual embodiment in physical things, eternal life is not something far off and unattainable. The beginnings of eternal life commence now.

In John 3, Jesus speaks about entry into the kingdom of God but in John 6 he speaks about the daily nourishment needed to prepare souls for the final realization of the kingdom. In this passage, Jesus does not use the term “kingdom” but “eternal life.” In John 3, Jesus speaks in the idiom of the fantastic. If water, being an agent of kingdom life sounds strange, the use of bread as a vehicle of eternal life seems ludicrous. But a careful study of the progression of thought in John 6 reveals that Jesus’ Bread of Life discourse moves from the unbelievable to the utterly impossible. And the story itself anticipates the problem when the Jews ask, “How can this man give his flesh to eat?” (6:52). This is the moment at which human reason fails and we must rely on the authority of the Son of God Himself. Still, faith in Christ’s human presence in the Eucharist is prepared for by the recognition that the impossible has already taken place, i.e., that the Logos became flesh.

There is much more in John’s Gospel. If space permitted, we could explore the Church in the Gospel focused and encapsulated in the apostolic disciples whom John says Jesus “loved as his own to the end” (Jn 13:1). Or we could plumb the depths of His words in the farewell discourse of John chapters 14-16 where Jesus promises His continuing presence among His disciples through the Person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit will now be the agent of Jesus’ teaching authority (Magisterium, see Jn 15:26; 16:8,13) and the comfort of Jesus to the disciples. Most poignantly of all, we could immerse ourselves in Jesus’ prayer in

John 17, Jesus' parting prayer for unity among His future disciples. In one important sense, this prayer is the other bookend of John 1:14. When John says that the Logos became flesh, he highlights the union of God with humanity. In John 17, Jesus is praying for the unity of all humanity with God through Himself. In other words, eternity enters the world through Jesus' Incarnation but it spreads throughout the world by the agency of Jesus' Church. Hidden under the visible structures of the Church is the eternal life and presence of Christ.

This retailing of the mysticism of John's Gospel offers us an answer to our question about how to arrive at the Beatific Vision and the experience of eternity. The only way for us to move from here to eternity is for eternity to move here. Then by returning with all the blessed in its train, eternity ushers us into a timeless existence of praise, adoration, and love. Once we are safely ensconced in eternity, we then have the one thing that alone fulfills our human nature: love, the love that is God Himself.

In the end what matters is that we experience a continual conversion of heart and mind that draws heaven down to earth so that earth may be drawn up to heaven. Then, and only then, will conversion be complete. The greatest saints have known and taught this conversion, this *metanoia* as a transformation of the whole person from the inside out. Being Catholic is about so much more than changing churches or theology. It is about so much more than something in this life, the *diesseits*. Becoming Catholic is about the path to heaven, about being renewed in the mind by a process of transformation "from glory to glory."



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