Return to ROME

CONFESSIONS of an EVANGELICAL CATHOLIC

Francis J. Beckwith

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Introduction

So far as a man may be proud of a religion rooted in humility, I am very proud of my religion; I am especially proud of those parts of it that are most commonly called superstition. I am proud of being fettered by antiquated dogmas and enslaved by dead creeds (as my journalistic friends repeat with so much pertinacity), for I know very well that it is the heretical creeds that are dead, and that it is only the reasonable dogma that lives long enough to be called antiquated.

G. K. Chesterton, from The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton (1936)

It’s difficult to explain why one moves from one Christian tradition to another. It is like trying to give an account to your friends why you chose to pursue marriage to this woman rather than another, though both may have a variety of qualities that you found attractive. It seems, then, that any account of my return to the Catholic Church, however authentic and compelling it is to me, will appear inadequate to anyone who is convinced I am wrong. Conversely, my story will confirm in the minds of many devout
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Catholics that the supernatural power of the grace I received at baptism and confirmation as a youngster were instrumental in drawing me back to Mother Church—after a sojourn of several decades in Evangelical Protestantism. Given these considerations, there is an awkwardness in sharing my journey as a published book, knowing that many fellow Christians will scrutinize and examine my reasons in ways that would appear to some uncharitable and to others too charitable. And I suspect that most of these examiners will see my reasons as mere pretexts for justifying my travel to a destination to which I had unconsciously been moving for quite some time. Nevertheless, given the public nature of my return to the Catholic Church and my former prominence in the world of Evangelical Protestant Christianity, I believe that I have a responsibility, in the words of Peter, “to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pet. 3:15a).

There are temptations I hope my Catholic and my Protestant Evangelical readers will avoid.

I hope my Catholic readers will resist any temptation to triumphalism. I, of course, believe that Catholicism is in fact true in all its dogmatic theology, including its views of scripture, ethics, church authority, ecumenical councils, etc. I also believe there are many outstanding and persuasive defenses of Catholicism, authored by minds and souls far greater than mine. But my story, because it is a return, requires a departure. And that departure, to be candid, does not speak well of the early post-Vatican II American Church. That Church was littered with dioceses, parishes, and schools that did not adequately catechize their young people with a clear and defensible presentation of the Catholic faith. Things, of course, have changed, and swaths of the American Church seem to be ridding themselves of the vestiges of that unfortunate era. The inspiring pontificates of John Paul II (1978–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005– ) have resulted in a new evangelism within the Catholic Church, especially in the United States. Those entering the priesthood seem more serious and theologically orthodox than the priests I remember from the late 1960s and 1970s.

Nevertheless, the American Church lost much as a consequence of those early post-Vatican II days. Its reluctance to properly screen
prospective priests for theological fidelity and personal chastity in the deceptively halcyon days of the sexual revolution and its aftermath, coupled with the unchristian company-man instincts of some bishops who reassigned and did not appropriately discipline wayward priests, has brought scandal to the Church in America. This is not to say that the vast majority of priests are not fine Christian men who are honorably and properly administering the sacraments. For this is in fact the case; praise be to God. Rather, it means, to borrow a phrase from Richard Weaver, that ideas have consequences, that what one believes about the nature of theological truth and personal holiness will be cashed out in the catechesis that one prepares and the prospective clergy that one selects and forms.

Not only did some post-Vatican II Catholics and their progeny embrace a secular ethos and abandon their Christian faith entirely, many Catholics, like me, were drawn to Evangelical Protestantism, since it seemed to us that Evangelicals were serious about their faith.3

My Evangelical Protestant readers may in my case face a temptation not toward triumphalism, but toward trying to find some subrational reason as to why I returned to the Catholic Church. Several commentators seemed incapable of resisting this temptation during the months following the public announcement of my return. For example, on a May 2007 episode of his radio program, the president of a major Evangelical Protestant seminary discussed my move to Catholicism with one of his school’s theologians. During their discussion they spoke kindly and graciously of my academic work and personal character. They are both honorable men for whom I have great respect. At one point in their conversation, however, one of them vocalized his amazement that someone with my intelligence could become Catholic, seeming to imply that Catholicism does not have the intellectual resources a person with real accomplishments, gifts, and theological commitments would find compelling. But that’s a road down which no Evangelical Protestant should go, unless he’s willing to hold his own theological tradition and its converts and former members to the same level of scrutiny. After all, for every well-known pastor, scholar, or writer
who as a young Catholic was drawn to the love of Jesus he or she found in Evangelical Protestant communities, there is a Protestant scholar, pastor or writer who, after years of study and reflection, was compelled to convert to Catholicism.\(^4\)

In July 2007, the Evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* published an editorial that opined about my return to the Roman Catholic Church, noting, “Evangelicals who visit Rome cannot help but enjoy the stately buildings and stirring sense of history. A few like it so much they never leave. Such is the case with Francis Beckwith, former president of the Evangelical Theological Society. In April, the Baylor University philosopher rejoined the Roman Catholic Church.” These comments suggest an account of my return that relieves the reader from any obligation to look beyond Vatican City’s architectural grandeur and ancient patrimony. One could, of course, turn the tables on this account and draw attention to Evangelical Protestantism’s disproportionate number of gaudy mega-church monstrosities that have more in common with Wal-Mart and abandoned warehouses than sacred places of worship. But that would be unfair, for it would amplify one aspect of Evangelical Protestant culture that some may find unattractive, while disregarding those expressions of its ecclesial life that are indeed appealing and draw many to the Christ that is lifted up in such venues. I should say for the record, however, that the only Rome I have ever visited is about 70 miles west of Atlanta. It is, to be sure, a fine city, one that may turn an Auburn Tiger into a Georgia Bulldog, but not a Protestant into a Roman Catholic.

Years ago, while I was studying for my PhD, Augustine’s *Confessions* had a profound impact on me. It showed me how faith and reason were not incommensurable categories that reside in the same soul side by side while never touching. Rather, they are natural human faculties designed by God for our acquisition of knowledge. When ordered to the right end, they work together in cooperation for the good of the whole person. As Augustine put it, “I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe.”\(^5\)

And yet, as a Christian philosopher, whether Protestant or Catholic, I must also take into account a third temptation, warned...
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against by Paul in Colossians 2:8–9: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (KJV). This passage reminds me of how important it is for one to remain true to the Gospel and to be diligent in recognizing the alluring temptation of being impressed by, and for that reason, more easily deceived by, one’s own philosophical speculations and professional accomplishments.

It would be a mistake, however, to read Colossians 2:8–9 as a warning against the study of philosophy. This passage is no more telling Christians to stay away from philosophy than a command not to drink poison is telling Christians to avoid all study of pharmacy. Just as one cannot tell the difference between arsenic and medicine without knowing something about pharmacology, one cannot discern the difference between bad and good philosophy or sound and unsound reasoning, without an adequate grasp of philosophical and logical principles. Paul’s example at the Aeropagus (Acts 17:16–32) shows us why Christians should take seriously the advice of C. S. Lewis: “To be ignorant and simple now—not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground—would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defence but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered” (emphasis mine).6 My mission as a Christian philosopher—both as a Protestant and a Catholic—has been, and continues to be, driven by Lewis’s important insight.

With these three temptations observed, I can say more precisely what it is I intend this book to be. What I hope to offer here is an account of a personal journey that focuses on my own internal conversation, or struggle, between the Protestant theology I embraced during most of my adult life and what I’ve come to think of as my Catholic constitution, which I have to believe had always been there. Much of this book is a celebration of the Christianity that has shaped my life, intellectually and spiritually, both in its Protestant and Catholic forms. I do indeed explain how and why my mind changed, but with respect and admiration for the Evangelical
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Protestants whom the Holy Spirit used to deepen my devotion to Christ, which I carry with gratitude into the Catholic Church. Thus, this book is a narrative intertwined with encounters, arguments, criticisms, and reflections. It is not meant to be an apologetic for Catholicism or an autobiography in the strict sense.

It is my hope that this book may effectively, with grace and charity, communicate to my fellow Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, an understanding of the reasons and internal deliberations that culminated in my departure from and eventual return to the Catholic Church.
Confession on the Brazos

For Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.

St. Augustine, from The Confessions (c. 398 AD)\(^1\)

It was a spring Texas afternoon, a little hot, not too humid. I had arrived at St. Jerome’s Catholic Church. St. Jerome’s is located in Waco, Texas, the home of my employer, Baylor University—sometimes called “Jerusalem on the Brazos.” Although the church is only about three miles from my home in the adjacent town of Woodway, my arrival on that April 28, 2007 afternoon marked a turning point in a long spiritual pilgrimage that began in 1973 in Las Vegas, Nevada. I had come to church that Saturday to receive the sacrament of reconciliation, which to many is known as confession. This ordinarily would not be such a big deal, except that it was my first confession in more than 30 years. And at the completion of the sacrament I would be in full communion with the Catholic Church. My younger brother James emailed me earlier in the week and had jokingly asked if I needed help in recalling my sins.
Of course, people become Catholic every day. But in my case, I knew that there would be ramifications: I was the president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), an academic society with nearly 4500 members. I was also a fairly well-known public intellectual who had gone through a very public tenure battle at Baylor University that had, fortunately, ended in my favor only seven months earlier.²

Upon entering the confessional, I sat face-to-face with the priest. I said, “Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been over 30 years since my last confession.” Then I said, “I’m not sure I can remember all of my sins.” In his thick East Indian accent, he replied, “That is all right. God knows them all.” I responded, “I was afraid of that.” The priest then heard my confession and granted me absolution. I found my way to the main sanctuary, where I did my penance, which consisted of one “Our Father” and one “Hail Mary.” When I told this to my wife, Frankie, she thought the priest was far too lenient. She has a thorough recollection of my sins.

During the last week of March 2007, after much prayer, counsel, and consideration, my wife and I decided to seek full communion with the Catholic Church. Given my status in ETS, I had decided—after consultation with trusted friends—not to seek to return to the Church until my term as ETS president had ended in November 2007. I would then permanently resign from the ETS executive committee. (Former presidents may be committee members for four years following their presidential terms.) I wanted to make sure that my return to the Catholic Church brought as little attention to ETS as possible. To complicate matters, I received conflicting advice from wise friends regarding how and when to address the ETS executive committee on this delicate matter. Some suggested the committee would rather not know about my reception into the Church until after the national meeting in November. These friends recommended I lie low, give a presidential address that was irenic and did not address Protestant-Catholic issues (which I had planned on doing all along), and then quietly ask not to be nominated to the executive committee for the four-year, at-large term.

Other friends, equally as wise, opined that by withholding from the executive committee my plans to return to the Church, I would...
play to prejudices that some Protestants have about “secretive Jesuit conspiracies” and the like.

Prayerful Confirmation

I did not know what to do. Frankie and I prayed and asked the Lord to provide us with clear direction. We believe we received this direction on the morning of April 20. Frankie and I were visiting in Washington, DC, having breakfast with my parents. My cell phone rang, interrupting our breakfast. It was my sixteen-year-old nephew, Dean Beckwith. Dean called to ask if I would be his sponsor when he received the sacrament of Confirmation on May 13. Several months earlier I had written a letter to Dean, at the behest of his mother. She had asked several of us, including his other aunts and uncles, to write a note to Dean explaining the importance of affirming his Christian baptism at confirmation. This is what I had written to him in a letter dated March 6, 2007:

Dear Dean:

I’m writing to offer you my encouragement as you partake in the sacrament of confirmation. I am sure you were taught much in your catechism about the meaning of confirmation and its significance in affirming in public your commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and your desire to be one of our Lord’s followers. . . . I want to focus in this letter of encouragement on the spiritual and intellectual tradition in which you find yourself. It is a tradition that includes some of the wisest, smartest, holiest, and influential minds in the history of humanity. To quote the author of Hebrews, “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . .” (Heb. 12:1).

Let us begin at the beginning. Jesus of Nazareth is the smartest and wisest man who ever lived. No one can compare with his insights, his deft combination of love, tenderness, tough-mindedness, and mercy. His life and his ideas reshaped
the ancient world and changed the trajectory of history itself. You are one of his followers. What an amazing privilege.

Either Jesus was who he said he was—the Son of God—or he was a liar, or he was a lunatic [as C. S. Lewis once put it]. These are the only options. Yet, the picture of Jesus that we receive is one of a psychologically balanced individual who had incredible wisdom concerning our duties to others and our relationship to God. He was willing to die, which means he believed himself to be who he said he was. . . . A liar may do many things, but he does not march to his death for what he knows to be false. Thus, Jesus was either a lunatic—he sincerely believed himself to be the Son of God even though he was not—or he was Lord—he sincerely believed himself to be the Son of God because he was the Son of God. As the Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis has pointed out, many people believe that Jesus was a great moral teacher. But if he was, it is unlikely that he was a lunatic. Great moral teachers are typically balanced, mature people possessing intestinal fortitude and personal integrity. Do you think the picture of Jesus we get from history and the New Testament is that of a lunatic, a David Koresh or Osama Bin Laden, bent on a single idea that is self-defeating? It does not seem that way to me. It seems to me that Jesus was neither a liar nor a lunatic. But that means that he was Lord. Those are the only options. I know that you confess Jesus as Lord. But it’s always good to remind ourselves about Jesus and why he stands out in history and why we measure history by his birth.

There are certain core-facts about Jesus’s death that virtually all scholars agree on: (1) Jesus died by crucifixion; (2) His tomb was found empty three days later; (3) His followers (the apostles and other disciples) believed that they had had experiences with Christ after his death; (4) His followers were willing to suffer death for their belief that they had met the risen Christ. These facts, which are not even disputed by most unbelieving scholars, are difficult to account for apart from Jesus actually rising from the dead.
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Although it is common for those who doubt the resurrection to say that the early church made up the story, this theory fails to account for the church itself (not to mention having no evidence in its favor). That is, Jesus’s resurrection makes sense as the cause of the early church, a body of believers who personally knew Jesus and would have recanted their belief if they knew that the resurrection was a fabrication. But not one of Jesus’s early disciples who believed that they had met Jesus after the resurrection ever recanted. In fact, many of them (including 11 of the 12 apostles) suffered horrible torture and death for their beliefs, something that does not make sense if they had made up the whole thing. Granted, people die for false beliefs. But rarely if ever does anyone die for a belief they know is false. These are some of the earliest witnesses that form the cloud that surrounds us.

Under the leadership of St. Peter and St. Paul, the church grew from a small band of believers to an international phenomenon that through its message slowly but eventually dismantled the spiritual infrastructure of the greatest empire the world had ever known, the Roman Empire. As the church moved through history, it began to reflect on its own theology and produce some of the clearest creeds ever penned, such as the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. But that is not all. The church’s finest minds were willing to wrestle with and respond to the non-Christian challenges of their day, to follow St. Paul’s instruction to take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Throughout church history, and even to this present day, gifted Christians became well versed in the philosophy, literature, sciences, and arts of their day. For they believed, as we all should believe, that all truth is God’s truth, that the Christian worldview illuminates our understanding of the world and the order and nature of things. The enormity of Christian influence in the shaping of Western civilization boggles the mind. Ideas about human nature, economics, the sciences, the arts, ethics, architecture, music, mathematics, and politics flourished.
under the direction of Christian intellectuals and leaders. According to my Baylor colleague, Professor Rodney Stark (in his book For the Glory of God [Princeton University Press, 2002]), without Christianity's understanding of God and nature, much of what we take for granted today—including our legal system, our understanding of truth, and the success of the sciences—would have never come to be.

You, indeed we, stand on the shoulders of predecessors whose beliefs about God, man, and nature—derived explicitly from their Christian faith—furnished the cultural infrastructure that gave rise to the knowledge, wealth, and liberties that make it possible for us today to freely worship God and to study his world.

The Lord has given you many gifts. Use them wisely. But do not ever forget that you now stand with that great cloud of witnesses.

It should be evident that I could not say “no” to my dear nephew, who had credited the renewal of his faith in Christ to our conversations and this correspondence. But in order for me to be his confirmation sponsor I would have to be in full communion with the Catholic Church. Because I had received the sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation all before the age of fourteen, I needed only to go to confession, request forgiveness for my sins, ask to be received back into the Church, and receive absolution. And that is what I did on that spring day in Texas, April 28, 2007. The next day I was publicly received back into the Catholic Church at the 11:00 a.m. Mass at St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Bellmead, Texas. My wife, standing beside me, was accepted as a candidate for full communion. She was received into the Church on August 18, 2007, at the culmination of her catechesis.

My Christian Vocation

Prior to my return to the Church, virtually all of my professional work in Christian philosophy and apologetics, as well as in legal,
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political, and moral philosophy, has focused on questions and issues of concern to all Christians, regardless of theological or ecclesiastical tradition. For example, long before I had thought about returning to the Catholic Church, I had written about and defended the Catholic Church’s positions on abortion, natural theology, and the natural moral law—positions held by many other non-Catholic Christians as well. The manuscript for my book, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice*, was written while I was a committed Protestant, though the publisher, Cambridge University Press, released it after I had returned to the Catholic Church. And yet, there’s nothing in *Defending Life* that a pro-life Catholic or Protestant would find inconsistent with his or her theological tradition. So, I do not anticipate my return to the Church radically altering the sort of work that I have been doing for years, and which has been well-received by Catholic and non-Catholic Christians alike.

In 2004 I coedited a book with my good friends J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *To Everyone An Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*. It was a volume in honor of our mentor and friend, Norman L. Geisler, a self-described “Evangelical Thomist.” (A “Thomist” is a follower of the great philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas [1225–74].) I authored the book’s introduction, which includes the following description of the *Christian Worldview* (notes omitted):

What do we mean when we say that Christianity is a *worldview*? What we mean is that the Christian faith is a philosophical tapestry of interdependent ideas, principles, and metaphysical claims that are derived from the Hebrew-Christian Scriptures as well as the creeds, theologies, communities, ethical norms, and institutions that have flourished under the authority of these writings. These beliefs are not mere utterances of private religious devotion, but are propositions whose proponents claim accurately instruct us on the nature of the universe, human persons, our relationship with God, human communities, and the moral life. The following is a summary of some of these beliefs.

First, there exists an eternally self-existing moral agent named God, who created the universe ex nihilo. The universe is completely

and absolutely contingent upon God for its beginning as well as its continued existence. He is, among other things, personal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, perfectly good, necessary, and infinitely wise. . . .

Second, God created human beings in his image. A human being is not merely a collection of physical parts but has an underlying unity or soul. A human being’s life is sacred from the moment that human being comes into existence; the value of a human being is not something acquired when he or she reaches a certain level of physical complexity, as many secular thinkers maintain. Because human beings are moral agents, they have the capacity to make decisions and judgments within the larger framework of family and community. Thus, for the Christian worldview, marriage, government, and church are not merely social constructions that can be shaped in any way consistent with some utopian vision of justice, but rather, are natural institutions in which and by which human beings ought to learn what is good, true, and beautiful. . . .

Third, God reveals himself both in special revelation (2 Tim. 3:14–17), the Bible, as well as general revelation. Concerning the former, if the Bible is truly God’s word, then it must be inerrant, for God himself is perfect (Mark 10:18; Heb. 6:18), and it follows logically that his Word must be as well. The Bible provides us with (1) an account of humanity’s genesis and fall, (2) a history of God’s chosen people, (3) the institution of the law of Moses and its inadequacy to redeem, (4) prophecy, prayer, wisdom and poetry, and (5) the good news and story of the first coming of the Messiah and the establishing of his church on earth.

The latter is the cornerstone of Christian faith. According to the Bible, human beings have violated the moral law of God and need to be made right with Him. That is, human beings are in need of salvation but are powerless to achieve this on their own. This is why God became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth so that he may pay the sacrifice necessary to atone for our sins, his own death on the cross. Christians believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave three days after his death and 40 days later ascended into heaven. Shortly after that Jesus’s apostles and disciples established His church, a body of believers that continues to grow to this very day. . . .

According to scripture, God has not left himself without a witness among the unbelievers (Acts 14:17). This is called general revelation, since it is something that all people have the capacity
to access through observation, reason, and reflection apart from the Bible.  

At the time I published the above in 2004, I was a firmly committed Evangelical Protestant. Yet, there is nothing in these paragraphs that I do not believe as a Catholic. Of course, Catholicism commits me to a richer or more detailed array of theological beliefs than what I presented above. But that fact does not diminish these beliefs. This is why it does not seem peculiar to me to think of myself as both Evangelical and Catholic, though I am fully aware that some have and will continue to dispute this self-understanding.

Yet, if one is a careful reader with an eye for detecting an underlying idea that accounts for a text’s apparent continuity, one will have noticed, as I noticed only later, that both my letter to Dean as well as my introductory comments from To Everyone An Answer presuppose the Church, that irreducible living substance, the Body of Christ, that remains identical to itself as it marches through history. This Church plays an integral part in the formation and fixation of Christian doctrine and scripture as well as our understanding of how the Christian faith illuminates and enhances our knowledge of every aspect of life including the academic disciplines. But, of course, accepting such an understanding of ecclesiology, theology, and the biblical canon does not make one a Catholic, even though it is consistent with Catholic dogmatic and moral theology. How then did I come to leave Catholicism, think of myself as Protestant, and then return to the Church more than three decades later? That will be the focus of the next four chapters.