

FROM WHEATON TO ROME: WHY EVANGELICALS BECOME ROMAN CATHOLIC

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I. INTRODUCTION

People convert to Roman Catholicism for a variety of reasons and, though the stories that follow will illustrate a fairly uniform paradigm, it is mistaken to think persons convert to Catholicism for one basic reason.¹ Moreover, because recent technical study of conversion provides an opportunity to examine various sorts of conversions, in the following study we shall focus on why evangelicals become Catholic. My favorite story of a traditional conversion to Catholicism is by Alec Guinness, known to most of us as Obi-Wan Kenobi in the mega-hit *Star Wars*. While acting the role of a priest in *Father Brown* in Burgundy, France, he tells the story of a late-evening shoot that attracted a fair number of local folk, including children. In his autobiography he writes,²

A room had been put at my disposal in the little station hotel three kilometres away. By the time dusk fell I was bored and, dressed in my priestly black, I climbed the gritty winding road to the village. In the square children were squealing, having mock battles with sticks for swords and dustbin lids for shields; and in a café Peter Finch, Bernard Lee and Robert Hamer were sampling their first Pernod of the evening. I joined them for a modest Kir, then discovering I wouldn't be needed for at least four hours turned back towards the station. By now it was dark. I hadn't gone far when I heard scampering footsteps and a piping voice calling, "Mon père!" My hand was seized by a boy of seven or eight, who clutched it tightly, swung it and kept up a non-stop prattle. He was full of excitement, hops, skips and jumps, but never let go of me. I didn't dare speak in case my excruciating French should scare him. Although I was a total stranger he obviously took me for a priest and so to be trusted. Suddenly with a "Bonsoir, mon père," and a hurried sideways sort of bow, he disappeared through a hole in a hedge. He had had a happy, reassuring walk home, and I was left with an odd calm sense of elation. Continuing my walk I reflected that a Church which could inspire such confidence in a child, making its priests, even when unknown, so easily approachable could not be as scheming and creepy as so often made out. I began to shake off my long-taught, long-absorbed prejudices.

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² *Blessings in Disguise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986) 36.

Not many can tell such a story, but such an event contributed to Guinness's conversion. G. K. Chesterton, on my Hall of Fame list for those who know the *joie de vivre*, was converted, in part, because after writing a book called *Heretics*, he was challenged to write not only what he was against but also what he was for. The next book, called *Orthodoxy*, was a robust defense of a path he was charting for his own life on his own journey that ended in Catholicism.³ Once, when asked, "Why did you join the Church of Rome?" Chesterton replied, "To get rid of my sins."⁴ Like America's great baseball spinner of tales, Dizzy Dean, Chesterton would have had other answers on different occasions.⁵ I must add that two of Chesterton's finest books, *St. Thomas Aquinas: "The Dumb Ox"*⁶ and his *Autobiography*, illustrate for us one of Chesterton's forgivable stylistic features: in his own autobiography we get almost no biography, while in someone else's biography we get a lot more autobiography.⁷ That sentence, if I may be so bold, also illustrates his love for paradoxes.

Famous converts are regularly paraded by Catholic evangelists, and none has done the job better than Fr. Charles P. Connor (a Catholic name if ever there was one!) in his *Classic Catholic Converts*,⁸ where he offers vignettes of such notables as Elizabeth Ann Seton, John Henry Newman, Robert Hugh Benson—whose father was no less than the Archbishop of Canterbury—Edith Stein, Jacques Maritain, Ronald A. Knox—whose father was an influential Anglican—Dorothy Day, and Malcolm Muggeridge—and that does not give the whole list. Two recent studies on the conversion of intellectuals to Catholicism reveal a rich and fascinating complex set of factors, involving personal faith, intellectual stimulation, historical perception, as well as political commitments. Those studies are by the converted biographer Joseph Pearce, in his wonderful study, *Literary Converts*,⁹ and by Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts*.¹⁰ Of course, the King Kong of these studies is John Henry Newman's autobiography *Apologia pro Vita Sua*.¹¹ For rigor, for theological acumen, and for persuasiveness, none matches Newman's proto-typical road to Rome.¹²

³ Catholicism" will be used at times for "Roman Catholicism" at the request of the editors.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (Collected Works 16; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988) 319. See also *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* in his Collected Works 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986).

⁵ In particular, see his other smaller books *Where All Roads Lead, The Catholic Church and Conversion, Why I Am a Catholic, The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic* (Collected Works 3; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990). In the same volume (pp. 357–91), in his *The Well and the Shallows*, he speaks of his six conversions, referring in these instances to experiences that would have led him to convert had he not done so already.

⁶ New York: Doubleday, 1956 (also Collected Works 2).

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*.

⁸ San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001.

⁹ Subtitled *Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

¹⁰ Subtitled *British and American Intellectuals Turn to Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Ed. W. Oddie; Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1993 (Everyman's Library).

¹² In addition, for Newman see also his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1968).

It is not my purpose here to discuss *just* conversions to Catholicism, fascinating as they may be in and of themselves. Instead, I am concerned in this paper with why *evangelicals* have made the same trip to Rome. Before we get to some of these stories and to an analysis of them, let me define two terms: first, for the purposes of this paper, when I use “evangelical” I mean Christians who believe a personal decision for Christ is necessary for salvation and have made one themselves, and who also adhere to the classical theological tenets that emerged from the Reformation under Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. Since most of these stories come from American evangelicals, we note that post-Reformation theology took on some special hues in the tussle emerging from American Fundamentalism known at one time as Neo-Evangelicalism.¹³ While G. K. Chesterton was an Anglican and therefore “evangelical” in some sense, he was so in name only, and must be disqualified from the list—even if I do not resist the urge to quote him. By “Roman Catholic” I mean those who go through the liturgical process of conversion, including conditional baptism, reconciliation, confirmation, and First Communion. We are not talking about those who “appreciate” the Catholic Faith in general and who come off as “ecumenical”—as was the case for some time with Thomas Howard,¹⁴ or even of those who become Orthodox or Anglican, but of those who actually become authentic Roman Catholics. Nor are we speaking of those who slide into the Catholic Church by birth and who, like Henry Fowler, can be described by friends as Christians “in all but actual faith.”¹⁵ Our theological world is aplenty with such examples of non-faith. However, our theological world could benefit from those who, like Fowler, wrote readable prose with a blunt point.

II. THE MAJOR PLAYERS

Hands down, the key figure is John Henry Newman, but his situation is too far in the past to be used here because we are looking at the recent phenomenon of conversions by evangelicals to Catholicism. As I am writing this, to my right is playing a CD by John Michael Talbot, a 3d Order Franciscan who converted from a nominal Christian heritage to a Pentecostal and Fundamentalist form of evangelicalism, only to convert just a few years later to Catholicism.¹⁶ In addition to John Michael, there is the highly-influential

¹³ For what it is worth, I think the map charted for evangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s by the leading thinkers of the Neo-Evangelical movement was split during the Reagan era, and the return by some to an older form of fundamentalism now finds vocal expression alongside the more progressive voices of the older evangelicalism. I am fond of describing the former as “Reaganology.”

¹⁴ His first story can be found in *Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984). The second phase led to a re-shaping of his story, when he moved from Anglicanism to Catholicism, in the beautifully-written *Lead, Kindly Light: My Journey to Rome* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ See Jenny McMorris, *The Warden of English: The Life of H. W. Fowler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 25.

¹⁶ His story can be found in D. O'Neill, *Troubadour for the Lord: The Story of John Michael Talbot* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

and articulate biblical theologian of modern Catholicism, Scott Hahn. Scott was converted to Christ through the evangelical parachurch organization Young Life in Pennsylvania, attended Grove City College, and then honored himself as a budding scholar at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. As a Presbyterian pastor, Scott became convinced that he was becoming Catholic. He resigned his pastorate, studied theology at Duquesne and Marquette, and is now a professor at Franciscan University in Steubenville, OH, but is even more famous for his *Rome Sweet Home*, whose sales are now approaching a quarter of a million.¹⁷ Someone recently told me Hahn is more influential among American Catholics than any bishop or cardinal. A third major player is Marcus Grodi, founder and host of the EWTN program called *Coming Home*, an evangelical-sounding collection of stories of those who “came home,” that is, who became Catholics, and most of his stories are of former evangelicals.¹⁸ Let me mention one more figure: Patrick Madrid, who has edited two very successful books of conversion stories, called *Surprised by Truth*, which has sold over 100,000 copies, and *Surprised by Truth 2*.¹⁹ If those titles remind you of C. S. Lewis, they should, though the writing will not. Here they are, then: John Michael Talbot, Scott Hahn, Marcus Grodi, and Patrick Madrid, key players in what is becoming a significant movement in Catholicism. And now I add one more figure: behind Hahn and Grodi, both graduates of Gordon-Conwell, is Thomas Howard, formerly a professor at Gordon College, who is now a Roman Catholic. His two books, *Evangelical is Not Enough* and *Lead, Kindly Light*, are in some measure behind both Hahn and Grodi. Howard’s contribution was to show to evangelicals just how valuable *form* is to Christian existence, how the forms of worship reflect the incarnation itself.

Among those who have converted from evangelicalism to Catholicism are three of my former students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, David Palm, Richard White, and Vaughn Treco. I have maintained a relationship with both David Palm and Vaughn Treco; David’s story has been published in a book cited above, *Journeys Home*, and Vaughn’s has appeared on the website of *Coming Home*. (I have not seen his story at that internet site; instead, Vaughn sent me a copy which I have retained in my records.) I would like to tell you that the reason I did this research is because I wanted to see whether or not my theory of conversion I previously published would explain their conversions,²⁰ and thus pretend that I was being simply an objective, scientific scholar. That would be a bold-faced story

¹⁷ Co-written with his wife, Kimberly, the book is subtitled *Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993).

¹⁸ See M. C. Grodi, *Journeys Home: The Journeys of Protestant Clergy and Laity Coming Home to the Catholic Church and the Coming Home Network International, a Lay Ministry Committed to Helping Them* (Goleta, CA: Queenship, 1997).

¹⁹ *Surprised by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* (foreword Scott Hahn; San Diego: Basilica, 1994); *Surprised by Truth 2: Fifteen Men and Women Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000).

²⁰ See *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

by a bald-headed story-teller. I became interested in this because of a recent set of e-mails with David Palm. In addition, the model in my previous study was given a boost, and the opportunity was, for me, an opportunity to explore what has become my favorite theme of Christian theology.

The best approach to studying why evangelicals convert to Catholicism is to enter it through the stories of two of these key players, John Michael Talbot and Scott Hahn. So, to their stories I now turn before an analysis of the common experience is proposed.

III. TWO PROTO-TYPICAL STORIES

John Michael Talbot told his story to Dan O'Neill in a book justly called *Troubadour for the Lord*, and that is what John Michael is—and he is so for me. For more than ten years I have had, nearly every day, one of his albums playing next to me as I read and write, and often when I commute to school, and when my children and wife tolerate it, in the car when we travel. His music leads me to worship; I remain grateful to this troubadour.

In a nutshell, here is his story:²¹ John was a talented musician, and he, his brother Terry, his sister Tanni, and some others, with Tanni eventually dropping out, marketed themselves into a crowd-pleasing, money-making southern folk band called Mason Proffit—"Mason" because it was southern, "Proffit" because Frank Proffit sang "Tom Dooley." John distinguished himself as a major vocalist and extremely talented banjo picker, guitar player, and anything else that would make people enjoy the gigs and encourage political activism and protest. They opened for the Youngbloods, and bands of that level, and once John Denver opened for them. But John (not Denver) found the rock 'n roll world filled with hypocrisy, sought for deeper meaning and, in a moment of intense prayer, had a vision of Jesus Christ that revolutionized his life. Married at 17, John returned home to be a Christian, and a Christian did he become—of a Fundamentalist, condemnatory sort. He was a Bible-thumping, unloving, and unhappy man when he returned from a last-ditch effort to resurrect Mason Proffit only to find that his wife wanted to leave him. He found little consolation or guidance in the fundamentalism of Indianapolis and so sought out Father Martin of Alverna, a Franciscan retreat center. Father Martin became not only John's father confessor, but also his counselor and theological mentor. The story can be shortened now: John, as a result of a virtual hermetic existence of study and music, converted to Catholicism. His first album, following this conversion, remains a spell-binding set of words and harmonistic music called *The Lord's Supper*. From that time on John Michael's music has captured the heart of much of contemporary American Christian music.

With my wife and a former student, I once attended one of his concerts, at a small monastery in Wisconsin. John Michael walked in with a background vocalist, took a seat on a stool, tuned his guitar quickly, closed his eyes, sang his songs for 1 hour and 45 minutes, stood up and said, "May the

²¹ See *Troubadour for the Lord*.

peace of the Lord be with you!" The more liturgically-trained, and we were not among them, knew what to say next. He then exited the front. I have never been in a more worshipful setting. John Michael now directs Little Portion Community in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, on land he purchased during a major Mason Proffit concert. He is known for his ecumenical efforts, his fund-raising for social justice, as well as his many books and albums.

If John Michael's story is proto-typical, so also is Scott Hahn's.²² Hahn was a rough and tough kid who was about to be put in jail when he caught the wave of his life. A Young Life leader, named Jack, led him to see his problem; he confessed his sin and accepted Christ as his solution to his sinfulness. Hahn, liked John Michael, then became a rabid Bible student and sought to convert and convince, whichever was needed. He attended Grove City College, met and married his wife, Kimberly, and then went to Gordon-Conwell Seminary, graduated and then became a Presbyterian pastor. Theological issues, which he wrestled to the ground, eventually led to his conversion to Catholicism: these issues were the theme of the covenant (his life-long love), contraception, justification by faith alone, liturgy and the sacraments, the early Fathers, and eventually the clincher was *sola scriptura*. In the process, he had a dramatic and lengthy debate with John Gerstner, a well-known Jonathan Edwards scholar, but the Protestant mind kept losing in Hahn's mental debates. His wife, however, remained unconvinced, and the rift created serious marital strife and loneliness. His own journey led to his eventual acceptance into the Roman Catholic Church. He is now a world-renowned speaker and teaches at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. Over 100,000 of his personal conversion story tapes have been sold. After some time, his wife came alongside him and joined him in the Catholic communion. His story, told with compelling force, is tailored to meet the objections of evangelicals who, admittedly, have many gaps to leap in understanding what Catholicism is all about.²³ If the styles of John Michael Talbot, Scott Hahn, and Tom Howard differ, the substance of the three remains constant and typical of evangelicals who convert to Catholicism.

I now take a stand next to the theory I have already published on how conversion, all conversion, takes place.²⁴ That theory, which cannot be explained in this context except where absolutely necessary, will be used for our analysis of why evangelicals convert to Catholicism. As mentioned above, this study is an attempt to use recent scholarship on conversion to explain, in ways previously not noticed, a specific sort of conversion: why evangelicals become Catholic. In what follows it will be seen that the model of conversion proposed enables us to find a clear and consistent pattern for a phenomenon that is clearly on the rise.

²² See his *Rome Sweet Home*, with his wife Kimberly Hahn.

²³ And the best study, according to the converts, seems to be Karl Adam's *The Spirit of Catholicism* (foreword Scott Hahn; afterword Alan Schreck; Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1996).

²⁴ See *Turning to Jesus*.

IV. ANALYSIS OF EVANGELICAL CONVERTS TO CATHOLICISM

When we examine faith stories from the angle of sociological categories we run the risk of de-sacralizing faith. The categories I am using in this study are abstract, to be sure, but my intention is not to minimize the sacredness of religious conversion. Neither are these categories I use to understand conversion intended to criticize anyone's faith. I am an evangelical, but I appreciate and value the entire breadth of the Christian Church, including the Roman Catholic tradition with all its pimples. I do not think any of the evangelical converts mentioned above or below has done anything wrong, and I certainly do not think they have lost their faith, even if I differ theologically at many crucial points.²⁵ From each of these converts evangelicalism has much to learn. Thomas Howard's theme is that evangelicalism is not enough, because it does not absorb the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church into its very bones. In many senses, he is right. Evangelicalism has its strengths and its weaknesses; one of its weaknesses is its decision to hack off nearly 1500 years of Church history (apart from a singular, and somewhat shut-eye glance at Augustine). Just one afternoon with Chesterton's biography of St. Thomas Aquinas will show that we evangelicals are missing someone of powerful significance; perhaps I should say two persons!

The present study is the result of a careful sifting of about thirty conversion stories of evangelicals who converted to Catholicism (= ERC); not included are the stories of those who converted from other backgrounds. These ERC conversion stories were charted on a checklist developed on the basis of my study, *Turning to Jesus*, and pages were jotted down for further reference. Each of them was an American, though the stories from the UK reveal identical trends that one sees in the American conversion stories.²⁶ Each, so far as I can tell, was white (most of evangelicalism is). The numbers are about equal in females and males. Sometimes it was the husband who led the wife into the RCC, but at other times it was the wife who led the husband. And a pattern emerges from the evidence that leads me to think that we can speak of a *typical kind of conversion*. That is, when evangelicals convert to Catholicism, there is predictable set of crises, quests, and encounters. It is my goal here to present that pattern, focusing especially on the specific set of crises that generate the conversion to the RCC.

²⁵ To be sure, I am aware that many of my students (past and present) are converts from Catholicism and are the first to toss in the accusation that the Catholic Church is deserving of serious criticism for its laxity on personal faith and piety. I do not dispute their experience. All I ask (in this context) is that evangelicals recognize the presence of genuine faith among Roman Catholics—something evangelicals have at times been loath to admit. This, I think, is a tragedy.

²⁶ A similar collection of stories about conversions to Rome can be found in D. Longenecker, *The Path to Rome: Modern Journeys to the Catholic Church* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1999). There are two other features of these conversions, besides the four analyzed below, that contribute to the "English experience." First, there appears to be a more profound integration of the political with the religious in England, seen, for instance, in particular precipitating events, like the ordination of women in 1992 (cf. pp. xii, 45, 96). Second, the dominant experience of leaving the Anglican for the Roman Catholic communion colors most of these stories with the struggle with the former's theological and ecclesiastical shapes.

Not part of the pattern, but nonetheless predictably true, is that these converts will frequently depict the Protestant Reformers as the warlords of the Church, warlords who have splintered the Church. And this polemical dimension of how ERCs perceive Protestantism grieves me, even if I know that at the same time my fellow evangelical apologists depict the apologists and leaders of the RCC (I have heard barbarous words about Ignatius, Irenaeus, Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and that is without mentioning what has been said about popes) as warlords at times. How one group depicts another group, especially its leaders, is a part of the conversion process of learning a *rhetoric* and an *attribution theory* that enable the convert to adopt a language that explains and categorizes past faith and other faiths. If such language is inevitable, it needs also to be held in check whenever possible and chastened with charity.

It is not intended here to reveal how to create this sort of crisis and conversion; nor is it intended to show how to block such a conversion. People convert because of perceived needs; the needs are met by the group into which they convert. I think the needs tell us something about the person; they also tell us about the incompleteness of each major Christian denomination. I intend to carry out a further study on why Catholics convert to evangelicalism, and I believe the chart will reveal another set of factors, but also a clear pattern. (But this study is not yet completed.)

Here are the categories, each fully explained and illustrated with stories in my previous study,²⁷ that we will use to compare conversions. We will begin with the *kind* of conversion and then proceed to discuss very briefly the *context* of these converts. Then we will focus on the *crisis* that characterizes such conversions. Following this, we will look briefly at the *quest*, the *encounter*, with its sort of *advocacy and encapsulation*. Finally, we will briefly mention a few factors about the kind of *commitment* and *consequences* of such conversions.

1. *Kind of conversion.* Nearly every example of the ERC type is an *institutional transition*. In other words, it is the “switching of denominations” and, in each case, it was not a conversion to faith in Christ but a *conversion to (what is perceived to be) the fullness of the Christian faith*. There were no examples of evangelicals who were “dead in their faith” who were awakened to faith by an encounter with a Catholic advocate. My chart contains 28 examples of such conversions. Half of these are noted by a previous *affiliation type of conversion*, that is, a previous awakening of faith from nominal faith. In each case, the awakening was to an evangelical sort of faith. In other words, about half of our examples *found faith in an evangelical context* and then later, as a result of further study and thought, made an *institutional transition* from an evangelical denomination to the Catholic Church.

There are notable examples of persons coming to a new-found faith in Christ through Catholicism; but that is not the focus of this study, and neither was it the focus of the collectors of stories I read for this study. But let

²⁷ *Turning to Jesus* 49–114.

me say that when one thinks of the “proto-typical Roman Catholic convert,” one thinks of Cardinal John Henry Newman, not of a Billy Sunday or a Charles Colson. This says something about Catholic evangelism as much as it does about its ability to rear its own in the Catholic faith.

The watchwords for the ERC convert are quite simple: in nearly every case, the convert believes that he or she has “come home” or “entered the fullness of the faith” or has experienced conversion to the “truth of the Catholic faith.”

2. *Context of converts.* This needs little attention. The ERC is predictably from a culture *incompatible* with a conversion to Catholicism. By this we mean that most evangelicals are not readily available to convert to Catholicism; in fact, most are hostile to Catholicism. Most such conversions occur in a pluralistic culture where persecution will not occur and where such a conversion is tolerable in the wider culture. Most of our converts spoke of the “hardship” and “difficulty” of converting to Catholicism. In fact, Kimberly Hahn, Scott’s wife, opposed his and her own conversion fiercely with tears and intense pain. Her reason for opposition was because of what her family and friends would say and think of such a conversion.²⁸ The same applies to Marty and Kristine Franklin. Born and reared within evangelicalism, graduates of evangelical colleges and Seminary, these two were missionaries in South America when it became clear to them that they would have to resign their ministries to sort out their faith. Their sorting out resulted in conversion to Catholicism, but they, too, experienced serious opposition from friends and family.²⁹ That the culture was pluralistic, however, permitted a much easier conversion. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that evangelicalism has been unfriendly to Catholicism. These ERCs were in an incompatible culture because of the all-too-typical anti-Catholicism of evangelicalism.

Behind the conversion of many was a previous conversion to evangelicalism within the social crisis of the 60s, when the hippies were in full bloom (pun) and the Jesus Movement rode on its own wave. Thus, one thinks here of John Michael Talbot. But, a social crisis that was provoking anti-authoritarianism could only with great difficulty also provoke a conversion to the authoritarian-type of religious institution found in the RCC. Hence, I see no “social crisis” precipitating these conversions to RC. Unless, however, one wants to see these conversions as mirroring or reacting to two recent social trends in the USA: first, the movement toward traditional morality and historical memory during the Reagan years (during which time many of our converts made their move) or, second, the moral reaction to the Clinton years (during which time some of our converts made their move). It is quite likely that such social movements influenced some of these conversions. For some of the converts, there was also a political context in which their faith was given new life.

²⁸ See their *Rome Sweet Home* 97–118.

²⁹ *Surprised by Truth* 2 3–26.

As is the case with many conversions, a dynamic relation to an advocate often is the context for a conversion. Marcus Grodi's seminary friends were converting to the Roman Catholic faith;³⁰ Fr. Francis Cosgrove made a lasting impression on Kenneth Howell, a former professor at Reformed Theological Seminary;³¹ Sharon Mann's boyfriend influenced her conversion, a man she was warned about because as an Evangelical Free young woman she should not have been dating a RC;³² the same kind of relationship led James Akin to the RCC;³³ and Father Martin led John Michael Talbot into the doors of the RCC.³⁴ I could go on here; most convert because of a special relationship to someone.

If the kind and contexts for conversion reveal only marginally interesting information, the next dimension of conversion, *the crisis*, tells the whole story and unlocks the secret for the ERC. Accordingly, this study will focus on the crises of evangelicals who convert to Catholicism.

3. *Crisis of evangelicals converting to Catholicism.* A "crisis" is a convergence of various factors in a person's life that leads a person to "quest" for a religious conversion. In *Turning to Jesus* I discuss and illustrate ten "catalysts" or "kinds of crisis" that can lead a person to convert.³⁵ I find the ERC may be led to convert as a result of the following "crises": mystical experience, illnesses and the need for healing—and here I include any sort of psychological condition expressed by the convert—a general dissatisfaction with life, as well as the external factors of politics, a charismatic figure, and a tragedy in the family. It is not possible in this context to develop each of these minor sorts of crisis (though not minor to the specific person). Because of the genius of this kind of crisis, I will focus on the major crisis for the ERC: namely, a desire for transcendence.

A desire for transcendence is a crisis about the limitations of the human condition and a desire to go beyond the human experience. This occurs, for the ERC, in four manifestations. First, the ERC wants to transcend the human limits of knowledge to find certainty; second, the ERC wants to transcend the human limits of temporality to find connection to the entire history of the Church; third, the ERC wants to transcend the human limits of division among churches to find unity and universality in the faith and Church; and fourth, the ERC wants to transcend the human limits of interpretive diversity to find an interpretive authority. These four desires—certainty, history, unity, and authority—are the four manifestations of the ERC's crisis of transcendence. In the following illustrations of these four manifestations, it needs to be emphasized that I am describing as fairly as possible and not evaluating. Furthermore, these various manifestations of the crisis of transcendence are interconnected, even if we need to separate the threads to see them in full color. Together they display the peacock-brilliance of the ERC.

³⁰ *Journeys Home* 3–22.

³¹ *Ibid.* 27–31.

³² *Ibid.* 85–90.

³³ *Surprised by Truth* 57–76.

³⁴ D. O'Neill, *Troubadour for the Lord* 82–98.

³⁵ *Turning to Jesus* 66–74.

I begin with someone who puts his own words in my mouth, a certain T. L. Frazier. Frazier was raised between divorced parents but, after horsing around briefly with drugs, became addicted to books and found that he needed more in life. He says, “I was searching for a standard which was absolute and immutable where all around me seemed contingent and variable, something *transcending myself and the secular society around me and thereby allowing me to place it in an overall perspective.*”³⁶ Here is a clear expression of the typical ERC: a desire for transcendence.

a. *Certainty.* This same T. L. Frazier, who converted to evangelicalism and then to Catholicism, said, of his experience among evangelicals: “Nor is it even possible for one to *be certain* that he himself is actually saved”³⁷ and he says this because answers to the questions we ask are not “self-evident.”³⁸ His quests for certainty and for what was “self-evident” were found in turning to Catholicism. Mary Beth Kremiski, who was reared in the RCC but strayed from it only to find faith among Pentecostal evangelicals in part through the power of Corrie ten Boom’s *The Hiding Place*, states that she had in her heart a questing for meaning and says, “sometimes it was a search to know how to live—to know the purpose of life in general and my life in particular—or a quest for peace built on a *sure* foundation, rather than on false self-confidence or wishful thinking. In short, I longed for *the real thing: reality.*”³⁹ She found that among the evangelicals “there wasn’t complete *certainty* in the truth I had found” and so asks, “How could I know which of the many Churches, teachings, and interpretations of Scripture presented truth, and which taught merely human theories and opinions?”⁴⁰ She wanted “pure truth” and the “unadulterated Truth.”⁴¹ And, when she came to the RCC, she gained “the ability to know with certainty.”⁴² Her confession is that she has found, in capital letters, “the Whole Truth.”⁴³ These two converts echo the stronger notes of Marcus Grodi, Kristine Franklin, and Bob Sungenis, to whom we now turn.

Marcus Grodi, the founder and director of the very successful TV talk-show called *Coming Home*, makes the claim to certainty frequently. As a pastor of a Presbyterian congregation he was tormented by these 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?” Without certainty, he says, all we have is “doctrinal mayhem.”⁴⁴ He asks, “Is my interpretation of Scripture the *right* one or not?” and states, “I *think* I’m right, but how can I know for *sure*?”⁴⁵ In “those trying days of uncertainty” he quested for “absolute assurance” and

³⁶ *Surprised by Truth* 183.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 189.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 191.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 120.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 125–26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 126.

⁴² *Ibid.* 135.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 151.

⁴⁴ *Journeys Home* 6 (italics added).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 7.

“clear, confident answers.”⁴⁶ He came to the conclusion, after a series of encounters with the Catholic faith, especially with the writings of Clement of Rome (*Ep. Cor.* 42:1–5) and Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 3.4.1), that “it is the mission of the Church to teach with *infallible certitude*.”⁴⁷ Of Protestantism, then, he says that “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 issue was the “teaching authority of the Church in the magisterium.”⁴⁸

As another important example of the crisis of certainty, I take Kristine Franklin.⁴⁹ Before her conversion to the RCC, while *en route* to the missionary field, she said, “I didn’t feel even a twinge of regret over what we had left behind in the States. . . . I knew we were being obedient . . . [because] We were living smack in the middle of God’s will, and it gave us a great feeling of security. We had given ourselves *fully* to bringing Christ’s light . . . , etc.”⁵⁰ She encountered theological problems with *sola scriptura* that created doubts. She says, “Worse yet, I didn’t see how claiming to go by the Bible alone could provide *certitude* of belief for believers.”⁵¹ About the “choose-your-own-church syndrome” she says, “there was no way for any of us to *know for sure* which of us *had it right*.”⁵² And about preaching the gospel to the illiterate (another troubling problem for her view of the Christian life), she comments, “. . . as a missionary taking the gospel to illiterate people, I realized *I had to be absolutely sure, before God, that what I was telling them was, in fact, the Christian Faith, free from error. It had to be one hundred percent Truth. The problem was, using my ‘Bible alone’ principle, I had no way to be absolutely sure.*”⁵³ Into this “cacophony of conflicting teachings” she stepped and hollered out, “how was a person to know who was right?”⁵⁴ She concluded that “[t]heology for the modern Evangelical is a matter of his own opinion about what Scripture means” and among them “there is no way to know who has the *whole truth*” and such was “completely unattainable.”⁵⁵ She, with her husband evidently in tow, converted to the RCC, and there “we have the fullness of the Christian Faith—not seventy-five percent of the Truth, not ninety percent, but all of it, one hundred percent.”⁵⁶

If Kristine Franklin expresses her need for certainty, she ranks second to Bob Sungenis, who went from controversy to controversy, and therefore from one church to another. He says of himself, “Presbyterians are known in Protestant circles as the ‘split P’s’ because of all the factions created over their divergent interpretations of the Bible. When I joined the fray, things

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 8–9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 18

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 20

⁴⁹ *Surprised by Truth 2.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 9.

⁵² *Ibid.* 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

didn't get any better. We were in and out of five different Presbyterian churches within the next five years, each move being due to disagreements on the pastor's interpretation of the Bible."⁵⁷ After questing for a resolution to this crisis of transcendence and finding it, ultimately, in the RCC, he says, "I found an *indisputable* example of the infallibility of the Catholic Church when I began to reflect on the question of the canon of Scripture."⁵⁸ He declares, "The issue of the canon is an unsolvable epistemological problem for Protestants. For if one cannot *be certain* which books belong in the Bible, how can one presume to use it 'alone' as a reliable guide to saving faith in God?"⁵⁹ Of Protestants, then, he says, "Many prefer *uncertainty* than to acknowledge that the Catholic Church is Christ's Church."⁶⁰ His confession: "As a Catholic, I am now at peace, away from the roiling controversies of Protestantism, *secure in the consolation of the truth*" and "I rejoice in God's free gift of grace that opened my eyes to see the truth that had always been plainly evident, though I had missed it all those years."⁶¹

These examples, and many more could be presented,⁶² illustrate that the crisis of transcendence for the ERC is frequently a crisis about *certainty* and *knowledge of the truth*. These ERCs had a need for sure knowledge, a knowledge that would transcend the normal limits of the human's grasp of theology as experienced among Protestant evangelicals, and found that certainty when they converted to the RCC. And almost every ERC found that path by exploring history, which is next on the list of our crises for the ERC.

b. *History*. A fundamental problem staring into the faces of many evangelical Christians is *temporality*. Many feel they are isolated in the faith, in a modern evangelical movement that has cut itself off from the history of the Church. Most evangelicals know almost nothing about the early Fathers, and what they do know (they think) supports what they already believe, so why bother studying them. When it comes to realities, however, few have read even a page of the Fathers. However, very few evangelicals are drawn to either the Fathers or the Medieval theologians to strengthen their faith and interpretation. The *only* theologian from this era most of them bother reading is St. Augustine (whom they hesitantly call "saint" out of courtesy).⁶³ Some know of Anselm, but few have read his *Cur Deus Homo*, even though Anselmian soteriology lies at the foundation of the normal, evangelical theory of the atonement (penal satisfaction and substitution of the Divine-Man). Where was the Church for all those years? Was it in hiding? How could God keep his end of the promise to Peter (Matt 16:17–19) if most of the time there was no true Church?

⁵⁷ *Surprised by Truth* 113.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 123–24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 126.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 132–33.

⁶² E.g. *Journeys Home* 28–29, 51–52, 84, 91, 95; *Surprised by Truth* 227; *Surprised by Truth* 2 120.

⁶³ They could begin with Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (new ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) or with Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine* (Penguin Lives; New York: Penguin/Viking, 1999).

This historical disenfranchisement, when discovered, can lead to curiosity. Even more profoundly, it can lead to a need to discover how the Church developed. And many of the ERCs were led right to Rome when they began to study this part of Church history. In fact, many sense that they were prevented from studying this period of Church history by their evangelical professors and they think the prevention was doubly directed: kept from reading to prevent their conversion to the RCC because of what they might learn there. This is no feeble accusation. It strikes at the root of the integrity of teaching. But the crisis lies behind it: a Christian, so they conclude, must be connected to the entire history of the Church. Is it true, they ask, that the true Church went underground for more than a millennium? And what about the Roman Catholic nature of so many of those early Christian writings, including the highly-acclaimed (proto-Calvinist) Augustine? So the crisis becomes one of temporality: how might we be connected to the entire history of the Church and how is it right for so many Christians to live in small, disengaged splinter groups?

The premier example of this is John Henry Newman who said, somewhere (I do not know where), that if one studies history, one becomes a Roman Catholic. It was in his own study, made public as *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, that he demonstrated that it is the RCC that is most organically related to the apostolic Church. A modern example is Thomas Howard, a professor of English at Gordon College who, while in England, learned that the *form* of theology is as valuable as the *content of the preaching and theology*—in other words, liturgy and church architecture and church calendar—and so began a life-long search in the history of the Church. This quest led him to Rome. His book *Evangelical is Not Enough* tells his story, and I find the book gentle and attractive. That book was then completed in a smaller book called *Lead, Kindly Light*, which is also gentle and attractive. These books reveal the engagement a modern evangelical can have with ancient Church history.

The same consideration has been attractive to others, though most do not express themselves as gently as does Howard. Marcus Grodi, almost as gentle as Howard, says, “The more I read Church history and Scripture the less I could comfortably remain Protestant.”⁶⁴ These converts see the Fathers as the aristocrats of the Church, the elite thinkers, and the inner circle who knew best. Kenneth Howell, a convert to the RCC from the Reformed Theological Seminary as a result of studying the history of doctrine on the Eucharist, said, “I realized that the Protestant faith was not the faith of the Ancient Fathers of the Church. The irony of all this is that John Calvin led me to the Catholic Church. [Hold on, pardner!] Calvin in the 16th century wanted to bring the Church back to its original purity from which he and other Reformers believed the Roman Church had departed. So Calvin said in essence: go back to the ancient church! But when I did, I found that it wasn’t Protestantism.”⁶⁵ David Palm, who, I am proud to say, was one of my students—would that all students were as serious about the

⁶⁴ *Journeys Home* 22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 29.

foundations of their faith as he was and still is—when he began to find troubles with his evangelical beliefs about the Eucharist, “went back and read the writings of the earliest Church Fathers—Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Augustine—and found that they all believed in the Real Presence. I could no longer swallow our Protestant assertion that millions upon millions of Christians, including some who knew the apostles personally, had been misled by the Holy Spirit until Calvin and Zwingli came along and set everybody straight.”⁶⁶

Another example is Paul Thigpen, whose odyssey into faith in Christ and then to the RCC led him through “trafficking in spirits”⁶⁷ and striving for racial unity.⁶⁸ As well, he was in and out of various Protestant denominations, but finally landed in a Ph.D. program in historical theology where his mind and imagination were “sacramentalized.”⁶⁹ The result was that “all the knotted highways and byways of Church history led at long last to the same seven-hilled city.”⁷⁰ In this study of history, without minimizing the faults of the RCC and its leaders and actions, he came to the view that “Rome has remained the spiritual center of gravity for the churches that have separated from her.”⁷¹

Steve Wood, who was established in the faith through the ministries of Chuck Smith, the noted evangelical pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, was troubled by the variety of interpretations of Protestants and so studied at Gordon-Conwell where he began to study covenant theology and then, naturally, baptism and then, as a pastor, the Eucharist. He became convinced that it should be celebrated weekly, and contact with the weekly Eucharist led him to the Church fathers—and the rest, as one might say, is history.⁷² This study, along with several others, led him to Rome.

The crisis created in some about the *temporality of modern evangelicism* cannot be denied or even minimized. It is no trivial matter that evangelicals have quartered Church history and excluded the first three-quarters. Within this crisis for transcending temporality, it is both the Church fathers’ articulations as well as the *liturgy* that play equal and convincing roles for many ERCs. Julie Swenson says “the most important factor in my journey toward Rome was my growing appreciation for liturgical worship—I was falling in love with it.”⁷³ But it is Dave Armstrong, a convert to faith among evangelicals who then converted to RC, who said that when he was reading Newman’s *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* he “experienced a peculiar, intense, and inexpressibly mystical feeling of reverence for the idea of a Church ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic.’”⁷⁴ Though hardly fool-proof, the following seems probable: for those who are

⁶⁶ Ibid. 50.

⁶⁷ *Surprised by Truth* 19.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 19–20.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 27.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 31.

⁷¹ Ibid. 29.

⁷² Ibid. 87–93.

⁷³ Ibid. 152.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 249.

driven by the crisis of temporality, if their quest takes them along the path of early Church history, the likelihood is that they will find themselves attracted to Catholicism.

c. *Unity.* This confession about the Church as “one” is part of the same crisis of transcendence. It is the splintering of the Church that disturbs so many ERCs that they have sought out the biblical teaching on the unity of the Church as well as the articulations of ecclesiology in the history of the Church. Once again, the study leads many back to Rome. The most important reference in the Bible on this, apart from the obvious “general sweep” of what the Bible says (and surely God is not “for” splintering), is John 17:11, 21—Jesus’ so-called high-priestly prayer for unity. When it comes to the matter of unity, there is a fundamental (and seemingly necessary) disagreement between Catholics and Protestants: for the former, “the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church”—as confessed in the First Constantinopolitan Creed—is the objective, sacramentally-based, and Roman-led Church, while for the latter, the unity is spiritual, intangible, and not directly linked with any earthly “church” manifestation. The difference makes a huge difference. If one believes that “unity” means “objective,” then one must be Roman Catholic or must think the true Church went underground only to emerge with the Reformation—but then that “unity” is not as pure as one might wish. Which Reformation church? Lutheran? Reformed? Anabaptist? And, to be quite frank, we will then need to ask “which of these?” and might as well spit into the wind because the term “unity” can no longer have an objective sense. If, however, “unity” is given a spiritual meaning, one can include any Christian and any Christian church that faithfully proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics and the ERCs will quickly join the chant and be the first to raise their hands and ask if this was what “one” meant in the First Constantinopolitan Creed, and they are probably right also in how they would answer their own question.

When I think of an ERC who was drawn into the Church because of the unity of the Church, in the face of all of its divisions, I think of John Michael Talbot. He even wrote a book on this theme, and wrote an album about it, too, called *Regathering Power*. John Michael has sustained a ministry of seeking for a unified Christian Church, but he does so absent the liberal agenda of so many World Councils that have sought, repeatedly and with very little progress, unity at the expense of theological articulation.

Robert Hugh Benson, an Anglican priest, while touring France and Italy, was hit between the eyes with the insignificance of his homeland’s national Church and said that he “suffered a certain shock by my perceiving what a very small and unimportant affair the Anglican communion really was.”⁷⁵ What he had taken for granted to be *the* Church, suddenly became *a* church dwarfed by the Roman Catholic Church of Europe. If one has any sense of the “communion of the saints,” one can be driven to despair by facing the church in another country.

⁷⁵ *Confessions of a Convert* (Sevenoaks: Fisher, 1991) 34.

With a sustained rhetoric, Marcus Grodi refers to the disunity of the Protestant churches and speaks trenchantly of the “anarchistic principle that lies at the center of Protestantism.”⁷⁶ He does not let up, for next he speaks of Protestants as “in the full solipsistic glory of its natural habit: protest.” If he wants to pick a fight, I do not know of a better way, and I am not sure I can disagree with the overall thrust of his comment. I am not sure all Protestants do is protest, but I am sure they feel no hesitation to drive to the front their individual interpretations. David Palm asks, “[W]hat is the basis of Christian unity if we formulate customized doctrines? Isn’t it precisely because of these differences that Protestants have been fragmenting and dividing for centuries?”⁷⁷ More pointedly, he states that “it was difficult for me to see how reforming the Church consisted of smashing it into thousands of splinter groups.”⁷⁸ Thus, he concludes, “The continuous division and rupture, schism upon schism, that characterizes Protestantism is impossible to justify and is profoundly unbiblical (John 10:16; 17:20–23 and 1 Cor. 1–3).”⁷⁹ Rosalind Moss wondered why evangelicals do not work toward unity.⁸⁰ And Douglas Lowry, a significant leader for decades in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, grieved “over the disunity that seemed woven into the fabric of our denomination’s life.”⁸¹ Polemically, Peter Cram describes Protestantism as “one long, continuous line of protesters protesting against their fellow protesters, generating thousands of denominations, para-churches, and ‘free churches,’ which are simply one-church denominations. Schisms occur when factions arise within denominations; rather than seeking absolute truth, the American appetite for individualism leads to yet another denomination.”⁸² Kristine Franklin speaks of the “disease of dis-sension” and “doctrinal spats”⁸³ and decried that she belonged to “a teeny, unhistorical, brand-new splinter of a splinter of a splinter.”⁸⁴ And Bob Sun-genis complains that “[t]his syndrome of fragmentation is the Reformation’s tragic legacy of confusion and disunity.”⁸⁵ In short, these ERCs think of Protestantism as a movement sprinting as hard as it can just to stand still, and it cannot, for when they look around, the ground under them is falling apart.

When evangelicals look around, they must face this one fact: the Church of Christ is hardly “one” in any organizational or even cooperative sense. If there is “unity,” it must be purely “spiritual.” The tragedy, so these ERCs complain, is that this disunity can be transcended by opting for the RCC. I must add here that, no matter how much I respect this argument, converting

⁷⁶ *Journeys Home* 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 46.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 51.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 56.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 69.

⁸² *Ibid.* 94–95.

⁸³ *Surprised by Truth* 2 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 20.

⁸⁵ *Surprised by Truth* 121.

to Rome is not a “unification” of the Church. Instead, nothing happens by joining the RCC. There are only three options for the ERC: (1) in converting to the RCC, the convert claims a unity only within the RCC by denouncing all other churches as apostate and damned (an older view, still occasionally voiced by some); (2) less harsh, but still quite strong, is the view that, by joining the RCC, the convert joins the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church with all other churches as disobedient but not damned—and this is preferred apparently by most of these ERCs; or (3) they have misunderstood what “unity” means—and I assume most Protestants opt for this view or think of themselves as the Church of option #2.

In this matter, the ERC arguments are sometimes compelling. It grieves me, too, that the Church is so fragmented. It also grieves me that ERCs can denounce other Christians so cavalierly at times. I must stand here with John Michael Talbot, not as a Catholic myself, but as one who believes that we must work together by way of appreciating what each brings to the table. I cannot resist a parting shot, and I do so by asking two questions: Was the Church ever a “unity” as they envision it? That is, is the “Church” of the first generation an objective unity? More potently, is it not proper to think of diversity within a unity from the outset—of a Matthean-type Jewish Christianity, of a more Pauline, Gentile Christianity, and of others? A second question, more philosophical: Are the ERCs not forcing an Aristotelian movement into a Platonic mold? That is, have they not converted to what they think is a Platonic ideal when they are really making more of an Aristotelian differentiation?

d. *Authority.* The answer of the Roman Catholics to this case should be apodictic (straightforward commands rather than couched and cushioned by arguments and reasons). It should be that what they are saying is what the Roman Catholic Tradition and Faith has taught. End of discussion. It is this sense of tradition and authority that also troubles the ERC. A fourth manifestation of the crisis of transcendence is the crisis over authority.

I might as well say this up front: in evangelicalism (and Protestantism in general), the authority of the Church resides in two spheres—the Bible and the specific interpretation of the Bible by the interpreter himself or herself. No one can deny this. There is no such thing as a “Bible alone” idea; that Bible must be “articulated,” unless we are only reading it, and that articulation is itself an interpretation. The RCC admits this openly and says that the final arbiter of interpretation is the Magisterium. The evangelical movement hides this openly and says, ever so discreetly, that the individual is the final arbiter. Such a bald claim, to be sure, must be given its pragmatic reality: most evangelicals and Protestants think of orthodoxy in terms of the historic faith once and for all delivered to the saints, and this orthodoxy governs what should and what should not be believed. To be sure, Protestant denominations have a functional, if somewhat fuzzy, “teaching magisterium” within their ranks, but that magisterium can be denied at any time by most pastors and certainly by all individuals with no more powerful punishment than banishment from the local church so the person can join a church of his own choosing. I add, however, that most evangelical

churches, pastors, family members, and friends can make one feel that their specific church is that sacrament, but they will not confess that aloud—and many do not confess anything aloud.

This democratization of Scriptural interpretation, leading inevitably to the authority of the individual conscience, is intolerable for some evangelicals, because everyone gets to believe whatever he or she wants. This is a principle only; it does not actually work out this way, because most learn to read the Bible within an interpretive tradition. So, a crisis is found for many in a crisis of *interpretive diversity* that they resolve by *affirming the authority of the RCC and its teaching Magisterium*. That is, the issues are now settled: the Church can tell us what to believe. And it does so infallibly.

This matter of interpretation, and where the locus of interpretation lies, is no small matter. Some have considered this discussion nit-picky and splitting of hairs, but the analysis of where authority rests can be a difference with a difference. Robert Hugh Benson, once accused of this, retorted properly: “I understood that a hair’s breadth is sometimes a great distance.”⁸⁶ The alternatives are obvious, and Benson expressed them well: “I proposed becoming a Roman Catholic not because I was necessarily attracted by her customs, but because I believed that Church to be the Church of God, and that therefore if my opinions on minor details differed from hers, it was all the worse for me. . . .”⁸⁷

Marcus Grodi, no stranger to this study, said, “Bible-believing Protestants claim they *do* follow the teaching in this passage [Prov 3:5–6] 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.”⁸⁸ So, after much deliberating, Grodi says that he “realized that the single most important issue was *authority*” (p. 20). His decision was for the teaching Magisterium in the Church; once that was settled, he was willing to accept everything else. David Palm faced the same crisis and turned to the creeds before he turned to the authoritative teaching of the RCC.⁸⁹ Grodi did not move forward until he thought it was biblical; and Palm did not until he found it was “biblical, logical, and consistent” (p. 49). Douglas Lowry expresses the relief of many at the joy he found when he submitted to Rome’s teaching authority: “Why this greater joy? Because I do not have to be the judge in judgment of the Catholic Church, of the Scriptures, or even of myself. It’s not my job. Millions of people over a period of two thousand years have reflected on our holy faith, and struggled with it, some cases even given up their life for it. Shall I improve on their combined insight, as it is shared with us through the Magisterium? Shall I pit my few decades against millions and millon [sic] of man years? No!”⁹⁰ This is no small set of questions. And Bob Sungenis came to the same conclusion: “As I studied Scripture in the light of the Catholic materials I had been sent, I

⁸⁶ *Confessions of a Convert* 63.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 88.

⁸⁸ *Journeys Home* 6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 47.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 71.

began to see that the Bible in fact points to the Church as being the final arbiter of truth in all spiritual matters."⁹¹ Tim Drake, a convert from Lutheranism to RC, tells of the impact of church "votes" on theological matters; it led him to Rome and away from Wittenberg.⁹²

This finding of authority should not be equated with being "always right" or with "absolute infallibility." It is true that Catholicism contains within its doctrines an appeal to papal infallibility, but such a claim does not mean that every act by every pope or by every theological council or by every Roman Catholic church is infallible. Evangelicals have failed to listen to what Roman Catholics have said about their own history, which is far from pure. Thomas Howard speaks for the entire Roman Catholic Church (which, I suppose, is had Catholic theology but I am making the claim for him), when he says: "The thing that I was proposing to choose (or, more accurately, that was drawing me) was this great riddle: the Church Catholic, in all of its antiquity, authority, unity, liturgy, and sacraments, but also that Church dressed, as often as not, in the tawdry garments of contemporaneity, ethnicity, and even ignorance."⁹³ Catholicism's infallibility is about doctrine, not about its own actions. But this claim to authority in matters theological divides the camps, as can be seen in Howard's further confession: "On certain points I had to step down, as it were, from my unwitting, self-appointed role as arbiter and judge of all doctrine, and remind myself that I had, indeed, become convinced that the Catholic Church is the Church, and that there was a sense in which a man may have to 'hand over' to that Church the final responsibility for doctrine."⁹⁴

This sketch of the ERC reveals a pattern. The ERC came to a crisis of transcendence and that crisis had four manifestations: first, a crisis over the limits of human knowledge, seeking certainty; a crisis over temporality, seeking a continuous place in history; a crisis over division, seeking unity; and a crisis over interpretive opinion, seeking an authoritative arbiter of truth.

4. *Quest, encounter, and commitment.* This crisis over transcendence is the reason why evangelicals turn and run to Rome. Everything else follows from this crisis, and I want now to discuss this very briefly.

The *quest* of an ERC moves most often along the path of encountering transcendence, though intellectual satisfaction is the primary feature of that quest. Yet, the intellectual satisfaction pertains to an issue of transcendence. In some cases, there is a quest to settle relationships involved (some of the ERCs have spouses or close friends who are RC and they want to be at one with them). I should emphasize here that the typical quest for an ERC is long and often torturous. The movement from evangelicalism to Catholicism is far from natural and involves massive shifts in theology, with only a tip of the hat to family relationships that form massive imped-

⁹¹ *Surprised by Truth* 118.

⁹² *Surprised by Truth* 2 208–9.

⁹³ *Lead, Kindly Light* 54.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 67.

iments. In fact, I would characterize these conversions as, to use the language of Arthur Krystal, “slowly forming epiphanies.”⁹⁵

The *advocate* for an ERC varies, but not much: for most there is either a charismatic individual who can appeal to them with a high degree of correlation (Father Martin and John Michael Talbot) or, most often, these ERCs experience a “bookish” advocate. That is, they are led into the faith by *massive amounts of reading and research*. Nearly every ERC came to the faith as a result of reading pro-Roman Catholic books, books like Karl Adam’s *The Spirit of Catholicism*, or through reading the Fathers, or through re-examining the texts of the NT. Hence, the *encapsulating features* are all present: physically, the ERC locks herself in a room to study and pray and think; socially, the ERC gathers with other Roman Catholics; and ideologically, the ERC reads the responses of Roman Catholics to Protestant questions. In this role, Scott Hahn and Patrick Madrid have played large, defining roles for ERCs. An important aspect of the ERC’s conversion, however, is *fear*—many are driven to despair of what their evangelical families and friends will think of them. I call this the Augustinian fear, for it was Augustine who spoke of what others thought of him as being “roasted daily in the oven of men’s tongues.”⁹⁶

An inevitable feature of a convert is *rhetoric*. The ERC assumes the rhetoric of the RCC and this in two directions: positively, he argues for such things as papal infallibility, the Eucharist, Marian dogmas, and the like; and negatively, he denounces evangelical Protestantism. An important example of this is Stephen Ray, whose *Crossing the Tiber* has influenced many with its sometimes witty but thoroughly documented critique of Protestant theology.⁹⁷ Once again, Augustine’s funny line about the Donatists applies to all such divisive claims, including those of the ERCs: “and the frogs cry from the marsh, We are the only Christians” (*Exp. Psalms* 96:10). David Currie, whose testimony is told in his book, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (whose title is not as accurate as it is clever), says, “Evangelicals have eighty percent of the truth, including most of the important issues.”⁹⁸ To illustrate what I mean by rhetoric as language used to explain the meaning of life and the paths we have walked, Currie states: “I see my decision [to convert to RC] as a natural outgrowth of my Evangelical commitment.”⁹⁹ Robert Hugh Benson, whose own story is told in his *Confessions of a Convert*, speaks of the massive impact this rhetorical re-invention has on one’s own consciousness, leading to an inability to comprehend the rhetoric and system one previously used to orient life’s meaning: “He [Benson] no longer, as in the first months of his conversion, is capable of comparing the two systems of belief together, since that which he has left appears to him no longer a coherent system at all.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ “Why Smart People Believe in God,” *American Scholar* 70 (2001) 70.

⁹⁶ *Confessions* 10.60.

⁹⁷ Subtitled *Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997).

⁹⁸ San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996, p. 32.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

¹⁰⁰ *Confessions* 2.

The *commitment* of the ERC is predictable. First, for many there is a progressive sorting out of issues until there is a consciousness that, “by golly, I’m a Roman Catholic.” For many, this means grief because of family and friends. But, second, there is a “formal” form of witness when the ERC is “received into the Church.” I find that for each I have studied, the *consequences* of conversion are unmistakable: there is commitment to obedience as one learns in Rome.

V. CHALLENGES

This study of the ERC leads to a challenge to think of what “should be done.” It has not been the purpose of this study to offer a critique of the ERC, a critique that would involve a lengthy discussion of each of the major terms (certainty, history, unity, and authority). Instead, I have tried to utilize a model of conversion to show its value for describing a current trend by evangelicals to convert to Catholicism. However, with those limited goals, two final comments are in order by way of assessment. First, until the evangelical churches can get a firmer grip on authority, unity, history, liturgy, and a reasonable form of certainty on interpretation, there will continue to be plenty of ERCs. I am not saying that ERCs are led into the RCC for psychological reasons—though I would be a fool to think psychological studies would not reveal some things for consideration. No, what I am saying is that there are some serious challenges here that will take plenty of planning and consideration. Furthermore, until evangelicals learn to take seriously the importance of liturgy and aesthetics as a true embodiment of the gospel, they will lose converts to those sectors of the Church that do so. Thomas Howard once said accurately that “[a]ll buildings are icons” and that “[c]eremony does what words alone can never do. It carries us beyond the merely explicit, the expository, the verbal, the propositional, the cerebral, to the center where the Dance goes on.”¹⁰¹ This aesthetical and liturgical dimension of the gospel interweaves its presence in each of the four crises analyzed above. If it is not a major catalyst of conversion for the ERC, for some it plays an important part.

Second, I lay down another observation: until the Roman Catholic Church learns to focus on gospel preaching of personal salvation, on the importance of personal piety for all Christians—and abandons its historical two-level ethic—and personal study, and on the Bible itself, there will be many who will leave Catholicism to join in the ranks of evangelicalism. There is something wrong in Rome that leads so many to Wheaton, or to Willow Creek! And the rhetoric of ERCs is not going to convince most evangelicals until these features become a central aspect of Catholic life.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ *Evangelical is Not Enough* 63, 98.

¹⁰² I express my gratitude to colleagues and friends who have read this paper and made comments but who do not necessarily agree with any of it: Susan Rabe, Joseph Alulis, David Palm, Greg Clark, Sonia Bodi, Jay Phelan, Elizabeth Ritt, Harold Netland, Kermit Zarley, Dale Allison, and Brad Nassif. The latter two pointed out to me that evangelical converts to Orthodoxy show a very similar pattern to the one that will be presented in what follows.