

CANADIAN CONVERTS

VOLUME II



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Volume II**

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Growing into Being Catholic

1. Not yet Catholic

Before becoming Catholic I had no idea what it meant to be Catholic. I was raised in a loving home, by parents who were simple people (a housewife and a farmer who became a grain elevator manager). Their parents were Swedish immigrants who had left Sweden to escape poverty, war, and an oppressive state Church (Lutheran). Finding themselves in a new land, they prospered and found freedom, including new churches that welcomed them and other immigrants seeking freedom.

Unfortunately, the Catholic Church of the late 19th and early 20th century was not a welcoming church for anyone other than those who already were Catholics. In part this was because of ethnic differences: the Catholic Church in the small towns where my grandparents and parents settled was dominated by German immigrants; Norwegians, Swedes, English... were the "other." But the exclusion was also

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theological. Though I didn't understand it, I felt it. In school, on the playground, on the farm, there were no real differences between me and any other friends, including Catholics. But, from Saturday night until Sunday evening the doors of local Catholic parishes were shut tightly against any outsiders.¹ In contrast, the church of my parents was the community hub. Everyone in town was welcome. The Boy Scouts met there. Town potlucks and pancake suppers were held there. Everyone was welcome, even Catholics!

But by the time that I had reached my teens, my church, like most other Protestant churches, was so open and welcoming on Sundays that it basically offered nothing different from what one could hear socially and politically on TV networks, or on the radio, or in the rest of the community during the week.² And so I, like many teens who did not want to sit through another "boring church service" stopped going to church as soon as I was able to do so.

¹The one open door to the Catholic Church was the TV broadcast by Archbishop Fulton Sheen. I can still remember as a child being mesmerized by his persona, his eyes, his delivery. For as long as he was on the screen, it was as if I could not take my own eyes off him.

²The changes to these churches, as I note below, had been some time in coming, but clearly the change that occurred during the 1960s was sudden and for many unexpected. On this point, see Callum G. Brown, "What Was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?" *Journal of Religious History*, no. 4 (December 2010): 468-79.

My abandonment of church coincided with the political and cultural ferment of the 60s. In my case this ferment became palpable when I went to Spain as part of my high school studies. Arriving in the momentous year 1968, my middle-class eyes were opened to the tremendous poverty and repressive government that was very much evident in Spain in the wake of almost thirty years of authoritarian rule by General Franco. Though I didn't look for it, I also learned there the uncomfortable truth about the collaboration between the Spanish Catholic Church and the Fascist government.³ Freed from parental and church constraints, with my eyes now opened to the realities of poverty and injustice, I embraced a radical, leftist political activism fed by Maoists, Trotskyites, and Anarchists.

But, during that same period a group of young, vibrant, Spanish Evangelical Christians also witnessed to me concerning their own living faith in Jesus Christ. They unhesitatingly answered the challenges and questions that I posed to them about their faith and rebutted my political arguments against their faith. Most importantly of all: they loved me. Not that this was an easy love! My political activity, shadowed by the police, nationally and

³For an overview of the Catholic Church in Spain during this period, see Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution, and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1975* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

internationally, endangered them every time I was present with them. But in the end, it was God who won, and I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ and was baptized in a little working-class Baptist church outside of Barcelona, among dozens of working-class Spaniards who surely wondered who I was and what I was doing there.

During the years of political radicalization and abandonment of my childhood church, my life had become more and more chaotic and disordered. But with my conversion to Christ, my life began to become ordered. To paraphrase Robert Louis Stevenson, my life gained an even keel, like a beautiful ship.⁴ I witnessed in my own life signs and wonders, miracles that anyone I spoke to was hard-pressed to explain. I developed an inexhaustible desire to read and understand Scripture and to get to know God through prayer. I even began to speak clearly and boldly about Christ to others. I had truly been converted by God.⁵

⁴The exact quote is found in Stevenson's *Reflections and Remarks on Human Life*, with the pertinent section quoted in John Kelman, *The Faith of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1903), 13, Available at https://archive.org/stream/faithofrobertlou00kelmuoft/faithofrobertlou00kelmuoft_djvu.txt.

⁵Catholics who believe that there are no graces from God found among Christians outside the Catholic Church need to remember the sage words of the *Catechism*: "many elements of sanctification and of truth' are found outside the visible

2. The Start of a New Life

As I began to grow in this new relationship with God, I soon realized that I was going to have to better understand my new-found faith and what was happening. Like the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road (Acts 8), I had started to read the Scriptures, but I couldn't always understand them. Even my Evangelical family in Christ found my questions hard to answer. So, searching for answers, I decided to enroll to study in the Jesuit Seminary in Barcelona.⁶ Why? Well, that was certainly the question that my Evangelical family asked me. But it was for quite a simple and pragmatic reason: at that time in Spain the only place to study the faith outside of regular church communities was in a Catholic seminary. So, that's where I went. In truth, I leaped without fully knowing what I was doing. But God is faithful and the studies that I began in the seminary quickly captured

confines of the Catholic Church. . . Christ's Spirit uses these Churches and ecclesial communities as means of salvation." (819, quoting from *Lumen Gentium* 8.2).

⁶The advice of my Evangelical family is easily understood, given the sad history of the "religious wars" that ravaged Europe in the early modern period and which continued in Spain well into the 20th century. Catholics know well the story of persecution by Protestants in England, but less well the role of Catholics in persecuting Protestants elsewhere on the Continent, in particular Spain and Italy, even into the 20th century. A recent work tells the story of the persecution of Evangelical Protestant believers in Spain from the Civil War until the 1960s. See Andrés Rodríguez Domingo, *La memoria robada* (Madrid: Letrame, 2017).

my newly enlivened Christian mind—Philosophy, Greek, the Bible, the writings of the Fathers, the burning theological issues of the 20th century . . . these were all new to me, but what a feast! And while there were many answers, sometimes the original questions were replaced by yet more complex questions!

So not surprisingly, like the woman at the well who had tasted the first fruits of Christ and had learned a little bit (John 4), I, too, wanted more and I could only go so far in Spain. So, I returned to North America and began to study Theology and Philosophy, first in the United States and then in Toronto at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies and the Toronto School of Theology. Seven years later, having completed my coursework and having all but completed a doctoral dissertation in Theology, and still very much of an Evangelical, I boldly and certainly naively wrote to my former Jesuit professors at the Seminary in Barcelona and asked them whether they would have a place for me to teach. To my astonishment but also my delight they warmly invited me back and on arrival they made me, my wife, and our by-now three daughters feel as at home as anyone might feel—at least anyone who was not a Jesuit! And so, it was there that I began my teaching career with the very professors who had first welcomed me as a fervent, new, Evangelical Christian student some ten years earlier. Little did I know how

profoundly my time first as a student, then as a teacher, would affect the very core of my Christian belief, for it was there that I began to grow into being a Catholic. But that was still to come.

3. Becoming Catholic

After five years teaching at the Seminary in Spain word reached me of a position in Ottawa. I applied (with the strong support of my Jesuit friends) and was offered the job. My wife and I, and our three daughters, with a son on the way, now took up a new life in a new city, Ottawa. It was a new city, but I was once again teaching in a Catholic setting, the pontifically chartered Faculty of Theology of Saint Paul University.

Another change took place that same year: I was ordained in the Anglican Church of Canada. As a new Christian, I continued to seek for the place in which I understood that the Lord wanted me to worship Him and work for Him. After my marriage, I found myself more and more drawn to my wife's Evangelical Anglican heritage, a legacy characterized by an elevated use of the English language, by historical rootedness, and by an astonishing breadth of churchmanship that could encompass almost any strain of Anglican belief, from extreme liberalism to

Evangelicalism.⁷ My ordination resulted from pastors and bishops seeing my desire and abilities and suggesting that I consider ordination.

I served faithfully, but I also quickly became disillusioned with what I saw and more importantly with what was missing. During my years in Ottawa as a theologian, as an Evangelical Christian, and as an ordained Anglican minister assisting in a variety of parishes, my wife and I both began to see disturbing weaknesses, weaknesses that reminded me of what I had witnessed as a teenager growing up in my parents' Protestant Church. In the early 2000s I received a call from an Anglican church that had also witnessed the weakening theology and practice in the Anglican Church of Canada. The church that had called was one of the largest and most active parishes in our diocese of the Anglican Church of Canada. They called to ask me to assist them in finding a way forward through a discernment process. A little less than a year later, that parish made the difficult decision to leave the Anglican Church of Canada and become part of a group of like-minded Anglican

⁷I was one of countless Evangelicals drawn to the Anglican Church. See Robert E. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1985). Interestingly, many of those who feature in Webber's book now find themselves members of the Catholic Church, too!

churches that hoped to maintain a reformed, evangelical, and charismatic identity.⁸

It was a hopeful beginning. But as my wife and I soon found out, leaving the Anglican Church of Canada did not leave the problems behind. Our newly realigned parish vacillated between competing styles of leadership; was torn between Biblical fundamentalists and those ready to heed the siren calls of secular culture; was unsure whether a strong central government or independent parishes was a better way to go. And so once again we found ourselves adrift.

In hindsight, I know that the problem was not any particular parish or denomination; the problem was Protestantism itself, and Evangelicalism in so far as it was a Protestant phenomenon. That's not to say that the problem was heresy.⁹ All that was wrong with Protestantism or Anglicanism was not simply because they preached heresy: our realigned parish did not. No, the problem was a disconnect: a lack of the Spirit that flowed in undivided form from the

⁸These parishes in Canada were originally led by the Right Reverend Donald Harvey, ironically an Anglo-Catholic, who remains a good friend and mentor. Had the Anglican Church had more bishops like Bishop Harvey, I imagine that today the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church would be in the final phases of overcoming the divisions of the 16th century!

⁹For a fuller description of the kinds of heresy found in Protestantism and some Evangelical sects, see my presentation on "Heresy," which can be found at <http://www.bloomquist.ca/sermons-and-presentations.html>.

Church founded by Jesus and established by the apostles. In an article published in 2008, Mark Galli expressed the problem well when he wrote that Evangelicalism

has been a chief engine of church renewal, with its emphasis on the individual's relationship with God, a proper suspicion of institutions that can indeed thwart the Spirit, and boldness to step into the future to which God is leading us. But these strengths have also produced our movement's weaknesses: spiritual narcissism, shaky institutions, and historical amnesia—in short, a tenuous connection to the ancient church's wisdom and strength."¹⁰

The problem was that neither Protestantism nor Evangelicalism was Catholic.

So, I began to ask my own parishioners and churchgoers from other contexts why we continued to have churches that were not fully in union with the Catholic Church. Could they provide me with any reason today for the heirs of the sixteenth-century Reformation to continue to fight for an identity separate from the "ancient church's wisdom and strength?"¹¹ As happened to Paul on the Areopagus,

¹⁰See Mark Galli, "Ancient-Future People," *Christianity Today*, February 2008, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/february/24.7.html> The fact that Galli's words were published in the flagship journal of Evangelicalism is significant.

¹¹The question is raised acutely in the Biola University video "The future of Protestantism," which can be found in a link on

a few listeners became interested to learn more, but the majority seemed to say: "We will hear you again another day on this . . . perhaps" (Acts 17). But my wife and I had reached a point where we needed to make a decision. So, we decided to take a "time-out" for discernment. Our goal was to set aside time to reflect and discern whether we should remain within our renewed Anglican parish and "tough it out," or

the Sermons and Presentations page of my WWW site (bloomquist.ca). As a result of my public questions, I was invited to speak about the ongoing relevance of Calvinism on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth (2009). On that occasion I challenged my Reformed audience to ask whether there was a need to continue the reform that Calvin had sought to introduce in the 1500s. As a result of that talk I was asked to give the Reformation Day sermon that same year. In that sermon I suggested that the Protestant Reformation had been only one of many reformations by which God had sought to purify His Church and that God continued to reform His church today but not through Protestant churches that embodied a divisive and defective theology. "Children of the reformation: Orphans or heirs?" Reformation Rally sermon, St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Ottawa (October 31, 2010), which can be found in a link on the Sermons and Presentations page of my WWW site (bloomquist.ca). As a result of both talks, I was invited to present a day-long workshop entitled "Reformation: In history and today" in which I finally answered my own public questioning about where reformation today will take place by declaring the end of the Protestant Reformation and the need for Protestants to return to the ancient church in her unbroken Tradition, one from which the Protestant churches had separated themselves. In my own parish, I asked whether the Protestant Church would necessarily fall one day into heresy, even if it wasn't there yet. The talks on "Heresy" can be found on the Sermons and Presentations page of my WWW site (bloomquist.ca).

whether it was time to take seriously where my questions and those of so many others like us were leading us. Accordingly, we set aside the period of the first Sunday of Advent 2014 to Easter Sunday 2015 as a time of discernment, characterized by prayer, reflection, study, visits, and honest conversation with each other and with trusted friends.

Having been freed from ministerial responsibilities in my parish,¹² we visited Protestant and Evangelical churches—to make sure that we had identified the problems correctly—and we visited Catholic and non-Catholic liturgical churches to determine the differences and some possible new directions. But early on we discerned something that we had already begun to sense even before the formal discernment period had begun, namely, that we felt most at home in the Catholic Church, whether in parishes in Ottawa, or in the rest of Canada, or throughout the United States and Europe. It didn't matter. It was the Catholic Church itself that we knew was "home." It was never clearer to us than when we realized that what we had been so missing and so delighted in when we entered a Catholic parish was the presence of the Eucharist.

¹²I have often joked with the senior pastor at the church that called us to assist them with their discernment about remaining Anglican that it actually started my wife and me on the way to our own discernment, a discernment that ultimately led us to leave Anglicanism and become Catholic.

So, during Lent of 2015, my wife and I asked to speak with the episcopal vicar of the Archdiocese of Ottawa, Mgr. Kevin Beach, who graciously met with us and assisted us in bringing to focus our reflections and in confirming our direction. He then led us into a personal conversation with the Archbishop of Ottawa, the Most Reverend Terrence Prendergast, S.J., who confirmed the direction that we were moving. Finally, as the culmination of our discernment process we were received into full communion with the See of Rome as members of the Catholic Church at the feast of the Most Holy Trinity in 2015, surrounded by friends, colleagues, students from the Faculty of Theology at Saint Paul and Holy Spirit Ukrainian Catholic Seminary, and the parishioners of our new parish, St. Maurice in Ottawa. There we delighted in our first Eucharist. We tasted and we saw!

4. Being Catholic

As is clear, my conversion happened almost fifty years ago. When I came to Christ, a process of growth began. Fifty years later, however, I am starting to see the gloriously full flower to which Christ has led me. And that has happened by becoming Catholic. Being stopped in my tracks and converted by God those fifty years ago began a decades-long process of discernment, but those decades of discernment laid a solid foundation for being Catholic.

For fifty years, I knew well the theology behind the Eucharist. What theologian doesn't! But it is another thing entirely not just to know the theology, or even to remember or be spiritually moved by the sacrifice of Christ, but to participate fully heart, mind, and soul in the mystery of the Eucharist, to be joined with Christ "body, blood, soul and divinity." It is no more possible to explain to a non-Catholic what this participation is than it is for a sighted person to explain the colour red to a blind person.

I also knew well the theology behind the other sacraments. I knew well what it meant to confess one's sins, and even heard occasional confessions as an Anglican priest. But the power of the Spirit was not there. It is another thing entirely to feel overwhelmed by the flood that is sin that brings Jesus to the cross and then in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to feel a hand reach down and rescue you from the flood as the waters of sin recede at the word of absolution from the priest. Only those who have been caught in a raging river or rapids from which there is no escape and who have been pulled from those waters by a hand of salvation can know what power there is to be found in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The *Catechism* clearly underscores that there is indeed grace outside the Catholic Church; however, the *Catechism* is equally clear that that grace finds its

fullness in the Church.¹³ I know that many Catholics have not had the privilege of seeing things from both sides as I have. Becoming Catholic and now being Catholic has not meant ceasing to be an Evangelical, only that being an Evangelical is not enough.¹⁴ My wife and I now see ourselves as being even more fully Evangelical than we could ever have been had we not become Catholic.

I believe that one of the most fervent cries of the heart of any Evangelical today is "Lord, save us from yet more division." But that cannot happen in Evangelicalism that is still rooted in the Protestant experience, which understands Scripture outside of its proper context within the Church. When this happens, Scripture is prey to multitudes of different interpretations, resulting in ever-greater division and fragmentation. That process of multiplication of scriptural interpretations, which has led to the proliferation of self-governing, autonomous entities breaking still further away from any original

¹³The *Catechism* describes the Protestant world as "imperfect" in its communion with the ongoing See of Peter (838). By "defective" I mean what the *Catechism* says in 837, that Protestants do not, as Catholics do, accept "all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization."

¹⁴In so many ways, my experience mirrors that of Thomas Howard, who summarized in the title of his book the truths that I have come to know. See Thomas Howard, *Evangelical is not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984).

continuity with the apostolic tradition, has led to a situation in which there are over twenty thousand denominations in North America alone! In marked contrast, the Catholic Church provides the context within which a truly Evangelical faith—a lively faith grounded in Scripture—can come to full blossom without division, either by ideology or by ethnicity.¹⁵

For my wife and me, George Weigel was a crucial guide in assisting us to understand our true Evangelical home.¹⁶ Weigel showed us how the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) revealed the true nature of the Catholic Church as Evangelical Catholic Church. Vatican II came as the culmination of one hundred years of prophetic Biblical scholarship through Catholic Biblical studies and magisterial teaching. It has been nourished in the half-century since in the teaching of Paul VI, Pope Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis.¹⁷ Perhaps not coincidentally, that half-century coincides with my own becoming Catholic!

¹⁵The divisions that plague Orthodoxy for largely ethnic and territorial reasons are remarkably similar to those that plague Protestantism.

¹⁶George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

¹⁷Pope Benedict XVI summarized Vatican II well when he describes it as the time when the Church fully evidenced its embrace of Scripture as the "soul of theology." The phrase comes from the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, from Vatican II.

Vatican II also unleashed the Spirit, and lo and behold, signs and wonders followed: the Catholic Charismatic movement flourished, bringing about vibrant, new charismatic orders like the Companions of the Cross into whose care our parish of St. Maurice is entrusted. The Church, long known as a “closed shop” was encouraged through the “new evangelization” to take the “joy of the gospel” into Catholic homes and into all the world.¹⁸ Is it a coincidence that the fifty-year period following the council saw the Catholic Church on fire for mission? In this revived Church the Spirit of Truth is unfettered, bringing life to every corner of the Church, especially where Catholics “give God permission” to do His work.¹⁹ As a Biblical scholar I always stressed to my students that mission was the fundamental feature of earliest Christianity. How thrilling for me now as a Catholic to be able to affirm the ways in which the recovery of Scripture at Vatican II not only sparked Evangelical revivals of signs and wonders in the Church but also a renewed Evangelical vision of

¹⁸The “new evangelization” was the term first used by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (“In proclaiming the gospel”) and was popularized by Pope Saint John Paul II throughout his papacy. The phrase “Joy of the Gospel” is the English translation of the opening words of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis.

¹⁹The phrase is most closely associated with Fr. Bob Bedard, and is drawn from the title of his memoirs. See Fr. Bob Bedard, *Give God Permission: The Memoirs of Fr. Bob Bedard* (Ottawa: Companions of the Cross, 2010).

mission. The Catholic Church has never not been a missionary church, spreading the gospel across the globe from the early birthing of the Church in the most hostile lands of barbarian Europe, the British Isles, India, China, Japan, and eventually the New World of sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and southeast Asia. But, truth be told, Vatican II reaffirmed this most Catholic desire. Fifty years out in the wake of Vatican II, the growth rate of the Catholic Church now exceeds the growth rate of the population of the entire world!²⁰ It is an explosion that the Holy Father himself prophetically oversees. As he emphasized again and again throughout the Year of Mercy, announced the month in which we made our decision to become Catholics (April 2015), the task of the Church is to draw all people into the open arms of Jesus, who offers them grace and mercy through Himself. My wife and I know of no more Evangelical announcement for the twenty-first century than this good-news agenda, backed by a Church that is energized to deliver it to every corner of the world, led by the grace of God today by Saint Peter’s successor in the person of Pope Francis!

But it is not all going out. It is not all action. We know that the Catholic Church is our home because there we find peace, not as the world gives. In the

²⁰See

<https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/is-the-catholic-church-experiencing-exponential-growth-or-declining>

Catholic Church there is a transcendent peace and order where a still small voice can speak in the silence. This peace is palpably evident in the remarkable respect that one feels upon entrance into any parish at the start of the Mass, the honour and reverence shown to the altar and the sacrament, the attentiveness to the readings from the Word of God and to its simple, direct, and prophetic proclamation.

Where will this new life lead us? To life, of course! Which is why I have made mine the prayer of St. Gregory the Great: "Let us stir up our hearts, rekindle our faith, and long eagerly for what heaven has in store for us." St. Gregory, pray for us. St. Maurice, pray for us. St. George, pray for us.

Martin Carter

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Ongoing Conversion

It is with some trepidation that I begin this conversion story. Recollecting events that occurred half a century or more ago can be daunting. In addition, I'm cognizant of the words of St. Edith