

# MY ROAD TO ROME

The Experience of a Modern Convert

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In these rather tumultuous times, hardly a day goes by without one hearing of reports of defections from the Church, or defiance against her authority. Stories of those converted to, and not from, Catholicism, have become rather scarce. I offer the following account, therefore, in the hope that it may be of help to some who are confused, doubtful or perplexed about the Church and her most Holy Faith. At the same time, we need to remember that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who leads men to the Church. He does not do so on account of their own cleverness or natural virtues. As Our Lord said, 'The wind blows where it wills' (John 3:8.)

## BEGINNINGS

Many converts have been attracted to the Catholic Church initially because of the awesome impression made by the dignity and beauty of her worship. I can honestly say that this carried no weight with me at all. I was brought up in an old-style evangelical Presbyterian environment, and was taught that "all the gaudy pomp and ritual of Rome" was an "abomination in the sight of the Lord". Indeed, "liturgy" was practically a dirty word in our world. We believed that the simpler, plainer, and more spontaneous our worship was, the purer and more acceptable it was to God.

Other converts have joined the Church largely as the result of the personal influence of other Catholics, particularly if these happen to be close friends, husbands, or wives. Again, I must confess that assistance of this sort was mainly lacking in my case. With a few notable exceptions, the Catholics I first encountered when I started at university were apparently apathetic about their religion, and probably did more to "turn me off" than "on."

Catholicism on paper, however, presented a rather different picture. I remember being quite impressed by some of the expositions of Catholic doctrine which I found in the university library. I was quite unprepared for a reasoned defence of the Catholic Faith, because I had always assumed that Catholics were frightened of reason, and relied on brainwashing (and, in Catholic countries, persecution) to maintain their position. I had been told that many Catholic beliefs were contrary to Scripture. But I found that the Catholic explanations of the Scriptural passages in question often seemed just as plausible as the Protestant ones. It was true that Catholic teaching often went *beyond* the plain words of Scripture in many ways, but that is not at all the same thing as contradicting Scripture. The Bible does not state that Our Lady was taken up body and soul into Heaven, for instance; but it certainly does not state that her body decayed in the grave, as most Protestants believe.

## AUTHORITY

By the end of a year or so at university I think I had reached an awareness that there was only one doctrine really worth discussing in the field of Catholic-Protestant relations, and that was the question of authority and infallibility. Once you granted Catholics the single point that Christ founded a Church with its own inherent authority to teach and preach in His name, then everything else they taught followed logically; all the other Protestant objections were bowled over in one fell swoop, as it were.

I didn't see how one could disprove the Catholic position from the point of view of pure reason alone, but I was still very far from becoming a Catholic. The ultimate argument, from those whom I considered holier and wiser than myself, was always to quote Our Lord's words:

"By their fruits ye shall know them." The fruits of 'Romanism' (it was pointed out to me) were the Inquisition, the stake, greed, idolatry, lust, ritualism, persecution, worldliness and clerical tyranny; therefore all true, pure-hearted lambs in Christ's flock had abundant evidence for the essentially Satanic nature of the Papacy, if only they would follow their hearts and not be misled by the cunning intellectual sophistries of Jesuitical apologists. This sort of thing, admittedly, I always found somewhat far-fetched and one-sided, but it provided a sufficient deterrent for me simply to shelve the whole matter indefinitely.

As my undergraduate years progressed, however, I became more disenchanted with what I saw of Protestantism, though without being consciously drawn towards Catholicism. With views too 'conservative' to feel at home with the

Student Christian Movement, but too ‘liberal’ to join the Evangelical Union, I spent my undergraduate days in a kind of religious ‘no-man’s land’, although I leaned rather more to the latter society. The evangelicals attracted me because of their devout, and sometimes even saintly, personal example; I had no time at all for others (including Christians) who ridiculed the evangelicals and called them “religious fanatics”, since, of course, many of the great saints, and Our Lord Himself, were branded “religious fanatics” by their contemporaries. The world will always sneer at holiness.

### **THE BIBLE**

But I had to admit that the Evangelical Union form of religion, in which some vaguely defined “conversion experience”—“accepting Christ as your personal Saviour” was supposed to “save” you irrevocably like a free one-way ticket to eternal blessedness, was to an unhealthy degree emotional and even anti-intellectual.

I also became more and more and more disenchanted with the evangelical emphasis on the Bible *alone* as the sole source of revealed truth.

Why should God, if He wanted to make Himself clear to us, leave us with nothing more than a book which can be interpreted in hundreds of different ways, even on fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Justification? Even more devastating was the question that occurred to me, “How do I know that the Bible is even *supposed* to be the sole source of revelation?” It certainly doesn’t claim to be. It doesn’t even claim to be inspired by God in its entirety (although certain parts of it do). Nor does it claim to consist of the 66 books which Protestants have put between its covers; and it certainly makes no claim to be self-interpreting to any sincere Christian reader, as Protestants say it is.

In other words, I came to see that Protestantism contradicts itself. In one breath it insists passionately that all its doctrines are to be found in the Bible. But that doctrine itself — the famous *rota scriptura* — isn’t there, and neither are various other special doctrines concerning the Bible that it turns round and starts preaching in the next breath. These doctrines are completely dependent on the authority of Reformation tradition, and yet tradition is the very thing Protestantism says must *not* be trusted!

I began toying around with “High Church” Anglicanism, which purports to recognise both Scripture *and* tradition as sources of Christian revelation; and in this I was stimulated by the conversion of a good friend who became a “High” Anglican after twenty years or so of unbelief. I remember being quite astonished by the fact that, unlike ‘converted’ evangelicals, she did not believe she was ‘saved’ as a result of her conversion.

### **LUTHERANISM**

It was in this frame of mind that I went to New Guinea, directly after my graduation, as a teacher with Australian Volunteers Abroad. I was posted with the Lutheran Mission, since although I had never met a Lutheran in my life, I was assured that they were fairly similar in outlook to Presbyterians. While this turned out to be true in some respects, the Lutherans also manifested certain traits which I had always associated with Catholicism.

The most important of these was that they held basically Catholic ideas about the two main Sacraments: Baptism, they said, is a true means of grace, a washing from sin and a regeneration to the new life in Christ; whilst (horror of horrors to a Presbyterian!) they believed that the true Body and Blood of Christ is objectively present in the Eucharistic bread and wine.

I came to accept this Lutheran-Catholic sacramental outlook, and in fact practised as a Lutheran for several years. However, I never formally joined the Lutheran Church, because while it appealed to me more than other Churches, I still could not accept it *in toto*. The *rota scriptura* principle seemed just as illogical as ever, and, furthermore, I came to see that in practice, as distinct from theory, the Lutherans believe in the infallibility of their own Church, as the interpreter of Scripture, just as much as Catholics do. In other words, here was another contradiction. The real touchstone of orthodoxy for Lutherans is not the “Bible alone”, but the Bible as interpreted by the 16th century confessional documents, to which all Lutheran pastors must subscribe.

The same contradiction is to be discerned in all Protestant Churches which manage to maintain any sort of coherent doctrinal message at all. The basic dilemma for a Protestant Church which stands by any sort of confession or faith-statement in addition to Scripture — even just the Creed—can be put more precisely thus: either it must claim that the

confession in question *is* definitely and certainly a true exposition of Scripture; or it must say, “This confession *seems* to *us* a true exposition of Scripture, but we may be mistaken, since other sincere Christians think differently.”

If the former alternative is chosen, one is really claiming infallibility for whichever group of churchmen formulated the confession; if the latter, then there can be no justification for retaining the confession at all as a *binding* document on either clergy or laity, or as a barrier to union with other Churches. Why maintain fallible human opinions as a cause of division between the separated brethren of Christendom? Why not open the gates to anyone as long as he is prepared to affirm that he thinks his views are scriptural?

In practice, the latter alternative is that which has now been adopted in the big, “liberal” Churches — Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and one or two others. They manage to avoid the trap of behaving just as “infallibly” as the Pope; however, they have no alternative but to permit any and every deviation from historic Christianity. The traditional Christian symbols and formulae are given lip-service, but everyone is free to interpret them (as much as the Bible) just as he sees fit.

The Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury has been quoted as saying publicly that he does not consider it dishonest for someone to stand up and say the Creed in full, without believing that Our Lord was born of a virgin, provided he gives a “general assent” to the overall content of the Creed.

I disagree strongly. How can you assent in general to doctrines from which you dissent in particular? Where will you stop in your “reinterpretation”? The whole basic approach to religious truth in “liberal” Christianity is diametrically opposed to that of the New Testament and the early Church, even though it may accidentally come to the same conclusions in many respects. It’s not just *what* you believe, but *why* you believe it that matters, though “liberals” just cannot see this.

The ancient Church had a definite, coherent message to proclaim, and a definite code of morals. She *knew* the message she had received from her Lord, and was conscious of her power to discern corruptions of that message and exclude them. New converts had to accept the Creed *because its doctrines were revealed by the Lord.*

There was no question of taking in people who wanted to make acceptance of the substance of the Church’s dogma dependent on the supposed results of natural philosophy — what we today would call scientific or historical criticism. A person who wanted that was called a heretic. Such an approach would turn the whole of revealed truth into mere human opinion. In other words, “liberal” Churches are doctrinally inclusive, whereas the ancient Church was doctrinally exclusive.

And yet I could see the Archbishop of Canterbury’s point. Modern knowledge has rendered some older beliefs untenable. Not even so-called fundamentalists today take literally the first chapter of Genesis and the genealogies which seem to prove that the world was created in six 24-hour days in the year 4004 B.C. But once you start allowing non-literal interpretations there is no saving the authority of the Bible at all unless, like the Catholic Church, you can appeal to an infallible teaching authority to act as a sort of “backstop”; such an authority can start drawing a few definite lines somewhere, saying, “this bit and that bit are essential parts of Christian tradition; you have to take them literally, even if the exact historicity of other bits is debatable.”

All these considerations led me to a renewed respect for Catholicism, with its insistence on revealed dogma. It was beginning to look much more like the faith of the ancient Church than most Protestants suspected. Christianity is a revealed religion. But if all we have is something which can be interpreted in a hundred contradictory ways, then there is really no revelation at all. A Church without dogma, or (what amounts to the same thing), a Church wherein there is no agreement as to what is dogma and what is merely opinion, cannot be an authentically Christian Church at all.

## JUSTIFICATION

I was finding other problems connected with Protestantism as well. On the vital question of justification, St. Paul and the other New Testament writers were starting to sound much more like Catholics than Protestants. To insist on “justification by faith apart from works” was all very well; but what precisely does that *mean*? Faith in what? Luther and Calvin said that what justifies a man is faith in the promise of free forgiveness of his own sins for Christ’s sake alone. There is a curious, involuted, illogical mysticism here: you are supposed to be personally justified solely by believing that you are personally justified; which sounds like the logical equivalent of trying to lift oneself up by one’s

own bootstraps.

Even love and repentance were regarded by Luther as “works” which must on no account be thought of as a necessary condition for forgiveness. He said that even if you have done something bad and have a guilty conscience about it, you must never, never doubt that you are in a state of grace regardless.

Repentance follows forgiveness, he said; it is not a prerequisite for forgiveness. All this seemed to me to be putting the cart before the horse. I could find none of it in the New Testament. St. Paul (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:3-5, 9:24-27) and the other apostles, were not concerned to give others (or themselves) some absolute, unconditional guarantee of their own personal state of being accounted righteous before God. The faith they seemed more concerned to spread was faith in the truths later summed up in the Creed. If you accepted this doctrine, and were baptised into the Church, you would be forgiven and saved, to be sure, but only if your faith was accompanied by a repentance from sin and a perseverance in trying to do the will of God.

The New Testament, I began to see, made it quite clear that God did not forgive us our sins as a reward for any good *deeds* we had done; but the Reformers wanted to exclude even good *intentions* as a prerequisite for forgiveness, even when the Catholic Church conceded—indeed insisted—that those good intentions were themselves only possible as the result of God’s grace working in a man’s heart. This was really going too far, I thought; it made man into a mere puppet with no real say in his eternal destiny at all. The Council of Trent was surely much truer to the New Testament.

All these difficulties haunted the back of my mind for years, but for most of the time I pushed them aside and carried on with the business of everyday living. Deep down, I think I was frightened of facing up once again to the challenge of the Catholic Church’s absolute claim on my allegiance, because I instinctively sensed that there might be traumatic emotional and social ramifications if I was converted, and I was more secure and comfortable the way I was. Conversion, when it did come, came as a sudden, overwhelming, and unexpected experience and it was precipitated by reflection on what is probably the most unpopular of the Church’s teachings.

## CONTRACEPTION

People are often surprised enough when I tell them I am a convert; they are frequently quite astonished to hear that my conversion was largely due to the Pope’s teaching on birth control. Like most non-Catholics today, I had always more or less taken it for granted that contraception was O.K. But when I began to think more closely about it, I came to see that much of the current argument about this matter is quite inconsistent. There is no question of the Church ever allowing contraception *alone*, because any argument for admitting contraception is also an argument for admitting all sorts of other ugly sexual deviations which a man and woman can practise together, and which the Church has always condemned just as definitely as contraception, though with much less publicity. When pushed further, the argument will ultimately admit masturbation, sodomy, and any other kind of sexual deviancy.

Anyone who wants to justify contraception must argue either that it is a bad thing in itself, but can be justified in some cases as the lesser of two evils; or he must argue that it is not a bad thing in itself.

If he takes the first line, he will point to the evils of over-population, or the hardships that extra births might bring to individual families, as the greater evils he wishes to see avoided. However, this end-justifies-the-means philosophy can be used to condone all manner of hideous evils, as Hitler and Stalin have shown the world all too clearly. To admit that an inherently evil means can be used to control population would be to admit abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, compulsory sterilisation, and so on, until everyone’s life is at the mercy of the State. Furthermore, contraception never *is* necessary. To assert that it is to imply that periodic continence is simply impossible — that man is an animal with no means of voluntarily controlling his sexual impulses. Periodic continence is not easy, to be sure, but modern advances in the ovulation method have made it much easier, and much more reliable, than the out-dated rhythm method.

Most Christians can appreciate the above points, and thus, the great majority of those who wish to defend contraception do so by taking the second line of approach. They maintain that it is *not* inherently evil. Protestants often rely simply on the argument, “It’s not condemned in Scripture.” In view of Genesis 38:9-10, this is at least highly debatable, but even if it were true, such an argument would be simplistic and inadequate. Neither are

masturbation, necrophilia, sado-masochism, abortion, pornography or sterilisation condemned explicitly in Scripture. But this surely does not mean we can simply approve of them all without further ado. The Christian must look for the principles underlying the God-given meaning of sex, and apply them consistently.

Much confusion stems from a rather idle discussion about the “primary” and “secondary” purposes of sex considered abstractly. But all that really exist are particular sex acts. And particular acts between a man and woman, if not interfered with chemically or mechanically, are either fertile or they are not. But in the case of a fertile act, there can surely be no doubt for the Christian as to what its primary purpose is in the sight of God — the creation of a new human being in His own image, endowed with an immortal soul. This is a result with eternal significance, obviously far more important than the transient pleasure, or expression of love, which was occasioned for the couple by that particular act.

It follows that the application of some contraceptive technique to this particular act, to deprive it of its natural procreative power, is a deliberate contravention of God’s clearly discernible purpose. Of course sex is also for mutual love and pleasure; you can even say that is the primary purpose in naturally infertile acts, if you wish. But to snatch at the pleasure on occasions when you deliberately frustrate its natural consequences is to lay down the pernicious principle that God’s designs and purposes, made manifest in the way he has created our bodies and their sacred procreative functions, can be distorted and subordinated to serve those of man.

Practically everyone is instinctively revolted by the thought of at least some of the lowest forms of sexual perversion. But if someone defiantly insists that *for him*, such behaviour brings love, joy and fulfillment, there is no coherent criticism that can be brought against him by the advocate of contraception. Any attempt to pinpoint some rational reason *why* his action is immoral and degrading will inevitably fall back on ideas of “unnaturalness”, or of sex being “designed” for something else, or of using our bodies in the way they are “supposed to be used”. But these are criteria which can be urged equally against contraception. The critic is trying to have his Pill, as it were, and eat it too.

The last-ditch stand of the contraceptionist is to protest that if the Catholic Church were consistent, she would condemn the use of periodic continence as well, since it is also “unnatural” for couples to restrain their natural sex impulses. But notice carefully the implications of this argument. For one thing, it forgets that our sex impulses are not now as God originally planned them to be. They have become distorted, and rendered much less subject to the control of our wills, as a result of Original Sin. If it had not been for this, periodic continence would be no more difficult than refusing a drink is for a non-alcoholic. Since the fall, not everything about our “natural” impulses can be said to have God’s unqualified stamp of approval.

Furthermore, those who argue that periodic continence is “unnatural” are seldom themselves consistent. They seem to be suggesting the conclusion, “therefore, let’s do away completely with the whole idea of ‘naturalness’ or ‘unnaturalness’ as a criterion of sexual morality.” But those who talk this way, especially Christians, will nearly always be found to disapprove of sexual deviancy in at least some of its most degraded forms — say bestiality or necrophilia. But as we have just seen, these perversions can be condemned rationally only by an appeal to some sort of objective “natural” norms. In other words, those who use this argument are themselves making an unacknowledged distinction between one kind of “unnaturalness” which is wrong, and another kind which isn’t which is precisely what the Church does. The fallacy in the argument is, of course, that it fails to distinguish between the non-use and the abuse of a gift given by God.

The mere *word* “unnatural” is neither here nor there, since it is so vague and ambiguous in popular speech that it has a whole range of meanings. Nobody imagines for a moment that the sort of “unnaturalness” which is nothing more than a self-restraint of one’s spontaneous drives or impulses is morally wrong — least of all the Catholic Church. If it were, then we should all be morally obliged to behave like animals, obeying every impulsive dictate of our bodies. The only kind of “unnaturalness” condemned by the Church is that in which we *use* our God-given drives, but do so in a manner which subverts or frustrates the ends for which God has designed them. If my friend gives me a beautifully-bound book by my favourite author, he will not be offended if I don’t read it all the time; but he will certainly be very hurt if I tear it up because its thin rice-paper rolls a very good, smooth-smoking cigarette!

In other words, we all make the kind of distinction between non-use and abuse, restraint and distortion, that the Church makes in this case. Sex acts during the fertile hours of a woman’s cycle are designed for procreation just as

plainly and obviously as sexuality as a whole is designed for union between man and woman, rather than between man and man, man and beast, or man and the hideous masturbatory devices now being offered for sale in sex shops and pornographic magazines. If God's purposes may be ignored in one case they may be ignored in others as well.

When I came to the conclusion that contraception was wrong, I was converted almost overnight. It was as though scales fell from my eyes, and I saw the Church, and indeed the whole world, in a totally new way. The Catholic Church appeared now, in spite of the great wickednesses of so many of her members throughout history, as a city set upon a hill, as a sign of Christ in a world where the forces of evil were progressively eroding away man's dignity as a creature in the image of God. Everything suddenly "clicked"; all the jumbled bits and pieces of my experience, all the anomalies, contradictions, and "loose ends" which plagued all the other forms of Christianity, rose up from the back of my mind, where they had nagged and troubled me for so long, and resolved themselves by falling together like the pieces of a great jigsaw puzzle. And the picture that appeared when they did so was that of a single, visible Church, founded by Christ to last until His return — a Church which all men could trust as a teacher of his revealed truth. It seemed strange that ecumenical dialogue between the Churches was proceeding so vaguely and ponderously.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that most ecumenical dialogue is not nearly radical enough; Catholic theologians are sitting down politely with Protestant theologians and trying to work out how much they have in common on what appears to be a "Bible alone" basis. We are getting "agreed statements" about the Eucharist, Orders, and even the Papacy. More often than not they are vague and even compromising. Protestants have a deeply rooted conviction that we simply cannot go beyond what the Bible says, and it is this, I believe, that is the major barrier to reunion. If Catholics insisted more firmly on pointing out that Protestants have already gone well beyond "what the Bible says" in their doctrines about the Bible itself, we might see a few more genuine "breakthroughs."

### **EASTERN ORTHODOXY**

There were still, however, barriers ahead of me before I was finally received into the Church. Conversion brought with it emotional difficulties, especially since I was almost wholly isolated; I had no friends and few acquaintances who were practising Catholics. My whole personality was still that of one who had been brought up outside the Church in an anti-Catholic environment. Then, shortly before I was due to join the Church formally, there came a major setback. I 'discovered' Eastern Orthodoxy.

I had assumed that the Roman Catholic Church alone claimed to be the one true Church of Christ, and that she alone claimed that infallible teaching authority which is the only alternative to doctrinal chaos or self-contradiction. But now I found that the great Eastern Church—the second largest in Christendom—also makes the same claim. Orthodoxy, furthermore, is opposed to contraception just as much as the Catholic Church. How was I to decide between them?

This led to a period of considerable doubt and anguish, and I began to feel like giving up religion altogether. If God was really there at all, and if he wanted me to do anything about it, why didn't he make himself clear, instead of throwing countless religions at me, all claiming to be Ultimate Truth? How did God expect me, an ordinary young Australian, to come to any decision to which, if any, was true, when all the experts- the philosophers and theologians and mystics of all countries and all ages—continued to wrangle and argue interminably with each other?

Nevertheless, I did cling to a belief in God throughout all this. The idea that there is no God always seemed to me irrational: So did Pantheism in all its multifarious forms; if everything is God, then I, as a real, individual self simply do not exist; I am an illusion. Personally, I find the idea of my own non-existence sheer madness, even though great, holy and learned men from all over Asia and elsewhere have believed it firmly. I suspect that their insights are really, in a sense, a distorted approximation to a truth which I am too dull to perceive for myself, and can know only by revelation — that there is a sense in which we do become part of God. The Christian knows that by grace, we become incorporated into the mystical Body of Christ, and yet that even in Heaven, this will not destroy our individuality, but rather fulfil it.

So, through all my long period of confusion, which lasted six months or so, I did retain a trust in Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. The gospel of a God who loved us so much that He was willing to become one of us, to share our weakness and even suffer the worst agonies that we have to pass through, in order to give us eternal life, was a

love story my heart could not resist. And in this case, my head supported my heart. A God who was *not* the Christian God — who could have done all this for us, but preferred to remain comfortably ensconced in paradise above—would not be as perfect and loving as He might have been. In other words, he would not really be God at all.

This fact of *two* contenders for the title, “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”, though, threw me into considerable confusion, and I began to wonder whether there was any “right” or “true” denomination at all. Finally, however, I was led to see that the Eastern Orthodox Church cannot sustain her claim to infallibility. Infallibility implies some sort of readily recognizable authority which can make infallible decisions, when necessary; but Eastern Orthodoxy has no such authority. The Orthodox claim to recognise the doctrinal decisions of ecumenical councils as infallible, but they offer no coherent criteria for deciding which councils are “ecumenical” and which are not.

Anglo-Catholicism, which sees the absurdities of the sola *scriptura* approach, and insists that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of “early tradition”, breaks down for similar reasons. *Whose* early tradition? There were dozens of contradictory versions of Christianity in the early centuries, as there are now. It so happens that Anglo-Catholics choose the tradition of the majority, and we have just seen what happens when we apply that criterion consistently. And how early? Some Anglicans appeal to the tradition of the “first five centuries”; others to what they call the period of the “undivided Church”, meaning, in fact, the Church which recognised the primacy of Rome in its first thousand years, before the East broke away. But the whole idea of a Church which was infallible for a certain period of time and then gradually became fallible, which is what the Anglo-Catholics claim, is self-contradictory.

“Infallible” does not mean “*is* not in error”; it means “*cannot* be in error”. If the Church eventually came to err, then she always had the potential for error, and was thus never infallible in the first place! If the Council of Florence and the First Vatican Council were *capable* of error, then so were the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Chalcedon. Whether they or any other councils erred *in fact* must be decided by some independent criterion.

The overwhelming majority of Protestants can see that once you admit the principle of subjecting scripture to the interpretation of tradition, Roman Catholicism is the logical result, and thus they reject the Anglo-Catholic theory. But yet they remain unaware of, or unconcerned by, the contradictions inherent in their own “Bible alone” approach.

## TO ROME

And so, my long and rather meandering journey through all the Christianities had led me once more back to Catholicism. The road to the East turned out to curve right round and lead back to Rome. So did the road to Canterbury. All the traditional non-Catholic forms of Christianity — that is, all those who believed in a Church with definite, revealed dogma — turned out to be full of logical leaks. The Catholic Church alone, the old “ark of salvation”, as the Fathers used to call her, remains watertight.

One was forced to conclude that, as the Catholics claimed, papal infallibility must have been implicit in the original deposit of faith, even though Christians in the first few centuries were not clearly aware that Christ’s promises to Peter carried this implication. It was not so much that you could prove the papal claims by a purely empirical survey of what people actually said and wrote about Peter and his successors in the early centuries. It was rather that you could disprove all the other traditional theologies and were thus left with Catholicism by a process of elimination.

The only alternative to all this was the modernistic, non-traditional approach, which rejects the whole idea of *any* authority — book or Church or Pope or Creed — which can be trusted to speak the truth about God. But this non-traditional approach, an unbridled individualism which would give us a Church in which everyone is free to believe exactly what he likes, was incredible for me precisely because it was so obviously alien to the whole spirit of historic Christianity.

Tradition is simply inescapable for the Christian insofar as he acknowledges its authority (even if only that part of it which affirms that the Bible is inspired by God), he is on a road which will lead him to Rome if he follows it consistently. Insofar as he rejects its authority he is on a road which will lead him just as surely away from Christianity altogether. There was no way out. I had reached the stage where I was simply incapable of resisting the Church’s absolute claim, made in the name of Christ, on my allegiance. I was received into the Church and made my first communion at the Easter Vigil on the night of Holy Saturday, 1972.

## DIFFICULTIES OF A MODERN CONVERT

But even then there were ominous signs -- signs which I have since discovered were indicative of a widespread cancer which is at present gnawing away at the very vitals of the Catholic faith. The priest who was preparing me for entry into the Church would, if I had taken any notice of what he told me, have prepared me much more effectively for a speedy exit. I simply would not have joined the Church if I had shared his beliefs. He had apparently fallen into the fatal Protestant trap of individualism from which I myself was just escaping — the trap which says that it is up to each individual Christian to decide what the Christian religion teaches and what it doesn't.

He hinted to me that these days it is no longer necessary to believe in the Infallibility of the Pope; consequently, other defined dogmas such as Purgatory and what he called “all these doctrines about Mary”, also had to be considered pretty much “optional”, so he seemed to think.

In other words, infallibility—the very doctrine which had provided the key which led me to the Catholic Church, because it is the only logical alternative to chaos and apostasy — was to be thrown out as excess baggage! The trouble is that many Catholics, suddenly released from the old pre-conciliar “ghetto” mentality, have now gone completely overboard with ecumenical zeal. The “new theology” of today is really a revamped version of trends which have been around for centuries. The idea is that we are to “peel off” layers of supposedly unnecessary dogmatic accretions, which have become encrusted like barnacles on the Church's hull as she has sailed down through the centuries.

Finally, it is hoped, we will reach the pure, simple essentials —the solid core of Christianity—so that a renewed, streamlined Church, uniting all Christians, will be ready once again to face the challenges of a new age. But instead, the process turns out to be like peeling the skins of an onion. You peel away merrily with your tools of rationalism and existential philosophy and biblical criticism, until you suddenly find to your consternation that there is no “solid core” in the middle at all, but just smaller and smaller skins, and finally — nothing. The supposedly “external” layers have turned out to be the essence of the onion itself, which now lies torn to shreds.

This I believe points to the grave responsibility facing the Catholic catechist in today's high schools—the responsibility to take a firm stand for orthodoxy in doctrine. Let us give young people something definite, something solid. Let us fight this growing “inferiority complex”. We must show them the *rationality* of Catholicism, and not be ashamed to point out to them clearly the illogicalities of our separated brethren. Let us try to develop an appreciation for the lives of the great saints and martyrs in the Church, and well-authenticated miracles such as those of Lourdes and Fatima. In short, let us emphasise that Christ established one Church, with a definite, clear gospel of salvation for all men, and that the divinely appointed guardians of this gospel are the bishops and the successor of Peter.

I see no reason why this approach need degenerate into the “authoritarianism” which everyone seems to be frightened of today. We need not suppress honest questioning with threats of hellfire. But neither should we neglect or misrepresent the Church's teaching on authority and conscience, so as to give students the impression that it is up to every individual to decide for himself what the content of Christ's message is. Certainly it is up to every individual to decide for himself whether he is going to be a Christian at all; from that point of view I believe the modern catechetical emphasis on personal commitment is very healthy.

But it must be made clear that personal commitment to Christ logically implies commitment to the Catholic Church and a willingness to listen to her divinely appointed magisterium. The lines, I believe, must be clearly drawn and catechists who feel that they themselves cannot in conscience argue in support of the Church's official teachings — especially on the sexual matters which are perhaps the major rock of offence for modern teenagers — should, I think, be honest enough not to continue in their job. Commitment to some vague, ill-defined “Christianity”, in which all the emphasis is placed on a safe, uncontroversial message of social justice and brotherly love which will arouse no criticism from unbelievers, is not an authentic Catholic commitment at all.

I have heard the view expressed by influential catechists, “kids today just won't listen to doctrine of the sort we used to give them. They're not ready for it. We can only discuss life-situations.” I doubt whether this is true. Human nature and psychological growth are not much different from one generation to the next. Provided it is expounded and defended reasonably and interestingly, young people *will* listen to doctrine.

I have been living in a whole seminary full of young Protestants who have listened to it. The catechetical methods used in Lutheran schools today would be considered ‘quite out-of-date’ by current Catholic standards, and yet they are

succeeding where the modern Catholic approach largely seems to be failing. They are turning out a relatively high proportion of confident, keen, and informed Lutherans, while Catholic schools are apparently turning out a pretty low proportion of confident, keen and informed Catholics.

### **INFALLIBILITY**

The infallibility of the Church, or of the Pope, is not an “inessential” doctrine which we can dispense with while retaining other “essentials”. It is the “glue”, as it were, that holds the whole Christian Revelation together in one piece. To say that the Church is infallible simply means that she *knows* what it is that she is supposed to go and teach all nations. The Church which Hans Kung and others believe in, which could claim nothing more than to preserve the truth “in spite of all ever possible errors”, could plainly teach nothing at all to the nations with any certainty, because it would have no way of sorting out the truth from the error.

If the Pope is not infallible then neither are Councils, because it was a Council that declared that he is. And if Councils are not infallible, then neither is the Nicene Creed that we say at Mass every Sunday, because it was Councils that laid down that Creed.

Most other big Churches, including the Anglicans, have already reached this conclusion, as we noted earlier, and everyone is free to reject or “reinterpret” anything in the Creed which he finds doubtful. But if we can no longer be certain of the Creed, then obviously we should stop saying it; in fact, we might just as well admit, in that case, that the whole Christian religion is completely uncertain, and give up practising it.

There is a remorseless chain of logic involved here, so it is no wonder that so many today who start treading down the “liberal”, “progressive” road end up leaving the Church altogether, even priests and nuns. Once you jump on the current bandwagon of protest against “excessive dogma”, there is no rational stopping place short of a complete rejection of the Church. But there is no need to jump on it! The Church is still founded on Peter, the Rock. And if only we stand faithfully by his successor, and listen to his voice, we shall retain intact the faith which Our Lord has revealed to the world.

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