

A Rake's Progress

by J. Budziszewski

FROM:

Faith and Reason

*Philosophers Explain Their
Turn to Catholicism*

Edited by
Brian Besong
Jonathan Fuqua

IGNATIUS PRESS SAN FRANCISCO

© 2019 by Ignatius Press, San Francisco

A Rake's Progress

J. Budziszewski

Introduction

Since this book is about philosophers who have become Catholics, it would be splendid to present a steady intellectual advance from birth to Catholic faith. This I cannot do, since both philosophically and spiritually, much of my life was a rake's progress. For this reason, I am not sure how edifying the tale will be. Then again, perhaps most lives have something of this messy character, so I am emboldened to proceed.¹

Writing about oneself has never seemed to me helpful to spiritual discipline. The compilers of the book seem to think it may be a good idea for other reasons. So I will trust them. Besides, it is too late to back out now.

Perhaps I should begin by saying something about what sort of person I am. Though does anyone know what sort of person he is? We speak of finding or even "inventing" ourselves, but we are already invented, and only God can find us. I find it immensely comforting that in this life I don't have to know who I am. God knows and will tell me in the next.

¹When one is telling the same story, one inevitably repeats himself. Some portions of this narrative are adapted from "Escape from Nihilism" (campus lecture, 1997); an essay entitled "Why I Am Not an Atheist", in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe*, ed. Norman Geisler and Paul Hoffman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 49–61; and "Objections, Obstacles, Acceptance", *Catholic World Report* (January 2005). I am grateful to the editors.

Some people claim to know God's will for them in minute detail. Though I have a strong sense of his providential care, I have never possessed such knowledge. I can count on the fingers of one hand the occasions on which I have "heard his voice", although they have been powerful. Perhaps some few spiritual luminaries have always known down which pathway to walk and at which door to turn in. I use a method better adapted to fools: "Lord, show me the door, but if I can't see it, please push me on through."

This works surprisingly well.

I suppose I am what is called an intellectual. I can hardly now imagine another life for myself, although when I was a little Baptist boy, working my way through the Old Testament stories, I was enamored of the idea of being a Jewish priest, and when I was a young socialist, after I had dropped out of college to pretend at being proletarian, I spent some time as a welder. I would like to say I crave understanding like food and drink, but those who know my weakness for chocolate would laugh. People have always thought I was smart, probably less because of my real intellectual gifts than because I have a precise manner of speaking. Curiously, those who think I am intelligent—there are numerous dissenters—have sometimes assumed I must be cold. Actually, I feel strongly about things, I am sentimental about my family, I cherish my wife, and I am of the personality type sometimes called romantic. Men, of course, were the inventors of romance. Women, who are more practical, said, "This is a good thing. Let's push it along."

Though in early adulthood I suffered strongly from *acedia*, today I am almost always cheerful. This cheerfulness, a product of faith and hope, is not native to my temperament, since I am predisposed to a certain melancholy in which the sense of the fall of man and the feeling of things passing away are very strong. Unless he is careful, such a disposition can make a person a crashing bore, and some people would say that I am one. However, dispositions are also gifts to be used, and if I lost mine, I would miss it. I tend to be more acutely aware than most people of how things go awry in our culture. Now and then, the memory of the many ways in which I have personally gone awry provides some small insight into the travails of others. I don't object to the description of the world as a "vale of tears"; it seems to me refreshing, because honest. The

acknowledgment of sin does not burden me. I would be burdened if there were no cure.

I am not telling everything; some things are only for God and one's confessor. Besides, one cannot do everything at once. There already exist books about philosophers who come to accept the reasonableness of Christian revelation, so for the most part, this essay presupposes that belief is reasonable rather than arguing the point. Since I am describing how I became Catholic, inevitably it includes thoughts about what I found missing from Protestantism, but I would not wish these reflections to be misunderstood. It was in Protestantism that I first learned the Gospel, and I will be forever grateful. Christ prayed that his followers would be one.²

Childhood

Aristotle says philosophy begins in wonder. This includes all people, certainly children. I remember how puzzled I was as a child that one continuous substance could interpenetrate another, as when cream is poured into coffee. The theory that matter is made of particles came as a revelation, because it spared me the need to suppose that the little bits of cream and coffee interpenetrated; instead, they slid past each other.

Yet if matter is made of particles, what are particles made of? Is everything matter? Is the act of will matter? I used to think to myself, "Arm, move," then note that my arm did not move, and puzzle over how thinking "move" was different from willing movement. Knowledge puzzled me too. At age eight or nine, it struck me that for all I knew, what other people "saw" when looking at an object that I called green might be the color that I called red. How could I know? Not until many years later did I learn that this quandary is old hat. In the meantime, it was maddening not to be able to make the puzzle clear to others, even to the adults of my admittedly limited acquaintance. When you look at something green, they said, you see green. Did you expect to see puce?

Yet the power of wonder was strongly mixed with what can only be called the wonder of power. I was very much taken with the

²Jn 17:11, 21-23.

descriptions of the so-called primordial soup in the science books I borrowed from the public library. A pint-sized mad alchemist, I endlessly mixed various disgusting things together in the attempt, as I supposed, to “create life”. The closest I came was to create a mess. With encouragement of authors who wrote for boys like me, I also confused wonder, which is the laudable desire to know the truth of things, with empty curiosity, which, as the great Augustine teaches, is a vice. Years later, when I read C.S. Lewis’ opening remark in *The Abolition of Man*, “I doubt whether we are sufficiently attentive to the importance of elementary text books,” I knew exactly what he meant. My school library contained a book, written to stir boyish scientific interest, that commended to our awe certain neurobiologists who had cut off the heads and tails of centipedes and stitched the stumps together to make loops, just to see if the hapless creatures would run in circles. (Dreadfully, they did.)

But my greatest questions were about God. Why did he create? How *could* he create? Who created him? It goes without saying that although I could pose such questions, I had none of the intellectual equipment necessary to frame them well or think about them clearly. I had heard of cyclotrons and synchrotrons, novae and supernovae, random mutation and natural selection, but no one had mentioned essences and accidents, first and second causes, or the difference between necessary and contingent beings.

Concerning the God questions, my encouragement was neither philosophy, of which I had never heard, nor science, or what I thought was science, but Christianity. I was the sort of boy sometimes called “pious, but not holy”—that is, I was just as crass, selfish, and inconsiderate as other boys; one Sunday I got into the organ loft, removed some pipes to play with them, and put them back in the wrong order so that the organ was off-key. Yet I was serious about faith. I devoured all 608 pages of *Egermeier’s Bible Story Book*, began on the Holy Scriptures, and made myself obnoxious to my Sunday school teachers by asking why we didn’t read the Bible instead of dull lesson books that rehashed it.

I also read the myths of the Greeks and other ancient peoples, which raised interesting questions. But the myths did not have the savor of the Scriptures, and I was never in danger of thinking that God was a Hebrew version of Zeus. Reading the Old Testament,

I was particularly awed by the dealings of God with Moses. In one epochal encounter, Moses protests that if he comes to the sons of Israel and says to them that the God of their fathers has sent him, they will want to know His name. What shall he say to them? God replies, "I AM THAT I AM."³ How I struggled with that demonstrative pronoun! Though I did not know the words for it, this was my first glimpse of God's ontological self-existence and nondependence.

The family faith was exclusively Protestant. When I read in the Old Testament about the institution of the Mosaic priesthood, I told my parents and grandparents, "I want to be a priest." This vastly amused everyone. As Baptists, we had pastors, not priests. But I did not want to be a minister like Pastor White, much less a Catholic priest, whatever that was. I wanted to be a priest like Aaron, and did not get the joke.

Though I played with Catholic kids, I was taught that Catholics worshipped idols, like pagans. My remote Polish and Ukrainian ancestors had been Catholic, but my relatives on both sides became Protestant a short time after arriving in America. One relative is supposed to have turned to the Baptist church in disgust after finding the priest drunk in the sanctuary. Since he is supposed to have been a drinker himself, when I reached adulthood I came to wonder just who had found whom.

My maternal grandfather was a very different case. Upon his arrival in the country as a teenager, he was converted by the Baptist aunt who took him in. After marrying and working various jobs—for example, as a tailor and a railroad laborer—he was admitted to Crozer Theological Seminary, as part of an outreach of the American Baptist Association to the immigrant communities. Later he was pastor to what I am told may have been the first Polish-language Baptist congregation in America. I still venerate my grandfather, a good man who had fully as much influence on my spiritual formation as my parents. It was he who baptized me in my tenth year.

Considering the stress that Protestants have historically placed on the insufficiency of "works" for salvation, it is curious that this doctrine made no impression on me when I was small. I clearly remember conversations about the afterlife with my little friends, most of them,

³Ex 3:13-14.

I think, Baptist and Lutheran. Every last one of us took for granted that we would have to earn our way into heaven. At death, God weighed each person's deeds, like Anubis of the Egyptians weighing the heart on a scale, and if the person had done more good than evil, he was in. At that age, I had no idea that this scenario would have been anathema to the Protestant Reformers. Indeed, I didn't know that there had been Reformers; I thought the Baptist church went all the way back to Jesus. (After all, wasn't Jesus baptized?) Still less did I know that it wasn't Catholic doctrine either.

Eventually I absorbed the Protestant idea that we become acceptable to God by faith "alone". However, what I understood by faith was not the Catholic understanding of faith as the assent of the whole person to Christ, heart and mind and will, but sheer belief. But if sheer belief makes us acceptable to Christ, what did St. James mean when he wrote that faith without works is "dead"?⁴ My elders responded that *if we have faith, then we will* behave differently, but what matters is faith. But if faith, as such, is mere belief, then it was not clear why this should be so. Besides, why then did St. Paul urge his readers to "work out" their salvation with fear and trembling?⁵

Music made a great impression—everything from the polyphonic doxology and the majestic "Holy, Holy, Holy", to sentimental old Baptist favorites like "The Old Rugged Cross" and black spirituals like "Go Down, Moses". On road trips, my family would sing hymns in harmony. I was also moved by holy communion. We called it the "ordinance" of communion, to show that we didn't consider it a sacrament, although, since I had never heard of a sacrament, I didn't know that.

My grandfather and I spent hours in conversation about God. He never doubted the words, deeds, and divinity of Jesus, but surprised me in other ways. For example, he thought that when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes,⁶ what really happened was that the people who had secretly hoarded food began to share it with others. To put the difficulty in terms I would use today, I was uncomfortable with

⁴Js 2:14–26.

⁵Phil 2:12–13.

⁶First miracle, feeding of the five thousand: Mt 14:13–21; Mk 6:32–44; Lk 9:10–17; Jn 6:1–13; second miracle, feeding of the four thousand: Mt 15:32–39; Mk 8:1–10.

the attempt to naturalize the supernatural. If that's the game, why stop with loaves and fishes? But this did make me realize that any given passage could be interpreted in more than one way. Many years later I realized that this fact is one of the reasons why the Protestant maxim *sola scriptura*, "Scripture alone", must be mistaken, because Scripture does not interpret itself. That does not make it wrong or untrue, but it makes it incomplete.

During my early teens, my parents moved South and my grandparents followed, leaving the purview of the American Baptists and entering the ambit of the Southern Baptists. By this time my grandfather had retired, and though he grumbled about "fundamentalists", a term I did not understand, he was content to worship with the rest of us.

Tumult

In adolescence, my interior life began to fissure. By this time my passions were divided between religion and what I thought was science. John Paul II famously wrote that faith and reason are like the two wings of a bird: it needs both to fly.⁷ My Baptist forebears were far from rejecting reason, but except for biblical exegesis, they lacked a strong and critical intellectual culture. Consequently, I was not prepared for what was about to happen.

Even so, I was taught, and believe, that there is no conflict in principle between science and faith. But it depends on what one means by science and by faith. The method of science should be following the evidence wherever it leads. But the scientific investigation of material things is often confused with dogmatic materialism, which is not at all the same. Materialists do not follow the evidence wherever it leads; they accept only material explanations, even if the evidence is against them. This attitude has been expressed in a morbidly defiant way in an essay by the Harvard paleontologist Richard Lewontin:

We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant

⁷John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), blessing remarks.

promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.⁸

I do not fault scientists like Lewontin for being materialists, but for being unconsidered materialists. Suppose we follow the evidence wherever it leads a little further. I think we discover that so-called material explanations are not always the best explanations.

Though what I say would be widely accepted among philosophers, even so materialism grips many minds with surprising force. To use a helpful distinction of Hilaire Belloc, it functions more as a mood than as a premise.⁹ If their materialist suppositions were pointed out to them, many people would deny holding them; yet they do. For example, we hear every day that modern science has no need for explanations that refer to the purposes of things. Surprisingly, this statement expresses more a wish than a fact. Not only biology and psychology, but also, from optics to quantum mechanics, even physics makes use of teleology. This is especially clear in its extensive use of variational principles, such as the principle of least action. A variational principle is one that proposes that physical systems always tend to behave in such a way as to minimize, maximize, or hold constant some quantity—for example, the “optical length” of the path taken by a beam of light, which is the physical length multiplied by the index of refraction of the material through which the beam passes. Always remembering that we are not supposing such systems to have minds, these extrema (*not* the terminal points of the paths followed) may be considered the ends or goals to which they are directed.

⁸Richard C. Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons”, *The New York Review of Books* 44:1 (January 9, 1997): 28–32 (emphasis in original).

⁹Hilaire Belloc, *Survivals and New Arrivals* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1929), chap. 4.

But I was taught science through a materialistic filter, and materialism is not congruent with faith. At first I was not aware of the materialistic assumptions underlying what was taught to me, probably because materialism was often dished up with a dash of vitalism to make it more palatable. Life is merely a complex chemical reaction—*but if you like, you can believe that a divine spark got it going*. That sort of thing. The vitalist sauce could not long disguise the flavor of the materialist meat. So though, as a teen, I was even more a religious enthusiast than as a child, I was increasingly torn apart.

Materialism was not the only difficulty. For example, most of what passed for my schooling in “critical thinking” was really the inculcation of prejudices. It was not all wrong. For example, I was rightly warned of the *ad populum* fallacy: the fact that the majority believes something does not prove that the belief is true. But the textbooks insinuated that popular beliefs are *irrelevant*, an elite prejudice that is certainly mistaken. For example, what most people believe about free will is plainly evidential, because they have personal experience of making choices. But I developed the habit of ignoring such considerations.

Another difficulty was how I was taught to use language. My high school English teachers were determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called “opinions”, and moral and theological propositions were always included among the opinions. Protons are a fact; God is only an opinion. Later, my college social-science teachers were equally determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called “values”, and to much the same effect. The prevalence of marriage is a fact; its importance is only a value. I thought that to think in this fashion was to be logical. Actually it was obfuscation. I should have been told that an opinion is a hypothesis about a fact, a fact is what really is true, and a value, when true, is a moral fact. I do not think my high school teachers realized that they were denying the reality of moral and theological facts. My college teachers did.

Moreover, everything I read taught me that even the most basic ideas about good and evil are different everywhere. This is empirically false. As C. S. Lewis remarked, cultures may disagree about whether a man may have one wife or four, but all of them know about marriage; they may disagree about which actions are most courageous,

but none of them ranks cowardice as a virtue.¹⁰ But by the time I was taught cultural relativism, I wanted very much to believe it.

All these things tore me in two, but by the end of high school, I found a distraction. Having been caught up in the radical politics of the late sixties, I had acquired a new passion. I now had my own ideas about redeeming the world. By means of the mantra “Jesus was a cultural revolutionary”, I tried to hide the contradiction between my ideas and his. Actually, Christian faith made him important, political radicalism made me important, and that settled it for me. For something else had been happening within; I did not want God to be God. I wanted myself to be God. I preferred my way to his.

Every day Christ became less a personal reality, more an abstraction. As I drifted from him, I also drifted from common sense about moral law and personal responsibility. This fact set the stage for the next phase of my rake’s progress.

Apostasy

The apostasy that I am about to describe spanned my years as an undergrad, a dropout, and a grad student, along with my first year and a half of teaching. One day during my second year of college—the same year that I married—I realized that I no longer believed Jesus to be the Son of God and Savior. There was no moment at which I was aware of arriving at disbelief; rather, there was a moment at which I became aware that for some time I had not believed. Although in my intellectual pride, I took for granted that my disbelief must be reasonable, it was more a state of mind than a rational conclusion of argument. The atmosphere of my life provided no air for faith to breathe.

Not much longer after discovering that I no longer believed in the Son of God, I discovered that I no longer believed in God. This change in belief was equally without rational warrant. I never became what is called a theoretical atheist; I was a practical atheist. In other words, I didn’t claim that I could show there was no God; I understood the near impossibility of proving a universal negative. In this

¹⁰C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 6.

sense I conceded that there could be a God, and when the mood struck me, I called myself only an agnostic. But I didn't think there were any good reasons to believe God existed, and I lived as though he didn't. My pretense was that we cannot know anything about God, including whether he exists.

There is a great difficulty in asserting God's unknowability. To say that we cannot know anything about God is to say something about God: "If there is a God, he is unknowable." But why should this one thing be an exception? The agnostic would have to know quite a few things about God in order to know that he couldn't know anything else about God. In fact, doesn't he have an elaborate picture of God in his mind, full of all sorts of colorful details that render God either impossible or unknowable, apart from the colorful details themselves?

The agnostic must suppose that any possible God is infinitely remote—otherwise, he couldn't know that he couldn't know him. He must suppose that any possible God is either powerless to make himself known, unwilling to do so, or unconcerned about whether he is known—otherwise he would have provided means to know him. He must suppose that any possible God would be completely unlike the Pauline portrayal of him—because in that account, God is anything but remote, he desires to be known, he has already provided the means for the agnostic to know of him, and in fact the agnostic does know of him.¹¹

But if I did know of him, then when I told myself I "no longer believed" this and that, these were self-deceptions. In retrospect I see that at some level I knew very well that God existed and that good and evil were real. I only told myself I didn't.

Self-deception is a variety of lie, and the universe is so tightly constructed that in order to cover up one lie, we usually have to tell another. Deception begets deception; self-deception begets more self-deception. And that happened to me. Not much longer after discovering that I "no longer believed" in God, I discovered that I "no

¹¹ "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Rom 1:19–20.

longer believed” in objective moral law. Law supposes a lawgiver; how could I affirm the one while denying the other?¹² Of course sophisticated replies may be given to this question, for many thinkers do regard morality as something other than real law. Yet repeatedly and revealingly they slip back into the language of law. Conscience speaks the language of law because she is the lawgiver’s representative.

Crisis

So the agnostic has a pretty thick theology after all. He views the Heavenly Father as rather like one of the absentee fathers of our generation: he isn’t there, he doesn’t care, or he’s powerless. I too reached this conclusion, but I began by arguing that *I myself* was transfixed on two tines of that fork: *I myself* was either nonexistent or powerless. If to deny God’s reality I had to deny my own, so be it. My thinking went something like this.

First, I insisted that if the principle of causality is true, then the chain of causes and effects is an unbreakable fetter. It would make no difference even if the fetter were probabilistic, as in quantum theory, because I do not choose how the dice will fall. My mind is nothing more than an activity of my brain, my brain nothing more than a computational device. We don’t experience ourselves as machines, but I told myself we are under a double curse—the illusion of being more, and the desire for the illusion to be true.

How a machine could suffer such things as desires and illusions deeply troubled me. In fact *all* of the phenomena of consciousness troubled me. I was troubled by the redness of red; the preciousness of the beloved; the sense I sometimes had of exerting my will *against* an inclination, as though free—even by the experience of being troubled. I knew I couldn’t fit these things into the machine theory, and that the intuition that I was more than a machine fit reality better. Like Professor Lewontin, I had reached my conclusions not because of the data, but in spite of them.

¹² G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1–19, has interesting things to say about law presupposing a lawgiver, but I had not read the article at that time.

But if I *was* in the grip of a blind causality, then it followed that I had no freedom, no responsibility, no *Self*. These too were illusions. “I” didn’t produce my activity; I was its product. In a sense, I thought, “I” didn’t exist. What then of God? If he existed, then how could he escape what I called “causality” any more than I could? He was no freer than I.

That fact, I thought, showed that something else about him was like me too. For if I have no free will, then I believe what I believe, not because I recognize its concordance with reality, but because it is cranked out by a mental mechanism over which “I” have no control. That mechanism may have evolved to accomplish certain functions, but there was no reason to think that arriving at the truth of things was one of them. Unlike, say, an ability to find food or outwit predators, the capacity to arrive at the truth of things would make no contribution to its own survival.¹³ But if I am really in the dark about everything, then, I thought, God too must be in the dark about everything. How could he make himself known if he didn’t even know himself?

You see where this leads. Although I couldn’t prove the non-existence of God, I thought I could prove the nonexistence of a God that mattered. I pictured God like the blinded monarch in *King Lear*, helpless, raving, a pawn to fatalities he didn’t understand. It wasn’t Satan who was frozen in the ice at the center of hell, as Dante thought; it was God.

If my imprisonment in a blind causality made my reasoning so unreliable that I couldn’t trust my beliefs, then of course I shouldn’t have trusted my beliefs about imprisonment in a blind causality. In that case I had no business denying free will in the first place. But if I did have free will, then perhaps I could trust my beliefs—in which case I didn’t have free will. Because of the incoherence of my reasoning, I should have rejected it. I didn’t.

¹³ C. S. Lewis developed an argument to this effect in *The Case for Christianity* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996). A more rigorous version was later developed by the philosopher Alvin Plantinga; see his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216–38; cf. James Beilby, ed., *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Though the point seemed intuitively obvious to me, such was my ignorance that I was not at this point in my life aware of either version of the argument.

My picture of the universe did not make me an idolater. I was an idolater already. It only offered me an idol. I used the idol of matter until it broke, and then made an idol of the breakage. Did nothing make sense? Then I would make an idol of Nothing.

Though a million idols are adored by the sons of men, in the end there is only one, for they are but a million masks for the one idol of Self. Finding that we are made in God's image, we worship the image in place of God. Our own time is unusual in its tendency to adore the Self openly, according to its proper name. The classical pattern, however, is to disguise the adoration of Self under the adoration of one of its representatives. The idol of Reason is the Self represented by its rational powers; of Sex, the Self represented by its animal powers; of Duty, the Self represented by its moral powers; of Race and Nation, the Self represented in the millionfold mirror of the group.

My own idolatries followed the classical rather than the contemporary pattern. I didn't consciously think, "I shall adore Myself"; nevertheless, the real significance of my idolatries was that they seemed to annihilate God *so that I myself could be God*. This explanation of their significance may seem unbelievable, for as we have seen, in order to annihilate God, I had to annihilate myself; my road to deicide was through suicide. How could that be a worship of Self?

Because we misunderstand what suicide is. Killing oneself is not supreme self-resignation, as we suppose, but extreme self-assertion. As Chesterton pointed out, God may have called everything into being, but the suicide imagines that he can make it all go away.¹⁴ My suicide was just like that, but more violent still. The conventional suicide can destroy the universe only once, but for me each day was suicide. There was no need to bother with the slashing of wrists, because it was all going on in my mind. In one long prolongation of nightfall, the light went out, and went out, and went out, all without the inconvenience of physical death.

Besides, to commit suicide *was* to commit deicide, symbolically. I said above that self-adoration is the worship of God's image in God's

¹⁴G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 1 (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1986), chap. 6.

place. By now my wish to replace him was so strong that I resented even his image in me.

Conceive what a person has to do to himself to go on like that. St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness.¹⁵ The way this is put by natural law philosophers—such as I am now—is that the law is the deepest predisposition of the practical intellect: so long as we have minds, we *can't not know* it. Since I was unusually determined not to know it, I had to destroy my mind. I resisted the temptation to believe in good with as much energy as some saints resist the temptation to neglect good. I loved my wife and children (I had married at nineteen), but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Think what this did to my capacity to love them. Love is a commitment of the will to the true good of another person. How can one's will be committed to the true good of another person if he denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control?

I knew that the name of my malady was *acedia*, and I even had an image: I too was frozen in the ice. But the name and the image did not cure it. I knew that I was in agony, but the agony did not return me to God. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe that was hidden from their foolish eyes. Of course I was the fool.

Return

By this point I had received my political theory doctorate from Yale and been hired at the University of Texas. I won the position by giving a talk in which I maintained two theses: we merely make up the difference between good and evil, and second, we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. Good talk, son. Here's a job.

Yet I found that I couldn't teach these things to my students. Paradoxically, I felt too responsible for them to teach them there is no

¹⁵Rom 2:15.

personal responsibility, and too conscious of my duty to do no harm to teach that there is no good or harm.

Strangely, it was only after I had apostatized that I read much classical Christian literature. This literature had strongly shaped the Western tradition and was plainly worth teaching. So in the introductory course I designed on political philosophy, I included a unit on Thomas Aquinas. To dramatize his vision of the unity of eternal, divine, and natural law, I read to them from Dante's *Paradiso*:

I saw within Its depth how It conceives
all things in a single volume bound by love,
of which the universe is the scattered leaves.¹⁶

Some days while lecturing on St. Thomas, it took all the control that I could muster to conceal the fact that I felt like weeping for the sheer beauty of the appearance of truth, an appearance I bitterly told myself was an illusion. Something of the strain must have been evident. One day after class a student approached. Could he ask a question? "I've been listening to you every day," he said, "and I figure that you're either a Catholic or an atheist. Which is it?"

One evening, in tears but ashamed of my weakness, I prayed. I told God, "I don't believe you're there. I think I'm talking to the wall. But if you do exist, *you can have me*." In desperation, I added, "But you will have to show me, because I can't tell anymore."

I don't know what I expected. The room was silent. The ceiling did not part to reveal a choir of angels. The wall looked more and more like a wall. I felt like an idiot. I went to bed.

Yet when I said he could have me, I meant it. Could he have heard my prayer after all? I think so. Months passed before I noticed, but something happened. I began to experience an intuition that my condition was objectively evil. It grew stronger every day until it was overpowering. It did not present itself as an emotion, but as a perception: *This is what a fact looks like*. It was as though a man were to notice for the first time that the sky is not red, but blue. Finally I accepted it. Yes. It was factual indeed. My condition was objectively evil.

¹⁶Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. John Ciardo (New York: Penguin, 2003), canto 33, lines 85–87.

In letting that one through, my mental censors blundered. Augustine of Hippo had argued that although evil is real, it is derivative; the only way to get something horrible is to ruin something wonderful.¹⁷ “Pure” evil makes no sense, because evil is a privation in what would otherwise be good. We say disease is something missing from health; we would never say health is something missing from disease. I had always considered this argument a neat piece of reasoning, but with a defective premise. Granted evil, there had to exist good, of which evil was a disorder. But I didn't grant evil, so I didn't grant good. Now I saw that there was such a thing as evil after all. It was right behind my eyes. But in that case there must be a good, of which the evil was a perversion.

I still could not have told you *what* was good. But the insight that there was such a thing dizzied me. It meant I had been so wrong, for so long, about so many things, that for all I knew, almost anything might be true.

As time passed, I began to think forgotten thoughts and *unforget* suppressed memories. In particular, I came to remember that I had never had good reasons to apostatize. My self-knowledge—in which I had arrogantly continued to believe, even when I thought I had no Self—had come to nothing. That was a shock. One by one, various pieces of buried knowledge reasserted themselves: the good of this, the evil of that, the reality of God. Even the memories of experiences began to change. Imagine looking at an old and familiar photograph, but suddenly seeing in it a figure whom you had refused to notice before. The recollection of God's goodness to me was like that.

Just as I had come to realize one day that some time before, I had stopped believing, now I came to realize one day that some time before, I had begun again.

Of course I had to repudiate my dissertation. At the time, I thought my scholarly career was over. I couldn't possibly retool, rethink, and get anything published before my tenure review came up. By God's grace and providence, that turned out to be untrue, but I did not yet know that. If in penance I had to wash dishes the rest of my life, I thought, then so be it, but I was daily assaulted by the thought that

¹⁷St. Augustine of Hippo, *City of God Against the Pagans*, bk. 12, chap. 9.

I had wasted my gifts. No one is useless to God—but I thought I had become useless to him. My state of mind was black.

I could not remain long in that state of mind. This was my convalescence, because I was relearning all sorts of experiences the capacities for which I had tried to tear out of myself. It was as though I had lived in a dark garret for a very long time, and someone was flinging back the shutters. Shafts of light lanced in. The experience was almost physical. I was learning again how to feel, and for the first time, really, how to think.

Although I had understood that first Augustinian step, several years passed before I was able rationally to reconstruct the rest of what was happening. The movement was not irrational, but it exceeded the movements I had hitherto called reason. Just because I could not yet explain all my reasons, I was humiliated. It was a humiliation to come back to God and *then* begin gaining understanding. I wanted to have gained understanding, and then, for my own reasons, come back to God. But all love is like that. True, I had to know something about my wife to believe in her; but I had to believe in her to know more about her. So too with God.

Besides, I now understand that my humiliation was necessary. Since I had deserted God not through the proper use of my intellect, but through its pride, in his mercy he chose means of restoring me that starved that pride. Any other way would have left me too vulnerable to relapse. I had to be left no opportunity of taking credit for my return.

I had worked so hard over the years to forget all the good reasons for faith and all the sane mental principles that I had thrown away. Now by the grace of God, I remembered them—and recognized that their force was unimpaired.

Attraction

A few paragraphs ago I mentioned my wife, a ruby among women, who had been an anchor during the prodigal years. She too had wandered from Christ before returning to him, but she had never been so foolish as to tell herself that there was no God, or that there was no good, or to deny the reality of persons. In fact, when I expressed

such thoughts, she laughed at me. "You don't believe those things," she said. "No one can." This irritated me, but she was right. At some level I had known I was lying to myself.

By God's mercy, despite the difference in our paths, we two were drawn back to faith at the same time. We came all the way. Was Christ real? Then we would have to be Christians. One morning we told our children that from now on we would be worshipping on Sundays. I expected them to resent the interruption of their play, but they were delighted. My oldest child told me years later, "I had always wanted our family to go to church, but I had never told you." So strange are God's mercies.

The last church we attended before apostasy had been an empty social-Gospel congregation, in which what had once been holy communion had degenerated into a celebration of the grape boycott. Though we had nothing against unionizing migrant farm workers, there was no returning to that sort of thing.

So where would we go? Thank God, my Baptist family had taught me enough that even after abandoning Christ, I knew what it meant to return. Yet I did not want to reenter the Baptist fold, because its understanding of the faith seemed somehow incomplete. I mentioned that I had discovered classical Christian literature only after apostatizing. But writers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante were all Catholic. I could no longer believe with my old Baptist teachers that Catholicism was not Christian. In fact, I wanted to have one foot in the richness of Catholic tradition.

Yet I couldn't see my way to Catholicism proper, for I also wanted one foot in the Reformation. I still had the misconception that the Church teaches "works righteousness"—that if only we earn enough virtue points, we're in. Had you asked me, "If you still think that about Catholics, then how can you now believe that they are Christians?" I would have replied that even though they misunderstood the faith that reconciles us with God, somehow, they possessed it.

So we became Episcopalian. The Anglican world presented itself as a *via media*, a middle way, between Catholicism and the Reformation, which seemed just the thing. We had not yet discovered how John Henry Newman came to realize that there can be no *via media*, nor had we yet discovered its impossibility through our own

experience.¹⁸ During this time, I wrote a few articles for *First Things*, the journal of religion and public life. One day during a telephone conversation, one of the editors asked me to settle a bet. Some of the staff were sure I must be Protestant. Others were sure I must be Catholic. Which was I? If he would pardon the oxymoron, I told him, I would call myself an Evangelical Anglo-Catholic. He paused, then drily quipped, “That’s not an oxymoron. It’s a material heresy.” I found this very funny. But I was not yet convinced.

The Anglican choice made sense to my wife too. She had been raised in a religiously indifferent family, but had found her way to the Episcopal church as a teenager and been baptized and confirmed in it. I had visited the church with her in those days and had found the liturgy both moving and instructive. Just by a certain mode of worship, one is formed in a certain way. Or one should have been.

Yet as we went on, we discovered that Anglicanism was dying and all but dead. We naturally assumed that the reason the congregation recited the Nicene Creed together was that they believed it. After years of exile, this was indescribably wonderful. The “cloud of witnesses” of which St. Paul speaks was almost visible;¹⁹ I felt as though I could reach out and touch those millions of Christians from bygone generations. Then came the day when the priest who was giving the homily that day announced to the congregation that he was “no longer able” to believe in the Resurrection. I wanted to ask, “What happened to your vows?” and, “How can you call yourself a priest?” But appealing to him by name after the service, I confined myself to asking, “I see you every week, reciting the Nicene Creed like the rest of us. If you don’t believe it, how can you?” He responded, “I do it as an act of solidarity with the community.”

I think I was the only person in the sanctuary who heard him deny the Resurrection. Apparently no one listened during homilies. I came to realize that this was a divine mercy.

Doctrinal education in our parish followed the principle “anything goes”. One year a proposal was made in the education committee

¹⁸ In a series of tracts entitled *Via Media*, written while he was an Anglican, Newman had argued that there can be middle way. However, by the time he wrote his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, he had abandoned this view.

¹⁹ Heb 12:1.

to teach a series for adults on the various theories that held that the Resurrection never happened. I am afraid I made myself obnoxious in opposition (I have that talent). On another occasion a better idea was hatched, to teach an Advent series for children on the various biblical prophecies of the birth of the Messiah. An Old Testament expert from the local Episcopal seminary was invited to speak to the Sunday school teachers. His message: there were no such prophecies. They were all about other things. The roomful of dazed faces was a spectacle to behold. Finally a woman asked, "How are we supposed to teach this to children?" He shrugged.

Another year, a student from the seminary signed on to lead the youth group. Someone made a casual remark about orthodoxy to her. "There is no such thing as orthodoxy," she sneered.

The question my wife and I faced was whether it would be more pleasing to God to get out of the Anglican Communion, or to stay as a "faithful remnant". For the time, we remained Anglicans. However, we transferred our membership to another Episcopal parish where it seemed that historic Christian doctrine was still taught. We remained in that parish for years and still bear a deep love for the people we knew there.

When people asked, we said we belonged to the Christian wing of the Episcopal church. But the ongoing collapse of the Anglican enterprise forced us to ask deeper questions about the nature of the true Church. At a convocation of the Diocese of Texas I attended as a lay delegate, a resolution was moved that priests should abstain from sexual intercourse out of marriage. The majority of lay delegates voted in favor; the majority of priests, against. Really.

Christ had promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church,²⁰ but they were prevailing here. Where then was the Church? What would it have to look like? There seemed only one plausible candidate: Catholicism. No other ecclesial body even believed in the Church's unity and authority. The Eastern Orthodox communions were divided. The Reformation had led to tens of thousands of "denominations", each of them believing different things, most of them drifting like the wrack of gale-struck ships. According to the Protestant idea, all of them together are the

²⁰Mt 16:18.

Church. But St. Paul had called the Church the Body of Christ.²¹ A bloody arm here, a severed leg there, a torso floating in the river—no matter how many such things were added into the total, they could not make up his Body.

So our ecclesiology was very nearly Catholic, long before we joined the Catholic Church. This fact made our theory of being a “faithful remnant” inside Anglicanism harder and harder to take seriously. After all, if what the Catholic Church teaches about her nature and authority is true, how could we justify *not* becoming part of her? Although we continued to disagree with a number of Catholic dogmas, this was a poor answer, for we suffered a growing suspicion that it was we who were wrong, not the Church.

Sometimes my wife was closer to accepting Catholicism than I was, and I balked. Sometimes I was closer, and she balked. Sometimes we were both close. But neither of us was truly ready.

Not all converts come into the Catholic fold in the same way. For most, the ecclesiastical objection is the last one to topple. First they become convinced about doctrine A, then doctrine B, then doctrine C. At last, they accept that the Church has authority to teach doctrine.

For me it was the other way around. First I became convinced that the Church has authority to teach doctrine. That didn’t mean that my difficulties about doctrine A, doctrine B, and doctrine C disappeared, but it converted my “objections” into “obstacles”. In the meantime, Protestant theology was becoming implausible. After several years of wrestling, becoming convinced on one point after another, I finally found myself able to say about the remaining issues, “I am ready to obey.” That turned out to be crucial. As St. Augustine said, we believe in order to know.²² There are some things you have to understand before you can accept them—but there are others you have to accept, and live, before you can understand them.

It took about eight years to reach this point, ending in 2003. We made God wait. Two of our Catholic friends said to us, “Your whole understanding of things is Catholic. You think like Catholics. You sound like Catholics. You have a Catholic sensibility. Why aren’t you Catholics?” During a long conversation with another Catholic

²¹ 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:23; 4:12; 5:30; Col 1:18, 24.

²² St. Augustine, *Sermo* 43.9.

friend who knew of my attraction to the Church, I bellyached. "I can't call this an objection to Catholic doctrine," I said, "but you can't deny the flatness and tonelessness of the language coming from some of the liturgical reforms. Besides, the Church puts up with forms of popular piety that are utterly inconsistent with her own teachings." I gave an example: devotion to Mary should be all about Christ, but sometimes it is all about Mary. I was coming to love Mary too, but I could not imagine that she approved. I asked, "Why is this tolerated?"

My friend leaned back and answered, "All of this is true. These are real problems. The Church knows about them. But in two hundred years they'll all be taken care of."

It was a preposterous reply, and on another evening, in another mood, I might have considered it glib. That evening, though, it struck me that my friend was viewing things from the perspective of the Church. I realized that as a Protestant, I had a much shorter timeline, and much of what I considered wisdom might actually be impatience. The mystery of the endurance of the Church through centuries of heresies and assaults sank in a little deeper.

The last three of those eight years were quite difficult, because my wife and I had not reached that point of obedience, but needed to. We decided that if the Episcopal church ever came to incorporate the prevalent abominations into its canons, that would be our signal to get out.

The signal came unmistakably during the summer of 2003. It was bad enough that the Episcopal general convention ordained as bishop a man who had abandoned his wife and children in order to live in sin with another man. Yet that might have been viewed as an aberration. After all, even in the Catholic Church there have been bad popes and bishops, and there will be in the future. Much worse was the fact that the general convention authorized drawing up rites for the blessing of same-sex unions, because that converted the aberration into a rule.

But the signal turned out to have been unnecessary, because we had already crossed our Rubicon. That summer, we had visited an Episcopal church while out of town. The "tract table" offered visitors free pro-abortion bumper stickers bearing the Episcopal shield. We turned and walked out. Never again.

Friends sometimes ask, "Why didn't you consider one of the Anglican denominations that split from the Episcopalians?" The answer

is that we could not see how a schism could be fixed by a schism. A dear friend who had joined one of these denominations told my wife how wonderful it was to have found a congregation “where everyone is just like me”. We did not want to belong to a congregation where everyone was just like us; we wanted to belong to the Church.²³

My analytical habit makes this story seem more orderly than the actual tumble of experience, but the movement of our lives did possess an underlying unity. The beauty of Catholic truth was ever more evident, and its gravitational attraction ever stronger. All else is detail.

Conversion

We met with a priest. The first reason, frankly, was to take his measure—to make sure he believed Catholic doctrine himself. Thank God, this was not my old arrogance reawakening. But you must remember how much rank disbelief we had encountered among Episcopalian priests. An ordained friend related the tale of how the Episcopal seminary he had attended gave students who were about to graduate tips on how to keep congregations from learning what they really believed. The only good thing about the story was that he too had been disturbed.

Although we expected conditions to be different in the Catholic Church, we were under no illusions that there would be no troubles. The New Testament warns that there will always be wolves in the flock. Our Catholic friends, who had lived through various ecclesiastical disorders, told us, “Welcome aboard! It’s a mess!” Actually, we found conditions to be much less a “mess” than we had expected.

To this day, the priest with whom we spoke loves to tell how we “interviewed” him. He was enormously amused. After it became obvious that he was a good priest, we told him that we wanted to begin preparation to enter the Catholic Church, but that we were still troubled by certain obstacles that we hoped he could assist us in overcoming.

²³ Our friend later came to the same conclusion.

For me, the last such obstacle concerned the title of “co-mediatrix” often given to Mary. By using such a title, was the Church contradicting her own teaching that Christ is *the* mediator between God and men? He was most helpful. A convert himself—Methodist, then Anglican, then Catholic—he understood the difficulty immediately, discussed it with me, and encouraged me to read chapter 8 of Vatican II’s 1964 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. As he expected, it resolved my difficulties. I considered that people can be mediators in many ways. If you pray for someone in prayer, you are a sort of mediator. If you explain the Gospel to someone, you are a sort of mediator. If a priest offers the sacrament of reconciliation, he is a sort of mediator. As the vessel through which Christ entered the world, Mary has a still more exalted role in this economy of grace. But to confess this neither lessens nor compromises the uniqueness of what he did on the Cross.

Although at one time, the doctrine of justification had presented an even greater obstacle for me, by this time that iceberg had already broken up. The Church’s approval in 1999 of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification—an accord between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation—had been especially helpful. At the time, when I was still firmly Protestant, it had struck me like a thunderclap. Recalling Luther’s words that justification was the article on which the Church stands or falls, I thought as I read it, “The Reformation is over.”

Reaction among well-informed Protestant friends had been quite different. Most were simply indifferent; intuitively if not theoretically congregationalist, they viewed all faith as local. Others held that the agreement was merely verbal, a trick of ambiguous wording, signifying nothing. Others, my Calvinist acquaintances, held that it was real but unimportant, because the article on which the Church stands or falls is not justification, but the sovereignty of God (what has Wittenburg to do with Geneva?). Still others held that it was real, but that the Lutheran World Federation did not represent their views. A sizable group conceded that the declaration would be important if the Catholic Church meant what she said, but meaning it would have required renunciation of the Council of Trent; therefore, the Church had been lying. All this seemed preposterous. I came to realize that the Church’s actual teaching about justification is quite different from what I had always taken it to be—and that it made sense.

An uneasy fear persisted that in the Church I would find less Scripture, less prayer, and less Jesus. The reality has turned out differently. I have found more Scripture, more prayer, and more Jesus. The greatest surprise, though, has not been in the doctrine, morals, or devotion of the Church, but in her culture. To give but a single example, the warmth of the parish community expresses itself differently. We were accustomed to Protestant ways, according to which a new person is surrounded by well-wishers the instant he walks into the church building. By contrast, the Catholic Church seemed chilly. But then one Sunday after Mass, before our reception into the Church, we found our perspective turning upside-down when a new acquaintance warmly said to us, "I've noticed you coming for several months, and I've wanted to talk with you so much, *but I was afraid of speaking for fear of scaring you away.*" I am absolutely convinced that she was sincere. This devout woman plainly wanted us to become part of the community, but we wouldn't have known it before then. What might have seemed like chilliness was really an expression of her warmth. She didn't want to be so aggressive that we took alarm and fled. This consideration was touching, amusing, and a little bit bizarre, like finding yourself in a tribe where you express your gratitude for the meal by belching loudly.

Our cradle Catholic friends sometimes tell us, "It's good to talk to people like you, because people think we're crazy to be Catholic. We're so encouraged to find people who weren't Catholic discovering that Catholic faith makes sense." To me it makes more than sense. All the pieces that were missing from my faith have come together. The sacraments are channels of God's blessing. Possibilities of grace have opened up of which I had never been aware. I understand a little more what my marriage, my family, my teaching, and my life are about.

To what can I compare being received into the Church? Think of a man who has been living for a long time in a little cottage on the grounds of a palace. One day he stumbles across the palace threshold and falls flat on his face; yet he finds, to his astonishment, that he is welcome.

The best is to meet His Majesty in every Mass. Yet this sacramental meal is only a foretaste of what Scripture calls the wedding feast of the Lamb. I will be satisfied, when I am satisfied in him.