

THE CAUSES FOR MY BECOMING CATHOLIC

Your Excellencies, Reverend Fathers, Brothers and Sisters: I come to you with a truly grateful heart for the gift of full communion. For too long I had stood outside the window, on my tip-toes wistfully looking in, wondering whether ever I could find the way to enter. It turned out to be rather simple – “the front door ... it’s open!” – but you will appreciate that Anglicans need to create labyrinths and make the journey as complicated as possible. I thank you for your encouragement, your prayers, and your patience. Especially do I want to pay tribute to those of you who are the pioneers of the Pastoral Provision and the Anglican Use. Your courage in coming to the Catholic Church in the early days of this movement is praiseworthy indeed.

This is my second visit to the Church of Our Lady of the Atonement. I pulled out my pilot logbook recently to find an entry for February 24, 1989, when I flew Cessna N1057F from F71, Luck Field in Fort Worth, to San Antonio to meet the brave priest from Rhode Island, Fr. Christopher Phillips, who, like St. Paul, received a vision: “Come over and help us” (Acts 16:9). I remember being enthralled by his story and humbled by the sacrifices he and his family had made. That was almost twenty years ago. Luck Field has disappeared into the urban sprawl of the DFW Metroplex, but behold how the Lord has blessed Fr. Phillip’s faithfulness!

From my time as a seminary student I think I knew in my head and in my heart where my ecclesial home must ultimately be. I firmly believed what the Catholic Church teaches, knowing that the minimalism and economy prized in the Anglican theological tradition needed to be augmented. I believed that it would be possible to uphold this Faith throughout my ministry in the Episcopal Church and to contribute toward the reconciliation of our churches. I was proud to be Anglican, with its historic church order, high culture, worldwide communion, pastoral outlook, and patristic heart. But I was completely unprepared for the magnitude of the changes that would come. That church today is not the church in which I was ordained 28 years ago. It is almost inconceivable that the head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity should have to ask the Anglicans what their future direction will be, whether they will abandon their Catholic identity.¹ It is now painfully obvious that these changes will not be undone. My decision to leave it was not lightly or quickly made. My pastoral obligations weighed very heavily on me. But do you sense that contemporary Anglicanism is setting sail in a direction your conscience tells you is not right? Listen to your conscience! This is what the Archbishop of Santa Fe told me. Effective leadership, both personal and corporate, always acts out of a clear and well-formed conscience.

I also feared that the practical problems of making the journey were insurmountable. Those fears had paralyzed the will and for a long time held me back from embracing the gift of full communion that Pope John Paul II had held out to us. But the difficulties that follow from functioning with a troubled conscience ultimately outweigh the sacrifices one makes to live in the Truth. This is the lesson I have learned from my years of wandering in the wilderness. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ depends on my willingness to act in accordance with an informed conscience. “When he listens to

¹ *Catholic Herald* (6 May 2008).

his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking.”² If we do not listen to and act in accordance with conscience, it becomes harder and harder to hear God’s voice. I am so grateful that God gave me another chance.

So why did you become a Catholic? What was it that induced you to cast aside the reasonably comfortable life of a bishop in the Episcopal Church and commit professional suicide in your mid-fifties? And why the Catholic Church instead of one of the alternative Anglican options? I noticed that my answers have not always been the same, and this has bothered me. Conversion stories are supposed to be dramatic and simple, not nuanced and complex; they play so much better on *The Journey Home!* In preparing for the Theological Certification exams for the Pastoral Provision, the faculty at Seton Hall asked me to focus especially on canon law and moral theology, two subjects as you know are not much emphasized in the Episcopal Church today. For the first time I had to think about Aristotle. This is a very significant shift for an Anglican, as classical Anglicanism is deeply imbued with the spirit of Plato – the Church as it ought to be but never can be but only hopes to be. The Catholic Church is different, for the heavenly really does inhabit the earthly, and so everything about the Church in this world is taken so much more seriously. Aristotle is important for laying this conceptual foundation, and I found him helpful for making sense of my experience in becoming Catholic.

Aristotle said that nothing will cause a change in itself but something must act upon it in order to set it in motion. Now this is certainly true of conservative Anglicans, who embody the principle that it is the nature of a thing that it wants to remain at rest! We really, profoundly dislike change, and so it is an extraordinary moment when we become conscious that something has actually propelled us to act. In order to understand something well, Aristotle taught, one must be able to explain what caused it to happen. His analysis of the four causes – material, formal, efficient, and final – can be applied to the human will as well as the physical world: what is it that moved this person to do something? In Christian terms, how does the Holy Spirit bring the soul to act? –

- ❖ material – what is there intrinsically in Catholicism that brought about my “conversion”?
- ❖ formal -- what is there about Anglicanism that makes the journey to full communion with the Catholic Church a natural, organic development?
- ❖ efficient – what were the particular events that induced me to leave the Episcopal Church as an individual?
- ❖ final – why is this something I believe I simply had to do in order to be faithful to Christ?

Material

It all begins with the conviction that the Catholic Church simply is. She is not one option amongst many. People who become alienated from their own churches will sometimes think that the next step is to go down to the marketplace and see what is on offer: which church is going to give me the best deal? Those people seldom find the Catholic Church because they have missed the essential point – the fullness of Christ’s blessings is not distributed across the ecclesial landscape but flows from the one Church.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1777.

“The one Church of Christ, as a society constituted and organized in the world, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.”³ This is the ecclesiological North Star. On the other hand, Anglicanism’s branch theory of Catholicism cannot be located on the map because it is a *utopia*, οὐ τόπος, a place of nonexistence. This is a difficult truth, but the idea that Catholic Anglicanism exists *sui generis* is an illusion that must be let go of in order to experience the fullness of Catholic life. Many Anglicans have intuited this, but it is hard to overcome the notion we were taught, that Catholicism is simply the sum of all the Christian churches, καθ’ ὅλος, *according to the whole*. The Catholic Church has a different understanding: “Particular Churches are fully catholic through their communion with one of them, the Church of Rome, ‘which presides in charity.’”⁴

The extent to which Anglicanism does indeed depend on the Catholic Church is remarkable, a relationship that runs much deeper than the normal interchanges between two great church traditions. Let me give a personal example. There were many times in my 28 years of ordained Anglican ministry where, at critical pastoral junctures, what I needed to say to my parish or my diocese or to individual souls was, “This is what the Church teaches.” However, there was so little to which I could point and say clearly and unambiguously, “the Church teaches.” In the Anglican churches the exercise of authority is almost always personal and provisional, and as a result, the care of souls tends to lack that firm grounding which makes spiritual progress possible. In the quiet of my study, what kept me focused and connected were the writings of John Paul II. “He’s my pope too!” I would say to myself, and I am sure that many Protestant clergy were saying the same thing. John Paul II exercised the Petrine ministry beyond the visible sheepfold of the Catholic Church, and during his long and fruitful pontificate he gave much hope to a multitude of separated brethren.

Anglicanism has for the last quarter century proceeded quite intentionally from the principle that truth not only is discerned primarily in the experience of the Christian community but also that the community itself has priority over truth. This approach has produced a very meager and inconsequential harvest, and the great legacy of Anglican theological scholarship has been lost. The contrast with the Catholic mind is striking. As an Anglican I would take in hand, for instance, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* and ask, could my church have produced a work so penetrating and comprehensive? No, it has neither the capacity nor the confidence to speak its mind in such a way. Why? Because it has deliberately cut itself off from the tradition.

Pope Benedict XVI has called for the Church to engage in a hermeneutic of continuity, and this is an enterprise of extraordinary spiritual power. His Wednesday audiences are astonishing, as he opens up the rich treasury of Christian thought and faith and invites all to participate. For those who yearn for a living encounter with the apostolic tradition, the impact of this is transformative. When my wife and I were received this past Advent by Cardinal Law, patron to many Anglican pilgrims, he took us to meet the Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, and I shall always remember his words of welcome: “Communion with Peter is a very luminous experience.”

How could an individual person hope to comprehend and understand everything that the Catholic Church teaches? To think that one must do so before giving assent is a

³ *Lumen Gentium* 8; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 816.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 834.

very Protestant exercise of private judgment. People come to the Catholic Church not because they have worked out every point of doctrine but because they trust that what the Church teaches is true. This is no blind act of faith but the conviction that the Church of Rome is the principal witness to the apostolic tradition. The early Church Fathers were very much aware of the unique vocation of the Bishop of Rome to speak with the voice of Peter in matters of faith. For some twenty years I have reflected on a famous text in St. Irenaeus: "It is necessary that all the churches be in accord with this greatest and most ancient church, whose foundations were supremely laid by the chief Apostles, Peter and Paul."⁵ It really does all come down to the will, doing what you know to be true.

Formal

I still have a sense of guilt about the whole ordeal of becoming a bishop in the Episcopal Church, because I was so conflicted about its direction. It was perfectly evident in 2004 where things were heading. My only defense is that I still hoped Anglicanism, at the eleventh hour, might yet reorder its life so as not to lose its original Catholic identity. I wrote an article for the *Anglican Theological Review* that year on the unrealized goals of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC). I called it "The Unopened Gift," a reference to the 1998 ARCIC report, "The Gift of Authority."⁶ The report had driven home the point that primacy is a necessary condition for genuine communion to exist; otherwise substantive theological differences will tear local churches apart. The Anglican Communion was beginning to think about this problem, and of course we know now that it has been unable to sustain any kind of meaningful primatial oversight. But in 2004 there was much optimism that important ecclesiological changes were coming, focused especially on an enhanced role for the Archbishop of Canterbury in maintaining a communion discipline. There was a bit of historical romance in this, looking back to Pope Gregory the Great commissioning St. Augustine in the late sixth century, and I wondered then: "If primacy is the necessary condition of communion, why would we not want the real thing?"

Indeed, why not Peter? The Archbishop of Canterbury once belonged under the patriarchal jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. This was not merely an historical accident, but Peter's successor exercising apostolic ministry, and it speaks powerfully to that ineluctable need for belonging, that desire to be connected to deeper realities, which lies at the heart of Anglican spirituality. I wrote:

The Anglican identity depends not so much on rational formulations as on ancient memories. This is especially true of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Anglican world today is seeking to invest the office with dignities and responsibilities that go well beyond its actual place in civil and canon law. Why? Because of memories of what this office once was. How precious are those texts in the Venerable Bede, which connect the missionary foundations of Anglicanism with the principal apostolic see.⁷ The Anglican imagination works something like this: "Consider the Archbishop of Canterbury! There is the one whom Pope Gregory the Great sent on a great apostolic mission. There is the one on whom Gregory

⁵ *Against Heresies* 3.3.2.

⁶ *Anglican Theological Review* 87 (2004): 645-651.

⁷ *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, I.23-33.

bestowed the pallium, the symbol of Catholic unity and oversight. There is the one charged with the task of organizing the Christian mission in Britain and drawing it together as one Church. There is our link, tenuous as it may seem, with the rest of the Catholic world. But the texts prove that Anglicanism is not the product of national aspirations but comes from the heart of the Church founded by St. Peter and St. Paul."⁸

Yes, that may have been a little over the top, but happily I now am in a church that honors hagiography! The point to be made here is that Anglicanism belongs to Rome in a way that undergirds its ecclesiological legitimacy.

And it is much more than an historical connection. In October 1993, I was part of a small group that met with Cardinal Ratzinger in Rome about how smaller communities of Anglicans might be incorporated into the Catholic Church. My friend, Dr. Wayne J. Hankey, Professor of Classics at Dalhousie University, and I had the task of describing the existing theological relationship: "We belong to the Latin Church because we have come from her. In spite of being separated from the Holy See, we have always understood ourselves to be a part of Western Catholicism. The Anglican tradition is Augustinian in its foundations and formed in relation to Western scholasticism and Western modernity. Throughout its 450 years, however, there have developed within Anglicanism unique expressions of vibrant ecclesial life which, although incomplete, God has nevertheless used to attract and nourish many devout and committed Christians. We believe that those Anglican elements still have power to awaken in people a yearning for the full riches of the Catholic faith, but they must be properly secured under true apostolic authority."⁹

Anglicanism as a church of the Reformation raises difficult problems for serious ecumenism, and it must be admitted that the goal of corporate reunion based on the principle, "return to the rock from which ye were hewn" (Is. 51:1), is unrealistic. But it is worth noting that significant understandings were reached before Anglicanism veered away. Anglicans had begun to trust Rome and looked to her for leadership in many areas of church life. The Anglo-Catholics were well disposed, of course, but one of the most encouraging signs was the warm regard from the Evangelicals. The great scholar of the English Reformation, Dr. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (d. 1990) told me that the Vatican II constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, had essentially answered the Reformers' principal criticisms and that there was no compelling reason for the separation to continue.

Efficient

So, I am convinced that the claims of Rome are true. I believe that Anglicanism is intrinsically oriented toward Rome. Now I just need a little push. Normally conversion stories do not feature texts from the Second Vatican Council, but this is the central theme in mine. Let me return again to the passage from *Lumen Gentium* (8),
Although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of [the Catholic Church's] visible structure, these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.

⁸ "The Unopened Gift," p. 648.

⁹ William Oddie, *The Roman Option* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 243.

These words were constantly in my mind in 2007. The fathers of Vatican II intended for this text to be a positive encouragement for ecumenical dialogue, but I heard in it an urgent challenge. For Anglicanism to continue to occupy, for the Catholic Church, a special place amongst the churches of the Reformation,¹⁰ it must demonstrate that it has an inner dynamic toward Catholic unity. It must be held to a higher standard.

It is not necessary to rehearse all that was going on in the Episcopal Church at that time, except to say that the tumult reached a crescendo at the House of Bishops meeting on March 20, 2007. That was the day the bishops overwhelmingly rejected the valiant work that had been done to propose more effective instruments for the Anglican Communion, and they insisted that the polity of the Episcopal Church is independent, democratic, and connected to the rest of Anglicanism by voluntary association. By sunset I knew that I could not remain in the Episcopal Church under these circumstances. I still hoped that the Archbishop of Canterbury might exercise his discretion by whom he would invite to the Lambeth Conference (one of the few primatial prerogatives available to him), but two months later that hope was dashed.

Pope Benedict XVI was obviously thinking of the Episcopal Church when at an ecumenical gathering in New York on April 18, 2008, he said: “Fundamental Christian beliefs and practices are sometimes changed within communities by so-called ‘prophetic actions’ that are based on a hermeneutic not always consonant with the datum of Scripture and Tradition. Communities consequently give up the attempt to act as a unified body, choosing instead to function according to the idea of ‘local options.’”¹¹ It is no small matter to be taken to the woodshed by the Vicar of Christ at a carefully organized ecumenical event, and it demonstrates how seriously the Pope regards the disintegration of Anglicanism as a communion. So am I wrong to conclude that such actions raise acutely the question of whether this church has lost the inner dynamic toward Catholic unity? Unfortunately, this “shipwreck of faith” is having grave consequences throughout the Anglican Communion, and the result is likely to be further division.

The proposed Anglican realignment, led by the churches of the Global South, raises the question in a different way, as its inspiration is the Anglican Reformation and English Puritanism. I was resolved that I would not go in this direction, although I am certainly sympathetic toward these courageous leaders. So the problem could now be simply stated: if the minimal ecclesiological structures of Anglicanism have been proven ineffective to maintain communion, and if the way to preserve orthodox teaching and life is to be sought in some other configuration, then why not Rome, if Anglicanism can no longer be trusted to behave like a church? It was time to come home.

My counselors, Monsignor William Stetson and Archbishop Michael Sheehan, urged me to bring my ministry in the Episcopal Church to a close as honorably as possible. The clergy and lay people of the Diocese of the Rio Grande were truly wonderful to me, more than I had a right to expect given the considerable inconvenience and upset I was about to cause them. The Presiding Bishop and my colleagues in the House of Bishops were gracious and helpful, with only a few exceptions, and I was able to follow the canonical procedures to be released from my ordination vows. It is difficult

¹⁰ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 13.

¹¹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080418_incontro-ecumenico_en.html.

to renounce orders, but during those days I was strangely comforted by Pope Leo XIII's *Apostolicae Curae*, and, by ironic juxtaposition, the words of the martyred missionary Jim Elliot: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."¹²

Final

Aristotle thought the final cause to be the most important, because this is the explanation that looks for meaning, inner purpose, and ultimate end (*telos*). For example, we are here today because, as the Ecclesiastical Delegate for the Pastoral Provision reminds us, "The intention of the late John Paul II and our current Pontiff is to bring all the faithful into full communion with Christ and his Vicar on earth, the Bishop of Rome."

As a seminary student I sensed that my own personal destiny would be connected with John Paul II. One day in the fall of 1978 I came home from classes at Harvard Divinity School to tune in the evening news and see the new Pope step on to the loggia of St. Peter's for the first time. It was an intuitive *quo vadis?* moment, and I remember sensing for the first time the importance of being in communion with Peter. The audaciousness of identifying this extraordinary man with Peter certainly occupied my attention during those student years. The great texts that spoke of the ministry of Peter in the life of the Church had to be sought out, for they were not looked upon with much favor in the theological circles I inhabited. That one might actually order his life in relation to an ancient text is a very radical countercultural act, and many forces were brought to bear on me, both in the university and in the church, to remain in the circle.

That I was never fully socialized into this world was a great mercy, for I was mostly unaware of the spiritual danger of not listening to one's conscience. C.S. Lewis' prescription to read old books ("keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds"¹³) was wise counsel, and I am sure that the Church Fathers have been an instrument of salvation in my life. The passionate encounter with these texts makes the reconstruction projects of theological liberalism seem boring by comparison. More difficult for me was Anglicanism's claim to be an autonomous branch of the Catholic Church. *Rapprochement* with Rome is a good thing, but we were told, "Be patient! Full communion is not far off." All the while our churches were drifting further apart. The practical challenges of making the journey to the Catholic Church as an individual seemed overwhelming, and, I was often instructed, self-indulgent. To my sorrow and shame, I came to the threshold of the Catholic Church on several occasions with a convinced mind and an open heart, but fear held me back. Do you remember John Paul II's first words on the loggia of St. Peter's? – "Be not afraid!" How I wish that I might have seized those earlier opportunities to complete this journey while John Paul II was still alive!

In October of 1993, I had the great privilege of meeting the Holy Father at the general audience, when a group of us were in Rome to explore how Catholic unity might be realized corporately by smaller Anglican communities. The Holy Father greeted us personally on that occasion. My heart told me to kneel and kiss his ring. But my head told me I really ought to remain standing and take his hand, because I was still an

¹² Elizabeth Elliot, *The Shadow of the Almighty* (San Francisco: Harper, 1958), p. 108.

¹³ *St. Athanasius On the Incarnation*, introduction by C.S. Lewis (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's, 1966), p. 5.

Anglican and should not presume a relationship that, strictly speaking, did not exist. How I wish I had listened to my heart! It troubled me for years afterward – a little thing really, but a missed opportunity that I will always regret.

On April 2, 2005, I was in my first year as an Episcopal bishop and driving across central Wisconsin for a meeting, when I heard the bulletin from Rome that John Paul II had died. This news cut me to the quick, for I had resolved those many years before, when I was still a seminary student, that I would become a Catholic while he was pope. With tears in my eyes and a heavy foot, I sped through a speeding trap. The officer put away his citation book when he heard what I was listening to on the radio. I would like to think of this as the first little miracle in John Paul's cause for sainthood! I do not doubt that my unfulfilled resolution to be in full communion had now taken on a real measure of urgency in my own life.

Catholic-oriented Anglicans have expended considerable energy in the search for amiable ecclesial arrangements, both personal and corporate, but it is good to bring all this activity into perspective. There is an answer so simple and penetrating that it sweeps everything else off the table. To be sure, there are costs to be counted, teachings to be more fully comprehended (although this can easily become an excuse for indolence), and expectations to be managed. But this is what I should like to say to my dear friends who have put one toe into the other side of the Tiber. Listen to your conscience! The good conscience is a precious gift of faith, the Apostles regard it as the *telos* of all Christian acts, and it is our right by baptism. In the acrimonious Anglican wars, the liberals are acting from conscience (albeit misguided), the courageous Evangelicals are equally as clear, so why, dear friends, is your conscience so conflicted? God does not intend for it to be so but desires that we serve him with a good conscience (Acts 24:16).

To you who still remain in imperfect communion with the Catholic Church and yearn for her full and generous embrace, I fear that I am being an insufferable convert, and so I will stop. God calls us in his own good time. There is much good to be done for his Kingdom wherever one happens to be, however lonely the road on which one walks. My respect, my love, and my prayers remain with you in these difficult days for Anglicanism. Rome will be there for you. And of course this is the whole point: *“Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”* (Matt. 16:18).

Permit me, at the beginning of this Pauline Year, to add this postscript. The Kimball Museum in Fort Worth recently concluded a wonderful exhibition of early Christian art. What especially captured my attention was a late fourth century bronze lamp found in the House of the Valerii on the Celian Hill in Rome, now part of the collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence.¹⁴ Twin lights emerge from a ship that symbolizes the Church. In the bow of the ship is St. Paul, proclaiming the Gospel to the world. In the stern and on the rudder is St. Peter, steering the ship through the tumult. This penetrating image from the early Christian world, revealing its consciousness of the incomparable apostolic foundations of the Church of Rome, is worth a thousand words. How truly blessed we are to be her sons and daughters!

- Jeffrey N. Steenson

¹⁴ Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 249

