

Southern Baptist to Agnostic, to Atheist, to Catholic: Home at Last!

by Jay Damien

It was summer vacation, and I was again at my Grandmother's house, in her bedroom, staring at black beads in a green glass dish. Those mysterious beads! I was drawn to them but didn't dare touch them. Every night Grandma took those beads from their resting-place. Her eyes closed and her lips whispered as the circle of beads slowly moved through her fingers to the swish-swish rhythm of her rocking chair. What did it mean? What was she doing? I watched, transfixed. I was sure she was doing something "Catholic."

I always knew that Grandma was Catholic and that my family was Southern Baptist, but she never said a word to me about the Catholic Church. Except once when I blurted out, "Why are you Catholic?" Granny replied, "The Catholic Church was the first church, why isn't it the right church?" I would forever remember those thirteen words, spoken when I was seven or eight years old.

I grew up in Arizona, and my Catholic Grandmother lived eleven hundred miles away in the Midwest. I rarely thought of her and was unaware of the influence she and her beads would have on my life until many years later.

My paternal grandparents were also Southern Baptist. Only five miles separated them from my Catholic grandparents, but religious differences created between them a chasm the depth of the Grand Canyon. Religious conflict was a strong current beneath the surface of our family relationships – a constant tug-of-war was going on. The Catholic

relatives prayed in silence, demonstrating their faith by their actions. But the Baptist side tried to inoculate me against what they regarded as the plague of Catholicism by constantly talking against it and making sure I read such literature as, *"Why I'm a Preacher and Not a Priest."* As I grew older, I realized that my once-Catholic Mother was at the center of this vortex.

Distance put this conflict out of mind, and I grew up as a member of the Calvary Baptist Church, serenely confident that I was "saved," and that I possessed the "truth." Secure in the knowledge that I belonged to the invisible church of true believers, I was grateful that my mother had become aware of the errors of the "Whore of Babylon," as my pastor called the Catholic Church, and had escaped its evil influence. That meant that I, too, was safe. The shocking "truths" about the Catholic Church were taught from the pulpit and in Sunday School, and I believed them all.

As a child, I thought the world was divided into Baptists, who were right, and Catholics, who were wrong. But as I grew older, it disturbed my peace to realize that my friends were Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Methodist, or even some other denomination of Baptist, and our beliefs were different. "Don't you believe the Bible?" I asked. The answer was always, "Yes, of course."

This finally became such a burning question for me that, as a teen-ager, I took it to my pastor: "Why are there so many different churches, all based on the same Bible? How can I be sure which one has the truth?" He assured me that if I asked the Holy Spirit for guidance, with a sincere heart, that the Spirit would lead me to the correct interpretation of the Scriptures. "But if the Holy Spirit is leading everyone, why do people reach different conclusions? We are all sincerely seeking the truth." His answer was to suggest that I be baptized again. So I went under the waters a second time.

But the question continued to haunt me. I studied the doctrines of various Protestant churches in comparison to the Scriptures and began to see that words on a page are open to many interpretations -- and to believe that God had played a cruel joke on humanity. He gave us a Book as our sole rule of faith and practice -- then expected us to figure out for ourselves what we were to believe and how we should conduct our lives. He had left us desolate, after all (Jn 14:18 RSV). With young adulthood came the awareness that Christian truth, if it existed at all, could not be known with certainty. It was a guessing game.

Christianity is a revealed religion. What, then, had God revealed? I grew into the realization that this was a multiple-choice question, and that all answers were correct. I had my opinion about what the Bible said, which conflicted with the opinions sincerely held by other "Bible-believing" Christians. After many troubled years, I jumped off the Southern Baptist bandwagon. It was the only logical thing to do. I concluded that since every denomination is based on the same Bible but no two of them agree -- and since there is no way anyone can know with certainty which of them is "true," if any -- then "truth" has no objective meaning in religion.

Relative truth didn't interest me; I wasn't willing to stake my life on it. I reasoned that if we couldn't know with certainty what God had revealed, how could we be sure that there is a God at all? And what difference would it make if He did exist, since *opinion* about what He wanted me to believe and how I should behave is all Christianity offered? So I became an agnostic and eventually drifted into atheism -- and believed what I wanted and did as I pleased.

I had such an aversion to the Catholic Church, I had never even considered looking into it. I lumped it in with all the other do-it-yourself persuasions. And then, Father Emmett McLoughlin left the Catholic Church and the news was splashed across the front page of my hometown newspaper. He began speaking about the evils of Catholicism at local Baptist churches and introduced his book, *People's Padre*, at the

public library. I was enthralled by his words and reminded of how grateful I had been all my life that my mother had left the Catholic Church before I was born. I purchased his book as a "thank you" gift for her. And I read it.

Something about the book troubled me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Some "thing"-- which I now know was the Holy Spirit -- prompted me to go back to the religion section of the city library many times. There, on the library shelves, I found a different Christianity than I had known as a Protestant. I found the history of a visible, teaching Church founded by Christ, a Church which predated the New Testament, wrote it, and was its rightful interpreter.

At first, my reading was the result of intellectual interest, as I had once been interested in knowing about Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and all the religions of the world. But when I began to disagree with anti-Catholic writers whose books occupied the same library shelf, I realized that I was on dangerous ground. I had stepped into the magnetic field of Catholic Truth and was being drawn toward the Church. My reaction was an emphatic, "No!" I was a professed atheist, and becoming a Catholic was abhorrent to me.

But I continued reading, fascinated, supplementing the library's books with others found in a Catholic bookstore. I assured myself that it was just intellectual curiosity. But this was a Christian Church that didn't leave it up to the individual to decide what he would believe. This Church was an authoritative teacher who claimed to be the repository of authentic Christian Revelation -- of "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) -- and had a continuum of history to prove it!

The first jolt was my discovery of Bible history. It had never occurred to me as a Protestant to ask how we got the Bible. To learn that the early Church had existed for centuries before the New Testament canon was defined was a shock. All those Christian martyrs of the first four

centuries Anno Domini had gone to their deaths without knowing the New Testament as I knew it. If the Bible was the sole rule of faith, how could they have known what to believe?

I learned that many writings about Jesus were circulated among the local churches in the early centuries, hand carried by travelers, and that no church possessed a complete "Bible" all at once as it is known today -- in fact, the Bible didn't exist. No one knew which of these many, many writings were "Scripture" and which were not, until the canon was set by Catholic Church at the Councils of Rome (A.D. 382), Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397).

And there are no originals of the Scriptures. The Bible has come down to us through copies, and copies of copies -- no one knows how many generations of copies -- all made by Catholic hands. How could Christians be sure the copies were faithful to the originals? The answer was disturbing: only by the authority of the Catholic Church. Even more disturbing, only the originals are the "infallible word of God," not the copies, and certainly not the translations.

I felt betrayed. I thought my "Bible only" teachers either knew this or should have known it, and should have told me. I began to wonder whether I would have become an agnostic/atheist if I had known these basic historical facts. It was the first crack in my atheist shell.

As I continued to read, I discovered early Christian literature. The *Didache*, for example, is older than some of the New Testament writings. Its full title is *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, and it was used by the early Church to instruct adult pagan converts. The *Didache* says, "On the Lord's own day, assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks [Eucharist]; but first confess your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure...your sacrifice must not be defiled." Sacrifice? No Protestant church offers sacrifice! This had to refer to the Sacrifice of the Mass!

Also, the Baptist position on 'immersion only' crumbled when I read: "Baptize as follows...pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Both immersion and infusion (pouring) were taught by the Apostles! I read other Church Fathers and discovered that the early Church was distinctively Catholic.

It was all there, from the primacy of Peter to Confession to the Sign of the Cross. When St. Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110 A.D.), student of St. John the Apostle, referred to the Eucharist as the "...Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ" I knew the Apostles taught that it wasn't just a symbol, and that the sixth chapter of John meant exactly what it said.

I met John Henry Cardinal Newman through his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman wrote, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant." How right he was! Not only was I shucking Protestant prejudices from my past, but God was revealing Himself through history.

One day I did not believe God existed, and the next day I was absolutely sure He did and that He could be found in the Church He had established for my salvation and that of the whole world. I read Cardinal Gibbons' *Faith of Our Fathers*, and knew in my bones that it was true. Karl Adam's, *The Spirit of Catholicism* opened my eyes to the beauty of the ancient Church and the logic of its teaching, and remains to this day my favorite book.

Statistician and Anglican clergyman David Barrett's study, *The Oxford World Christian Encyclopedia*, identified 20,800 Christian denominations in 1983, "with a projected 22,190 by 1985. . . The present net increase is 270 denominations each year, or 5 new ones a week." The United Nations released a figure of 23,000 Protestant "competing and often contradictory denominations" (World Census of Religious Activities, U.N. Information Center, NY, 1989).

Barrett's 2001 *World Christian Encyclopedia* puts the number of Protestant denominations in the world at 33,820 -- all based on the same 66-book Bible -- with seven books and parts of Esther and Daniel cut out of it by Martin Luther. I haven't seen it, but I understand Barrett's 2006 edition cites more than 40,000 Protestant denominations worldwide. The splintering of the body of Christ never stops, all resulting from belief in Luther's doctrines of Sola Scriptura (Bible Only) and private interpretation.

So I have no doubt that if I had not read that anti-Catholic book written by an apostate priest, I would still be convinced that the truth could not be known through the Bible only, and my story would have ended there. Without Fr. McLoughlin, I would never have found the very author of the New Testament -- the Church established by Christ to be my teacher. I would never have known the Church that put the New Testament together with the Old Testament at the close of the fourth century to form the first Bible. It was as if Judas had shown me the way home to the Catholic Church. I will be grateful until the day I die, and beyond.

Fr. McLoughlin eventually came back to the Church, without fanfare; no book or newspaper documented his return. I was privileged to be present when a venerable, old Franciscan priest, Fr. Albert Braun, told a group one night that he had heard Fr. Emmett's confession before he died. Thank you, God, for your great mercy; your mercy endures forever.

I had long since identified what troubled me about Fr. Emmett's book. He had either been in seminary or in active service as a priest for about 25 years. Why had it taken him a quarter of a century to discover the evils of the Catholic Church? He could have left and written his exposé at any time. Instead, his criticism of the Church and rejection of its doctrines came after his refusal to obey transfer orders from his superior. He was a popular priest, well known and very influential in the community, and he didn't want to leave. He justified breaking his vow of obedience by launching an attack upon the Church. But, like the good Mother that she is, the Church forgave him.

Lastly, what does my Grandmother have to do with this? God has given me the grace to know that it was through Granny's Rosary, tens of thousands of prayers offered for her daughter -- my mother and her family -- for years and years, that my unbelieving heart was changed. Those prayers converted me, my anti-Catholic father and mother, my sister-in-law and brother -- in Grandma's words -- "to the first Church, the right Church." Never underestimate the power of the Rosary! And please say a prayer for my other brother and his family who are not Catholic (yet).

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