

In Search of the Church with a Capital C:

My Journey Home to Rome

James B. Griffin*

I. Romulus and Remus

On Holy Thursday, 1994, I attended Mass at St. Michael's Church in Remus, Michigan. My wife was ill, so I went alone. If you had known me at Easter just one year before, you would have thought it unlikely to find me in a Catholic parish, much less contemplating a crossing of the Tiber River. After the dismissal I remained kneeling on the back pew and realized that I would one day become a Catholic; it was only a question of time. I would become a Catholic as a matter of obedience, not that I was especially eager to dive across a great historic and cultural divide, but because I had come to believe that the Catholic Church really is what it claims to be: the Church founded by Jesus Christ Himself.

This journey began with a question: Where is the Church with a capital "C?" I was never one to be content with the idea that the Church was no more than a fractious guerrilla army. I knew from the words of Jesus in the Gospels that the Church had to be something greater than the sum of all the believers scattered among the world's congregations and denominations. As a Southerner, I am used to the frequent question, especially when you move to a small town: "Have you found your church home yet?" Here is my answer.

II. Thin Places

There are a few spots on Earth in which the distance to Heaven is relatively short. The Irish calls these spots the "thin places," and they were honored as shrines by Druid priests in pagan times and by Christian hermits, monks, and pilgrims in more recent times. In C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, a magical wardrobe is made of a Narnian tree and becomes a passage to another world. Next to Remus is the little village of Mecosta where there are at least two mildly thin places: the Baumann Farm where many in my wife's family have lived and worked for more than a century, and Russell Kirk's library.

The Baumann Farm is about two-hundred acres containing fields, woods, a barn, a tool shed, a large old farmhouse, and a relatively new house. My wife's uncle, Jerome Baumann, was born and died on the same hill. He lived vigorously and virtuously for most of the twentieth century, as did his wife, Catherine Dunn Baumann. The land on which he was born supported

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his parents, his children, and his kin with fresh bread, fresh corn and vegetables, firewood, fire, and fellowship. I can still see him chopping wood for his own stove, eighty-something years old and working as if he were thirty-five. My daughter has played in the sandbox he built and maintained, as did my wife and her sisters a generation before, always shaded by trees planted by their kin.

Somehow at the Baumann Farm, the earthiness and virtues of farming, soil, and sweat so commingle with prayer, liturgy, and the cycles of life that the chasm between Heaven and Earth closes. When I walk down the little rutted farm road behind the house on a clear night, I can look up, see the stars, and know exactly where I stand in the cosmos. Eternity is so close that the present, past, and future meld into peace and contentment.

Just a few miles away near “downtown” Mecosta (a quarter-mile from the blinking light) is Russell Kirk’s library. Dr. Kirk was born into relatively humble circumstances in Plymouth, Michigan. He earned degrees in history from Michigan State and Duke. At St. Andrews University in Scotland he wrote an ambitious doctoral dissertation that became 1953’s surprise bestseller, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*. He spent the next forty years writing and speaking on hundreds of topics of literature, history, and culture. He was of an extinct species: an independent man of letters not unlike Sir Walter Scott. Altogether he penned about thirty works of fiction and nonfiction as well as thousands of columns, articles, reviews, forwards, introductions, and letters. He refused to specialize and preferred the isolation of his ancestral home in rural Michigan to the tenured comforts of America’s universities. His private library of more than 10,000 volumes fills an old Dutch barn near his home: Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Plutarch, Tacitus, Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Montesquieu, Hume, Blackstone, Adams, Tocqueville, Santayana, Faulkner, Solzhenitsyn, and hundreds of other writers find a home there.

As G.K. Chesterton said of the room containing the dying Thomas Aquinas, the inside of the Kirk Library is bigger than the outside. On the wall above the mantelpiece is a sculpture by Hew Lorimer of three human-like figures representing theology, history, and law. In one corner is a marble bust of Edmund Burke. On the shelves are hundreds of great works that have the look and feel of books which have been revered. Dr. Kirk was not a man of his century; he was more of a relic of several previous ones. He did not drive, but preferred to walk. He knew nothing about planes or computers, but he understood the lasting significance of great ideas and the eternal truths spoken in ancient myths. Fame did not faze him. He had met Presidents Hoover, Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan and always showed proper courtesy, but he was more invigorated by young people, particularly writers and artists, with whom he could share what his friend T.S. Eliot called “The Permanent Things.” If you stand still in the Kirk Library, especially if you are alone, you can get the feeling that you are in some Narnian wardrobe and might open a door and find yourself in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, Socrates’ Athens, Cicero’s Rome, Samuel Johnson’s London, or perhaps in Heaven itself with the company of Ss. Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Catherine of Siena, and Thomas More.

III. Cafeteria Protestantism

My route to the Eternal City is a mystery. Rome was the one place I never expected to have on my spiritual itinerary. My religion, a strange mix of Anglicanism, charismatic teachings and practice, and covenantal theology, eventually led me to the Holy See, but no one could have told me in 1986 that I would become a Catholic within ten years. At that time I had one foot in Canterbury, one foot in Geneva, and both hands in the air!

My journey to Rome began the day I was baptized in the Episcopal church. My mother comes from a long line of Anglicans. Three generations of my ancestors were Episcopal clergymen in colonial Virginia, and they represent a Christian tradition which coincided with the greatest literary outpouring in the history of the English language. Anglican liturgies have a Shakespearean cadence: “Almighty God, unto all hearts open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love Thee and worthily magnify Thy glorious Name. Amen.” I have heard this opening prayer to the communion rite hundreds of times, usually while sitting under the pale colors of morning light shining through stained glass. When I was in high school during the late Seventies, the Episcopal priest always conducted the early service using the traditional rite from the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, and the music of the liturgy sang through his beautiful voice.

I scarcely understood any sacramental theology, but because of my childhood in the Episcopal church, I have never considered a Sunday worship service complete without Holy Communion, even as I embraced other Protestants in fellowship. Considering the fact that Holy Communion was essential to Christian worship until the Reformers and their heirs decided otherwise, Anglican worship has an apostolic continuity not common among Protestants. As Chesterton said, “Tradition is the democracy of the dead.” The Anglican tradition provided me an avenue every Sunday into the history of the faith.

Though I would have liked to believe that the church based in Canterbury stood on more solid historical ground than those in Rome or Constantinople, I have known my entire life that the Church of England was founded by politicians rather than martyrs and apostles. Henry VIII was once a good Catholic, but ambition to build a dynasty, combined with lust and the need to endorse his own sin, led him to usurp the rightful powers of the bishops. The nature of Anglicanism is to insist on corporate unity at the expense of doctrinal clarity, and those who insist that Christian bishops preserve the deposit of faith are considered reactionaries, bigots, and schismatics. When I was young in the Sixties and Seventies, the reformers were bent on modernizing the liturgy, and by the time they were finished, Anglicanism’s glory, that is, its liturgical language, was gone, or at least flattened.

My family also pursued Christian fellowship outside the Anglican tradition, and from my youngest days my mother took me to places that few Episcopalians dare to go, in particular, the churches and retreats of charismatics and Pentecostals. The first such event in my memory was

also the most historically dramatic. My native state of Alabama was a major battleground for the civil rights movement, and when I was perhaps four or five, my mother, a woman of great faith and moral courage, decided she would strike a double blow for racial desegregation and ecumenical dialogue by attending an African-American church in our hometown of Birmingham. Of course, she took her children with her! The church itself was alive with singing, swaying, hand-clapping, spirited preaching, and hearty amens. People were very friendly to us, much friendlier than my neighbors would have been to them. It was, to say the least, quite a contrast from the liturgical prayers, academic sermons, traditional hymns, and grand pipe organs I knew. My mother made a point never lost on any of us: the Holy Spirit is bigger than we can imagine and moves among people and in ways we don't understand.

There was a strong evangelical and covenantal pillar underneath my faith. When I was in the fifth grade, two high school girls held a Bible club for boys in my neighborhood. They were pretty and sweet, and with guitars and the scriptures they introduced us to God's covenant, beginning with Adam and fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. I remember the images on the flannel board: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Ark, Abraham and Isaac, and Moses and the Ark of the Covenant. They taught the wonderful truth that Jesus was the sacrificial fulfillment of the law and the prophets. They taught that Jesus' sufferings, death, and resurrection saved us from our sins. They prayed with us that we would ask Jesus into our hearts. I embraced covenantal theology then and uphold it today as the central truth of Christianity. Covenantal theology was the foundation for most of the fellowship and Bible studies I enjoyed in high school through Young Life and for my studies in college and graduate school. As a Catholic today, I see how covenantal theology leads to sacramental theology.

All Christians must face the Cross. At a retreat center not far from Birmingham stands a little stone prayer chapel. Suspended from the ceiling is a large wooden cross of unvarnished wood. Four nails protrude from it. I cannot recall a day in which I did not consider myself a Christian, but when I was old enough to question my faith, about seventh grade, I began reading about other religions throughout the world, namely Islam and Buddhism. Serious doubts grew quickly. That summer I went on a retreat and found myself alone in the little stone chapel looking up at that cross. The nails in that cross spoke louder than any preacher or book and erased my doubts. In a torrent of tears I encountered the Passion of Christ in His sorrows.

By the time I was a teenager, I practiced a tripartite faith in three Protestant traditions: Anglicanism, the charismatic movement, and evangelicalism. On Sunday mornings we would attend Episcopal services, and my mother, a soprano soloist, processed in and recessed out of the sanctuary with the choir and sang Handel arias at Christmas and Easter. Our Episcopal acquaintances were largely professional people with better-than-average incomes. But many of my friends at school and Young Life were Presbyterians and Baptists, and at least once a summer and several weekends each year, my mother took us to retreats, Bible studies, and prayer groups led by charismatics and Pentecostals. The Holy Spirit, as understood through my charismatic experience, was the driving vision: personal, subjective, dramatic, compelling, and spontaneous.

This subjectivity was somewhat balanced by the objective reasoning of covenantal theology. In this way I pieced together Christian doctrine from varied sources, never fully agreeing with any one denomination, and woefully ignorant of sacramental theology.

I could see early in my life that charismatics could fall far and fast as well as soar high. When you teach that an individual can hear directly from God and yet inadequately define any authority other than scripture to interpret the message, error and schism are inevitable.[†] Most charismatic fellowships implode or split, and even the successful “mega” churches usually leave a suburban trail of splinter groups.

In the fall of 1980, I enrolled at Gordon College, a liberal arts school led and staffed by evangelical Protestants of many stripes. Gordon’s ecumenical environment and excellent faculty fostered vigorous but reverent debate about eternal and cultural questions, and these debates continued at meals and in the dormitories. But what I remember best were the words of our campus chaplain: “It is OK to ask questions which threaten the status quo even here, so long as you are willing to bow down before Truth when you find it.” Though I rarely doubted the basic truths of the Nicene Creed, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the discordant Protestant answer to my basic question, “What is the Church?”

You might say my undergraduate education began and ended with C.S. Lewis. I read *The Abolition of Man* my freshman year, and it gave me my “marching orders” as a student, teacher, and lawyer. Our modern technological society is indifferent to the needs of the soul. We must nurture music, poetry, history, or moral imagination in some form to create order in our souls lest we become “men without chests” having nothing between brain and belly to civilize us. The soul is not an island, but something unexplainable which needs to be connected to something bigger than itself. No one taught this truth better than Thomas Howard, Professor of English,[‡] who led us energetically and mystically through Narnia, Middle Earth, and other places. He taught literature with all the joy of a man who knew that the earthly conversations of men were but a sweet echo of the Incarnate Word.

Few can attend a college like Gordon and not contemplate serving in foreign missions. When I was a senior at the College, I attended an international conference on missions at Gordon Conwell-Theological Seminary in nearby Hamilton, Massachusetts. One of the last speakers represented a non-denominational organization committed to a simple and radical idea: that the Great Commission calls upon all Christians to become foreign missionaries unless God specifically leads them to other callings. This organization passed around a pledge form and urged me and all attendees to sign such a commitment stating that I promised to become a foreign missionary unless God expressly instructed me otherwise.

[†] Allen Tate called it “angelism,” a term he probably learned from Jacques Maritain. See Allen Tate, “The Angelic Imagination: Poe as God” in *Essays of Four Decades* (1968, 1999).

[‡] Dr. Howard converted to Catholicism the year after my graduation, resigned his teaching post at Gordon, and accepted within a year a teaching position at St. John’s Seminary near Boston.

While this pledge was urged with the best of intentions, it struck me as an ironclad and absurd reduction of Christian obedience into a very short formula. It also implies that some of the best Christians we know are disobeying God by default. Like many false doctrines, this pledge attempted to make symmetrical and linear things that are inherently asymmetrical and mystical.[§] Instead of calling me to the mission field, the admonition to sign this pledge caused me to question the entire Protestant missionary endeavor.

IV. Failure of the Puritan Experiment

Perhaps no missionary undertaking demonstrates the centrifugal nature of Protestantism better than the planting and secularization of Puritan New England, and for that reason the religious politics of New England became the subject of my master's thesis in history. The Puritans failed in their quest to create a "city on the hill" not because of weakness in their own piety or personal commitment, but because their own congregational culture was uncontrollably fissionable. What puzzled me was how Trinitarian Christians of the Puritans' education, resources, political control, and zeal were unable to maintain consistent doctrine in the churches and society they founded in the New World. Their commitment to *solī scriptura* often backfired. For instance, the Puritans codified the Book of Deuteronomy as the criminal law of the colony, but found their own juries unwilling to impose death sentences and other severe punishments when prescribed. English common law was applied instead of Mosaic law because they could not legislate their own cultural norms. Despite great preaching and periodic revivals, the seventeenth-century churches of New England are today largely Unitarian, liberal, or abandoned. The spirit of John Cotton, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards lives mostly in the splinter groups and newer denominations, not in the direct institutional heirs of the Puritan founders.** Yet, no movement tried harder to break from the past and create an enduring Christian culture.

The Puritan rulers of New England quickly began to resemble the Anglican and Catholic bishops they despised, and their zeal and evangelical rigidity was tested to the breaking point by two basic questions: (1) Should nonmembers of the established church be allowed to vote and serve in political office? (2) Should the baptized children of church members (i.e., "cradle Christians") be allowed to participate in the governance of the congregations and their respective colonies, even if they could not demonstrate an experience of "regeneration" or conversion? Each colony in New England eventually answered both questions affirmatively, and thus, the passion and drive of the Puritans to create a culture of regenerate Christians free of "Romish" corruptions was gradually lost in the daily business of society and politics. The Puritan cultural experiment ended not with a bang but a whimper.

[§] After the death of St. Francis Assisi in 1226, some Franciscans argued that all faithful Christians should have to become Franciscans, but St. Bonaventure and other wise men rejected this idea.

** During the early nineteenth century, Aaron Burr's Jeffersonian Republican party disestablished Congregationalism as the state-supported religion of New England. Burr was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, who was the grandson of Cotton Mather, who was the grandson of John Cotton, founding pastor of First Church-Boston.

V. Reaching the End of the Protestant Road and Finding the Tiber River

The schismatic entropy at work in my own Christian fellowships mirrored the degradation of Protestant dogma and practice that I saw in my graduate research. I watched one charismatic church implode before my eyes when a young fellow stood up and began to share a Jeremiad about America, and the wife of an elder walked out and never came back. The church split, dwindled, changed locations a few times, and finally closed its doors a couple of years later. Another church I attended grew rapidly under the leadership of a gifted charismatic preacher and eventually gave up its denominational affiliation. However, conflict among the pastor, the congregation, the elders, and the staff ensued over doctrine, focus, and resources; this church too imploded and died a slow death.

The Episcopal church fared no better. Those committed to ancient Christian teachings were isolated, if not severed by default. Liturgical reform marked not an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, but a capitulation to modernism most exemplified by the abandonment of ancient Christian teachings on sexual morality long established by the blood of martyrs^{††} in the face of Roman orgies and violence. Whole parishes broke away from the main body. Splinter denominations multiplied.^{‡‡} Though I would like to think that the Anglican church declined only recently, its founding in 1529 was upon shifting sands and nationalistic politics. Ss. John Fisher, Thomas More, Edmund Campion and others were its victims, and its sacramental *gravitas* was largely derived from Catholicism. The sudden loss of its traditional liturgies merely revealed the doctrinal and ecclesiastical chaos that had long existed. Five centuries of trying to be the *via media* have paved the *via absurdia* instead.

After a brief sojourn with some evangelical Presbyterians, my last refuge in Protestantism was a Lutheran church. My little Lutheran congregation enjoyed traditional liturgy and music, weekly communion, covenantal theology, pastors of intelligence and integrity, and the teaching of *soli scriptura*. Its denomination, however, was an evangelical remnant which had doggedly resisted ecumenism in most forms. The fact that it was part of a small and narrow sect brought a deep sense in my heart that the Reformation was a terrible tragedy of discord, a lunge towards pre-Renaissance and pre-Medieval Christianity doomed to fail and disappoint. Martin Luther wished to reform the Church, not initiate nuclear fission. Yet half a billion Protestants are now divided into infinite sects while one billion Catholics remain united under the Magisterium and the Holy See.

VI. Swimming the Tiber River

^{††} Martyrs from St. Agnes to St. Maria Goretti have died rather than compromise their chastity, so it is not only unscriptural but ahistorical to demand that the Church “change with the times” regarding sexual morality.

^{‡‡} Jim Pinto is a family friend. He served as rector of an Episcopal parish, Christ Church in Fairfield, Alabama for many years, and he took most of his flock to the Charismatic Episcopal Church in the late 1990s. Several years later, he returned to the Catholicism of his youth.

Once I realized I was on my way to Rome, I wrote Dr. Howard, who had converted to Catholicism since my graduation from college, and let him know that I had reached the Tiber River and was contemplating the swim across to the Eternal City. He wrote me back the kindest letter with the best advice: “And yes: don’t be rushed. The ol’ Church has been here for 2000 years, and neither she nor God is in a flap about it. Take your time.”

Becoming a Catholic is a very difficult road for someone of evangelical Protestant background. In some ways, it's easy: you show up to R.C.I.A. classes (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) and then on the appointed day, usually Easter Vigil, you are received into the Church as a communicant. But obviously, there is more to it. It is a process of *conversion*. One friend of mine, a former atheist,^{§§} told me that the hardest thing he ever had to do to become a Catholic was *kneel* for the first time in his life! In my case, I struggled hardest to link the glory of sacraments with the necessity of sacramental authority. Once I understood that sacraments without sacramental authority are self-negating and not true sacraments, it was not difficult to conclude that the Church must also exercise sacramental and moral authority. The Petrine succession and apostolic tradition are not optional if the Church truly is something greater than a loose confederation of little Christian sects. The “great cloud of witnesses” of Hebrews 12:1 becomes more than a group of spectators when led by the Mother of God who physically carried the Incarnate Word to us. The communion of saints is a mystical body united in the sacraments and Christ’s sacramental authority.

Theresa Dunn came into my life in 1990 when she began working at Brenau Academy in Gainesville, Georgia. I taught history there. She was a dormant Catholic who was waking up. She had and has a sweet soul but was nothing like any of the Protestant girls I had dated. She was pious and reverent but seldom argued the scriptures or articulated theological abstractions. She talked little about her faith. But like Mary, she brought Christ to me. She loved everything Christian, holy, and good. By Christmas of 1992, we were engaged, and we visited her family in Michigan. On that trip I first saw the Baumann Farm and met Dr. Kirk.

We knew immediately that the meeting was providential, so I applied for and received a Wilbur Fellowship to live in Mecosta for a year and assist Dr. Kirk with his research and work. Theresa and I moved to Michigan shortly after we married in 1993. Besides reading ancient and modern literary classics, I read a string of Catholic writers: Kirk, Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, Richard John Neuhaus, Allen Tate, Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and John Henry Newman. I couldn't read fast enough: history, philosophy, aesthetics, poetry, criticism, education, political science, economics, sacraments, scripture, saints, prayer, etc. I also read a spectrum of Catholic periodicals from *Crisis* to *The Wanderer*.

Though I probably read more than most converts, Catholicism is not an intellectual abstraction; all roads lead to the Mass, and the Mass is a physical, sensory, emotional, mystical,

^{§§} Scott McDermott told me this. He befriended Theresa and me when we first moved to Nashville.

and spiritual experience. Theresa and I went to Mass every Sunday for three years, though neither one of us was a communicant. Theresa was pursuing an annulment of an old nightmare, so we longed for the Eucharist, not unlike St. Mary Seton before her conversion. I was in Christian "no man's land," being neither a Catholic communicant nor a Protestant holder of *solī scriptura*. I was an immigrant in transit, and after being a "somebody" as a Protestant Sunday school teacher, stewardship committee chairman, and choir member, I became a "nobody," a Catholic novice. Theresa and I had to accept the authority of the Church, in particular, the Church's authority to grant or deny the sacraments. Catholics do not "take" communion; we receive it. If the Eucharist were an entitlement, it would be cheap, but it cost God everything.

After just a few weeks in Mecosta, my life became very thoroughly Catholic, even while I struggled with Catholic ideas about scripture and tradition, Mary, and the priesthood. Dr. Kirk and his wife Annette were among the best Catholic lay witnesses I have ever known, and their home was a place for warm meals and intelligent guests. We had the opportunity to get to know Catholics who were rich and poor, educated and unlettered, cradled and converted. We went to Mass weekly at St. Michael's with Theresa's aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Though I could not fully articulate my thoughts, I had reached the limits of Protestantism. Protestant churches can deliver rich flavors but never Christian fullness under one roof. I did not want to be part of a church; I wanted to embrace the Church. I did not set out to become Catholic; I marched forward to know God and was surprised by joy when I found Him among those people who teach seven sacraments, venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints, and organize more soup kitchens and bingo nights than tent revivals. Theresa was a cradle Catholic enjoying a Renaissance of her faith. I was a lifelong Christian who was beginning to see continuity and harmony in the Church through her sacraments, authority, moral teaching, saints, prayer, liturgy, and history.

A. Sacraments and Sacramental Authority

It was in this Catholic environment at Mecosta that the primacy of sacraments for Christian worship and holiness became overwhelmingly evident. The Eucharist cannot be merely symbolic unless Jesus was only apparently the Incarnate Word and did not mean what He said in John 6. As divinity and man are joined in the Incarnation, the Eucharist is the timeless Incarnate Word, and when we drink of the holy wine, we are sharing the cup not only with those in the room, but with all those throughout the world who ever shared in Christ's cup.

As an Anglican turned Lutheran, sacraments were not alien to me, but sacramental authority was. I remember visiting Mission San Juan Bautista in California^{***} for Mass in 1984 and hearing the priest say: "When you receive communion in the Catholic Church, you are acknowledging the teachings of the Church and everything the Church stands for." And he proceeded to say that non-Catholics were not to receive the Eucharist. I was furious. I was

^{***} One of the twenty-one missions founded by Blessed Junipero Serra during the late eighteenth century.

offended that the Catholic Church had the audacity to assert sacramental authority. Such a statement denied the ecumenical eclecticism I had practiced in my tripartite faith, and I could not imagine it being correct, that is, orthodox. Of course, I did not seriously examine the claims of the Catholic Church; I merely sneered at them.

If Jesus said what He meant and meant what He said in the Gospels: “This is my Body,” then there are no “sort of, maybe, symbolic” sacraments. Quakers and Christian Scientists, for instance, do not believe in sacraments or sacramental authority; they do not need a priesthood. Of course, when Quakers break bread, it is merely bread, even if they are piously meditating upon Jesus’ life and teachings. Catholics believe that when a priest breaks bread while saying the prayers of consecration, the bread is transubstantiated into the Bread of Life, Jesus Himself. If anyone can affect this transubstantiation, then everyone can, and we might as well be Quakers or members of some other sect which requires no sacramental ordination. If, however, Jesus only allows certain people ordained as priests to affect this transubstantiation, then someone or some institution must answer three questions: (1) Who can be ordained as a priest? (2) How should priests be disciplined? (3) Who may receive the sacrament?

Perhaps these questions are analogous to the problems of licensing airplane pilots. Unless you believe that everyone can and should fly airplanes, then you believe that only a few people can and should fly airplanes (or none at all), and you will be careful to make sure that only those who are qualified get to fly an airplane. Moreover, if one of the pilots develops blindness or becomes an abuser of drugs and alcohol, you will ground that pilot. Finally, not every person gets to be a passenger on an airplane as a matter of right. If you suffer badly from vertigo, you need to remain on the ground. If you travel with a pistol, you need to unload it, declare it, and pack it with your checked baggage. If you wish to travel with explosives or your pet giraffe, you are not allowed to board. The Quaker view is either that everyone can and should fly, or that flight is not at all possible. The Catholic view is that flight is possible and that Jesus ordained the Church to ordain the “pilots,” discipline the pilots, and guard the safety of the passengers. Sacraments require sacramental authority over priest and communicant, or they are not true sacraments.

B. Saint Peter and the Apostolic Succession

Whenever Jesus discusses the Church, e.g., Peter’s confession in Matthew 16:13-19, and his instructions for rebuking the sinner in Matthew 18:15-20, He implies that there is a body of believers holding spiritual and moral authority. I have known many Protestants who were spiritually and morally assertive, but they had little or no objective authority, even if they had noticeable stature and abundant wisdom. Jesus promised to grant the requests of any two in agreement (Matt. 18:19) and to be in the midst of any two or three gathered in His name (Matt. 18:20), but these promises were all the unity and authority I had come to expect as a Protestant.

Is the Church a confederation of republics, each of which is governed by the temporary agreements of its members, or is the Church a monarchy unified under the kingly authority of Christ? Is it possible that personal discernment, individual moral conviction, and *soli scriptura* cannot substitute for the teaching and disciplinary authority of the Church? Is there such a thing deserving a proper noun called the "Church," and if so, how does the Holy Spirit come to this Church, guide her, teach her, and feed her?

Early in the Church's history, the apostles debated whether Gentiles should be received as full members of the community of faith. The apostles, led by St. Peter, agreed that Gentiles could enjoy full membership in the communion of Jesus' disciples if they foreswore food offered to idols and sexual immorality. The Church has been defining morality and sacramental fitness ever since, and only a few biblical literalists insist that all Christians must follow the Jewish law in its entirety, namely the Seventh-Day Adventists.

As I came to see it, the Church of the scriptures is the unified ministry of the Kingdom of God, a constitutional monarchy, so to speak, but the Protestant churches I knew functioned as little republics within a loose federation of Christians, never a united kingdom and barely an alliance. If, however, the Church is the Bride of Christ, He would not leave the Bride alone, yet Protestant history for five hundred years has been the scattering of sheep without a shepherd. There must be a better way.

There is something different about Catholic priests, even ones who are obviously troubled, unhealthy, and flawed, because they speak as men having authority. They act with the confidence of two millennia of apostolic succession that will continue for all eternity. In contrast, Protestant ministers often cannot speak for their own congregations, much less forty generations of Christian forebears and the generations to come. Only Catholicism exercises the doctrinal and structural unity necessary to fulfill the Great Commission, and this unity is based upon the sacraments and sacramental authority.

Jesus said, "Peter, you are the Rock, and upon this Rock I will build my Church.... I give you the keys to the Kingdom. What you bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven, and what you loosen on Earth shall be loosened in Heaven." (Matthew 16:13-19) It is obvious from the scriptures that Peter was the leader Jesus had chosen, not merely chairman of a committee. Peter was leader of the apostles and moved that they replace Judas Iscariot after the latter's betrayal and suicide. It was Peter who preached the magnificent sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, moved to ordain the deacons in Acts 6, baptized Cornelius' entire Gentile household in Acts 10, and explained the vision and correct teaching regarding Gentiles to the apostles in Acts 11.

I will not argue that the New Testament compels the conclusion that Peter was the first Pope, but it does establish that Peter was the leader of the twelve apostles and that the apostles exercised episcopal powers to ordain additional apostles and define other offices such as that of deacon. The apostles were careful not to create a hereditary priesthood; like all sacraments,

ordination is the Church's to give, not an entitlement. Likewise, the chair of St. Peter was and is not an academic honor, but a sacramental responsibility requiring nothing short of a man's entire life. A few popes such as St. Gregory and St. Pius X, and for that matter, John XXIII and John Paul II, have been so full of the Holy Spirit that their authority is obvious, but lesser men come up short and often fail miserably, such as Alexander VI, whose Renaissance excesses are well-chronicled. The wonder is not that the office has been corrupted during the centuries, but that after 2,000 years, the Holy Spirit continues to speak through the successors of a Galilean fisherman who was martyred in Rome in A.D. 67. My conclusion from reading the New Testament and Church history and observing the endless schisms recurring among Protestants is that Christ could not have possibly intended the Church to function under congregational supremacy or nationalistic episcopacies.

C. *Soli Scriptura* Not Self-Evident

Of course I know that Luther and Calvin taught that there can be no Church hierarchy not specifically described in the scriptures, but that teaching is based upon the premise that the scriptures alone teach the Church what it is. Here, I will offer a legal objection. In a court of law, a piece of paper is only considered a page of a contract, will, or mortgage if it is obviously such, that is, it must fit logically with the rest of the document by page numbers, reference, handwriting, notations, notarizations, etc. Collections of documents not obviously of the same source and time must be incorporated by reference or authenticated by someone who knows them, i.e., the secretary of state, the county clerk, the attorney of record, the treasurer of a corporation, or a council of bishops. The Bible is not a self-authenticating document; more specifically, what we call the New Testament was not given an official "table of contents" until the Council of Hippo in 393.

The Protestant doctrine of *soli scriptura* presupposes about the Bible what lawyers call *res ipsa loquitur*: "The thing speaks for itself." The doctrine of *res ipsa loquitur* allows a court to lower the standard of proof for causation in extreme cases, such as a plane crash. If you are suing an airline for wrongful death after a plane crash, the court does not require you to prove every step of how the airline pilot or mechanic committed some error or negligent act because "the thing," that is, the wreckage, "speaks for itself." If you ask a Protestant how he knows the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are God's Word, he will not likely give you a convincing answer because he will generally argue that the New Testament is self-authenticating, even though its contents were not established until the bishops debated and determined the issue late in the fourth century. If the New Testament were a contract or a will, it would require authentication to be valid under law. *Soli scriptura* cannot stand upon *res ipsa loquitur*. The Bible simply is not a self-defining collection of documents.

Once I saw how Christians cannot authenticate the New Testament without relying on the authority of the bishops in the Church councils, the doctrine of *soli scriptura* collapsed, and with it, most the claims of the Protestant Reformation. The Church, with all her flawed priests and

laymen, through her bishops as successors to the apostles, and led by the Pope as the vicar of Christ, holds authority to teach on all issues of sacraments, doctrines, and morals. The Church is essentially a constitutional monarchy whose king is Christ and prime minister is the Pope. As prime minister, the Pope has authority to carry out Christ's directives and teach in Christ's name, but no authority to do anything outside sacred scripture and sacred tradition; this heritage of apostolic teachings we call the Magisterium.

D. Living Stones: The Communion of Saints and Mary

I was not going to become a Catholic unless I was certain of Catholic teachings, and the only way to review the breadth of Catholic teaching quickly was to read the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. I read it cover-to-cover, eight-hundred pages of text, all four sections: the Creed, the Sacraments, Moral Theology, and Prayer. (It is designed more as a reference book than a narrative.) By the end, I was ready to come to the Catholic Church on her terms, accepting all the Church's teachings, even the difficult ones.

One Catholic teaching that never bothered me was the communion of saints. For one, I had recited the Nicene Creed my entire life, but also, I had visited the catacombs during my trip through Rome in 1984. Though I was blinded by *solī scriptura* from seeing Christ's Church among the splendid art and architecture in Rome,^{†††} I could sense holiness as I descended into one of the catacombs. Our guide exuded piety, and he told us of how Christians for centuries made similar descents in order to be near the bones of friends and martyrs as they prayed. When asked why the physical proximity made a difference, he replied: "Pagans believe in two kingdoms, a kingdom of the living and a kingdom of the dead. Christians believe in only one kingdom, the Kingdom of God." I knew he was right, and if I had stayed in Rome for a few more days, prayed in those shrines, and visited the crypt of St. Peter, *I might have found Rome while I was in Rome*.

As it was, I searched for more than a decade. Nonetheless, the communion of saints guided me throughout my journey. There is a reason Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father" rather than "My Father." We do not approach the throne of God alone. We are assisted at all times by our "great cloud of witnesses," that is, the communion of saints led by the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

The final hurdles in my acceptance of Catholicism were the Marian doctrines. I once believed that the Catholic view of Mary was a pagan corruption of the Christian faith and that Mary was simply the reincarnation of the fertility goddess. The doctrine of *solī scriptura* allowed no veneration of Mary, and attention to Mary was at best a distraction from the grace of Jesus the Son. It is from fear of Marian idolatry, cultural prejudice, a leveling spirit, and failure

^{†††} I was clueless about the Church when I toured Europe in 1984. I saw the entire Vatican edifice, clergy, and staff as neo-Pharisaic additions to the pure truth of scripture. My Protestant mind precluded the idea that the Church could have a physical presence. The Vatican was simply the remnant of an empire, not the Holy See.

to understand fully the Incarnate nature of God and the sacramental fullness experienced with the communion of saints that Protestants do not venerate the Mother of God. I need not be harsh, however. I neglected the Mother of God for all the same reasons, and cultural prejudice blinded me to the obvious: though I had memorized as a young man the latter verses of Revelation 12, I did not imagine that the “woman clothed with the sun” having a “crown of twelve stars” who gave birth to a “male child destined to rule all the nations” was the Blessed Virgin. But who else could possibly be the woman pursued by the fire-breathing dragon which waged “war against her offspring, those who... bear witness to Jesus?”

But why should we venerate Mary, when all worship belongs to God? First, we do not worship Mary; we venerate her. And we venerate her because she is our teacher, just as she was Jesus’ teacher. There is nothing demeaning to the Christian faith in asking any saint to teach us about Jesus. In Mary’s case, she is His most intimate disciple and carries a title that invokes all the mysteries of the Incarnation: *Hoodoos*, the Mother of God. Mary’s special place in the Kingdom of Heaven is stated dramatically in Luke 1 and 2. The miracle upon which the Christian faith stands is the Incarnation of God Himself. Jesus is somehow fully God and fully man, yet neither His divinity nor His humanity evolved while He was on this Earth. His Incarnate Nature is essential to His being from the beginning (John 1). Protestants sometimes write books to try to bring Mary down to our level, but words cannot diminish the fact of her physical attachment to the Savior of the world: she carried Him in utero, fed Him through her umbilical cord, nursed Him with her milk, taught Him to walk and talk, brought Him up in all the richness of the faith of the patriarchs and prophets, stood perplexed and mystified when He was discovered in His Father’s house, and walked the way of sorrows with Him on Good Friday. No other human in history was given such a role. She was the second Eve, humanity’s second chance through her Son, the second Adam.††† When we approach Mary, in her humble way she tells us what she told the wine steward at the Wedding at Cana: “Do what He tells you!”

I was received into the Church by the sacrament of confirmation at Easter 1996 at St. Peter’s Church in LaPorte, Indiana.§§§ Theresa’s annulment was finalized in time for us to have our wedding vows validated that weekend, and we received communion together Saturday evening at the Easter Vigil.**** All my longings as a Protestant I found fulfilled in Catholic sacraments: intimacy with our Savior, Truth with a capital “T,” reverence for sacred scripture, discipline and beauty in liturgy, the regular celebration of the Eucharist, the experience of the Holy Spirit in tangible and memorable ways, unity in marriage, and charity for all. Yes, the

††† Notice that most statues of Mary show her trampling a serpent!

§§§ After one year serving Dr. Kirk, I accepted a teaching position at a Catholic prep school called LaLumiere in LaPorte, Indiana. LaLumiere School is east of Chicago, six miles south of Lake Michigan. During my four years there I taught U.S. History, World History, Mythology, Moral Theology, Old Testament, and New Testament. I also coached soccer and basketball and supervised a boys’ dormitory.

**** My father came to Indiana for this event. He had returned to the Catholic Church of his youth during the early 1990s. My Catholic relatives are scattered from Maryland to California, so I was not exposed while growing up to their faith except during the funeral of my paternal grandfather in 1976.

Church has its many imperfections, but I was startled to learn from reading Church history that there is no problem in the Church today that was not present in every century. By the Holy Spirit, the Church keeps doing what Jesus ordained her to do. Priests, bishops, and laymen may let the Church down, but the Holy Spirit always gives the Church a holy shove in the right direction at the very moment that all the critics and pundits have declared her hopelessly corrupt and irrelevant.

I must admit that I was surprised by my own contentment and satisfaction with Catholic teaching and practice, but in retrospect, the Catholic Church has everything that I knew the Church should have: faith, grace, mystery, continuity, consistency, poetry, music, art, physicality, earthiness, reason, fellowship, love, and redemption. I was simply blind to Catholicism's virtues and truths until I married Theresa and lived near the Baumann Farm and the Kirk Library. There I met people who lived in great fullness; their lives were grounded in the soil under their feet and paced by seasons and liturgy. Yet through the sacraments they soared heavenward. Today, Jerome Baumann, Catherine Dunn Baumann, and Russell Kirk are buried in the churchyard at St. Michael's. *Requiescat in pace*. They introduced me to the better way of the communion of saints.

VII. Gigi's Pew

In the spring of 1996, a fertility specialist near Chicago told Theresa and me that we probably could not bear children naturally. We were devastated to say the least. I was just a few weeks away from being received into the Church at Easter, and plenty of people suggested that we attempt to conceive a baby using methods prohibited by the faith and authority we had just embraced. Having been a "cafeteria Protestant," however, I was not going to become a "cafeteria Catholic." Either the Church is what it claims to be, or it is merely an edifice built upon wishful thinking. Later that same year, my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.^{††††} In the face of these medical reports, I learned to pray the Rosary and pray it almost every day. Sometimes Theresa and I would pray it together. Other times I would walk down to LaLumiere School's Grotto. On many nights I sat on the cold bench in front of Our Lady and prayed; sometimes I cried a few tears. I remember one night in particular when a snowstorm was blowing hard from Lake Michigan. It was one of those eternal moments: our little lake was frozen solid and covered with drifting snow as a twenty-knot wind shot past the entrance of the Grotto. Inside the Grotto, however, all was calm. Our Lady stood in the candlelight with her hands held in prayer, interceding with her Son for the salvation of this cold, dark world. With the peace that passes understanding, I knew that my family was in God's kind hands.

The desire to have a natural child did not go away; it was our cross to bear. We had to learn to live with a type of death that does not happen once, but actually occurs every month. I

^{††††}My mother survived her cancer, embraced Catholicism, and was received into the Church at Easter 2001.

wish I could say that we held hands on one particular day, prayed a good prayer, and moved on, but it was not so easy. We concentrated on other types of service and had faith that God must have a better plan, but the longing did not cease. Because Theresa and I were willing to serve God as adoptive parents as well, in the spring of 1999 we filed an application to adopt through Catholic Charities.

We had moved to Nashville the year before so that I could begin law school, and I regularly escaped from my studies to attend Mass at noon in the Cathedral of the Incarnation. I usually sat on the second row all the way to right and prayed that God would give us a baby. In retrospect, we can see Divine Providence at work, even in Theresa's bad health. Her health made it imperative that we leave the Midwest, but if we had already had children, we would have been unwilling to take the risk of going back to school. As it worked out, we moved to Tennessee, finished the first year of law school while enjoying a year of improved health, and then received the unexpected blessing of bringing a baby of our own into the world!

Genevieve Grace Griffin was born on May 5, 2000. Our story would be remarkable without her, but with her it's almost too good to be true. When I attended Mass at the Cathedral during my third year of law school, I often brought little "Gigi" with me, and we would sit on the second row far to the right on what I now call "Gigi's Pew." This pew represents the unity of our family in the sacraments, the unity of the Church's sacramental and moral authority, and the triumph of prayer and redemptive suffering. Yes, I have found my Church home, and my Church has a capital "C."

On September 2, 2000, our daughter was baptized a Catholic. For her parents, it was one of our most joyful days together. For me as her father, it was a remarkable milepost on a journey that commenced many years before, a spiritual journey that began with my own Episcopal baptism and took me to charismatic fellowships, Young Life meetings, an evangelical college, a Lutheran church, and eventually, communion with the Holy See. Present with us were a priest, many of our Protestant and Catholic family, and about a dozen friends. A lifetime of search for Christ as the common author of theology, history, and law led to the one place I had been told could not hold truth: Rome.