A Wink of Heaven

I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven,
a whisper,
And I would no longer be denied; all things
Proceed to a joyful consummation.
T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

On a Thursday morning in mid-September 1975 I knocked at the door of the rectory of Saint Bede's parish in Williamsburg, Virginia. When a priest appeared I said, "Father, I want to become a Catholic." If the choirs of angels burst into rejoicing at that moment I did not notice, for I felt more apprehensive than joyful. I knew what this decision would cost: shock from kinfolk, incomprehension from friends, alienation from the culture that had bred me, and clucks of pity from colleagues at the College of William and Mary. I knew something else as well: there was no turning back -- I must become a Catholic.

Three weeks short of my thirty-first birthday I had reached a decision that did not square with my upbringing. No wonder some of my friends viewed my sudden penchant for papistry as an indication of incipient derangement. After all, I had been born into the thoroughly Protestant and energetically anti-Catholic culture of rural Maryland. That I had been raised in the Seventh-Day Adventist denomination made my choice of church all the more perplexing: former Adventists may stray into atheism or take up sheep molesting, but they rarely head for Rome. Unlike Saul of Tarsus, I had no Damascus Road to explain my conversion -- no voice from heaven, no darting flash of celestial light. Nor could I claim that I had followed the example of such converts as John Henry Newman or Ronald Knox, Englishmen who poped only after arduous and systematic study eventuated in intellectual certitude. Yet I was ready to enter the Catholic Church (ready at that moment had the priest been willing); if that struck my friends as preposterous I could only reply that it was the most sensible step I had ever taken.

Before answering the question "Why Rome?" I must respond to another: "Why not Takoma Park?" Almost a decade earlier I had repudiated Seventh-Day Adventism, thereby abandoning my appointed role in the cosmic drama that culminates in the triumph of the fundamentalist saints. That I was a graduate student at the University of Virginia when my apostasy occurred explained everything to the Adventists back home in Takoma Park; they sorrowed over the loss of yet another young man of promise who had succumbed to the beguilements of secular learning. Suitable as that explanation was for home consumption, it bore little resemblance to the truth; my disillusionment with Adventism had in fact arisen during my undergraduate years at Columbia Union College, an institution dedicated to the three R's of Religion, Righteousness, and Republicanism (of the Barry Goldwater variety). There, surrounded by Adventist students and taught by Adventist professors on a campus that lay only a mile from the world headquarters of the denomination, I had begun to question the dogmas of my faith.

Oddly enough, the first stirrings of rebellion coincided with my formal reception into the denomination. Like Baptists, Adventists condemn infant baptism as a nonscriptural practice foisted upon Christianity by the Catholic Church. For Adventists, baptism (in this case, total immersion) does not occur until one reaches "the age of accountability," usually somewhere between the ages of ten and thirteen. Although thoroughly indoctrinated in the faith by my grandmother and by the teachers at John Nevins Andrews Elementary School, I had passed through the critical period of emergent accountability without seeking baptism. Why, I cannot say for certain. Perhaps my reluctance arose from the fact that my mother was not an Adventist, and when we moved to Takoma Park my grandmother's vigorous influence began to carry less force. Then, too, I bridled at the pressure our schoolteachers exerted upon us as we approached the brink of accountability. By the time we reached the sixth grade they had begun to bombard us with appeals to seek baptism. Twice yearly the school's principal would invite an evangelist to conduct a "Week of Prayer," which would reach a crescendo on Friday mornings with students marching to the front of the assembly hall to declare their readiness to take the fateful step. One by one my fellow juvenile miscreants renounced their lives of sin and succumbed to the overwrought emotionalism that pervaded these sessions. Whether from nascent rationalism or an overdeveloped case of adolescent obduracy (most likely the latter), I resisted the siren song and refused to follow my schoolmates into the baptismal tank. I suspect as well that the prospect of being dunked in a pool of water while an assembly of Adventists stared at me was repellent; like the practice of foot washing, public baptism struck me as an embarrassing display of forced intimacy.

Though I refused baptism, I continued to consider myself an Adventist; I diligently attended weekly services and, moreover, I believed the church's teachings. It came as a shock, then, when in my senior year in high school my girl friend, the daughter of a preacher, informed me that we could never marry because I was not an Adventist. I stalled, hoping she would relent, but when my hope of reprieve evaporated I steeled myself for the ordeal. Besides, I knew that baptism would fulfill my grandmother's urgent desire to see me assume full fellowship with the church. On November 24, 1962, toward the end of my first semester in college, I descended into the waters to take what had become by then an anticlimactic step.

Baptism failed to forestall a mounting dissatisfaction with Adventism. I would prefer to remember those first heady days of skepticism as the product of a high-minded search for truth; the image of the earnest student combing his books, thrilling to new insights, and then acting upon his convictions appeals to one's self-esteem. Unfortunately, candor will not permit this; my rebellion stemmed most directly from a motive so commonplace as to be a cliché: the young man's ineluctable urge to tweak the orthodoxies of his elders. Armed with a smattering of learning, a vaunting self-confidence bred of ignorance and immaturity, and an ill-defined sense of grievance against authority, I sallied forth to do battle with the established powers. The sixties were upon us as well and we of the blessed young were rapidly discovering that everyone beyond the age of thirty was irredeemably corrupt.

The symptoms of this malady flared up initially in a psychology course I took in the second semester of my freshman year. At the first lass meeting the professor announced that we could earn extra credit by sampling (to the tune of one hundred pages a week) the writings of

famous psychologists. We could eat freely of all the trees in this bountiful garden save one: with a gravity commensurate to the imminent danger, the professor proscribed the works of Sigmund Freud. I could have cared less about the wicked Viennese doctor, but once warned is twice tempted: I headed immediately for the forbidden fruit. Clutching the Modern Library edition of Freud's *Basic Writings*, I plunged into the abyss, and for an entire semester I wallowed with ids, egos, superegos, complexes, maladjustments, sublimations, and a profusion of delectable neuroses. I emerged from this orgy relatively unscathed. I did not contract satyriasis nor renounce Christianity; I did not even latch onto the catchwords of Freudianism as a means of impressing my less-learned friends. But I had discovered the sweet delight of defying the moss backed guardians of orthodoxy. What ecstasy to be young and freethinking!

If my fling with Freud left my religion intact, my introduction to Charles Darwin took a more ominous turn. I entered college firmly convinced that all decent people adhered to a literal reading of Genesis and that only reprobates and perverts credited the pernicious theory of evolution. This tidy dichotomy collapsed when I took a course titled Philosophy of Science, taught by a jocular herpetologist who boasted of having survived the bite of virtually every variety of poisonous snake that had fallen into his (perhaps careless) hands. Professor Harris nursed no heretical notions, but he insisted that in pursuit of the truth one must give the devil his due. His devotion to this principle meant that not only did we scrutinize creationism but that we also read *The Origin of Species* in its interminable entirety and listened to the lectures of visiting evolutionists. In search of additional I reading I discovered Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey*, a lyrical rendering of evolutionary progression written by an anthropologist who possessed the soul of a poet. Encountering the enemy at his most attractive, my enmity began to dwindle; and if I knew too little to call myself an evolutionist, I had learned too much to rest comfortably with the official version of Genesis.

With my critical eye growing ever sharper I began to spy out the fallacies and inconsistencies embedded in the faith of my childhood. I focused on Adventism's weakest point: those moralistic strictures and prohibitions with which it abounds. That drinking should be denounced as a grievous sin struck me as incongruous when one considered that Christ Himself had transformed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. ("Grape juice," retorted the orthodox; "Christ turned the water into grape juice") Could a puff on a Marlboro or a chaw of Red Man really cost one eternal life? Would the eaters of pork chops go to hell? Would the illegitimacy rate soar if we danced? Would the angels weep if I stepped inside a movie theater? ("Bad people frequent theaters," a preacher once told me.) How I loved to catch the saints in their little hypocrisies! Never, for example, would the pious Adventist matron adorn herself with a necklace, a bracelet, or even a plain gold wedding band, but somehow she and the church saw nothing amiss in a swank diamond brooch displayed on a basic black Sabbath dress. Most Adventists could not intelligently defend their culture-bound proscriptions; when cornered they resorted to two defenses: the Bible says so ("Strong drink is a mocker" -- so there!) and the church teaches it. But their Bible was a truncated handbook of legalisms and their church a small sect that had arisen out of the heated fantasies of nineteenth-century millenarians.

When Adventists asserted that "the church teaches it," they really meant that Ellen G. White, the denomination's founder, had issued a dictate on the matter. This lady's omnipresent authority began to oppress me. Her spirit hung like a thick fog over the comings and goings of Adventists. One could sit through an entire sermon and hear scarcely a mention of Jesus Christ, but find Mrs. White quoted repeatedly on everything from toilet training to the Second Coming. Beginning in high school I had read assiduously in her voluminous writings; two other books -- *The Desire of Ages* and *The Great Controversy* between Christ and Satan -- were, I had learned, to be ranked only slightly below the Bible, for they completed the revelation contained in the Scriptures and schooled us on how we as Adventists differed from other Christians.

Mrs. White and her writings permeated the instruction at Columbia Union College. Sociology: "What does Mrs. White teach about the ills of modern society?" Psychology: "How does Mrs. White refute the theories of atheistic psychologists?" Phys. ed.: "Mrs. White offers the soundest principles for good health that the world has ever seen." My English teachers shied away from assigning novels because Ellen White had decried their deleterious effects, and my religion courses were often little more than glosses on her writings. Most infuriating to me, because I had chosen history as a major, was the way she intruded upon our study of the past. Whether in courses on European or American history, a religion major ("preministerial" would be more apt, for they were all headed for the Adventist pulpit) would invariably inform the class of what Mrs. White had declared about a given event. God, said Mrs. White, had brewed up a storm to destroy the Spanish Armada, thereby preserving England as a Protestant stronghold. God, said Mrs. White, had intervened in the struggle between France and England in the eighteenth century to ensure a Protestant triumph in North America. God had even taken sides in the American Civil War; prim New Englander that she was, Mrs. White had discerned God's hand in numerous Union victories. Groaning audibly was my only defense against such arrant nonsense -- that, and a mounting aversion to the very name "Ellen White."

One of the crucial events in my rejection of Adventism occurred in a course on Christian ethics. In the midst of a discussion one day an irritatingly self-righteous young woman blurted out that it infuriated her to sit in the same Sabbath congregation with flagrant sinners. As she prattled on about her offended sensibilities my rising discontent took a new turn: for the first time I saw dearly the arrogance of the Adventist conception of the Church -- this huddling together of a handful of saints who cling to their list of niggling do's and don’ts while the rest of humanity gropes blindly toward perdition. Had Christ died only for my smug classmate and those she would deign to sit with on Saturday mornings? Although I possessed too little theology to refute her, I was certain of one thing: I was more comfortable in the company of sinners than in the embrace of self-proclaimed saints.

Despite my dissatisfaction with Seventh-Day Adventism, I was unprepared as yet to leave it, and had I remained in Takoma Park it would have taken many years to make the break; the dictates of that tightly knit society would have been disregarded only with strenuous effort. But I was not to linger in that environment, for in late February 1966 the University of Virginia awarded me a fellowship to study American history. Three months later, accompanied by my bride (the preacher's daughter), I headed for Charlottesville.

With Takoma Park and the threat of censure one hundred miles away I undertook to discard the remnants of my faith. I felt immense relief at ridding myself of a burden, but at times

a pang of remorse would stir up memories of the security and certitude of the fellowship I had abandoned. Carol shed her Adventism even more easily than I did; for her, it had always been bound inextricably with the rigid authoritarianism other father, and without him to enforce belief, her belief vanished. Out of a mixture of habit and residual guilt we continued to attend services at the small church in Charlottesville; other than that we had no contact with Adventists, for the church members left us alone -- largely, I suspect, because I attended a university that they regarded (not without justification) as a sinkhole of drunkenness and fornication. Our observance of Adventist mores could not hold out once the doctrinal foundations crumbled. We began to sneak off to movies and to violate the Sabbath by watching television on Friday nights. Occasionally I would return to my studies on Saturday afternoon instead of awaiting sunset to signal the conclusion of the day of rest. Most egregiously, we began to skip church services, at first only sporadically, then with some frequency.

Carol and I dwelled half in the faith and half out until the fall of 1968, when a new pastor took over the pulpit of the Charlottesville church. Had he been one of those crusty, crotchety old preachers molded in the Adventism of an earlier era he would have scolded us for our waywardness and threatened us with expulsion if we failed to mend our ways. This one, however, was a modern and enlightened preacher, so fresh from seminary that his diploma was still unframed. His courses in pastoral psychology had taught him to eschew old-fashioned coerciveness in favor of friendly persuasion. He would, he decided, entice us back into full fellowship by dangling a carrot instead of thrashing us back into the fold with a stick. Playing on Carol's interest in social work, he asked her to assume leadership of the local Dorcas Society, an organization of Adventist women devoted to aiding the poor and sick. Carol accepted, but only reluctantly, for we knew that implicit in the bargain was the understanding that we would resume regular church attendance. A week later the preacher returned with a quid pro quo: because Carol's wedding band offended the women of the church she would have to remove it, if only, he hinted, when she participated in church activities. That settled it: we never returned to church, and at my insistence we demanded that our names be struck from the membership rolls.

I did not fully comprehend the implications of my rejection of Adventism until the spring of 1969, when I received a letter from my former mentor at Columbia Union College, who was now the academic dean at Andrews University, an Adventist institution located in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He informed me that a job had opened up in the university's department of history; he would be passing through Charlottesville in June and he wanted to discuss the position with me. Dr. Joseph Smoot had exercised an immense influence upon my college career. He had inspired me to aim for a Ph.D., had given unsparingly of his attention in fostering my budding intellectualism, and, most important, had furnished me with a model to emulate. Widely read, erudite, blessed with a powerful and probing mind, humorous, compassionate, and deeply committed to the idea that teaching is a vocation and not simply a job, he had become my hero and, I suspect, something of a replacement for the father whose absence I had keenly felt.

Dr. Smoot came to Charlottesville that June. We walked the grounds of the University of Virginia and admired yet again the elegant buildings of classical grace and symmetry; we talked of their architect, Thomas Jefferson, a man whom we both venerated; and we excitedly plied the range of topics that had formed the meat of our conversations in my undergraduate days. Finally the purpose of his visit, which I had been skirting, could be avoided no longer. Did I want the

job? Never have I found it more difficult to admit to an Adventist that I had left the faith. A deep sadness entered Dr. Smoot's eyes: "I feared that, Jim; I feared that we could not hold you." There was nothing more to say: he was an Adventist, I was not, and not even the affection we felt for one another could heal the rift that had opened between us.

With Dr. Smoot's departure my last tenuous ties with the church were cut, and I relegated religion to the outer edges of my life. Yet I never ceased to believe in God's existence, nor did I disavow the Incarnation, redemptive death, and bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this sense, I suffered no crisis of faith; the blandishments of atheism and agnosticism failed to sway me. If asked my religious affiliation in those days I would reply, "unchurched Christian," a term whose ring of fearless independence pleased my fancy. I was fooling myself, though; in reality, my soul shriveled. Save for an occasional wedding, I avoided churches. I stopped praying as well -- gladly, I might add, for I had been a tumbler at what the country folk of my childhood had called "talking to Jesus." My Bible lay unread and unopened, certainly not rejected, but certainly ignored. Calling myself a Christian, I drifted into a secular view of myself and the world; God still existed, but I effectively told Him to mind His own business. Who needed God? I had a wife who loved me, a Ph.D., and, as of September 1971, a job at the College of William and Mary. A future of success and happiness lay waiting for me to grasp it.

To those who knew me in those first euphoric days at William and Mary I must have appeared one of the blest; outwardly I had everything, or, at least, if I lacked anything it would surely come in time. I flourished in the classroom, winning student approbation with a combination of ebullience, hard work, youthfulness (the students, barely younger than I, welcomed me as an ally in the war against stodginess and mental decrepitude), a quick wit, and an intuitive grasp of what it takes to entertain an audience of adolescents. I had found my vocation and I assumed that it would reward me with continuing pleasure. But it didn't: by the middle of my second year at William and Mary the delight had vanished and an inexplicable sadness had replaced it. No one guessed my secret; I told no one -- could have told no one even had I wanted to. How could I explain my sadness when my sadness had no name?

There was one name I might have given it: a disintegrating marriage. Carol and I had met when we were sophomores in high school and, in the parlance of those antique days, we had started going steady at the age of fifteen. We capped our long and tempestuous courtship -- one rife with betrayals, fights, breakups, and reconciliations -- with a union destined for disaster in the opinion of more than one observer. I neglected her from the start as I immersed myself in a world of books and ideas, which she -- a practical and unbookish woman -- had no desire to enter; in return, she vested her time and energy in her thriving career as a social worker. We drifted apart, and though we continued to profess our devotion to one another, we both increasingly realized (but refused to acknowledge openly) that beyond some vague and immature idea of love we had no grounds for a lasting marriage -- no shared interests, no children (and no plans for any), no mutual joy in each other's company, no comfort in the other's presence. The move to Williamsburg only exacerbated matters. We shared a house like antagonists caught in unwelcome propinquity, stepping gingerly around one another lest a fragile peace flare into savage warfare. At times this game of mutual self-delusion would fail and our frustrations and meticulously refined grievances would plunge us into bouts of lacerating recrimination.

With both marriage and career on the skids, I looked for solace and found it in alcohol. I had never been a serious or even regular drinker. In high school I had sampled only sparingly the dubious exaltations of teen-age inebriation -- that state of ecstasy induced by three beers and followed by a two-day hangover. Seventh-Day Adventism proscribes all alcohol, and though sneaking a beer in defiance of such intransigence had been exhilarating, it had been hardly worth the trouble or risk. In graduate school, largely out of deference to Carol's inbred hostility to drinking, I had teetotaled -- to the utter amazement of my fellow students. As if to confirm Father Ronald Knox's quip that the Catholic loses his morals first and belief last, while the Protestant reverses this order, Carol relinquished her faith but refused to compromise her opposition to alcohol. As our marriage disintegrated I ceased to care what she thought. Late afternoons would find me in a bar, washing away the dissatisfaction with teaching and anesthetizing myself for the evening's combat. My drinking goaded Carol to new outbursts of rage, and her fury in turn reinforced my conviction that only by dulling my senses could I continue to live with her.

I hit bottom on a Friday in October 1974. As yet another week of teaching, drinking, and marital discord drew to a close I headed to my favorite hideout, a dank and noisome bar called the Cave. I drank far past my usual time to leave, but the alcohol only deepened my gloom. Late in the evening I left for home, but I never reached there that night; once in the car I kept driving, heading for nothing, escaping nothing, but propelled onward by a restless urge to keep moving. I remember only fleeting and blurred images of that long night: losing my way in a maze of highways in Arlington; drinking coffee and listening to lugubrious country songs at 4:00 A.M. in an all-night diner in Warrenton; buying a six-pack of beer at a market in Charlottesville; stopping by the side of the road to watch the sun rise over Monticello; and finally returning to Williamsburg, admitting that I could not flee the sadness because wherever I went I carried it with me.

I made two decisions in that night of aimless wandering and on Monday morning I acted on both of them: I submitted my resignation to the dean of the faculty and I called a psychiatrist for an appointment. Although my resignation would not be effective until the end of the academic year in June, I was relieved that I would soon be free of a profession that had bitterly disappointed me. I was less pleased with my second decision; I did not relish the idea of subjecting myself to the ministrations of psychiatry, whose practitioners I ranked slightly below snake oil salesmen in the hierarchy of humanity's benefactors. But I needed help and since alcohol had failed I decided to give psychiatry a chance to ply its magic.

I found no magic, but I did discover in Dr. Ann Stewart a psychiatrist of insight and wisdom. Though semiretired and reluctant to accept new patients, she agreed to take me on, her affinity for dilapidated college professors (she had over the years salvaged the psyches of more than one of my colleagues) persuading her that I was worth the effort. She promised no miracles; all I could hope for was mitigation of the misery that plagued my days and nights. After several months of weekly sessions with Dr. Stewart I reached a conclusion I had desperately sought to avoid: peace of mind would be purchased only at the cost of my marriage. In mid-April 1975 Carol and I parted, convinced at last that our shattered marriage was beyond repair. There were tears on both sides; it was not easy to accept that our love had ended in sorrow and separation.

To my surprise the pain of loss subsided quickly; in its place came, at first, relief, and then -- greatest surprise of all -- serenity. I rented a two-room furnished apartment four blocks

from my office and set about restoring some semblance of order to my life. With the encouragement of the dean of the faculty I withdrew my resignation, for I suspected that my discontent with work had come not from teaching itself but from the general disarray of my life. Had I solved my problems? Had I at last banished the sadness?

This mood of hopefulness was lovely while it lasted, but it could not hold reality at bay for long. By early June the examinations had all been graded, the students had departed, and the professors had scattered for vacation and research; I was at loose ends, left to the mercy of the hordes of tourists who descend upon Williamsburg with the first sign of summer. The loneliness I had dreaded now seeped into my days; it became a palpable presence, there in the morning when I awoke, there at night when I drifted off to an uneasy sleep. The loneliness brought the full shock of what had happened: I had lost the woman whom I had loved for half my life. She might as well have been dead, for I knew that she was gone forever: the emotional wounds we had inflicted upon each other, especially in that last appalling year of our marriage, precluded reconciliation.

I spent much of that summer stumbling through a fog of drunkenness, longing for death but clinging to life, shrinking from suicide but afraid to live. Often at 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. -- after a night of solitary drinking -- I would head in my Fiat for the deserted serpentine roads in the countryside around Williamsburg where I would push the car toward the razor's edge where a split second's mistake leads to twisted wreckage. Back home I would wash down a handful of Valium with a can of beer and in drugged sleep seek an obliviousness from which I hoped never to return.

Catholicism saved my life. Graham Greene facilitated the rescue. A friend loaned me a copy of *The Rawer and the Glory* and I entered Greene's bleak and chaotic world of sin and redemption. The book seized me with a violence that shook my determination to surrender to hopelessness; I read it hungrily and then I read it again. I followed this with *The Heart of the Matter*, *The End of the Affair*, and *A Burnt-Out Case*. In Greene's bedraggled and Christ-haunted characters I discerned a reflection of my own anguish, and as I pondered the meaning of their lives I understood fully for the first time -- understood in heart as well as in mind -- the meaning of that brutal execution on Calvary nearly two thousand years ago: Jesus Christ had died for even the most forlorn of sinners. The Protestantism of my youth had implied that only the godly deserved to be numbered as Christians; Catholicism, by contrast (at least as filtered through Greene's sensibility), provided a hospital for ailing souls. As Christ said, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick."

Though encouraged by Greene's rendering of Catholicism, I resisted the idea of joining the Church; I had carried away from Adventism a distaste for organized Christianity and I had no intention of leaping from the Adventist frying pan into the Catholic fire. Curiosity, however, prompted me to slip into Saint Bede's one Sunday morning to observe a Mass. I was ill prepared for what greeted me; expecting something along the lines of a small-scale Saint Patrick's Cathedral or Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (my idea of typical Catholic churches), I found instead a sanctuary of shocking simplicity. To my untrained eye, only the presence of a statue or two and a canopy over the altar betrayed the church's identity; there were no stained-glass windows, no votive candles, no holy water stoup, no confessionals -- none of that creepy --

mysterious atmosphere that had both repelled and allured me on previous excursions into Catholic churches. The Mass was disappointing; not for Saint Bede's any of the smells and bells that Protestants with a hankering for Rome have always wanted and expected and, until recently, found in the Roman Church. I entered Saint Bede's that morning in search of Baroque or Gothic splendor; I left trying to decide if even a Southern Baptist would be offended by what I had witnessed.

I thought, Well, that takes care of that; unless someone offers me the equivalent of Henry IV's Paris I'll not be returning to Saint Bede's. But my preoccupation with Catholicism refused to abate; to the contrary, it compelled me to seek out books on Catholic history and doctrine. As the stack of carefully read books -- Chesterton, Belloc, Pieper, Maritain, Guardini -- mounted, so too did the conviction that the Catholic Church was the greatest repository of Christian truth; other churches had bits and pieces of the truth (even important bits and pieces), but nowhere outside the Roman Church could one find such richness and plenitude. The next step was obvious: I returned to Saint Bede's, there to find in the Mass the liturgical expression of the doctrines I had noted in my reading. I began to frequent the church at odd hours as well, and there, in the stillness of the empty building (no, not truly empty; the burning candle before the tabernacle reminded me of a divine presence) I rediscovered how to pray. I even accepted the neo-Protestant bareness of the church, for I had come to realize that the ultimate value of Catholicism lies not in its Gothic or Baroque magnificence -- in the trappings that Protestants so often mistake for the essence of Catholicism -- but in the simple fact that it is true.

On a morning in September I awoke knowing that the time had come to act. I sought out the parish priest, and three months later -- on December 14, 1975, amidst the piercing loveliness of the season of Christ's birth -- I walked to the railing in Saint Bede's to receive my Lord.

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