

My Journey to the Church

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Author's Note

What you are about to read is my initial effort, right after joining the Catholic Church, to distill what led me to the Church. It is not exhaustive, and it is, admittedly, a bit rough around the edges. While you may think it is long, too long perhaps, it is not as long as it once was when I thought I needed to address all of the topics that went through my mind, heart and prayers. In reality, it could be as short as this first paragraph. I did not convert because the Church's teaching lined up with my own understanding. I did not convert because I saw in the Church the best example of religious structure and effectiveness. And I did not convert because I heard a great homily (a Catholic sermon) or met a vibrant Catholic who convinced me. I converted because I had a hunger for truth and, after investigation, I discovered that the Catholic Church is the Church. And that's it, that's the thesis: seek truth and you will find it.¹

If you are reading this because you are genuinely seeking truth, be warned: this is not an endeavor for the half-interested. The journey will likely include heavy sledding. Just like in Eden, there truly exists an enemy who desires to keep you from truth. So any effort on your part will be met with resistance. I don't know what resistance will look like for you—but I do know that it will come. As Christ said, nobody starts a project without first calculating the cost to see if he has enough to complete it.²

I've repeated the word "truth" a lot so far—it's intentional. While there are many teachings in the Bible that require guidance, one truth is self-evident even on cursory reading—truth is objective. There is no room for 'my truth' or 'your truth'. That notion has not been left open for us. This life, in so many ways, is about coming to grips with objective truth. Just a few verses that illustrate the point:

- *John 14:6* – Jesus says, “**I am the way, the truth, and the life.**” Truth is not a perspective; it is a reality rooted in Christ Himself.

¹ Matthew 7:8-9

² Luke 14:28-35

- *2 Peter 1:20* – “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture becomes a matter of someone’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” Meaning is not up for individualization.
- *1 Timothy 3:15* – “I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.” Truth has a structure that supports it—and the Church is it.
- *Proverbs 14:12* – “There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way of death.” There is no “your truth” or “my truth,” just truth.

You, like me, have a choice: you can genuinely seek after truth or you can live life in its shadow. If objective truth exists, it would be the height of foolishness to ignore it. Pontius Pilate is an apt example of most of humanity since Christ’s death. In John 18, Jesus appears before Pilate and after a short discourse Jesus says to Pilate: “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Pilate’s response is tragic: “What is truth?” He asks the right question, but we’re told: “When he said this, he went out again to the Jews...”. He didn’t wait for the answer. Was Pilate jaded—disillusioned with the world? Was he just too busy to care? Probably both. Either way, he missed the Truth standing in front of him.

Last thing before you get started: I had to realize in my own faith journey that I am not just being saved from something (hell), but I am (more importantly) being saved to something. That something is membership in the eternal, royal family of God to be forever in His presence (which requires holiness) and in His service (which requires complete end of self). That end, we can trust, is monumentally more fulfilling than giving God a part of ourselves. It’s what we were made for.

Chapter 1

The Tipping Point

You know that feeling when you lean back in your chair a bit too far and get a startled sensation deep in your gut? That's how I felt in the fall of 2023 when my long-running search for deeper truth led to the suspicion that Jesus actually established a visible universal church on earth. I immediately leaned back forward and tried to settle my feet on the ground by studying to reject the notion that the Catholic Church is the one, true Church. Over the course of my investigation, God flipped me all the way back past the point of no return and on Easter vigil 2024, I joined the Catholic Church.

Throughout my process, I read and studied a lot. I read early Christian texts, I read commentaries from both sides on whether the Catholic Church is *the* Church, I watched debates between Protestants and Catholics and I prayed constantly.

There were five things that were instrumental in my process:

1. **The Eucharist** – While there were many, many things I learned through this process, it ultimately came down to a complete acceptance that the Eucharist is now and always has been fundamental to the Christian faith. For 2,000 years, it has been the ultimate expression of worship, a mysterious physical act that reflects and produces a spiritual reality.
2. **Christ Really Did Establish a Physical Universal Church** – The New Testament records Jesus' establishment of His Church, not some loose grouping of all believers, but a literal visible Church. The writings of the early Church (those who learned from and followed after the Apostles) confirm its establishment. The Catholic Church *is* the church that Jesus established and not just an expression of the Christian faith that suits some.
3. **Christian Unity** – Jesus prayed for Christian unity in what we call the High Priestly Prayer in John 17, and it continues as a major theme of the New Testament writers and the early Church. The present-day “church” in America, and my own experience in several congregations, is characterized by a level of diversity that could not be called unity. Cultural diversity is one thing, but diversity on fundamental aspects of the faith is not unity.
4. **Sanctification** – The goal of life is not to make sure we get into heaven. The goal of a Christian is not just justification. The goal of life is to continue to grow to be

more and more like Jesus – to be holy. Through this process, I realized that I didn't want to live my life as a "just" Christian. You don't *have* to go to church every Sunday, you just... You don't need to do all that Catholic stuff, you just... The more I learned, the more I valued the spiritual disciplines and reverence of the ancient faith of the Catholic Church.

5. **Prayer** – I'm not putting this last because it is the least important, but because it is (or should be) the most obvious. As I reflect back on my journal entries over the months I was processing all of this information, it is amazing how God led me through each and every obstacle and preconceived notion.

As I worked through all my issues with the Catholic Church, I came to understand and agree with much more of its teaching beyond what I will discuss here. If you read this and want to talk through specific issues, please reach out. I can almost guarantee that I processed through whatever might be puzzling you. My observations are not novel. There have been many, many converts before me who have reached the same conclusions. I am not writing a treatise on the subject matter of Protestant to Catholic conversion, I'm just writing about the big things that stood out to me and moved me over the apex toward conversion.

The First Spark

About a year before my fall 2023 dive into whether the Catholic Church was Christ's Church, I watched a video of an evangelical Protestant pastor I respect discuss his realization that the Eucharist is central to the Christian walk. In that discussion, he wrestled with the fact that he had come to agree with the early Church on the importance of the Eucharist but felt the weight of his Protestant tendency to discount early Church writings to align with Protestant beliefs³. He commented that it is odd that within the tradition of Protestantism, the work of the early Church to compile the canon is accepted, while many of its other teachings and generally accepted realities are not.

³ If you are curious about this point, where and how the writings of the early church conflict with Protestantism, I would recommend two books. Jimmy Akin's "The Fathers Know Best" and Steve Ray's "Crossing the Tiber."

We all ascribe to tradition, it's just a question of whose.⁴ The maneuvering of Protestantism to accept the Bible, but not the Church that compiled it quickly became an obvious disconnect. We all come to topics like this with preconceived notions based on our own history. When I first got that uneasy feeling, I made a list of all my problems with the Catholic Church and then studied through them one by one. Ultimately, I had to determine if there was objective truth on the matter, because if so, this was not a question of which form of worship suits a person, rather it was a question of what Christ intended. My landing spot tells you how that worked out

As I mentioned at the outset, I am not writing this as a thorough apology for the Catholic Church and its teaching. When I first set out to write this, I intended to write about my exploration of a variety of topics like sola scriptura, sola fide, baptism, purgatory, etc., but I realized there are many great apologists who you would be better served reading on those topics. Of course, I would be glad to discuss them if you want. If you are interested in apologetics, I have included a few resources at the end that you might find helpful.

Join me in reaching back to the beginning and retracing the history of the Christian faith. Through my investigation, I came to believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.⁵ May His truth lead you as you process this yourself.

⁴ If they're focused on history at all to guide their interpretation of Scripture, Protestants look to confessions applicable to their particular tradition, like the Westminster Confession of 1646. Catholics look to Church tradition, passed down from the first council in Acts 15 and over the subsequent 2,000 years. Generally, Protestant apologists claim that Protestant traditions are consistent with the Bible and that Catholic traditions are built on top of traditions. Through my own research, I found this line of reasoning faulty. Fundamentally, whether Catholic traditions are consistent with Scripture is a matter of interpretation. For example, did Christ leave a Church with Peter as its initial leader? I have found Catholic tradition to very much be consistent with the Bible and wonder if such a claim from Protestant apologists is just lacking knowledge or if it is simply a conclusion looking for a leg to stand on. The Catholic concept can be found summed up as follows: "Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (Acts 2:42), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort. But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed. It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." (Catholic Church. (2011). [Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum](#). In *Vatican II Documents*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.)

⁵ This phrase, as you probably know, is from the Nicene Creed, which was adopted at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

Chapter 2

What is the Eucharist?

It started with the Eucharist. The Eucharist, also referred to as communion or the Lord's Supper, is a point of division between the Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy on the one hand and most of Protestantism on the other. The division relates to the question of whether the Eucharist is actually Christ's body in some mysterious way or if it is a symbolic act that is done in remembrance, reverence and obedience. The Catholic Church holds, together with all believers for the first 1,500 plus years of Christianity, that the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ is present in the Eucharist. Most of Protestantism teaches that the bread and wine are mere symbols.

The question was: Is the Eucharist a union with Christ or is it a symbol of the union like a wedding ring is a symbol of the marital union though it holds no power beyond its symbolism? Is it an act of obedience or is it an action that gives us strength through a mysterious union with Christ? The implication of a right understanding of the Eucharist is no small thing. Christ's real presence in the Eucharist can be analogized to His real presence in the world. There were many in the New Testament who were unwilling to accept Christ's divinity because they only saw His humanity, whether the fact that He was in bodily form or because they knew Him from a younger age. They were stuck because they trusted in what they knew rationally. The same is true for the Eucharist. A rational mind only sees bread and wine. But those who accept the real presence of Christ know there is something more to it. Thomas, often called doubting Thomas, had this problem following Jesus' resurrection. He saw the risen Christ but said that unless he placed his fingers in the place of the nails and his hand into Jesus' side, he would not believe. Jesus appeared to Thomas and allowed him to place his finger into His hands and his hands into His side, but then He said to Thomas: *"Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*⁶ In the Eucharist, Christ has chosen to continue His presence in the world for the benefit of His followers. It is a mysterious act of worship of and union with Christ that He meant as an ongoing, sustaining sacrament.⁷

It really is an important question. If Christ's command to eat His flesh and drink His blood is to be taken literally and if participation in the Eucharist is to have the same prominence in our worship it did for the very first Christians, then there was something very wrong with the way I had been taught and, therefore, taught others.

⁶ I have set the words of Christ in red to make it easier for you to tell when Jesus is speaking in the quoted passages. I'm not advocating for that style as it relates to Bibles. Reasonable minds differ on that practice.

⁷ A sacrament is a Christian physical act that brings about a spiritual change, namely greater spiritual holiness.

The roots of the Eucharist begin before the Last Supper.

I have taught John 6 and I'm embarrassed to admit that I glossed right over what is clear to me now: that Jesus was speaking literally. I had been taught that the Eucharist was symbolic. And because it was symbolic and not the actual mysterious power and presence of the Lord, it made sense that it was relegated to a monthly event for Methodists and a quarterly(ish) event in the Baptist churches I attended more recently.

John 6 begins with Jesus turning five loaves of bread and two fish into more than enough to feed 5,000 people⁸. It was such an obvious visible miracle that the people said, "This is truly the Prophet who is come into the world." Jesus' fame was growing. Soon after, Jesus crossed the sea to Capernaum and was met by a crowd. Jesus commented to them that they had sought Him not because they saw signs, but because they ate of the loaves that He had multiplied and were filled. Jesus then moves the focus away from earthly needs telling them: **"Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal."** The people ask Jesus: "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus tells them that they should believe in Him whom God has sent and they respond by asking Him for a sign so that they might believe — some visible, tangible proof. Odd since many of them had witnessed the multiplying of the fish and bread, but I suspect they wanted Him to do it again so they could again eat what the miracle produced. They respond by saying that their fathers ate manna in the wilderness, having been given bread from heaven to eat.

Now here we get to what led to my conversion. Jesus tells them that the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world. They say, give us this bread. Jesus says, **"I am the bread of life, he who comes to Me will not hunger and he who believes in Me will never thirst."** This statement causes His hearers to grumble saying isn't this the Jesus we all know and now He says He has come down out of heaven? What they are saying is what they know and see does not comport with what Jesus is saying — they can't make rational sense of His claims. So, Jesus presses further. He says again that He is the bread and that **"if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."** This really takes it up a notch and the people balk saying, "this man is going to give us His flesh to eat?" Jesus doubles down and says **"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves."** When Jesus says "truly, truly" it calls the hearer to pay attention. Up to this point, when Jesus says "eat," it is the Greek word "phage," which means to eat or consume. Jesus goes on to press the point saying: **"He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in**

⁸ Note also in John 6:4, John points out that "the Passover, the feast of the Jews was near." This is important because what Christ discusses in John 6 is what He will ultimately fulfill, that is becoming the Passover lamb by giving His body and His blood as a sacrifice for our salvation. Search and listen to Scott Hahn's talk "The Fourth Cup" for a detailed discussion of this amazing truth.

him.” Now when Jesus says “eat,” the Greek word is “trogon,” which means to gnaw or chew. It is a much more graphic word than phagete, focusing on actual, literal eating. Some translations, like the ESV, use the phrase “feed on” to illustrate the graphic nature of the word.

Now His hearers are really struggling, saying “This is a difficult statement, who can listen to it?” So, they grumble, and we’re told in John 6:66 that many of His disciples walk away. Jesus does not call them back to tell them it is just a metaphor. He asks the twelve, “do you want to go away too?” And Peter says: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” This idea of abiding in Christ is a theme in John’s writings. In John 15, John records Jesus proclaiming that we need to abide in Him — that to bear fruit, we must abide in Him. So, it is interesting to note in John 6 that John records Jesus saying, “whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood *abides in me and I in him.*” And, more directly as quoted above: “*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.*”

In John 6, we see two reactions to a difficult teaching from Jesus. Many disciples, John tells us, went away because they could not wrap their heads around His teaching on the Eucharist. Whether they thought it odd, inappropriate or inconsistent with their own beliefs, they chose to leave Him. And then there is Peter. There is no indication that he gets it either. But Peter leans on what he does know; that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

It hit me that an underlying truth presented by this text is that, once you believe that Jesus is who He says He is, it would be foolish to not accept His teaching even if you don’t understand it. Isn’t that what happened in the Garden of Eden? Adam and Eve were lured into pursuing their own understanding rather than God’s direction. When Jesus tells us something that doesn’t make rational sense, we can choose to follow Him or we can adjust our interpretation to lessen what Jesus said or walk away completely.

Later in my process, I connected that to the Catholic Church. If I come to believe that Jesus started an actual Church under Peter’s guiding hand on earth (and Christ’s leadership from heaven), then confusion over core theological matters falls away. If I conclude that Jesus established such a Church, my obligation is to trust in the Spirit-led teaching of that Church He left the world and not rely on my own understanding. Note for those who are not familiar with the Catholic Church, which was me a few months ago, not everything the Catholic Church or the Pope does or says is infallible teaching.

Infallible teaching of the Church is limited to its teaching office⁹. So, when the Pope gives an interview, that is not infallible teaching. And when those in the Church do things that are inconsistent with Christ's commands, their actions are not infallible.

How did we get from a literal interpretation of John 6 to a symbolic one?

So how did we get to a teaching that Jesus was speaking in metaphor in John 6, that the Eucharist is just a symbol? Sometime around 1524, a guy named Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland began to publish his opinion that the Eucharist was not really Jesus in body, soul, blood and divinity. Rather, he said, it was just a symbol. 1,500 years after Christ's death and resurrection, Zwingli promoted a teaching that was contrary to the teaching and practice of the Church for 1,500 years, including those who learned directly from the Apostles. Even Luther didn't believe that the Eucharist was symbolic and wrote against Zwingli's assertion. At the Marburg Colloquy in October 1529, Zwingli, Luther and others convened to form a political coalition of all of Protestantism. Following debates, the parties came together on a number of items, but not the Eucharist. Luther continued to insist that Christ is present in the Eucharist and Zwingli continued to assert that He was not. This was the beginning of a panoply of theological teachings that would take varied and contradictory paths through the course of Protestant history.

What else does the Bible say about the Eucharist?

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul teaches the importance of the Eucharist, that it is something special and not just a meal together. Paul tells the Corinthians that they must examine themselves before participating in the Lord's Supper, for to do so unworthily is to "eat and drink judgment to himself." Paul says that participating in the Eucharist unworthily has caused many to become sick and some to die. Sounds like more than a memorial event to me. And in Luke 24:30-35 we read the story of two of the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus after Christ's death. As they are talking about what had

⁹ The teaching office of the Catholic Church, also called the Magisterium, has a three-fold meaning: First, it refers to the teaching authority which Christ has given to the Church. Here the term refers to the authority itself, not those who exercise it. This usage appears in statements like, "The Church exercises its magisterium when it authoritatively proclaims Christ's teachings." Second, the term refers to those who exercise this teaching authority—in other words, to the pope and the bishops teaching in union with him. Collectively, they are referred to as the "Magisterium," as in "the Magisterium has infallibly taught that God is a Trinity." Third, the term can refer to a particular body of teachings that have been authoritatively proclaimed. This usage appears in statements like, "*Humanae Vitae* belongs to the magisterium of St. Paul VI."

The Magisterium can exercise its teaching authority in many ways, and it typically does so in its official documents. Interviews with popes and bishops, not being official Church documents, typically do not involve an exercise of the magisterium. Neither do books that popes and bishops publish as private individuals (e.g., Benedict XVI's *Jesus of Nazareth* series or Cardinal Robert Sarah's *The Power of Silence*), though they often contain references to things that the Church has authoritatively taught. When it does speak officially, the Magisterium can exercise its authority in different degrees. At the low end, the Magisterium may merely propose an idea for the consideration of the faithful without imposing it authoritatively. At the high end, the Magisterium may infallibly teach a truth, binding the faithful to definitively believe or hold it. It can also exercise any degree of authority between these levels. Source: Catholic Answers

taken place, they are joined by Jesus, but we are told that “their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him.” In talking with Jesus, who they think is a stranger, they say that they had hoped He was going to redeem Israel, but it had been three days since His death. Jesus then explains to them the underlying truth of what had taken place, starting with Moses and all the prophets. As they approach Emmaus, they urge Jesus (still a stranger in their eyes) to stop and eat with them. Jesus does and when He reclined at the table, He took bread, blessed it and gave it to the two disciples. It was then that their eyes were opened, and they recognized Jesus. Later, when they relay the story to the other disciples, they told them “how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.”

The mysterious imagery of bread and wine go way back.

While the Bible is full of references to bread and wine, one of the earliest and most curious is from Genesis 14. After a battle in which Abraham (then still called Abram) and other kings defeated Chedorlaomer, Abraham goes to what is called King’s Valley to meet with the King of Sodom and the other kings who were with Abraham in battle. Among them is Melchizedek, who is called the king of Salem (aka Jerusalem) and a priest of the God Most High. We know very little about Melchizedek as he appears in Genesis 14 without genealogy in a book filled with genealogy and then disappears from the narrative. But here is what verse 18 does tell us: “Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High and he blessed him [Abraham].” After receiving the blessing, Abraham gives Melchizedek “a tenth of everything.” So, you have a king priest showing up from out of nowhere and offering bread and wine to God’s chosen human representative.

It is an exchange that has led to much speculation by theological scholars for a very long time. What we do know is that both King David and the writer of Hebrews connect Jesus with Melchizedek. Hebrews 7:15-17 says: “And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of Him, ‘*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*’” The italicized quote in Hebrews is from Psalm 110, which is a prophetic Psalm of David that looks forward to Jesus. It is the Psalm that begins: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Jesus, Himself, affirms the Messianic nature of Psalm 110 when talking with a group of Sadducees as recorded in Matthew 22, Mark 12 and Luke 20. Finally, in Peter’s sermon at Pentecost he concludes in Acts 2:34-26, saying: “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for your feet.’ Therefore, let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Apologies for jumping around. There is a lot to unpack here and to truly do it justice

would dwarf the length of this entire story. As I worked through understanding the importance of the Eucharist, it was striking that bread and wine played a part so early in the narrative and, more importantly, with a figure like Melchizedek, an early type of Christ. In fact, some early Church writers and theologians have posited that Melchizedek might have been a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus, a Christophany. Whether that is accurate or not, I can't say. But it does underscore the interesting nature of the interaction as it relates to the bread and wine.

Also, it's worth mentioning that a number of early Church writers (among them: Jerome, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen, Cyprian of Carthage and Augustine) and later theologians like Thomas Aquinas connected the "daily bread" in the Lord's Prayer to the Eucharist, seeing a dual meaning of physical sustenance and spiritual nourishment.

What did the early Church believe about the Eucharist?

What about those who learned directly from the Apostles and their successors? What did they believe? Well, for the 1,500 years until Zwingli (and for the 500 after...), the Church believed that worship was the Eucharist and Eucharist was worship. And they believed that Christ was present, actually present, in the Eucharist. For context, Catholics believe that the priest's Eucharistic prayer is efficacious in mysteriously changing the bread and wine into the actual body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus. The Church teaches that, while the bread and wine (called the accidents, meaning "appearance") remain bread and wine, their substance is changed into Christ's body, blood, soul and divinity. So, when the writers below refer to the prayer, the invocation or the sanctification by the word of God, they are referring to that efficacious prayer.

St. Ignatius of Antioch (writing around 100 AD), was a disciple of John and was ordained as Bishop of Antioch by Peter (pretty good bona fides):

I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, *which is the flesh of Jesus Christ*, who was the seed of David; and for drink I desire His blood, which is love incorruptible.

Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ, which have come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer *because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ*, flesh that suffered for our sins and that the Father, in His goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.

If Jesus Christ, in response to your prayer, should reckon me worthy, and if it is his will, in a second letter which I intend to write to you I will further explain to you the subject about which I have begun to speak, namely, the divine plan with respect to the new man Jesus Christ, involving faith in him and love for him, his suffering and resurrection, especially if the Lord reveals anything to me.

Continue to gather together, each and every one of you, collectively and individually by name, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who physically was a descendant of David, who is Son of man and Son of God, in order that you may obey the bishop and the presbytery with an undisturbed mind, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ.

St. Justin Martyr (writing about 150 AD) in his First Apology to the Roman Emperor to explain the faith:

We call this food the Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing that is for the remission of sins and regeneration and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, *as we have been taught*, the food that has been made into the Eucharist by the eucharistic prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, *is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus*.

Let's skip forward a bit to see if this teaching of Christ's literal presence in the Eucharist continued. Here is St. Cyril of Jerusalem writing in about 350 AD:

[A]s the bread and wine of the Eucharist before the invocation of the Trinity, which is holy and worthy of adoration, were simple bread and wine, after the invocation the bread becomes the body of Christ, and the wine the blood of Christ.

St. Augustine of Hippo writing in about 411:

I promised you [new Christians], who have now been baptized, a sermon in which I would explain the sacrament of the Lord's table.... The bread you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. The chalice, or rather, what is in the chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ.

There are a lot of other early writers that say the same about the Eucharist. They write what they were taught. Who are we to change the teaching to suit our own rational minds?

Which groups hold to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

Below are the groups that generally hold that Jesus is present in the Eucharist. Other groups, including Baptists and Evangelicals believe communion is a symbolic remembrance and that Christ is not actually present.

- the Catholic Church

- the Eastern Orthodox Church (split from the Catholic Church in 1054)
- some in the Lutheran Church (split from the Catholic Church in 1521)
- some in the Anglican Church (split from the Catholic Church in 1534 with the Act of Supremacy by King Henry VIII -- a political move to allow for the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage)

My initial reason for not affiliating with the groups other than the Catholic Church once I realized the true meaning the Eucharist and Christ's presence in the Eucharist was schism. By that, I mean that they all split from the Church — and, importantly, they split from the teaching of the Church. I don't mean that I did not explore the idea at all. These, in fact, were the first places I went. I was (for some imperceptible and unbounded-by-investigation reason) anti-Catholic at the time. But once I came to believe the Catholic Church was indeed the Church that Jesus left on earth, I realized that is where I belonged. Much like Peter in John 6, once I came to believe the Catholic Church was *the* Church I knew my duty was to follow. I have a lot more to say about this, but I think this is something that you should explore on your own. My respectful advice is to seek truth, to ask God to show you truth. And once you have the hunger for truth, examine what the Eucharist is, how the Eucharist is consecrated and how many have worked (actively or passively) to try to ameliorate its great value since 1521. Only then can you fully grasp why communion in these other groups is not communion for a Catholic.

The mystery of faith

Following the priest's prayer to consecrate the Eucharist, the liturgy adds a simple commentary: "the mystery of faith...". It couldn't be so simple, could it? In a way, everything comes down to this one principle: once we assent to a truth, are we willing to accept everything that flows from that truth? In the Garden of Eden, Satan used this principle to cause Adam and Eve to sin. They assented to the truth that God was their creator, but they were convinced to reject the simple instruction regarding the tree because they traded His truth for their truth (and their truth became their truth through the deception of Satan). Same can be said in our day. Bart Ehrman is one of the foremost modern-day New Testament scholars. He was once a Christian but is no longer. His main point of contention that caused his faith to fail? Evil and pain in the world. He could not assent to faith in God because he could not rationalize God's love and the existence of evil and pain in the world. Rather than trust that there was something that God knows and understands that he did not, Bart Ehrman left the faith. He trusted in his own truth, no doubt also aided by the Enemy just as in the Garden.

Isaiah 55:6-9 says: "Seek the LORD while He may be found; Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" Isaiah warns to seek God

and not substitute our thinking for His.

Eucharistic miracles

Here is something you may find interesting to peruse:
<http://www.miracolieucaristici.org>. The website chronicles the occurrences of Eucharistic miracles throughout the world. Eucharistic miracles are when the host (the wafer) turns to blood and/or living heart tissue. Pretty fascinating stuff.

What do other groups think about the Eucharist?

Just a quick commentary on some other groups and their approach to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

- The Methodists (founded by the Wesley brothers and George Whitfield, as a reform movement within the Anglican Church that ultimately split from the Anglican Church in 1795) do not teach that Christ is present in the Eucharist. Additionally, they use grape juice and not wine.
- Reformed (including the Presbyterian Church) teaching differs materially from the Catholic and Orthodox view--the host does not change so it is not His flesh, though they say Jesus is present, but not actually. The reformed church (following Calvin) goes through mental gymnastics to maintain an idea of the real presence, but to deny the mystery of transubstantiation (that the substance (though not the appearance) actually becomes the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ). I find their theology full of human invention, trying to reconcile a mysterious truth by building a rationally acceptable rubric around it. It's like the departed disciples of John 6:66 emerged from their think tank to present Christ's teaching in a way they could understand. Read this and tell me you follow their effort to pin down something their rational minds can't understand:
<https://www.wscal.edu/basics-of-the-reformed-faith-the-lords-supper/>.
- The Baptists — Here is the Southern Baptist Convention's statement on the matter: "The Lord's Supper is a *symbolic act* of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine [My note: This is grape juice used by the Baptists], memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming." And here is what the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith says: "That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood, commonly called transubstantiation, by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense and reason, overthrows the nature of the ordinance, and has been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries." Here again is that troublesome human tendency that plagued the departed disciples of John 6:66, if I can't understand it rationally, I can reject it theologically. The arrogance of man, which the Bible calls pride, is so deadly. As you can tell from the language, this resolution takes aim at the Catholic Church, and (at that time) 1,650ish years of Christian tradition.

Sadly, these approaches to the Lord's Supper sound reverent and special, but they reject a core truth held by believers until Zwingli came along. As St. Ignatius of Antioch said in his letter to the Smyrnaens: "Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it." Accordingly, the sacrament of the Eucharist is solely available in the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, the latter being recognized by the Catholic Church because the Orthodox have maintained apostolic succession, valid ordination, and a proper understanding of the Eucharist. Like so many other aspects of faith, it is what is true that matters and not what is true or right to the individual.

Chapter 3

A church, a book? What did Jesus leave?

Did Jesus leave the world a Church, a visible Church (singular), before He ascended?¹⁰ I have come to believe, with certainty, that He did, and I want to be part of His Church.

John Henry Newman famously wrote: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant." Christianity has a history. And that history extends far past the Reformation. In trying to understand Jesus' plan for His earthly body of believers, I sought out and studied what the Apostles passed along to their successors. With a goal of understanding Christ's intention for His Church, I delved more deeply into what the Apostles wrote and what they passed along to the next generation of leaders in the Church. Ultimately, I came agree with what the Catholic convert John Henry Newman wrote in the introduction to his "An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine": "And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this."

Jesus was crucified and resurrected in 33 AD. Before His ascension, Jesus met with His remaining eleven disciples and instructed them to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28). He did not instruct them to write a book in order to spread the Gospel, though I believe that (nearly 400 years later) the Holy Spirit ultimately provided for the compilation of the Christian canon. Jesus charged His disciples to make disciples. And that they did. They traveled to towns and cities and preached, taught and baptized. As we know from early Church writers, examples being Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, the Apostles trained men to follow in their footsteps. As I worked through my list of difficulties I had with the Catholic Church, I quickly came to realize that to continue in Protestantism, I would have to believe that Jesus did not do a

¹⁰ By visible Church, I do not mean collective reference to all who attend gatherings that are affiliated with varying degrees to the name Jesus. I mean a Church that is visible in its teaching and structure, fundamentally organized for the feeding and tending of Christ's flock. A Church that can tend the flock in the manner set forth in the New Testament.

good job establishing His church when He departed, but a handful of men figured things out 1,500 years later.¹¹ Of course, I would also have to figure out which men over time got it right. I'd have to think that what Jesus left somehow ran completely off the rails. I believe it is more likely that the Enemy infiltrated His Church. Like birds perched in the branches of a tree planted by God, the Enemy took up residence in the Church and said to His followers: "did Jesus really say that or mean that?" Just like he did in the Garden of Eden. Satan's techniques are powerful. And consistent.

So, what did Jesus intend to leave His followers — those he prayed for in John 17, who would come to believe through the word of the Apostles? If the canon was not compiled until almost 400 AD, and even the first letters (what is now our New Testament) were not circulated for at least the first 20 years after His death, it does not seem He intended to just leave a book. The Biblical canon was raised for discussion at the Council of Rome in 382, the Synod of Hippo in 393 and, finally determined at the Council of Carthage in 397 and 419. As you probably know, these councils and synods were gatherings of the bishops in the cities and towns where the Gospel had spread. That is, they were gatherings of the leaders in the Church (the entirety of the Church as there were no schisms at that point). The Church leaders gathered together to address heresies (false teaching) that had arisen, in order to determine a unified teaching of the Church to pass along to believers.

An interesting question regarding sola scriptura arises from the actual history of the Bible: If God intended for sola scriptura to be the means to ascertain truth, were the first 400 years the dark ages and the first 1,500 years (Bibles were not readily available until the invention of the printing press and, even then they were not readily available to the masses.) the cloudy ages?

Peter, the Rock?

The starting point for my inquiry was Matthew 16. Matthew 16 begins with the Pharisees and Sadducees testing Jesus, asking Him to show them a sign from heaven to prove His authority. After engaging with them, Jesus and His disciples depart for Caesarea Philippi and as they enter the area, Jesus asks His disciples who people say that He is. The disciples answer that some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus asks them (and with His cross and resurrection, He asks all of us), "**But who do you say that I am?**" Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Note the similarity of Peter's response to how he responded to the difficult teaching of John 6. Jesus replies: "**Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in**

¹¹ As discussed elsewhere herein, creative men have come up with other theories to avoid the logical conclusion that accepting the Reformation makes mockery of 1,500 years of Christ's Church. Among them are "hidden church" ideas that contend the church was underground for a huge portion of the church age. So much for Christ's statements like in Mark 4:21-22: "a lamp is not brought to be put under a basket, is it, or under a bed? Is it not brought to be put on the lampstand? For nothing is hidden, except to be revealed; nor has *anything* been secret, but that it would come to light."

heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

First, note that Jesus says He is going to build His church, singular. He is going to build a church, not multiple churches. And when He says to Peter "I will give *you* the keys to the kingdom of heaven", that "you" is singular in the Greek. He is talking to Peter. What are the "keys"? The reference to keys means the granting of authority. In Isaiah 22:22, a man named Eliakim is given authority by being given the keys of the kingdom of David. Jesus was giving Peter the authority he needed to build His church. Later in Matthew 18:18, Jesus tells the disciples collectively that they all will have the power to bind and to loose, but only Peter is given the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus has been crucified and some of the disciples, including Peter, had gone back to fishing. Jesus appeared to them on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. After enabling them to haul in a great number of fish harkening back to His blessing when gathering the first disciples in Luke 5, Jesus sat down and ate breakfast with them. After breakfast, Jesus pulls Peter aside and asks him three times if he loves Him. Each time Peter says that he does, and Jesus says that Peter is to tend (or shepherd) and feed His sheep. Jesus is directing Peter to protect (tend) and teach (feed) His flock.

Did Jesus leave a visible or invisible church?

So, did Jesus intend to create a church that is a spiritual grouping of all believers — an invisible church? Did He intend for there to be numerous denominations, each with their own interpretation of core theological matters like baptism, the atonement, the Eucharist, marriage, etc.? Did His prayer for unity in John 17 fail?

If there was not to be one Church, then how do we make sense of Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:15-17 regarding church discipline? Jesus tells the Apostles that if a brother sins against them, they are to tell him his fault. If the brother does not listen, they are to take one or two others along and He quotes Deuteronomy 19:15 that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. But if the brother still does not listen, they should tell it to the church if he still refuses, then he shall be to them "as a Gentile and a tax collector." If there is an invisible church, shouldn't two or three believers be the church? Here there is a difference between a handful of believers and the Church. And if you say the church means the local church, with its own isolated leadership, doesn't the sinning brother just drive down the road to the next church? If there is no universal structure, what does this mean? Of course, the churches referenced in the New Testament and the Church Fathers were not isolated bodies of believers, they were connected to one another under one teaching.

I found, and have fully accepted, that Jesus meant to charge Peter to establish a

church that cared for His sheep. A church that decided, through the working of the Holy Spirit in the leaders of His Church, theological matters and set up boundaries to protect His sheep from heresy. I don't think Jesus intended to leave a church characterized by confusion over which way to go and what to believe about important matters. A church where each of us individually tries to ascertain which church or which pastor is bringing the right truth. Where many, many people shop for which church to attend (me included, many times). But is that what Jesus intended? One such church (under the direction (in their mind) of the Holy Spirit) teaches that marriage is not necessarily between a man and a woman. Another teaches that Jesus did not die for all, but only for some (This is limited atonement, the "L" in five-point Calvinism's TULIP.). Another teaches that, contrary to what all the early church writers wrote, Jesus is not present in the Eucharist. The irony is that in my own shopping for a church, I finally found the Church.

A universal ("Catholic") Church that guides its flock with respect to core theological matters (1) fosters unity, (2) protects believers against heresy by holding teachers accountable, (3) protects teachers from harsher judgment (James 3:1) by removing the pitfall of straying into poor (or heretical) teaching in an effort to provide engaging content to their listeners and (4) provides comfort to Christians by removing the confusion of competing doctrines. What it does not do is remove the deep joy found in searching the Scriptures. Clear teaching on core matters should not create lazy Christians any more than the existence of foundational mathematical truths undermines the study of mathematics.

Chapter 4

What Christian unity?

In John 17, Jesus prays for the believers who will come to faith after His death. That's me. And what does he pray? That they would be one as He and the Father are one. Is Protestantism united? If you use the metric that they all worship Jesus, then you should include the Mormons (or Latter Day Saints...), which of course Protestants (and Catholics) do not because they say the LDS church misses the mark on core matters. But don't Protestant churches differ on core matters? And in many of them, they teach unbounded by any authority but their own — save for each claiming that they are led by the Holy Spirit. I find it odd that the Holy Spirit would leave some to teach that God created some people without the ability to be save (limited atonement (or double predestination) of five-point Calvinism.) or that he has inspired some to teach that marriage is not necessarily between a man and a woman¹² or that baptism is not necessary for salvation, but is an outward sign of an inward reality or that our focus as a church should be America first. The list goes on and on. Not many of you should become teachers, because you will be held to a higher standard, says James. But if the legacy of Peter is not tending the sheep, is anyone? Is each believer? I have read many, many Protestant teachers call out other Protestant teachers as false teachers. Which one has the gift of the Holy Spirit? In the modern, western, non-Catholic church it is up to the individual to rightly divide amongst these combatants. Of course, there are many teachers who will tell you they have done the work and their interpretation can be trusted. We humans have a real propensity to mess things up. I would rather trust the Holy Spirit working through a collective we and not an isolated individual when it comes to theological foundations.

I do believe that individual believers have the responsibility to navigate truth claims, but I also believe that Jesus left a structure to assist in that endeavor, a Church to guide, to teach and to lead. Without a universal¹³ Church (Or, as the Nicene Creed states: “one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.”), each believer is left to interpret teaching on their own. Each church in the Protestant tradition (and in some cases church groups, e.g. the Presbyterian Church has several different groupings: PCA, PCUSA, EPC and the now-split Methodist Church has different flavors) has their own belief requirements. I have attended several Baptist-leaning churches, and they were all different, one is strictly Calvinist, one is seeker-focused with a theology to match, and another more traditional Baptist, that is, Arminian and not Calvinist (In the 1640s the Particular Baptists led the charge in splitting from their brethren to adopt Calvinist

¹² There was a tipping point for me on this topic when I woke up one Sunday morning in the middle of this process and saw a tweet from a pastor at a church in Austin who was going to teach that day that marriage was not necessarily between a man and a woman.

¹³ Catholic, by the way, means universal. In the sense of across all peoples *and* unity of teaching. It was first used by Ignatius in the quote that appears below to describe the universal and unified nature of the Church.

theology.). This cannot be the right way to approach fundamental truth.

Spiritual warfare within the Church?

Since I am 100% certain that ongoing spiritual warfare is real, I kept going back to an underlying premise that Satan has worked in the Protestant Reformation and its resulting chaos in the same way he worked in the Garden of Eden when he said: "Did God really say...?". Same adversary, same technique. One can spend immense energy arguing that their view of truth is true, or they can simply trust in what Jesus left us. And I believe Jesus left us a Church that is to feed (teach) and tend (protect) the sheep. I think I know what you are thinking right now. And it's exactly what I thought before all this. The Catholic Church sure has made some grievous errors in protecting the flock over its history. I agree that countless humans within the Church have indeed done and failed to do things that are the acme of evil. But I don't think those are the actions of the Church. You don't leave Jesus because of Judas. You don't give up on Israel because of countless terrible judges and kings. Jesus has not and will not fail, even though the enemy maliciously meddles in the Church. Jesus said there would be tares among the wheat. In Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus says: *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."* Could we interpret the birds as the actions of Satan and his demons? That is the connection Jesus makes earlier in that same chapter. He says in verse four that the birds came and ate the seeds sown by the sower. And in verse 19, He explains: *"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one on whom seed was sown beside the road."* So, let's reason together. At Jesus' death, a new age is inaugurated, the Church age. Note what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16. He said that he would give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven. And this mustard seed in chapter 13 is the kingdom of heaven that grows into a large tree with branches that the birds of the air nest within. Could the tree be the Church? We already know that the birds represent the enemy. Seems a reasonable conclusion that Jesus was telling us that the enemy would work within His Church. Also note that there are many warnings in the letters of the New Testament of this very thing.

The events surrounding the Reformation were a perfect storm for the fracturing of the church, in both the macro conditions and in micro influences. Just one example of how evil and chaos might have worked in the micro circumstances that lead to the Reformation is discussed in the book "Rebel in the Ranks" by scholar Brad Gregory. Gregory explains that what initially stirred Martin Luther was a disquiet in his soul. He lost faith in the promises of God's forgiveness and in the sacrament of reconciliation for the absolution of sins. He knew what the Church taught, but his emotions were telling a different story and his emotions were winning the war, resulting in an anxiety that Luther could not tame. Gregory says in his book: "Luther's interior torments are the religious roots of the Reformation. Luther is no rebel seeking to undermine the Church. Neither does he aspire to start a church of his own; the very notion would have made no sense to him. In fact, Luther's own anxiety, intense as it is, by itself would not have

produced the Reformation. Plenty of other devout men and women in the Middle Ages struggled with their own sinfulness. If Luther had kept his spiritual wrestling to himself, he probably would have remained mostly unknown. But he doesn't. The Reformation begins because Luther acts on his anxiety." Satan whispers and man acts — a familiar story.

Chapter 5

Why did I believe what I believed?

Throughout this process I had to ask myself why I believe what I believe. My knowledge is so very limited in the macro. I have certainly learned that through this process. The more I read and study, the more I find things that I have not read or studied. So why was I so sure of my position previously? Why was I so dismissive of (or apathetic about) Catholicism when I had hardly any knowledge about it? I think it was a combination of arrogance, ignorance, apathy and trust in the echo chambers of my slice of Christianity. I am still dismayed at my own arrogance in dismissing Catholicism without any thought or investigation. I had little to no basis for determining the veracity of the claims of the Catholic Church.

As I have studied the creation of the major denominations of Protestantism, I have been surprised at how all these disparate denominational beliefs grew out of the personal beliefs of one or a few individuals. If you are currently a member of a Protestant church (non-Catholic or Orthodox), I would encourage you to really delve into the history of the founding of your denomination. For example, if you are Baptist, go read about the General Baptists who were Arminian (they believed in free will) and the Particular Baptist, who were Calvinist (they believe in election and, therefore, a limited atonement). And read about the history of the adoption of the Baptist Confession of 1689 and about the idea of Baptist successionism of the 1931 “Trail of Blood,” which has since been rejected by mainline Baptists. In each denomination, you will find a handful of men who took exception to established teaching and then through vocal and written contention grew a following of their own. Often this was done under the auspices of returning to the true form of Christianity. But what I found were individuals who cherry picked verses of the Bible and early Christian writings to align with their beliefs.

Confirming what Jesus meant in John 6 and Matthew 16 was not something I wanted to get wrong by simply resting upon my own traditions. I wanted to make sure I had a full view and understanding, not only for myself in terms of how I follow Jesus, but also because I often talk to others about my faith. I don’t want to be on the wrong side of James 3:1, which says that not many shall become teachers as they will be held to a higher standard. As Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:5-7, I needed to add knowledge to my faith and virtue.

Chapter 6

The Reformation

The Protestant Reformation was like the Big Bang of false teaching, for there can be only one true position on these matters. Not that there had not been numerous heretics for the first 1,500 years of Church history, but the Church had fulfilled its role in debating and responding to those heresies with definitive conclusions. Starting with a handful of people seeking to reform certain practices within the Church (setting aside Zwingli who from the beginning sought to change core beliefs held from the days Christ walked the earth), the Reformation quickly exploded into veritable chaos now characterized by church shopping, differing theologies and monumentally different outward focuses. The invisible church of Protestantism could be described as having multiple personality disorder were it truly one human body¹⁴. Now you might say that Catholics disagree on things too. And you would be right. The Catholic Church sets forth certain theological beliefs as settled and leaves others as open matters. For example, a Catholic is free to hold to a literal six-day creation or a creation period over many thousands (or millions) of years. You can also debate much of the details around end times matters. But Catholics cannot hold differing opinions on core matters. These items are generally set forth in the Catechism, which is a well-organized collection of essential Catholic doctrine.

Through my process, I came to understand that the Bible teaches, and the early Church echoes, that Jesus intended to establish an organized church and that He intended for that church to be united and to hold to consistent teaching on fundamental issues and to look out for heretical teaching from false teachers. I don't think Jesus intended for every believer to have a Doctorate in Theology to identify and deconstruct heresies. I think He intended for the leaders in the Church to do that work. Reading the early Church response to heresies is instructive. And it is interesting how many of the heresies have been rebranded into viewpoints throughout the years to today. It is so very clear now why many of the earliest writers, including Paul, stressed the importance of unity and not leaving the Church.

But one might say, what another Protestant believes, I don't believe — you can't judge all of Protestantism based on the truth claims of some. This is the problem — disunity and confusion. Here's my recommendation: if you listen to a Protestant vs Catholic debate, decide for yourself whether our Lord intended for each believer to sort through the myriad arguments set forth, cloaked in centuries of history, or if He intended for believers to trust in a Church. Faith is trusting God. And I now believe that

¹⁴ Consider John 16:12-13, which says: *"I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth..."* Does it really make sense that the Holy Spirit would lead His people into different truths? As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, "For in *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of *one* Spirit."

includes trusting that He left a Church to shepherd us, his flock. And we are called to trust in that shepherding and not in our own current view of theological matters, no matter how well informed we think our view may be. Whatever you believe about the cause of the Reformation, its consequence was to scatter countless sheep out into the wild, each searching for a shepherd to lead them to the Shepherd. Brad Gregory writes in "Rebel in the Ranks": "The Reformation had the long-term impact of gradually and unintentionally transforming Europe from a world permeated by Christianity to one in which religion would be separate from public life, becoming instead a matter of individual preference. This separation from public life is what I mean by secularization. Multiple areas of life in Western societies ended up getting secularized because the Reformation inadvertently made Christianity into an intractable problem."

I recently watched a video of a prominent Protestant pastor at a conference attacking the Catholic Church. His tag line was that Christ and the Apostles formed the church, the Church Fathers conformed the church, Rome deformed the church and the reformers reformed it back to how Christ set it up to begin with. He said it with real conviction and authority. Let's play out his little line. Christ did form the Church (Matthew 16 and John 21, among others). The Church Fathers did continue and conform the Church as you will see within this writing. And the Church they continued, they continued as the Catholic Church, which ultimately gave us our Biblical canon. And the Reformers? They sent the church body in 28,000 different directions, they did not reform anything. The more I learn, the more I am saddened and, to be honest, angered by these teachers who teach such things. They twist Christ's statement in Matthew 16 when he placed Peter at the head of the Church and gave him the keys to the kingdom of heaven and said that His Church would be established, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it and they mischaracterize Catholic teaching. The Church Christ established still exists. The gates of hell have not prevailed against it. The reformers certainly did seek to recreate the Church, albeit with new (and diverse) beliefs. By the way, do you know what other two religions believe that they had to recreate the church that Christ left? Islam and Mormonism. Two religions founded by two individuals.

How did the church function from the beginning?

The first recorded operation of the Church as a hierarchical structure to protect the flock is recorded in Acts 15. In response to the first heresy to arise in the Church, that new believers had to be circumcised to be Christian, Paul and Barnabas, who first confronted the heresy, go to Jerusalem to meet with "the Apostles and the elders about this question." After "much debate," Peter stands and provides a conclusion to the question. This is the Church in operation. As I read through the Church Fathers, I read countless references to "the teaching of the Church," "the Church's doctrine" and "the Church teaches." Those phrases can only come from writers who believe there is one Church with one faith and one doctrine. Here is a brief selection of writings from the early church on the Church:

St. Ignatius of Antioch writing to the Smyrnaeans in about 110 AD:

Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.

Tertullian of Carthage in "Prescription Against Heresies," circa 200 AD:

Where was [the heretic] Marcion, that shipmaster of Pontus, the zealous student of Stoicism? Where was Valentinus, the disciple of Platonism? For it is evident that those men lived not so long ago—in the reign of Antonius for the most part—and that they at first were believers in the doctrine of the Catholic Church, in the church of Rome under the episcopate of the blessed Eleutherius, until on account of their ever-restless curiosity, with which they even infected the brethren, they were more than once expelled.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem in his "Catechetical Lectures," circa 350 AD:

[The Church] is called catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely the doctrines that ought to come to men's knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins that are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue that is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gift.

And if ever you are sojourning in cities, inquire not simply where the Lord's house is (for the other sects of the profane also attempt to call their own dens houses of the Lord), nor merely where the church is, but where the Catholic Church is. For this is the peculiar name of this holy Church, the mother of us all, the spouse of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God.

St. Vincent of Lerins in his *Commonitorium*, circa 434 AD:

I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning, how and by what sure and universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always, and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect: That whether I or anyone else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways:

first, by the authority of the divine law,¹⁵ and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church. But here someone perhaps will ask, since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinarius, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, and lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation.

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense Catholic, which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally.

¹⁵ Divine law = Scripture.

Chapter 7

“Train yourself for godliness...as it holds promise for the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8)

Many years ago, when I would get on a plane, I would pray what evangelicals call the sinner’s prayer. I would acknowledge my sin and ask for forgiveness, and I would ask Him to save me. Every time I flew. Of course, I know now why I did that over and over. I wasn’t living a life consistent with my faith. Actually, maybe I was living a life commensurate with my faith, it was just a small faith. Back then, I was concerned with getting into heaven—or at least not going to hell. There is a Latin phrase “memento mori,” which translates “remember you will die.” In my younger days, I felt pretty bulletproof. Death was a long way off. But getting on a plane brought a realization that things happen. I was definitely a “just” Christian. I knew there was life beyond this life and I believed I needed Christ to get me there, but I was doing the bare minimum. Or maybe not even that. In the 1441 classic “The Imitation of Christ,” Thomas A Kempis writes: “What good is it to live long when we improve so little? A long life does not always improve us; in fact, it often adds to our problems! Would that we could spend even one day well in this world! Many people count the years of their lives in Christ, but often not much comes of their attempts to change their lives. If it is frightful to die, perhaps it is more dangerous still to live a long life. Blessed is that person who always has the hour of death before his eyes and who is daily prepared to die!”

Thankfully, I moved beyond that stage, steadily gaining an awareness of the realities expressed in the Bible. As I studied, I learned that fire-insurance salvation is not Biblical. The call for a Christian is total change. Peter, quoting Leviticus says in 1 Peter 1:15-16: “like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’.” But what is holiness for a human? Holiness means, generally, “set apart.” But if we take the cue from Leviticus and Peter, it really means to be like God in our character. There was a very wide gulf between the me of those years praying the sinner’s prayer and the character of God. Really wide...

As I continued studying the Bible, I increasingly realized how drastic a change is expected for those who are in Christ. Yes, Jesus’ burden is light and yes, it is Christ in a believer that provides the change, but it’s a big change. His burden is light because He effects the change from within. As we grow in Christ, our nature changes and His thoughts and desires become our thoughts and desires. The Bible is not a self-help book. It is not a set of instructions that you follow, boxes that you check. It is the revelation of who God is and an invitation to become His adopted child. Real Christianity means death of self: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

So, what does that have to do with the Catholic Church? During this process, I wrote

in my journal “Grasping, struggling to find purchase to secure my sanctification process as a Protestant vs. resting on and in the sacraments, liturgy and disciplines of the Catholic Church. The two approaches are so different. There is peace in His Church and there is growth. What a blessing to find foot and hand holds.” I have quite a collection of devotional books, prayer books, and books about the Christian life. In my years as a Protestant, I found myself searching for tools to help me grow. In the Catholic Church, I have found daily readings and prayers that are the same across the entire Church. The Liturgy of the Hours (aka Divine Office) publishes six prayers for each day. Those prayers are made up of Bible readings, hymns and prayers. Instead of searching for the next devotional or book, I can now rest in the structure provided by the Church. And I find inspiration from canonized Saints, who are examples of lives well lived over the 2,000 years since Christ’s ascension.

Here is a small example of a spiritual practice that provided growth for me leading up to my realizations regarding the Catholic Church. A couple of years before my investigation of the Church began, I read Acts 3:1, which says, “Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer,” and I thought I don’t have that kind of structure in my prayer life. I prayed often, but I didn’t have any real structure or discipline to it. So, I set an alarm on my watch for 9:00 am (the third hour), noon (the sixth our) and 3:00 pm (the ninth hour). And when the alarm went off, I prayed. In the beginning it was conversation-style prayer: thank You for this or that and supplication for whatever I needed. Eventually, I started to feel that my prayers were less and less meaningful as the alarm would go off when I was in the middle of something, so I just threw up a quick prayer. So, I switched to saying the Lord’s Prayer every time the alarm went off. It was a weird change; I could feel growth in the structured discipline even though my Protestant mind told me it was just a mechanical action. So, when I learned that the Catholic Church has prayers to facilitate the same thing, I thought it was interesting and I began leveraging that structure in my life.

You see, what I started to learn was that this little structure, these little disciplines throughout my day were changing me from the inside. Instead of a set-aside quiet time in the morning or evening, I was tied in all day. Not that there is anything wrong with a set quiet time, I still set aside time each day to dig in.

In the book of Revelation, chapter 4 opens with a scene in heaven. It is an impressive scene, full of awe and reverence. It doesn’t look anything like the evangelical services I had attended. But you know what it is like? It’s like the Mass, full of meaningful liturgy and reverence. Looking back, I’ve realized that the services I attended weren’t really preparation for stepping into that reality, into God’s presence. Heaven is full of reverence for God, the entirety of the Bible demonstrates interaction with heavenly reality in a holy and structured manner, from the tabernacle to the temple to the scene in Revelation. And this is not to take away from the personal nature of God, but there is a reality to His holiness that I don’t think my prior “church” experience prepared me

for. Someday my life will end, and it will be my hope to step right into God's presence. Will I be ready for that?

Being in the Catholic Church doesn't grow you in Christ any more than being in a garage grows you into a car. But for those willing to lean into them, the beauty, disciplines, liturgy and reverence facilitate growth that comes from the inside out, versus a self-help style of Christianity that tries to leverage human effort into holiness. It is interesting to think about how I used to view the Catholic Church as a works-based perversion of faith alone. What I have learned is that the Catholic Church does not teach that I need to do good works to come to God and be justified, but that I must go beyond either an intellectual faith or an ego-centric attempt to change my life. Rather, the church teaches that I cooperate with God for my sanctification. I lean into being wholly focused on becoming a new creation in Christ. Pope Benedict XVI put it this way: "Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love. So it is that in the Letter to the Galatians in which he primarily developed his teaching on justification St. Paul speaks of faith that works through love." The Church provides the framework for me to become who I am meant to be, not by my action, but by my orientation.

A leap of faith

After all my reading, studying and praying, I uncovered enough information to make the leap. But it was still a leap, because this side of eternity we do not have 100% certainty. I recall a story told in a book by Francis Schaeffer about taking a leap of faith. Schaeffer tells of a man traveling a path high in the mountains when a storm suddenly sets in; thick fog, rapidly dropping temperatures and freezing rain. The man comes to a point where the fog is so thick that he can't see the path in front or behind him. If he remains where he is, he will die from the cold. While contemplating his next move, he hears a voice call out to him. The voice says that he had seen the man climbing the path and knows where he was standing. The voice tells him that if he will jump from the path, that there is a ledge below him and on that ledge a cave in which he can seek shelter until the storm passes. If you are the man stuck on the mountain path, you would likely ask the voice questions to ascertain whether he really knew where you were, whether he knew the mountains well enough to know about the cave and whether he really had your safety in mind. But at some point, you would have to jump. In this life, following Christ requires faith. As Hebrews 11:1 says: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." If the subject matter of my story is personally interesting to you, I pray that you will seek whatever information and ask whatever questions you need to decide for yourself.

Prayer

I mentioned prayer at the beginning, and I want to say a brief word about it before I

end. As I flipped through journal entries, I was reminded of how much God worked in response to my prayer for understanding.

I'll give you one example. It's weird, so you'll just have to trust me that it's true. The Catholic Bible includes books that are not included in the Protestant Bible. There is a lot to unpack here, but the basic issue is that the Catholic Bible approved around 400 AD included the books that were included in the Septuagint, which was the Greek version of the Old Testament used in Jesus' day. The Old Testament quotes in all Bibles come from the Septuagint. These additional books (from the Protestant perspective), referred to as the Deuterocanonical books by the Catholics and the Apocrypha by Protestants, include a book called Tobit. The book of Tobit tells the story of a virtuous man named Tobit whose humble prayer is answered when the angel Raphael is sent to assist him. On my list of issues was whether the Deuterocanonical books belonged in the Bible. I added that item to my list before any inspection or studying of them and I did not even know the names of the books. I had recently purchased a copy of the Apocrypha, but it sat on the shelf unopened (Again, you'll have to trust me on this, but I promise it's true.).

So, one night I was looking at my list and came to the, what I then called, Apocrypha and asked God to help me know whether I could trust them as part of the Bible. Then I went to bed. The next morning, just before waking, I had a dream. My wife and I were sitting on our couch watching a movie. The scene on the TV was of two men on an adventure through the wilderness. In the dream, I turned to Liz and said, "you know, this movie is based on the book of Tobit." Then I woke up. I was like, what the heck? So, I got up and went into my office and grabbed the Apocrypha and flipped through it. Sure enough, there was a book of Tobit. I began to read (it's a short book) and found that the meat of the story is the angel Raphael leading Tobit's son, Tobias, on a journey to Media to retrieve a sum of money and find a woman named Sarah. The journey as described in the book was exactly what I had seen depicted in the movie in my dream. Very strange and I honestly have no other answer for it. No, I had not previously read the book and forgot. I was a pretty anti-Catholic Protestant.

There were other instances where I was struggling with an issue, but once I prayed it wasn't long before I found my way to an answer. My point is, pray. If you feel a nudge from God to investigate whether this is true, be like the Bereans of Acts 17 and look into it, praying for wisdom as you go. In my journal, there's an entry where I felt I was at my rich young ruler moment. God was showing me a direction that I was not really prepared to travel. I wrote: "Do I have enough faith to pursue what He is showing me?" I am glad I leaned in. If He is nudging you, I hope you will too.

Chapter 8

What does the Catholic Church have to offer?

In my process, I came to two realizations that moved me into the Church: (1) I determined it was true and came believe that to know that and not follow Christ would have been disobedience and (2) I found beauty and spiritual power in the history, the liturgy and, especially, the sacraments. If we are called to be holy as God is holy, then I needed to pay more attention to sanctification, becoming holy. As I mentioned earlier, this was a key factor in my process. As I dug into the teaching and tradition of the Church, I found a peace in my soul, a peace that really did feel like coming home. Yes, I was awkward with the liturgies that were (and still are) new to me. But the reverent worship made absolute sense.

The other thing I found was an immense treasure of theological writing going back 2,000 years. For some reason, as a Protestant I gave more weight to current scholarship. When I taught, I would lean more on the most recent of my commentaries and I would look for some interesting new perspective. As a part of a faith that has a long history, that was dumb. As I have read those who have wrestled with truth over the past 2,000 years, I have found minds much, much brighter than mine or any of the current authors I was reading. Those minds do not all agree on every point, but they work out their theology in a way that provides a gold mine of thought to explore. It is evident in reading them that God really does allow for free will. Our heavenly Father allows us to exercise the minds He gave us. As you read those who history tells us were committed to God in a way that far surpasses anything I see in modern times, you see a depth to their theological observations.

The sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist have been most meaningful to me. Reconciliation, or confession, was strange to me. I was 100% in the camp that I could just (there's that word again) confess directly to God. And you can. But...in doing so, I still felt the nagging presence of past sins.¹⁶ Was I really forgiven? The sacraments are gifts from God to His children, physical manifestations that He has agreed to be bound by, though His grace is not limited to them. I felt the peace of forgiveness in confession, a peace that was

¹⁶ Prior to my conversion, I believed what I was taught, which was that all my sins were forgiven on the cross, the doctrine of eternal security or once saved/always saved. But when I looked at Hebrews 10:26-27 ("For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.") and other passages like it, I bounced between thinking the doctrine was wrong and the harsh reality that, if it was right, then perhaps I wasn't really saved to begin with. It was for me and should be for all who sit under such teaching, a painful doctrine with which to wrestle.

rooted in the love of God and the truth of Scripture. John 20:23 says that Jesus told His Apostles (those who then very carefully selected their successors); **“If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”** Through the sacrament of reconciliation, I felt a peace in my soul reinforcing the right reading of this verse. Jesus granted authority to the Apostles and this was not some convoluted way of saying to them that their spreading of the Gospel would result in the forgiveness of sins. No, it meant what it said.¹⁷

¹⁷ Here are some comments on this subject from early Church writers:

Hippolytus of Rome (circa 215 AD): After this, one of the bishops present, at the request of all, laying his hand on him who is ordained bishop, shall pray this way: O God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... pour forth the power that is from you, of “the princely Spirit” that you delivered to your beloved Child, Jesus Christ, and that he bestowed on your holy apostles, who established the Church that hallows you everywhere, for the endless glory and praise of your name. Father, “who knows the hearts [of all]” grant this servant, who you have chosen for the episcopate, to feed your holy flock and serve as your high priest blamelessly night and day, and unceasingly turn away wrath from your face and offer to you the gifts of the holy Church. And that by the high priestly Spirit he may have authority “to forgive sins” according to your command. [*Apostolic Tradition* 2–3]

Origen of Alexandria (circa 249 AD): In addition to these there is also a seventh [remission of sins], but it is hard and laborious: the remission of sins through penance when the sinner washes his pillow in tears [Ps 6:7], when his tears are his nourishment day and night [Ps 41:4], and when he does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine. [*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4249)]

Cyprian of Alexandria (circa 251 AD): If anyone consider and examine these things, there is no need for lengthened discussion and arguments. There is easy proof for faith in a short summary of the truth. The Lord speaks to Peter, saying, “I say unto thee, that thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” And again to the same He says, after His resurrection, “Feed my sheep.” And although to all the apostles, after His resurrection, He gives an equal power, and says, “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you: Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whosoever sins ye remit, they shall be remitted unto him; and whosoever sins ye retain, they shall be retained;” yet, that He might set forth unity, He arranged by His authority the origin of that unity, as beginning from one. Assuredly the rest of the apostles were also the same as was Peter, endowed with a like partnership both of honour and power; but the beginning proceeds from unity. Which one Church, also, the Holy Spirit in the Song of Songs designated in the person of our Lord, and says, “My dove, my spotless one, is but one. She is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bare her.” Does he who does not hold this unity of the Church think that he holds the faith? Does he who strives against and resists the Church trust that he is in the Church, when moreover the blessed Apostle Paul teaches the same thing, and sets forth the sacrament of unity, saying, “There is one body and one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God?” [Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* Paragraph 4]

As for the sacrament of the Eucharist, I have covered that enough above. My personal experience matches the promise. It's not magic, I don't feel a physical change. And I don't believe it has meaning to those who do not receive it with deep reverence (1 Corinthians 11), but I feel a deeper change and I find myself looking forward with anticipation to my next opportunity to receive the Eucharist. Sounds strange, I know. Fundamentally, if the Catholic Church is indeed the Church that Jesus established, then to be outside of it misses crucial components necessary for our spiritual growth and sanctification, starting with the Eucharist (Ignatius of Antioch's "medicine of immortality"¹⁸ and the Catholic Church's "source and summit of the Christian life"¹⁹) and extending to theological, doctrinal and ecumenical unity.

During my process, I kept wondering why, if the Church is Jesus' Church, do so many not find it, and why did it take me so long? And then I thought of 2 Peter 3:3-9, which tells of God's patience. God has granted us free will and He has patience. He does not force or coerce. Truth is available to us and He definitely invites us into it, but it is an invitation and not a compulsion. I am not

Basil of Caesarea (circa 375 AD): It is necessary to confess our sins to those to whom the dispensation of God's mysteries has been entrusted. Those doing penance of old are found to have done it before the saints. It is written in the Gospel that they confessed their sins to John the Baptist; but in Acts they confessed to the apostles, by whom also all were baptized. [*Rules Briefly Treated* 288]

Ambrose of Milan (Augustine's teacher in the faith) (circa 388 AD): For the Lord willed that the power of binding and loosing should be alike, and each sanctioned by a similar condition. So he who has not the power to loose has not the power to bind. For as, according to the Lord's word, he who has the power to bind also has the power to loose, their teaching destroys itself, because they who deny that they have the power of loosing ought also to deny that of binding. For how can the one be allowed and the other disallowed? It is plain and evident that either each is allowed or each is disallowed in the case of those to whom each has been given. Each is allowed to the Church, neither to heresy, for this power has been entrusted to priests alone. [*Penance* 1:2:7]

John Chrysostom (circa 388 AD): For they who inhabit the earth and make their abode are entrusted with the administration of things that are in heaven, and have received an authority that God has not given to angels or archangels. For it has not been said to them, "Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" [Mt 18:18]. They who rule on earth have authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the master confirms the sentence of his servants. For indeed what is it but all manner of heavenly authority has he given them when he says, "Whose sins you remit they are remitted, and whose sins you retain they are retained?" [Jn 20:23]. What authority could be greater than this? "The Father has committed all judgment to the Son?" [Jn 5:22]. But I see it all put into the hands of these men by the Son. For they have been conducted to this dignity as if they were already translated to heaven. [*The Priesthood* 3:5]

¹⁸ Ignatius to the Ephesians 20.

¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1324.

a Calvinist, I believe He has given us a meaningful role to play by exercising our free will—a role that goes beyond obedience toward efficaciousness. Throughout the Bible, God acts, but He includes man in the process. While Moses' hands were held high, the Israelites prevailed; Naaman had to wash in the river seven times to be healed from leprosy; Job's friends were only forgiven after Job prayed for them; the disciples had to collect fish and bread for Jesus to multiply; the blind man had to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam to receive his sight; etc. Foundational, real, true truth is there and God rewards those who seek.

Recently, I have been drawn to something Isaiah says in chapter 64. The end of Isaiah's prophecy rises to a crescendo of the Day of the Lord and the new heavens and new earth. In chapter 64 in the course of addressing the broad disconnectedness of man from God, he contrasts by saying: "[t]here is no one who calls on Your name, *who arouses himself to take hold of You.*" That sums up what I have felt called to do over this whole process, to move beyond God as a part of my life (even though He has been no small part of my life for years), to seeking Him and His truth as the central purpose of my time in this life. Jesus said to seek first the kingdom of God and everything else we need will be provided to us. That has been true for me.

Want more?

If you have made it this far, thank you. Know that I am praying for you. This is your search and the light bulb moments for you may very well be different than they were for me. That said, here are some suggestions on further reading/watching/listening you might find helpful:

- Scott and Kimberly Hahn's "Rome Sweet Home" is a great walk through the conversion process of two Protestant seminary grads. Same for Steve Ray's "Crossing the Tiber," which is chock full of footnotes to connect you to original sources.
- If you have doubts about the primacy of Peter and, therefore, the Papacy, try out Steve Ray's "Upon this Rock."
- Jimmy Akin has written a number of good books. One book, "The Fathers Know Best," is a great shortcut to what the early Church thought and taught about a variety of topics.
- I really like the podcast [Pints with Aquinas](https://www.youtube.com/@PintsWithAquinas) on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@PintsWithAquinas>) or your favorite podcasting app. Matt Fradd has hosted a ton of interesting guests and many converts to Catholicism that all have different, yet strikingly similar, stories.
- I also like Trent Horn's podcast, [Counsel of Trent](https://www.youtube.com/@TheCounselofTrent) (YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/@TheCounselofTrent>). Same for Joe Heschmeyer's

podcast, [Shameless Popery](#).

- Throughout my search, I really appreciated the perspective and teaching style of Father Mike Schmitz. You can find him on YouTube, primarily on the channel [Ascension Presents](#).
- To learn more about what the Catholic Church teaches, I would encourage you to pick up a copy of the [Catechism](#), which sets forth the teaching of the Church in an organized and easily digestible format.
- My email: steve@pilgrimagetotruth.com

Finally

Around 378 AD, Jerome, an influential early Christian scholar and translator, wrote *Dialogue Against the Luciferians* to address the theological controversies surrounding the followers of the unfortunately named Lucifer of Cagliari, not to be confused with Lucifer the fallen angel. The dialogue is structured as a conversation between a Luciferian and an Orthodox Christian (follower of the Church proper). Jerome concludes his commentary with a great quote that is just as applicable in the world of denominations that have developed over the last 500 years, each identified by their founder or some other distinguishing appellation.

Jerome says:

We ought to remain in that Church which was founded by the Apostles and continues to this day. If ever you hear of any that are called Christians taking their name not from the Lord Jesus Christ, but from some other, for instance, Marcionites, Valentinians, Men of the mountain or the plain, you may be sure that you have there not the Church of Christ, but the synagogue of Antichrist. For the fact that they took their rise after the foundation of the Church is proof that they are those whose coming the Apostle foretold. And let them not flatter themselves if they think they have Scripture authority for their assertions, since the devil himself quoted Scripture, and the essence of the Scriptures is not the letter, but the meaning. Otherwise, if we follow the letter, we too can concoct a new dogma and assert that such persons as wear shoes and have two coats must not be received into the Church.