

moral issue. We considered marriage indissoluble. We recognized the Pope as the earthly head of the Church; indeed we soon found events in the Catholic Church more relevant than events in Methodism. We now had no doubt that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist in the Catholic Church, but I knew it wasn't the same thing in Protestantism (indeed for a period I found it difficult presiding at Communion in my church; I felt I was pretending).

To Pat and me it now seemed essential that we belong to a church that was really founded on religious belief, and wasn't afraid to teach it. When the Catechism of the Catholic Church appeared in 1993, we thought, "Wouldn't it be great to belong to a church that can teach the truth like that!"

It would take a while, however, for near the beginning of this time of change, more change happened. I was sent to another Methodist church in July of 1993 and we were expecting our third child. I had to support my family and in any event I knew I needed clearer convictions than I had at that point. But I also knew that I would never find the solidity or consistency of belief in Methodism that I wanted.

There were also doctrinal issues that needed to be resolved: the Virgin Mary was the most difficult, but there were others. At the heart of them all was the infallibility of the Church, for if the Catholic Church was really what it believed itself to be, then its teachings had to be true. I had to learn to subordinate the sovereignty of my judgment to the voice of Christ in the Church.

I investigated all these things but as long as I was in the ministry I didn't feel that I could do more. Pat had more freedom and with my encouragement (for spiritually she was left high and dry, and I would have urged any parishioner to go where her faith led her) she went to a wise and sympathetic priest, Fr. Joseph, for instruction. For Pat, it was like water in a thirsty land. Within months she had no doubts at all. I was delighted; she would be there to welcome me into the Catholic fold herself. In December of 1995 she became a Catholic. Our daughter Lisa received her First Communion the next fall.

I knew I couldn't stay in the Methodist church forever; my beliefs wouldn't allow it. I was feeling

the strain of not being able to act on my beliefs. By now I had found others in the same path. Jeff, another Methodist minister whom I hadn't seen in years, heard of my interest in Catholicism from a Presbyterian pastor we both knew. "I hear you're thinking of swimming the Tiber," he said when he called, and we began meeting for lunch. Jeff was even closer to conversion than I was, and became Catholic in the summer of 1995. I found encouragement in meeting others who had converted, and in cradle Catholics. Brian, the local Baptist minister and his wife Phylis, had become good friends of ours. Phylis became Catholic shortly before Pat. Then Brian did. People in town were getting suspicious.

In March of 1996 I attended a Catholic men's retreat at Arnold Hall in Massachusetts, where I realized that nothing further needed to happen before I could convert. I fully believed the Catholic faith already. I didn't need any clearer light than I had—indeed, it couldn't be clearer.

With another baby due in July, a conversion, career change (to what, I didn't know), and relocation were not an option that summer; but I knew I couldn't delay much longer. In the meantime Fr. Joseph introduced me to his friend Monsignor James McGovern, who was seeking someone to work in adult education, Confirmation training, visitation, and various other responsibilities at the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Moorestown, New Jersey. Pat and I discussed this possibility and reached an agreement: in June of 1997 I delivered the last sermon from my pulpit.

A month later, when Bishop John M. Smith of Trenton, a successor of the apostles, received me into the Catholic Church, I became fully united to the only church that I believed could teach with complete authority. To this day, ten months later, in the voice of the Church I (still) hear the voice of Her Lord.

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# Searching For Authority

**Christopher Dixon**

For nine years I served the Lord Jesus Christ as a United Methodist pastor in New Jersey; for five of those years I had no thought of being anything else. I had a growing church, I was happy in my denomination and pleased with my prospects, and I was satisfied.

I believed that denominations were not only inevitable but good. Since Christians would always disagree about their beliefs and practices, having different denominations kept them from fighting. I didn't believe that visible unity was necessary for the Church, nor doctrinal unity. At the same time I insisted strongly on my own beliefs, which were defined largely by Wesleyan orthodoxy, and believed strongly that churches needed to teach doctrinal truth (which I still believe). The Christian faith was what it was, and the big things were not up for grabs.

I had been a lifelong Protestant, but I didn't grow up with a strongly defined religious identity. Until I was seven my parents were active Methodists, but when we moved to Schenectady, New York, my mother (a nurse) worked every weekend and my father was never again involved with any church. I think the infighting common to Protestant congregations gave him a distaste for church life. But my brothers and I were sent to Sunday School at the nearest church, Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian, where I received an excellent grounding in the bible and a Christian faith that I never lost (although my practice of it was inconsistent until I met my wife, Pat, in college).

From my days at Princeton Theological Seminary I had believed in the authority of the early church to speak definitively on the content of the Christian faith. I had no doubt that the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, for instance, spoke with the authority of the Holy Spirit. What I had not thought about much was what happened to that authority in the centuries since. I suppose I had the idea that it stayed in the Catholic Church (having nowhere else to go) until the Reformation and then made a lateral move to the Protestants. Nor was I concerned that the bishops at

Nicea who insisted on the divinity of Christ also insisted on His bodily presence in the Eucharist. The apostolic faith is all of a piece, but I did not know that yet.

Another important experience at seminary was reading John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, his story of how he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism by searching for the "Catholic tradition" in the Church of England. I had never thought much about tradition and authority before; I took it for granted that different churches have different beliefs and that it was just a matter of preference which church one belonged to. Newman, however, described a church that commanded assent, whose beliefs and visible form were both grounded in the teaching of the apostles. I longed for such a church, I was transfixed, and as Newman discovered that the Catholic tradition was found in the Catholic Church, I couldn't find any flaws in his argument. I wondered whether I ought to become Catholic.

Pat's response to this was, "I don't want to hear that! You came here to become a Protestant minister, I want to have children, and I don't want any more changes!" At that point I wasn't prepared to pursue the issue myself, either, and the matter dropped, not resolved but put aside, though I brought a rather High Church approach to Methodism.

After my graduation and into my pastorate I began to have questions about the basis of my denomination. John Wesley intended Methodism to be a spiritual renewal movement within the Church of England, not a separate church. He had an Anglican view of the Church, sacraments, and ordination (though he was not always consistent), but his successors did not, and though they kept many of the externals there was nothing with which to replace Wesley's view. The result was a church with a somewhat sacramental appearance but little sacramental theology, with strong central authority and no doctrinal authority, with an ecumenical emphasis (at least with other liberal Protestant denominations) but suspicion of any attempt to define what Christians must believe.

For years Pat had felt something missing in her relationships with the Churches we'd been part of without knowing what she wanted. She thought it came from wanting children, and then the isolation of a new mother and my being gone so much as a pastor. This came to a head in 1992 and 1993, when tensions with some of the congregation left her feeling totally cut off from the Church and wishing desperately that

she could belong to some other church. I didn't want to consider that—"You can't do that! I'm the minister!"—not a helpful response, but then it's hard to cope with the fact that the minister's job is tied to his wife's spiritual community.

I was right in believing we ought to be one religiously, but I asked myself: just what was it that we needed to be one in? Was there any reason for Pat to be Methodist except that I was the minister? If there wasn't, why was it so important to me? What is the Church, anyway? What holds it together? What reason could I give anyone for belonging to my church? I realized that I couldn't give any reason except preference. There was no relationship between our church and our Faith.

Practically speaking we didn't define the Church theologically; people belonged to a church because their family went there, or they liked the worship service, or each other, or the pastor. That was not enough. We both realized that we wanted (actually Pat had wanted for a long time) a church that had a claim on us even if it didn't make us happy, whether we liked it or not, where the Church was more than a preference. We wanted a church with authority, a church that was necessary. Part of the historic faith of the Church was that the Church didn't create itself, and that its authority came from God, not men.

No denomination can claim that, because none can claim to be more than an association of like-minded Christians. Wherever the lines are drawn, it's a purely human creation; a group of people get together and say, "We are the Church." If a denomination has a strong theological foundation (for example the Orthodox Presbyterian Church where I attended Sunday School as a boy), it at least has a reason for being separate: teaching the truth according to its beliefs. But where there is no strong theological foundation the denomination becomes nothing more than an administrative body and the congregation becomes an ingrained social habit.

My convictions about the Church crystallized more than they ever had. The Church was meant to have unity in structure and Faith, and both were necessary. Unless it was united in Faith there was no reason to be united in structure. If the Church couldn't claim to tell me what is true, why should I give it my loyalty? If I had to figure it all out for myself, why would I need the Church? (Which, indeed, is the situation of many Protestant denominations; since they don't claim to be necessary, people don't believe they're necessary.) I realized that

the nature of the Church went along with its beliefs. If the Church was to teach with authority, it had to have authority in its being. That couldn't be given by a denomination. Either it existed in the whole Body of Christ together, with visible unity giving shape to spiritual unity, or else it couldn't be found at all.

It struck me quickly that only two options avoided drawing arbitrary lines: congregationalism (in which each gathering of Christians could decide its own beliefs) or Catholicism, which claimed a principle of unity that brought everyone in. Congregationalism, however, seemed both unscriptural and unhistorical. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of them," but that didn't define the whole nature of the Church. If it did there would have been no great disputes, no councils, and no commonly held faith. The Council of Nicea meant more than the National Council of Churches.

Only the Catholic Church truly represented visible and doctrinal unity. The alternative to Catholicism was doctrinal chaos and no unity. The Reformers had decided according to their own judgment which parts of the Catholic faith to keep and which to reject; their followers continued the process of revising, and then the results were codified as revealed truth. The authority of the Catholic Church was simply replaced by the authority of Luther or Calvin. In the liberal denominations the fall was even worse; the principle of revealed truth was replaced by theological pluralism, the absolute belief that there are no absolute truths. Yet in both, the Church's authority was replaced by the individual's, and the visible church became nothing more than a collection of individuals.

The result was worse than each church believing something different; it was a milieu in which it didn't matter what a church believed, in which no teaching needed to be definitive, and in which the idea of necessary belief seemed offensive.

Some Catholic friends who knew what was going on with us came back from a conference at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, and gave us a tape of Scott Hahn's conversion story. Its effect on us was electric: he addressed the issues we were wrestling with rationally and biblically. Our beliefs were rapidly becoming more Catholic. We read *Humanae Vitae*, found it thoroughly convincing, and began Natural Family Planning. We were attracted by the Catholic Church's pro-life stand; our denomination was incapable of taking any strong position on this basic