

A Pilgrimage Ends, A New Journey Begins

A personal narrative by Scott Pfitzinger

We are all on pilgrimages of various sorts. If we do not grow, we stagnate. This is true of our mental, physical, and emotional aspects and is especially true of our spiritual nature. After a spiritual pilgrimage lasting about six years, I've gone from being a conservative Baptist to a Lutheran (LCMS) to becoming a Roman Catholic and spent some time looking into the Eastern Orthodox Church before finally settling back into Catholicism. It's been a long journey full of questions and answers, prayer and research, and I'm happy to say that my family has joined me on much of the ride. It's a very good thing that at least we've all been open minded enough to question and investigate along the way, rather than refusing to learn or grow.

Why have I converted to Catholicism? What led me to making this decision? What were my thought processes and questions along the way? These are some of the topics I will address in this essay. Extensive detail and reference sources will be avoided as much as possible so that this essay can stay focused and not become a huge theological treatise. If you want more information that way, please contact me individually. This essay is also not intended to persuade non-Christians to become Christians; instead, it is written for non-Catholic Christians to help them understand my decision and to get them thinking about some tough questions.

First my background. I grew up in the Baptist church. More specifically, the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC). My family started attending a GARB church when I was 6 years old and I was "saved" when I was 7. I wasn't baptized until a few years later, when I could "understand" better. In the Baptist circles that I was associated with, baptism didn't usually fall right on the heels of salvation except for adults. Children were usually expected to wait until they themselves were ready and asking for it. Maybe that was a sign that they were beginning to mature in their faith, even as children.

I didn't realize it then, but baptism in the Baptist denominations is viewed much like confirmation in the more liturgical churches, like a public profession of faith and an "adult" standing within the church. It was only after getting baptized that my parents allowed me to participate in communion. I grew up in a typical fundamentalist, pre-trib, pre-millennium church. The Bible was word-for-word literal and Jesus was coming back to take us home to be with Him, this rapture being imminent. All you had to do was pray "the sinner's prayer" and you were a Christian and sealed for heaven and guaranteed an eternity there no matter what your actions afterwards (except for a nebulous sin against the Holy Spirit). "Pre-tribulation" and "pre-millennium" are references to the Rapture (which is a relatively new belief in Protestant Christianity, having begun in the mid 1700's) when Jesus is coming back to take all believers to heaven with him. It may not seem like a core tenet of belief for many people, but most Baptists base much of their faith and life on this imminent return of Jesus, which will usher in the seven-year Tribulation period, followed by 1,000 years of an earthly kingdom of Jesus.

Any church or group that didn't agree with what my church taught (about this or any other doctrine) was just plain wrong; everything was black and white. Catholics were not considered Christians and were at best a sect where I figured there probably just had to be at least SOME true Christians. But those Christians were in error and the teachings of the Catholic Church were

wrong, full of man-made, anti-Biblical traditions. And the pope was just a step below the Antichrist. If not one and the same.

When I went to college, I ended up choosing a Baptist college of the same denomination. They say that when a student graduates from there, the amount of Bible and Religion classes that are included in the core curriculum roughly equal a Bible minor. I even took two years of Greek. Yet I learned hardly anything about Church History. That is, the history of the Christian Church. No attention was given to Christian denominations, either. It wasn't until about eight years later that I learned what Reformed doctrine meant, even though there was a well-known Reformed college just a few miles down the street. And that was only because I made a friend who had grown up Reformed and I asked a lot of questions. Practically speaking, Church History was really viewed as Baptist History, because it was taught that the true Christians were driven underground during the first century and stayed there until the Reformation. Any people that were part of the Catholic Church and were Christians was despite Catholicism rather than on account of it. I was taught that "New Testament churches" were "independent, Bible-believing" assemblies of people that followed Christ with no other authority than the Holy Spirit "leading them into all truth" and true Christians today need only their Bible and the Holy Spirit, along with an assembly of like-minded Christians to worship with. That was my view of Christianity right through my college graduation.

Seven years and a master's degree later, I found myself working at the same school that I'd graduated from. While I'd been away, they had dropped the "Baptist College" element from their name and chosen a new, more interdenominational name. That said, the doctrine being taught was essentially the same and the Church History study had only slightly broadened its focus. A few years later, a friend of mine became a Catholic. He had grown up mostly Baptist, Reformed, or Reformed Baptist and had had his share of struggling with his faith. His family was mostly Baptist and his father worked at the school with me, so it was a pretty big shock. For many of his "Christian" friends, it meant that he had abandoned his faith and was no better than a heretic or non-Christian. I wanted to give him, if not the benefit of the doubt, then at least some room to discuss why he'd chosen this spiritual route rather than just abandoning him because he'd "fallen away."

That meant I needed to put away my anti-Catholic preconceptions and take a new look at what it was he said he believed. Which meant looking at what the Catholic Church says it teaches. Not what nominal Catholics believe or what I see in movies or hear antagonists say about it, but what the Catholic Church officially teaches. If you're going to learn about a belief system, it's a good idea to start with their own official teachings. THEN you can evaluate whether or not you think them credible or worthwhile. But you certainly can't make an unbiased decision when your only information sources are biased against them.

And like so many other American Protestants today, I'd had a growing desire for learning more about and connecting with the Historical Church. Maybe it's because history has been so de-emphasized in our religious teaching or maybe it's just because there is a feeling that denominations that are less than a century or two old are somehow disconnected from that primitive Church started by Jesus 2,000 years ago. Either way, I've been hearing about tons of Baptists and other American Protestants joining more liturgical churches like the Episcopal, Orthodox, and Catholic Churches. The Lutheran Church worked for me for while, but as I mention below, there was still something missing.

So I started researching Catholic teachings. Here are some of the questions that quickly arose for me (and in roughly this order):

1. What kind of church existed at the beginning of Christianity?
2. Is the early church the same as the Catholic Church of today?
3. Did the early church teach apostolic succession?
4. What was the role of Peter in the early Church?
5. Is there one Authority for Christian doctrine?
6. Must all elements of faith and morals be derived from the Bible or could some have been passed down orally during the first few centuries without making it into the Bible?
7. If the Catholic Church is right and is the true Authority, then many of the other doctrines don't have to be tied 100% to Bible evidence to be right, as is the Protestant way of handling doctrinal questions.
8. What did the Early Church Fathers (up to Augustine) have to say about the following topics?
 - i. Justification
 - ii. Grace
 - iii. Apostolic Succession
 - iv. The Primacy of Peter
 - v. The Centrality of Rome
 - vi. Scripture and Tradition
 - vii. The Communion (and Intercession) of Saints
 - viii. Mariology
 - ix. The Real Presence and the Sacrifice of the Mass
 - x. Purgatory
 - xi. Penance
 - xii. Relics
9. Does the Bible back up, or at least NOT blatantly contradict, anything I'm reading?

I figured there has to come a point (for me, somewhere around The Real Presence in the list above) where the evidence becomes overwhelming and I have to agree and accept the rest or else disagree and avoid it all. The reason comes down to authority. If the first few questions have Catholicism as their answer, then eventually the pendulum will swing over to Catholicism and I'll need to examine my remaining questions in light of the Catholic Church's teachings.

It's not about my feelings or about my own perceptions of what the Bible says—it's about the Church that Jesus left and what the Christians of that time (and shortly thereafter) understood about the Church. My own opinions can't be the final judge, because ultimately it's not about ME but about JESUS and His teachings.

As I studied the Early Church, I learned about what the Church taught during the first couple of centuries of Christianity. As an aside, it is pretty outrageous to think that the vast majority of the Christian Church apostatized within one generation of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit was working and the Church was growing. Those people were the first generations of the Christian Church and to imagine that all the leaders became heretics along with their followers borders on the absurd. Not to mention that new heretical doctrines prompted a hue and cry that was documented and which spawned Councils where official Christian doctrines could be established and formalized in response to the heresy.

This puts a lot of weight on what Church leaders had to say during that time, since many were still alive in the first century A.D. and actually learned about Christianity directly from the Apostles. It's not the same as Holy Scripture, but it still is an accurate testimony to the faith and practice of the early Christians.

Anyway, after a year or two of study, learning, praying, talking to Bible scholars I respected, I still couldn't bring myself to consider Catholicism too strongly, but felt compelled to leave the Baptist church and join something with more ties to the historical church. I guess that meant more liturgical, for the most part. I ended up choosing the Lutheran Church, probably because it was one of the oldest Protestant denominations and because of my German background.

I enjoyed the liturgical setting and the ties I felt to the worldwide Church and the historical Church. But after a couple years, there still seemed to be something missing. I had some problems with what the Lutherans said the Catholics believed, when that didn't line up with what I'd learned. And it still seemed like a religion started by a man in the Middle Ages, instead of by the God-man Jesus, and I guess I had problems with a branch of Christianity being based on an individual and their teachings. I started reading more about Catholicism and learning more about it—especially with regard to how the doctrines were consistent with the Early Church, reading not only Early Church Fathers but modern Catholic apologists—and eventually came to the conclusion that the Catholic Church had it right and that was where I needed to be.

At one point when I'd begun to realize this, I knew that I would need to become a Catholic, but I was nervous and a bit uncomfortable, especially since I'd grown up so very anti-Catholic that it was like it was in my bones. The fear was partly the unknown and partly the stereotypes that were still in my upbringing and subconscious. I came to the realization that I needed people to be a part of this struggle in my life. Instead of just reading about things, I needed to talk with others about what they believed and make it more than just an intellectual issue. So the process continued as I joined the RCIA class (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) at a nearby Catholic church. After a couple classes, I knew this was where I needed to be. I prayed specifically that, if this was indeed the right thing to do, God would remove my fear and uncertainty and replace it instead with excitement. That transformation did happen, within about a week, and I'm convinced now that the Catholic Church is where the truth is. Not that non-Catholic Christians are not Christian, because that's not what the Church teaches, but more like if a Christian wants to find the fullness of the Christian faith, they will find it in the Catholic Church.

Another benefit of becoming a Catholic is that so many of the problem passages in the Bible now make sense. Catholic teaching explains them all in ways that make sense logically, religiously, and contextually. I'm talking about the passages that many Christians either ignore, gloss over, or have to twist to get them to make sense within their particular denomination's framework (I'll refer to a couple shortly). I definitely am enjoying learning more about the richness and depth of our Christian (and Catholic) heritage—there's so much more to it than what I was taught growing up Baptist!

Here are some questions I asked and things I learned over this pilgrimage, interspersed with thoughts that came to mind during this process.

What kind of church did Jesus leave? What was the Early Church really like? Is the Catholic Church the one that Jesus founded? To answer these questions is to discover God's will for His

Church today. Too many Christians are unaware of the history of Christianity, focusing instead on the history of their particular denomination, if they look at history at all. Many Christians today tend to ignore history and focus instead only on their relationship with Jesus. One's relationship with Jesus is of utmost importance, of course, but Christianity is much richer, broader, and deeper than just living like Christ wants us to. If we want to see what kind of church Christ founded and the apostles helped build, we need to look as far back as possible. What writings besides the Bible do we have from the first few centuries of the Christian Church? What did church leaders of the day have to say about doctrines and practices? To find out, we need to locate and familiarize ourselves with the writings of these "Church Fathers." That is not to say that these writings are placed on a par with Scripture, but they do give history and details that were available because of their proximity to the time of Christ. If and when there is an overall consensus on a particular doctrine, and if hardly anything can be found from that time speaking against that doctrine, it can be rather safely assumed that this was commonly believed and was part of the early Christian faith.

It is the duty of every Christian to become familiar with their heritage and to examine their own hearts and their relationship to Christ. Not to just sit and "be fed," but to become a seeker, purposefully striving to be more knowledgeable and more in accord with Christ and His Church.

One of the first questions I had to ask involved apostolic succession. Did the early Church teach that there were official Church leaders that took over for the apostles? It wasn't a real big serious question, but in terms of basic practice it was rather foundational. If the apostles started independent churches and then left them to fend for themselves, with only occasional letters to guide them, then Catholicism was right out. I'd grown up being taught that "New Testament churches" were independent assemblies of Christians that had no allegiance to any council or synod, but instead relied upon the Bible as their sole authority. But that's not what we find. First of all, the Bible didn't exist as we know it for several hundred years. The canon of Scripture was determined by God, no question, because He was the Author, but it wasn't collected and acknowledged as such by the Church at large until the fourth century. Christians before that time did not have access to the book we now call the New Testament; when they referred to the Scriptures, they meant the Old Testament, because that's what they had. Letters from the apostles were copied and circulated and even quoted by many of the Church fathers, but it took time for the Church to agree on which books were inspired and should be collected as a New Testament. Chronologically, the Church existed before the modern Bible did, because the Church was born when Christ instituted it and sacrificed Himself for her. Over 3,000 people believed when Peter preached his first sermon at Pentecost, and they didn't have a book to rely on to tell them what to believe. The early Christians had access to some letters or writings that eventually became part of the New Testament, but much of the teachings that their faith and practice were based on were the verbal teachings (traditions) passed on to them by the apostles.

Probably the heart of the matter is the question of authority. Did Jesus leave someone in authority over the Church?

So did the Christians in the first few centuries base their faith and practice solely on Holy Scripture? No. That's impossible, as we've seen. Paul's letters verify that verbal teaching was a core element of the basis for Christianity. II Thess. 3:6 - "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." II Thess. 2:15 - "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." I Cor. 11:2 - "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you."

Thus the role of verbal teachings was combined with the written Word. But did the apostles pass on their authority to others? Most definitely. II Tim. 2:2 - "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." This passage refers to three different generations of Christians: Paul's generation, Timothy's generation, and the following generation. Clement I wrote a letter to the Corinthians in A.D. 80 (while the Apostle John was still alive), where he said, "Our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife for the office of bishop. For this reason, therefore, having received perfect foreknowledge, they appointed those who have already been mentioned and afterwards added the further provision that, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry." Other Church Fathers said much the same thing, including Irenaeus (A.D. 189), Tertullian (A.D. 200), Cyprian (A.D. 253), Jerome (A.D. 396), and Augustine (A.D. 397). The Early Church Fathers constantly used apostolic succession for testing doctrine. Throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been heretics who put their own spin on Christian teachings to fit their own way of thinking. To determine the truth or falsity of a doctrine, they would look to what had been passed down from the apostles through the Church leaders who followed them.

If the apostles did indeed select others to follow in their leadership positions, what of Peter? Was he the first pope? Was he the "rock" on which Jesus would build His Church? Analysis of both Scripture and the writings of the early Christians results in at least a definite prominence or preeminence of Peter. It seems that every time the disciples (apostles) were mentioned collectively in Scripture, Peter was always named first. Sometimes solely, as in "Peter and the apostles." In contrast, Judas (when listed at all) was always put last. When making lists, prominence is given to the first name on the list—especially when it is done consistently.

Peter was also singled out many times in the Bible. For brevity's sake, I will list the references but not the texts: Matt. 16:17-19; Luke 22:31-33; John 21:15-17; Matt. 10:1-3; Acts 5:15; Matt. 17:24-27; Luke 24:12; Mark 16:6-7; Acts 1:15-17,20-22; Acts 5:3-5; Acts 15:6-11. Peter's name is mentioned more often in the Bible than all the other disciples put together: 191 times (162 as Peter or Simon Peter, 23 as Simon, and 6 as Cephas). John is next in frequency with only 48 appearances, and Peter is present 50% of the time we find John in the Bible! Archbishop Fulton Sheen reckoned that all the other disciples combined were mentioned 130 times in Scripture. If this is correct, then Peter is named 60% of the time that any disciple is referred to! Just from a quantific look at Scripture alone, Peter shows an astounding preeminence.

But then there are the statements made by Christ specifically to Peter. The most important one is in Matthew 16, right after Peter makes the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. Matthew 16: 17-19 - "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. I tell you that you are Peter (Kepha), and on this rock (kepha) I

will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' " This is one of those passages that we sort of overlooked in Baptist circles, because the ramifications were too hard to deal with. That's because it SOUNDS like Jesus is giving Peter authority. 1) Jesus blesses Peter. 2) Jesus acknowledges that Peter received divine revelation. 3) Jesus says He will build His Church on Peter. 4) Jesus promises that the gates of Hell [Hades] will never prevail against the Church. 5) Jesus gives Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. 6) Whatever Peter binds or looses on earth will be bound or loosed in heaven. These are some tough sayings.

One of the biggest controversies is on what "the rock" means. I included the Aramaic in the quotation above because that's the language Jesus spoke and what He would have said to Peter. In fact, Peter is called "Cephas" occasionally in the Bible. The controversy is over whether "Petros" and "petra" are the same (the Greek version of "kepha" or "Cephas"). In the language Jesus spoke, the words would have been the same, but in the Greek New Testament, the word changes, creating this controversy. Some say that the change in gender implies that it's not Peter that is going to be the foundation of the Church, but something else, such as Christ or Peter's faith or Peter's testimony of Jesus being "the Christ, the Son of God." Without going into all the details, the words mean the same thing, but the change in gender was because Jesus wasn't about to give Simon a feminine name. So in the Greek translation "petra" (feminine) was changed to "petros" (masculine) to make a name that was fitting. "Peter" had never been a name until Jesus gave it to Simon that day.

Many Church Fathers referred to Peter as the rock/foundation upon which the Church would be built, including Tertullian (A.D. 200), Clement (A.D. 221), Origen (A.D. 248), Cyprian (A.D. 251, 253), Ambrose (A.D. 379), and others.

What is still argued (between Roman Catholics and pretty much everyone else) is whether Jesus meant that Peter was to be the head of the Church (apart from Christ) or whether it was just a play on words. After all, "the Rock" throughout the rest of the Bible was Jesus (e.g., 1 Corinthians 10:4 - "they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ"). I've seen enough arguments either way that I feel it has to be taken along with all other doctrines into a whole rather than trying to prove the one point by itself.

Just for contrast, or food for thought, the Orthodox Church teaches that Pope did indeed occupy a place of preeminence, but that it was a "primacy of honor" rather than a "supremacy of jurisdiction." It was the Bishop of Rome's place to call for Councils and to lead them, but not to exercise authority or jurisdiction over the other churches. At least that is what is currently taught. Before the big split in 1054, Eastern Orthodox Church leaders can be seen (and quoted) deferring to Rome as an authority, not just a place of honor.

What does it mean that "the gates of Hell will never prevail against the Church?" That phrase has traditionally been interpreted to mean that the Church will never completely fall away, or that the Church will never officially teach error. To put that another way, that the teachings of Christ and His apostles will be consistently maintained for all time. While Protestants tend to take the former approach, that there will always be some remnant of the true Christian Church, the

Catholic view is that this Church, which was being established in this very passage of Scripture, will never pass out of existence and will maintain the truth forever. Sort of a combination of the two concepts and matching what many of the Early Church Fathers thought on the topic. After all, if the Church can be allowed to teach error, then it has indeed "fallen away" and you could never fully trust the Church to teach the truth. This is in contrast to the Scripture passage (I Tim. 3:15) where Paul writes, "In case I am delayed, 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." How many Protestants take this verse literally? That the "pillar and support (foundation) of the truth" is "the church of the living God?" That's exactly what the passage says!

The keys of the kingdom—another tough saying. This is a reference to the prime minister role, where a king would select someone to help deal with the daily details and affairs of running the kingdom, much like a Chief Operations Officer today. The prime minister acted as second in command and had the "keys to the city (or kingdom)" worn around his neck as a symbol of this authority. This is also a parallel of Isaiah 22, where the same terminology is used. While the king was still in charge, he left much of the running of day-to-day operations to his prime minister. This is a pretty clear instance of Jesus giving Peter authority, second only to Himself.

That leaves the issue of binding and loosing which authority was given both to Peter and to the rest of the apostles. Throughout Church history, this has consistently been viewed as having authority to forgive and not forgive (loose and bind) sins. This is why, even in many Protestant churches, you'll hear a statement of absolution at the beginning of the liturgy, where, after a time of silent confession, the minister says something like, "Therefore, as a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, by the command of my Lord and in His stead, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." What shakes many Protestants to their core is the idea that Jesus might actually have meant what He said, that He was giving His apostles the authority to forgive sins. Jesus repeats this statement about binding and loosing in Matthew 18:18, where he gives this authority to all of His disciples, not just to Peter as He did in Matthew 16:19. So while the entire group of apostles was given authority to forgive sins, only Peter was given the keys of the kingdom of Heaven.

I give so much discussion on Peter because this was one of my biggest hurdles. It is the primacy of Peter that separates Catholicism from Eastern Orthodox and other liturgical versions of Christianity. If Peter was truly made the leader of the Church, then Christians are obliged to put serious weight on that leadership. Once I had dealt with Peter and become convinced that he had indeed been made the Rock on which Jesus would build His Church, I began having this feeling of dread in the pit of my stomach that maybe the Catholics were right. And if that was the case, my entire world view was about to be seriously shaken.

How did the early Church understand the various passages that are "debatable?" In fact, we probably should be looking at how the early Church understood EVERYTHING we read in the Bible or practice today. How can we be sure about Scripture's interpretation when so many different people who are knowledgeable and sincere and sensitive to the Holy Spirit can come up with interpretations that are the opposite of each other?

This was another tough question that I had to wrestle with. I found it increasingly difficult to accept that God would have founded His Church solely on Scripture and left us all only the Holy Spirit to interpret it correctly. I'm not trying to downplay the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us interpret Scripture, but how could so many sincere Christians come up with disparate interpretations of the same passages? Some Protestant ministers have told me that it's because we're in a sinful world and so we'll never be able to perfectly interpret the meanings of Scripture. But why would God leave us hanging like that? Start this new religion but then leave no incontestable authority for explaining doctrine? The sad news is that, until the Reformation, this was not even a consideration. The Catholic Church was seen as the final arbiter and interpreter of Scripture, drawing from the history of interpretations consistently passed down from the apostles. 400 years of Protestantism has shown us that the Bible can be used to explain almost ANYTHING, regardless of whether or not anyone else believes it or has taught it throughout the history of the Church.

When I've sat under a Protestant pastor, a question I've struggled with is, "What makes HIS interpretation of Scripture right, and not the interpretation of the pastor at the church down the street, who takes an opposite position?" Where does he get his authority? Nominally from God, since the Holy Spirit helps us understand Scripture, but can't that equally apply to the pastor down the street? What it boils down to is the seminary where that pastor got his training, which begs the same question of seminaries. Ultimately there IS no earthly authority in Protestant eyes, and we'll never know if we "got it right" until we get to heaven.

Jesus said that a sign to the world of the true Church would be its unity and He prayed that the Church would be one, as He and Father are one.

Another problem is that the principle of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) is not even found in the Bible. How can the Bible be the only rule of faith when it doesn't even claim that itself? It's a logical fallacy. Just like the idea that the inspired books of the Bible are self-evidently inspired, while other books written by followers of Jesus were not. As an example, there were several other "Gospels" (e.g., the Gospel of James, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Thomas) that were distributed and read among the early believers but which were not chosen to be part of the canon. There's no place in the Bible that I or anyone else has found that says what books belong in it, or even that the Bible is SUPPOSED to be the only authority. A tract from Catholic Answers (http://www.catholic.com/library/What_Your_Authority.asp) sums it up well: "The fact is that the Holy Spirit guided the Catholic Church over time to recognize and determine the canon of the New and Old Testaments in the year 382 at the synod of Rome, under Pope Damasus I. This decision was ratified again at the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 and 419)."

Another question that got answered early on for me was regarding Papal Infallibility. Turns out that it DOESN'T mean that pope can't sin or is perfect or anything like that, as I'd grown up believing. It means that when the pope speaks an official proclamation (*ex cathedra*) regarding faith or morals, or when a Council makes a similar pronouncement, the Holy Spirit protects that pronouncement from error. Not nearly as outrageous as I'd thought, and not that frequent either. It's typically used only when doctrines are called into question. Here's a good summary of this doctrine: [What is Papal Infallibility?](#) Popes have all been certainly capable of sinning and most

were far from perfect (some were even scoundrels or downright evil), but Papal Infallibility has nothing to do with personal holiness or general statements. It's merely a prevention from error when official proclamations about faith or morals are made, allowing the Church to continually stand without the gates of Hell prevailing against her. That none of these evil popes issued any proclamations *ex cathedra* is one sign of this.

When a doctrine wasn't discussed much in the early Church, it was because everyone agreed with it. That's why some doctrines and practices aren't detailed in the Bible very much, or didn't become written dogma until centuries later--there was simply no question about them as they were commonly understood and practiced.

Christ instructed the Church to preach everything he taught (Matt. 28:19–20) and promised the protection of the Holy Spirit to “guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). That mandate and that promise guarantee the Church will never fall away from his teachings (Matt. 16:18, 1 Tim. 3:15), even if individual Catholics might. As Christians began to more clearly understand the teaching authority of the Church and of the primacy of the pope, they developed a clearer understanding of the pope’s infallibility. This development of the faithful’s understanding has its clear beginnings in the early Church. For example, Cyprian of Carthage, writing about 256, put the question this way, “Would the heretics dare to come to the very seat of Peter whence apostolic faith is derived and whither no errors can come?” (Letters 59 [55], 14). In the fifth century, Augustine succinctly captured the ancient attitude when he remarked, “Rome has spoken; the case is concluded” (Sermons 131, 10).

Of course, infallibility does not include a guarantee that any particular pope won’t “neglect” to teach the truth, or that he will be sinless, or that mere disciplinary decisions will be intelligently made. It would be nice if he were omniscient or impeccable, but his not being so will fail to bring about the destruction of the Church. But he must be able to teach rightly, since instruction for the sake of salvation is a primary function of the Church. For men to be saved, they must know what is to be believed. They must have a perfectly steady rock to build upon and to trust as the source of solemn Christian teaching. And that’s why papal infallibility exists.

Here’s a good and more detailed explanation, from which these quotes were taken:
http://catholic.com/library/Papal_Infallibility.asp

This is one of the areas that Eastern Orthodoxy differs from Roman Catholicism. The Orthodox Church teaches that what is infallible are the Ecumenical Councils, where the Christian leaders from around the world gathered together to clarify matters of doctrine and were guided into making the correct decisions and in declaring the truth. (Only the first seven Councils are recognized by the Orthodox Church.) Rather than having this reside in one person, the infallibility is seen as given to the Church as a whole. In fact, I think that the Orthodox Church teaches that even Ecumenical Council decisions require acceptance by the majority of the worldwide Church to be shown to be infallible. That would result in God's gift of infallibility being given to the entire Church, rather than even the group of leaders. But still a gift of infallibility.

But what about works righteousness? Doesn't the Catholic Church teach that you can DO things to earn your salvation? That's what I had always been told. As I read more about what the Catholic Church officially teaches, I discovered that it was just the opposite. Catholicism clearly teaches that we are saved by grace alone (not "faith alone," which is different). The Council of Trent said that "none of those things which precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification; for if it is by grace, it is not now by works; otherwise, as the Apostle [Paul] says, grace is no more grace" (Decree on Justification 8, citing Rom. 11:6). This grace totally comes from God and is based on the work of Christ.

The point of confusion seems to be whether works MERIT anything. I grew up being told that works count for nothing, even though James 2 says that faith without works is dead. The Catholic idea is that God's grace motivates us to do good works, which He has promised to reward because they please Him. There really isn't that much difference between this and the Protestant views of works; it's more a matter of semantics. Romans 2, Galatians 6, and Revelation 20 all speak of judgment based on works, so obviously works are important. You will recognize the tree by the fruit it bears. As we perform good works, we "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" and we slowly become more like Christ. This is truly the goal of every Christian.

I think one of the main problems that most Protestants would have, once they understand the true nature of Catholic doctrine, is the element of physicality that is part of Catholic Christianity. This dualistic concept of physical things being lower or bad and spiritual things being higher or good goes back to the Gnostic heresies of the early Church. The Early Church Fathers spoke against this view which proliferated during the first few centuries A.D. The Protestant tendency (I know, I've been one just about all of my life) is to shun any physical aspects of religion. Sure we'll baptize, but it won't DO anything—it's just a symbol. And we'll serve communion, but it won't DO anything either—it's also just a symbol. Many Protestant churches have very sparse sanctuaries, with little art, symbolism, or imagery, thinking that we need to "worship Him in spirit and in truth," which means getting rid of everything possible in the physical realm. The more liturgical denominations seem to avoid most of this, since there IS plenty of art in their churches, and since you kneel, sit, and stand for different parts of the service. Catholic devices such as holy water, crossing oneself, praying with Rosary beads, and lighting candles are more physical than Protestants are comfortable with, and yet they result in a more thorough spirituality because the body and soul are both immersed in the practice of religion. As humans, we have physical and spiritual dimensions, and when those dimensions are united in worshiping God, or even in daily living, the experience is more complete, meaningful, and transformative.

Christianity is more about a covenant relationship between God and His People than it is about individuals and their individual salvation. That sounds like heresy to most Protestants, but the Bible and the early Church seem to lean heavily that way. Concepts like households, having things in common, relationships within the Body of Christ, and unity focus the activity and lives of Christians on the Church and away from the individual.

The next question I dealt with had to do with praying to saints. This is another example of how what I'd been told didn't line up at all with what the Catholic Church teaches. Strictly speaking,

Catholics don't pray TO saints, asking them to heal them or perform some sort of action for them. Instead they ask the saints to pray for them. Just like they ask fellow Christians here on earth to pray for them. The idea behind this is that Christians never really "die." They pass on, or whatever similar term you want to use, and so Christians that are in heaven are still part of the family of God; they are not preoccupied with worldly living and are instead in the presence of God. And yet they are still aware of what's going on down here. Who better to ask to intercede for you? The only difference between this practice and that of asking someone in your church to pray for you (which all Protestants advocate) is the location of the person being asked to pray (intercede). Patron saints are asked to pray in this manner because they are known to have struggled with the same kind of problems. If you're going to ask a friend to pray for you, you generally want someone who can relate and who understands the problem you're having. That's why Roman Catholics use Patron Saints.

Mary is viewed similarly, but with more honor. She was, after all, the mother of Jesus and she did play a part in providing redemption for the world because she said "yes" to God. I learned that "Mother of God" does not at all imply that she somehow is above or even equal to God. That phrase was developed when the deity of Christ was in question, so as to emphasize Christ's divine nature along with His physical nature. Her perpetual virginity was another topic in question. I'd always taken references to Jesus' brothers as literal, as do people with backgrounds similar to mine. But I learned that in the Jewish culture, the term "brother" was used to refer to male family members including cousins and even uncles and nephews. At this point in my studies, it was a very feasible answer and, since it had been believed by Christians down through the ages, starting back even in the first century A.D., I saw no reason to argue against it. Mary's Immaculate Conception, that says she was born without sin, means that she was preserved from the stain of original sin and was filled with grace (as seen in how Gabriel addressed her: "Full of Grace") to make her a fit vessel to bear the Holy God of the universe. Orthodox Christians do believe in Mary's perpetual virginity and give her a place of honor, but do not teach that she was born without sin. Instead, since they have a different view of the concept of "original sin," they say she was given this grace sometime after conception, whether still in the womb or precisely at birth and that she did live a sinless life. This is one of the areas in which Eastern Christians accept something as a mystery rather than trying to codify all the details. When it comes down to it, though, there is not much difference between saying Mary was sinless because of grace given her at (or just after) the moment of conception and because of grace given her before her birth. It's more a matter of semantics than anything else.

One issue that resolved itself for me earlier on was that of the True Presence in the Eucharist. When I looked at becoming a Lutheran, I had to examine the Lutheran beliefs. One thing that was new to me was treating the Communion service as more than just a symbolic remembrance meal. Lutherans teach that the Body and Blood of Christ are "under" the physical presence of the bread and wine, and that the Presence departs after the service is done. This is called "consubstantiation" and during the service, they do treat the elements as the Body and Blood of Christ. This was quite radical for me who grew up thinking of it only as symbolic.

The Catholic view, called "transubstantiation," is similar, but ultimately more logical. If the elements become Christ's body and blood, why would they stop being that once the service is over? Is it right to take the wine that was mystically transformed into Christ's blood and pour it back into the bottle with the original wine?

The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John has an interesting story that has an incredible bearing on this topic. Part of this is a passage that most Protestant preachers tend to skip over, focusing instead on the symbolic aspects or else ignoring it altogether in favor of the historical activities mentioned. I quote the passage below because I feel this is particularly important. It is the New International Version that many American Christians today tend to favor, partly because of that familiarity for many people and partly to show that this concept isn't limited to just certain translations of the Bible. I've quoted excerpts, but you can turn to John 6 in your Bible to read the whole passage for yourself.

John 6:30-36, 48-61, 66-68

So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread." Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.

I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever." He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you?"

... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Most Protestant denominations keep the Lord's Supper only as a "feast of remembrance," a memorial service that views the bread and wine as symbols of Christ's body and blood--and only symbols, reminders of His sacrifice for us. That's probably why this passage gives so many people such difficulty, just as it did with Jesus' disciples 2,000 years ago. If you just read what Jesus is saying here, you really have to twist His words to make His intentions merely symbolic. And even more when you consider Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11:27, where he says, "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord." Sinning against the body and blood of the Lord couldn't happen if they were only symbols.

Of course, then, there is the creative power of God's Words, where He speaks and something is. "Let there be light" created light. "This is my body" is also viewed by many, including the Church Fathers, as being just such a statement, as St. Augustine said back in the early fifth century: "Christ held and carried Himself in His own hands."

But aside from His institution of the Lord's Supper, I want to focus on the passage in John 6. Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (vs 53-58).

It's very hard to get a merely symbolic meaning out of that passage. How much clearer can He be than repeating the requirement to eat His flesh and drink His blood, and saying "my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink?" It's like He's emphasizing the fact, particularly to say "this ISN'T just a symbol."

If the listeners, in the context of the culture and times, understood this to mean that the bread and wine were only symbols of Jesus' body and blood, why would they say, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" Moreover, if His intentions were misunderstood, why didn't He clarify? Throughout the Gospels, whenever Jesus taught something that wasn't understood correctly, He would at least take His disciples aside and explain it to them. In this instance, He instead asked, "You do not want to leave me too, do you?"

The bottom line is verse 66: "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Given the context, it's obvious that this large number of disciples left because of this issue. Too many people had a problem with what He was saying about His body and blood, and so they left Him.

When in doubt, you have to go with the actual words spoken by Jesus. Questions of literal vs. symbolic interpretations of Scripture are less relevant when Jesus clearly speaks in a literal sense. Or you can just choose to ignore sections of the Bible like this. Like I and many Protestants have done.

I had done a similar thing on the subject of baptism. The overall picture in the Bible is that there is a VERY STRONG Scriptural basis for saying that baptism is more than just a symbol that's used to "publicly confess" a believer's identification with Christ and His church. Some Scripture passages on baptism include: Matt. 28:18-20, John 1:32-34, John 3:5, Acts 2:38, Mark 16:16, Acts 22:16, 1 Cor. 6:11, Eph. 5:25-27, Titus 3:5-7, and 1 Pet. 3:21. Each of these verses talks about baptism and how it actually cleanses us rather than just symbolizes our salvation and identifies with Christ and His Church. It is a parallel of the Jewish custom of circumcision, inaugurating the believer into the Family of God and making him (or her) a part of His Covenant.

I am not putting any kind of 'spin' on the Bible here. I'm quoting Scripture and letting it speak for itself. I think what I did growing up Baptist was what all good Baptists do: ignore these passages and pretend they don't exist. Or at least that they don't mean what they say. Which is an odd thing for people who are known for literal interpretations of Scripture.

One verse on the topic might be something that could be interpreted differently or questioned, but such a large number of verses from Scripture, with ABSOLUTELY NO verses telling us that baptism is merely a symbol, creates a weight of evidence which becomes a very convincing argument. I haven't even gotten into what the early Christians said about it (even though it was practically unanimous for 1500 years). I've only looked in the Bible. And still it's a very one-sided argument: According to the Bible, baptism is inextricably linked to salvation, redemption, and rebirth. It's more than just a symbol. It is efficacious.

An interesting and encouraging thing I've learned is that Catholics don't see Protestants as enemies (while the reverse often can be true); instead, Catholics do view them as Christians, calling them "separated brethren." It's not that they don't wish they would reconcile with the Catholic Church which gave them their heritage, but at least it's not an adversarial view. They even accept baptism done in Protestant churches, as long as it is Trinitarian (in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), so I wasn't rebaptized, but was instead confirmed at the Easter Vigil Mass (Saturday, 7 April 2007) based on my profession of faith and having gone through the RCIA class.

There are more issues and more things I've struggled with, but this covers the majority of the questions I raised and the answers I found during my spiritual pilgrimage. Of course it's a very brief overview and much, much more could be said. I at least wanted to get a basic explanation of what led me to make the decision to become reconciled to the Catholic Church. I've become convinced that it's the one true representation of that Church that Christ started almost 2,000 years ago. Everything I read from the early Christians and the Scriptures ties right in. And what a feeling to be connected to that "ancient" Christianity instead of following what I might call a degradation of Christianity based on the teachings of some particular man 1500 years (or more) later. It's given me a broader acceptance of Christians worldwide and deepened my faith and my understanding of the Bible.

Since being received into full communion with the Church on Easter in 2007, I've truly felt like I've come home and have really become of a part of the Body of Christ, interconnected with Christians around the world and throughout the last 2,000 years. No more "me and my Bible" mentality, no more narrow-minded, judgmental attitudes toward everyone else in the world who calls themselves "Christian." Instead, I'm now a part of Christ's Church in all the fullness that He intended for it. And with such a rich history to learn about, I've begun a new journey to learn more about my heritage as a Christian and to become even more devoted to Christ in my heart and in my life.

My family has begun their own pilgrimages now, both individually and collectively. My wife and oldest son began RCIA classes in the Fall of 2007 while I worked as part of the RCIA staff. As they attended classes from August through November, my wife began to have some issues with a few of the Roman Catholic dogmas. The Immaculate Conception and the idea of indulgences are two of them. Dogmas, by definition, are required to be believed by the entire Roman Catholic Church. If you don't believe a dogma, you're not really in full communion with the Church. And call me old fashioned, but I'd say that if you don't believe everything your church is teaching, you should question whether you belong there.

Since my wife was having trouble accepting what the Roman Catholic Church taught in some of the dogmas, I suggested she might want to look at the Eastern Orthodox Church, which also is apostolic, tracing their roots back to the apostles and the early Church. If she found that more "sensible" and true to the original Christian faith, then we'd look at it together. I didn't feel comfortable with any other alternative. I strongly feel that the family needs to stay together and I'm compelled to remain in the "one Catholic and apostolic Church."

So we started reading about Orthodoxy and the history of the Orthodox Church. I'd been fortunate to make a friend that fall who was an Orthodox Christian, so I was able to ask questions of her and her family and make connections to other Orthodox Christians in Indianapolis. As we read books and discussed various issues, we felt the need to visit an Orthodox Church and learn more about the Orthodox faith. So we began attending St. John the Forerunner (the Baptist) Orthodox Church here in Indianapolis and started sitting in on the Catechism classes.

Orthodox services and ways of thinking are definitely different. Since they remained separate from the Western influences of philosophy and systematic theology over the last millennium, they've retained a more mystical and "spiritual" form of Christianity, as well as a more ancient liturgy. This is in part because the Orthodox Church only recognizes the first seven Ecumenical Councils and in part because since the split between East and West was formalized in A.D. 1054 the Orthodox Church has pretty much stopped changing. Change and growth in knowledge and understanding of doctrine result in the "development of dogma," which the Catholic Church is known for and which the Orthodox Church accepted before the split but now avoids. This results in less growth, unfortunately, which may be nice in that it preserves a more ancient liturgy, but which also hinders the growth in understanding of theology. Many of the doctrines are the same as those of other Catholics, but there are a few specific ones that keep the West and the East from proper unity.

I must make one side note about how beautiful the Orthodox Divine Liturgy is. It's almost entirely sung and is based on ancient formulas and texts. And the vast majority is comprised of prayers. Definitely a blessed and worshipful experience.

After about six months of Eastern Orthodox services and catechism classes, I still found myself wrestling with issues I thought I'd taken care of earlier. Especially regarding Peter. There were other things that I was growing a little uncomfortable with, but the way that the modern Orthodox Church handles Peter (very much like the Protestant treatment of the topics around him) was probably the part I had the hardest time with. I spent much of the summer of 2008 wrestling with bringing it all into one internally consistent world view. In the end, I had to remain Catholic. Not only did it make the most sense in many ways, but I also had a deep sense of peace after deciding that the Catholic Church was where I needed to be. Our whole family went back to attending Holy Spirit Catholic Church together and the two youngest boys spent a year taking classes to prepare them for their First Communion, which took place at Easter 2009. My wife and my oldest son, once we returned to the Catholic Church, stopped taking classes or reading or anything. It was my desire back when we took a look at the Eastern Orthodox Church that, if I ended up certain that I needed to remain Catholic, they would sit down and take a look at the doctrines they had issues with and find out what the Catholic Church actually teaches about them and why. Learning and growing instead of coasting or settling for what feels comfortable at the time. But that hasn't happened and I can only suggest for so long without appearing to be nagging. So the two of them have gone back to the Lutheran church we attended back in 2005. At least my son has a high school youth group there so he has activities with kids his own age.

My dream is that one day the Eastern Catholics and the Western Catholics (not to mention any Protestant denominations) will come to terms and reunite the Catholic Church into one whole again, just as Christ prayed for us in His high priestly prayer of St. John's gospel, chapter 17. Pope John Paul II called the East and West "the two lungs of Christianity" and if the sign of Christ's Church is unity, we are obliged to work toward unity.

There is a lot to learn and more to appreciate, but that's expected for any religious change one might make. Especially when you're moving toward a deeper and richer manifestation than you previously had. I am convinced, though, that the Roman Catholic Church is where the fullness of the Christian Faith is found. Many are Christians but not Catholic, and while I still believe they truly are Christians (and I appreciate the breadth of my varied Christian backgrounds and experiences), I feel these other Christians are missing out on the richness and fullness of their Christian heritage.

The following are some websites and books I've used and which I recommend. (The ones with asterisks I found very useful and are particularly interesting.)

Websites

- * [Catholic Answers: Library](http://www.catholic.com/library.asp) (<http://www.catholic.com/library.asp>)
- [Christian Classics Ethereal Library](http://ccel.org/fathers.html) (<http://ccel.org/fathers.html>)
- [Fathers of the Church](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06001a.htm) (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06001a.htm>)
- [The Catholic Guide](http://thecatholicguide.com/wiki/Main_Page) (wiki) (http://thecatholicguide.com/wiki/Main_Page)

Books

- * [Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic](#), by David B. Currie
- * [By What Authority?: An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition](#), by Mark P. Shea
- [Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition](#)
- [Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church](#), by Stephen K. Ray
- [Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia](#), by Peter M. Stravinskis
- [On Being Catholic](#), by Thomas Howard
- [Pope Fiction: Answers to 30 Myths and Misconceptions About the Papacy](#), by Patrick Madrid
- [Rapture: The End-Times Error that Leaves the Bible Behind](#), by David B. Currie
- [Surprised by Truth: 11 Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic](#), by Patrick Madrid
- [What Catholics Really Believe-Setting the Record Straight: 52 Answers to Common Misconceptions About the Catholic Faith](#), by Karl Keating

[http:// pfitzinger.net/essay.pdf](http://pfitzinger.net/essay.pdf)
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