

There and Back Again

by Sebastian R. Fama

When I was a child being Catholic was easy. Back in the 1950's most of the people I knew took their faith seriously. My parents taught me as much as they could about God, and we prayed regularly as a family. I went to Sunday school to learn more about the faith-not to be introduced to it as is sometimes the case today. It seemed to me that the world was a very Christian place.

In the mid-1960's things began to change. To be sure, some of what was happening was good. The Civil Rights Movement was long overdue. But along with the good came the bad. There were riots in the streets and violent protests on some of our college campuses. Traditional values were challenged. Parents and children became adversaries.

The Church was not left unscathed. Some Catholics deliberately misinterpreted the documents of the recently concluded Second Vatican Council. They adopted changes in the name of the council that the Council Fathers never envisioned. Church teachings were either watered down or ignored. It seemed that getting to heaven wasn't nearly as important as feeling good about one's self. The world I knew was quickly fading into history.

A Papal Imposter? No Way

In the spring of 1973 some of my relatives joined a new church. The members of this church seemed very devout. The homilies had substance; the priests even celebrated the old Latin Mass. I found all this very appealing, so I joined. It was part of the "Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement (ORCM)." The ORCM followed in the line of the Traditionalist movement started by the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. The ORCM rejected Vatican II and everything it stood for. The church presented what seemed to be a plausible case against the council. Not knowing any better I accepted their arguments.

I was married in this church, and two of my three children were baptized there. I was very happy there for about six years. That's when the pastor announced in one of his homilies that John Paul II was not really a pope. That had a profound effect on me. I could accept the idea that a pope wasn't doing his job properly, but the idea that an imposter could sit in Peter's chair was just too much. Christ didn't promise that popes would be perfect, but he did promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church. If my pastor was right, it would mean that the gates of hell had done some pretty serious prevailing. That would make Christ a liar. I knew that wasn't possible so I left the ORCM.

Unfortunately my prejudice against Rome did not dissolve with my loyalty to the Traditionalist movement. Traditionalists, at least in my area, considered the Eastern-rite churches to be unchanged by Vatican II. So I joined the local Eastern-rite church. It seemed like I had all of my bases covered. The church recognized the pope. The preaching was good, and there were none of those pesky changes that were ruining the Roman-rite.

Humbled Before God

In 1986 my oldest son was having learning and behavior problems. We had him evaluated and found that he had some profound learning disabilities. Later on we would learn that he also had a mental illness. I had always been a self-reliant person. If I had a problem I would find a way to solve it. But here was a problem I couldn't solve. Although I had a strong belief in God I wasn't accustomed to handing my problems over to Him. But this situation left me with no choice. Admittedly this was not the most noble reason for submitting my life to Christ. But it was a start.

For the first time in my life I humbled myself before God. Changes began to take place. I was at peace despite the problems that still plagued me. I began to have a desire for Scripture. At my mother's invitation I joined a charismatic prayer group that she had been attending. It seemed a little strange to me at first, but the member's openness to the Holy Spirit was very compelling. I felt closer to Christ than I had ever imagined possible.

The prayer group met in a Roman-rite church. Because I still harbored prejudices against Rome, I would refrain from receiving the Eucharist at healing Masses. Although the prayer group was an important part of my life, I was still determined to keep Rome at bay.

The group was run by a core group of nine people. Two leaders took turns giving weekly talks. At the end of my first year, one of the leaders had to start working nights. Because of my enthusiastic participation in the group I was asked to take his place. I wasn't sure if I wanted to, but eventually I accepted and looked forward to serving.

My co-leader, although a Catholic, had some Fundamentalist leanings. At first this wasn't much of a problem. But then a couple from another prayer group made their home with us. They were also Catholics with Fundamentalist leanings-and a little more vocal in expressing their objections to Catholicism. They had a great deal of influence over my co-leader and he gradually drifted further into the Fundamentalist camp. Many of their arguments against the Church seemed scripturally based, so I also began to move toward Fundamentalism. In time I made the decision-once again-to leave the Catholic Church.

Truth Takes Precedence

While I was in the process of picking a Fundamentalist church, a curious thing happened. I was visiting some relatives who were ex-Catholics. One of them made a sarcastic comment about my being Catholic. The insulting tone caused me to become defensive. Rather than tell them of my decision to leave the Church, I started defending it. Amazingly I was able to answer most of their objections. I wrote down the ones I couldn't and promised to get back to them.

On the ride home I began to think about what had just happened. I had decided to leave the Catholic Church, and yet I could effectively argue why I should stay. It was beginning to dawn on me that convenience had become more important than truth. This had to change. I didn't want to be one of the people spoken of in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths."

I happened to have a copy of "The Faith of Millions" by Fr. John O'Brien. I opened it and began to examine the arguments for the Catholic faith. As I researched each issue, I had to admit that the Church was right in what she taught. I may not have always liked those teachings, but I couldn't honestly say they were wrong.

I was fortunate enough to attend the first Defending the Faith Conference at the University of Steubenville. I was absolutely inspired. I felt as though I had received my draft notice. Two things really stuck in my mind. One was Karl Keating saying that anyone can defend the faith, and the other was Fr. Mitch Pacwa saying that if we wanted to defend the faith we would need to get some calluses on our butts (sit down and study).

And so I began to study. I subscribed to This Rock and the Catholic Answer. I began buying books on apologetics. Karl Keating's "Fundamentalism and Catholicism" was a tremendous help. Professor Mark Miriville's "Introduction to Mary" did an excellent job in illuminating the Marian issues that so many people struggle with.

An Apologist Sallies Forth

Then one Sunday I went to mass at a Roman-rite Church. To my surprise I felt like I was home. My hostility toward Rome had somehow passed, so I came back to the Roman-rite. This upset the Traditionalists in my family. In response to some of their objections, I did something I had never done before: I started reading the documents of Vatican II. Boy was I surprised. Taken in context, there was nothing objectionable in them. In fact, with a little investigation, I was able to show that some of the so-called innovations of the council were actually long standing Catholic teachings.

Meanwhile, back at the prayer group, the Fundamentalist rhetoric was increasing. I wrote a series of short essays that demonstrated the Scriptural basis for Catholic teaching. Unfortunately I was too late. Eventually what was left of the group moved to a Protestant Church in a neighboring town. I decided I needed to become more involved in apologetics. And so with a "Remember the Alamo" kind of attitude, I began to do more than just study.

Back in the early 90's This Rock invited readers to send in their names and contact information for publication. In this way people who were interested in apologetics could contact one another and work together. I called everyone on the list who lived within a hundred miles of me. We met for a while and even debated fundamentalists on local-access TV. We planned parish seminars. We also wanted to find others who were interested in apologetics so that we could study together and take meaningful action in defense of the Church. However, the fact that we lived so far apart was a problem. So we ended up going our separate ways. But it wasn't the end of my foray into apologetics.

Shortly after buying my first computer, I discovered a Catholic message board and quickly joined one of the debates. That led me into the world of internet apologetics. A website soon followed, and my essays and I have been very busy ever since.

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