

CROSSING THE TIBER: WHAT'S DRIVING THE EVANGELICAL EXODUS TO ROME?

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I. INTRODUCTION

A book released in February 2016 by the Roman Catholic Ignatius Press is entitled *Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Path to Rome*.¹ The back cover of the book states:

Over the course of a single decade, dozens of students, alumni, and professors from a conservative, Evangelical seminary in North Carolina (Southern Evangelical Seminary) converted to Catholicism. These conversions were notable as they occurred among people with varied backgrounds and motivations—many of whom did not share their thoughts with one another until this book was produced. Even more striking is that the seminary's founder, long-time president, and popular professor, Dr. Norman Geisler, had written two full-length books and several scholarly articles criticizing Catholicism from an Evangelical point of view.

What could have led these seminary students, and even some of their professors, to walk away from their Evangelical education and risk losing their jobs, ministries, and even family and friends, to embrace the teachings they once rejected as false or even heretical? Speculation over this phenomenon has been rampant and often dismissive and misguided—leading to more confusion than understanding. The stories of these converts are now being told by those who know them best—the converts themselves.

They discuss the primary issues they had to face: the nature of the biblical canon, the identification of Christian orthodoxy, and the problems with the Protestant doctrines of sola scriptura (“scripture alone”) and sola fide (“faith alone”).

One of the chapters of the book is authored by a young man who twelve years ago led worship for our church and received financial support from us while attending Southern Evangelical Seminary. What are the things that drew him and other evangelicals to “cross the Tiber” and become Roman Catholic?

II. CROSSING THE TIBER

Francis J. Beckwith, President of the Evangelical Theological Society from 2005 to 2007 and currently Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies at Baylor University,

¹ I draw the material for this paper from primarily two sources: *Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome*, ed. Douglas M. Beaumont (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016) and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, First Image Book Books, 1995). I will henceforth reference them as *EE* and *CCC*.

converted to Roman Catholicism in 2007. In the foreword to *Evangelical Exodus*, he relates:

After decades of assimilating Catholic thought in my spiritual pilgrimage without realizing it, and with the help of some Catholic friends who posed to me just the right questions with just the right degree of gentle prodding, I had been brought to the outer bank of the Tiber.²

His favorable view of the Roman Catholic claim to historical continuity and institutional unity led him to take “his first steps on the bridge that traversed those foreboding waters.”

The river Tiber is the main watercourse of the city of Rome. The Seven Hills of Rome lie east of the river. The Seven Hills are Aventine Hill, Caelian Hill, Capitoline Hill, Esquiline Hill, Palatine Hill, Quirinal Hill, and Viminal Hill. The Vatican Hill lies northwest of the Tiber and is not counted among the traditional Seven Hills. Ponte Sant’Angelo, a pedestrian bridge, crosses over close to the Vatican. Some converts employ the terms “swimming the Tiber” or “crossing the Tiber” to signify their conversion to Roman Catholicism.

III. WHAT’S DRIVING THE EVANGELICAL EXODUS TO ROME?

A. Departure from or Resistance to Faith Alone in Christ Alone for Eternal Life and the Study and Application of Scripture Alone for Faith and Practice

A departure from or a resistance to *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* may render an evangelical susceptible to the attraction or appeal of the Roman Catholic Church. *Sola scriptura*, Latin “by Scripture alone”, is the theological concept that the Bible is sufficient of itself to be the final authority for doctrine and spiritual practice. *Sola fide*, Latin “by faith alone”, is the theological concept that justification is by faith alone excluding all human works.

In Evangelicalism justification is seen as a judicial matter – God declares a believer righteous as a result of faith in Christ. In Catholicism justification is seen as a continuing process – God makes a believer righteous through the gift of faith that expresses itself in works of love which includes partaking of the sacraments which convey grace. Justification is initially conferred in Baptism and entails sanctification of one’s whole being.³

Evangelical Exodus contains appendices that attempt to refute the theological concepts of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. Most of the contributors to the book relate their difficulties with those two concepts. For example, Jeremiah Cohort expresses, “I have also never understood the Evangelical Protestant emphasis on the doctrine of *sola fide*

² *EE*: 9.

³ *CCC*: 1992, 1995.

because the “saved” inevitably do good works anyway.”⁴ Michael Mason writes of discussing with his wife his unease over the conflicting interpretations of Scripture found in Evangelicalism, “Our subsequent discussions led us to question the two fundamental guiding principles of the Protestant Reformation: sola scriptura and sola fide.”⁵

Evangelical academics who convert to Catholicism tend to write books attacking faith alone and Scripture alone. For example, Robert A. Sungenis wrote *Not by Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Queenship Publishing Company, 1997) and *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Queenship Publishing Company, 1998).⁶

B. Sevenfold Attraction or Appeal of the Roman Catholic Church

I metaphorically use the Seven Hills of Rome to describe the attraction or appeal of the Catholic Church. The prospective convert to the Catholic Church may appreciatively view the Vatican from one or more of these vantage points and then go down and “cross the Tiber.” Andrew Preslar after recounting the considerations that led him to Catholicism, states that the Church of Rome “exercised something like a magnetic pull upon me”.⁷

1. Hill of Infallible Authority – Church Magisterium

The Magisterium is the teaching authority of the Catholic Church vested in the Pope and the bishops. The Catechism states, “The supreme degree of participation in the authority of Christ is ensured by the charism of infallibility.”⁸

Douglas Beaumont, editor of *Evangelical Exodus*, writes of “Surveying the Tiber” from this vantage point:

Catholicism began working its way into my life in the early days of seminary. Another student had briefly sat in on a couple of classes, and one night he and I spent over an hour discussing problems of biblical interpretation. He could not seem to get past the fact that otherwise good Christians could not seem to agree on what the Bible teaches. I assured him that with proper hermeneutics and good philosophy, correct results were attainable. He asked how we could know what counted as proper hermeneutics and good philosophy apart from the Bible itself. Each time I suggested some other safeguard to accurate biblical interpretation, I was met with the same basic problems: How can we know which of the numerous competing claims to accurate biblical interpretation were correct? Eventually this exhausting conversation simply petered out, but it stayed in the back of my mind for some time.⁹

⁴ EE: 79.

⁵ EE: 127.

⁶ For a good response to Sungenis’s arguments against justification by faith alone apart from works see Bob Wilkin, “A Response to Robert Sungenis’s *Not by Faith Alone*”, *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 2003.

⁷ EE: 183.

⁸ CCC: 2035.

⁹ EE: 26.

Eventually Beaumont comes to see the Catholic Church as the only infallible authority for knowing and interpreting the Word of God. He chooses in the words of Thomas Aquinas to adhere “to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule.”¹⁰

The *Catechism* unequivocally asserts:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome. . . . [The] faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms.¹¹

Beaumont and the other contributors of *Evangelical Exodus* argue that the infallible authority of the Church is needed to determine the canon of Scripture and the tenets of orthodoxy. Without that there is interpretive chaos and church disunity. Can the canon of Scripture simply be determined by the tests of canonicity independent of the pronouncements of a “universal” council such as the Council of Trent? Can the tenets of orthodoxy be established by the study of the Scriptures alone? The fact that historical support for the canon of Scripture and some tenets of orthodoxy can be gained from the Church Fathers and theologians does not make the Catholic Church the infallible authority for these matters – that is a leap from support to determiner. It is God not the Church that gave us the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21).

2. *Hill of Historical Continuity – Apostolic Succession*

Closely tied to the appeal of infallible authority is the appeal of historical continuity. The *Catechism* asserts:¹²

In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority. Indeed, the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time.

This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes. . . .

The Father’s self-communication made through his Word in the Holy Spirit, remains present and active in the Church: God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son.

¹⁰ *EE*: 46-47.

¹¹ *CCC*: 85, 87.

¹² *CCC*: 77, 78, 79.

Thus, not only does the Church have the infallible unique authority to know and interpret the written Scriptures, she also infallibly transmits Tradition and continues to receive divine revelation. Apostolic succession makes all that possible.

Beaumont wants to “identify the Church objectively—by looking at whom the original apostles ordained to continue the Church’s authoritative functions (and whom they, in turn, ordained and so forth).”¹³ He finds that in the Catholic Church.

Did the apostles ordain bishops to continue their authoritative functions and is there a historically demonstrable line of succession from the first century apostles to the present? The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) but there is no biblical support for the apostles imparting an infallible spiritual authority through the laying on of hands to an unending line of bishops beginning with the bishop of Rome. Rome ultimately appeals to Tradition to support apostolic succession.

3. *Hill of Institutional Unity – Unified, Universal, and Visible Church*

The *Catechism* asserts:¹⁴

The sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.

Beaumont argues, “How could we evangelicals claim to have unity if we disagreed on so much?”¹⁵ He goes on to state:

I was convinced that the Church that Jesus founded had to be both authoritative and objectively identifiable. That meant it was unified, universal, and visible.¹⁶

Beaumont and other contributors to *Evangelical Exodus* are drawn to the Catholic Church by the appeal of its institutional unity. Did Jesus pray for the church’s institutional unity in this age or simply its spiritual unity by virtue of the baptism and sealing of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 10:13; Eph 1:13-14; 4:4-6)? I have a spiritual unity with all who believe the promise of Jesus for eternal life and are children of God (John 1:12).

4. *Hill of Spiritual Tangibility – Sacraments, Liturgy, Statues, etc.*

Betancourt relates the appeal that spiritual tangibility has for him: “There I was, in front of a life-size statue of Jesus at a rural parish in Northern California—my eyes fixed on

¹³ EE: 39.

¹⁴ CCC: 870.

¹⁵ EE: 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid*: 34.

his, and his seemingly on mine. . . . This encounter felt real: this Jesus whom I had read and sung about in Sunday school was standing before me.”¹⁷ He goes on to write:

I came to the conclusion that Protestant Evangelicalism is devoid of the spiritual resources that God intended to help regulate our concupiscence (or disordered passions). The truth is that we have a human nature that is wounded by sin, and God has provided us with the means to receive healing: the sacraments. Evangelicals are known for encouraging other believers “to be more like Jesus”, but the only way to do this is to partake of the divine nature (becoming more like God) through the sacraments, by which we receive the very life of God into our souls (2 Pet 1:8).¹⁸

Cowart asks of Evangelicalism: “Where is the liturgy? Where is the real presence of Christ with his people? ... Where are the aesthetics? ... Protestantism is paltry, and this paltriness just kept me searching for something more.”¹⁹

Dahm writes that “participating in Catholic spirituality gave existential confirmation of church teaching.” He explains concerning Eucharistic adoration:

Eucharistic adoration is a time when the host is exposed—is visible—so that people can come pray in its presence. Remember, the Eucharist is not just a symbol but is Christ himself. So think of adoration as going to spend time with Jesus. My first adoration was a powerful experience.”²⁰

The *Catechism* states,

Christ manifests, makes present and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, “until he comes.”²¹

Christian liturgy not only recalls the events that saved us but actualizes them, makes them present.²²

The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments. There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.²³

The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament.²⁴

Beaumont writes appreciatively of “incense, holy water, candles, pictures, statues, bells, chants, and even physical movement”. He states, “These things were designed to

¹⁷ EE: 49.

¹⁸ EE: 62.

¹⁹ EE: 80.

²⁰ EE: 103.

²¹ CCC: 1076

²² CCC: 1104.

²³ CCC: 1210.

²⁴ CCC: 1131.

engage the whole person, while Evangelicalism, I saw, limited faith expressions to between-the-ears activity.”²⁵ He continues to write depreciatively of Evangelicals, “Evangelical ‘liturgy’ typically consisted of a few songs, a long-winded sermon, and nothing else.”²⁶ He writes of himself, “For my part, I quickly learned to appreciate . . . the tactual worship services that respected our nature as embodied beings.”²⁷

Can believers have a spiritual vitality apart from ubiquitous sensual experiences? Can we “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7)?

5. *Hill of Kingdom Theology – Mission to Serve Justice and Peace as Kingdom of Christ*

The *Catechism* states:²⁸

Christians have to distinguish between the growth of the Reign of God and the progress of the culture and society in which they are involved. This distinction is not a separation. Man’s vocation to eternal life does not suppress, but actually reinforces, his duty to put into action in this world the energies and means received from the Creator to serve justice and peace.

Among notable factors that influenced his embrace of the Catholic Church, Brian Mathews cites “the Church’s being the largest charitable organization on earth” and “the Church’s leading the way in defending vital moral and social issues”.²⁹

6. *Hill of Philosophical Theology – e.g., Thomism*

In the foreword of *Evangelical Exodus*, Beckwith asks “How is it possible that such an august group of Catholic converts can arise from one small Evangelical seminary in one geographical region of the United States over only a few short years?”³⁰ He answers that one of the reasons was that the founder of Southern Evangelical Seminary Norman Geisler is a self-described Evangelical Thomist who found the views of Thomas Aquinas on God, faith and reason, natural theology, epistemology, metaphysics, and anthropology congenial to his Evangelical faith. Geisler rejects those parts of Aquinas’ thoughts that embrace Catholic doctrines, but his love of Aquinas inspired his students to investigate Aquinas’ body of work with greater depth and less antipathy to Catholicism.

Brandon Dahm writes, “What I loved about apologetics was the philosophy involved.” He then states, “Through Geisler, we became Thomists; that is, we took Aquinas as a

²⁵ *EE*: 35.

²⁶ *EE*: 36.

²⁷ *EE*: 36

²⁸ *CCC*: 2820.

²⁹ *EE*: 161.

³⁰ *EE*: 13-14.

philosophical guide. This meant that I had to respect Aquinas as a thinker, which required me at least to try to give his theology a fair hearing.”³¹

Betancourt writes of “Meeting the ‘A-Team’” Aquinas, Anselm, and Augustine”.³² He found himself drawn to Catholicism through his exposure to Catholic philosophers and theologians in his studies in Apologetics and Philosophy at SES.

Betancourt does point out that in an unpublished article in 2014, “Does Thomism Lead to Catholicism?” Geisler argues that there is no logical connection between embracing Thomism and converting to Catholicism. Valuing Aquinas’ natural theology does not obligate one to embrace his Catholic theology. The argument that if one accepts part of Aquinas’ teaching one must accept all is a philosophical fallacy.

7. Hill of Mystical Spirituality – Contemplative Practices

The Catholic Church has a contemplative tradition that enables a mystical spirituality – a spirituality that supposedly can bring about a direct experience of God and the possibility of hearing from God.³³ Betancourt finds the contemplative practices of the Catholic Church appealing:

The Catholic is equipped with a variety of prayers and spiritual exercises, such as sacramentals, meditation, and contemplative prayers. I was accustomed to praying only extemporaneously as an Evangelical. I deepened my prayer life with the Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet, which encourage the faithful to meditate on the lives of Jesus and Mary (in the Rosary) and on the mercy of Jesus (in the Divine Mercy Chaplet).³⁴

Contemplative practices are not found in the Bible. The Bible presents prayer as words and thoughts expressed by us to God. Nowhere in the Bible are believers encouraged to seek mystical experiences through meditative exercises.

IV. PRESCRIPTION TO COUNTER THE APPEAL

- A. Affirm faith alone in Christ alone for eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47).**
- B. Ascribe to the authority of Scripture alone for faith and practice – Be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 2:1-4; 2 Peter 3:14-18).**
- C. Adopt a simple spiritual life of devotion and obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Colossians 2:8).**

³¹ EE: 86-87.

³² EE: 52.

³³ The CCC devotes two sections to Meditation and Contemplative Prayer: 2705 – 2719.

³⁴ EE: 69.