

You Converted to What?

One Mennonite's Journey

Gerald W. Schlabach

At Pentecost 2004, I made a small yet formidable step in my life of Christian discipleship. Having considered myself a “Catholic Mennonite” for years, I entered into full communion with the Roman Church and became what I think of as a “Mennonite Catholic.” Catholic friends were gratified but puzzled. After all, this might not have seemed an auspicious time to join the church. The body blow of the sexual-abuse scandals; a shortage of priests that has left many parishes without regular Eucharists; a gnawing generation gap between incoming priests and the generation trained in the glow of Vatican II. “Thank you for joining us,” my friends’ faces read. “But why now?”

Christian apologists—ancient and new, Catholic or otherwise—too often provide answers in defense of the faith that really only work for those already convinced of the faith. So I would like to offer nine “non-Roman” reasons to be a Roman Catholic. They are not standard explanations of, say, Marian doctrine or papal authority, but reasons that simply grow from meditating on Scripture, on the vicissitudes of church history, and, above all, on the faithfulness of God.

1. From the Hebrew Scriptures. Disappointment with God’s people has a long and storied history. Ever since the call of Abraham, God has endeavored to form a people faithful in witnessing to all nations and peoples. These people are not always faithful, of course, yet God always remains a covenant-keeping God. God sends prophets to chastise the people’s unfaithfulness, but never to undo or delegitimize the covenant. God

perennially calls the people back to life in that relationship.

As a Mennonite, I grew up in a tradition of principled dissent from “mainstream,” “established,” “Constantinian” Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic. So I share deep sympathy with Catholics who are sorely tempted to leave the church. Frustration with institutional inertia and self-serving clericalist policies, doubts about whether Rome is following through on its Vatican II commitment to full participation of the laity in the life of the church, concern that the pope has not consulted more fully with bishops around the world and those better attuned to local churches and their cultural and pastoral needs—plenty of issues can try one’s faith.

Over many years, however, the witness of Catholics who have remained with their church through difficult times strengthened my own commitment to the Mennonite Church. Particularly striking and inviting has been the witness of Catholic “dissidents” and their dogged loyalty. As grateful as I remain for the charism of the Mennonite tradition, the old reformers’ justifications for leaving the ancient church eventually lost their grip on me, even as Catholic faithfulness made a deep impression.



CHARLOT

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2. From the New Testament. Jesus was a Jew. Of course, as St. Paul put it in Romans 5, Christ died for us all, even while we remained God's enemies. From this affirmation flows the gospel ethic of Jesus' nonviolent love, a love extended even to enemies. That confession has animated the Mennonite tradition in a remarkable way, for which I am grateful. Further, all Christians today join in the Pauline proclamation of grace and the light it shines on the all-sufficient faithfulness of God in Christ that animated Luther and Calvin. Among my most unexpected discoveries, however, is that Catholic sacramentalism holds all of these together.

In Jesus Christ, God has surely done the unexpectedly new. In calling his disciples, Jesus proclaims that all who do the will of God are his brothers, sisters, and mother. Jesus then sends them as apostles among the nations to call all families into the faith of Abraham. Thus God subordinates tribal, national, and other forms of organic loyalty, which so often depend on the making of enemies to maintain a distinctive identity. So are we justified by grace through faith and made into a new family of God.

Yet Jesus is still a Jew, and in the redemption he offers, our flesh-and-blood human bonds are also redeemed. The stuff that makes us who we are in this world—the wheat and corn, the wine and the waters that give Jesus fish to multiply, the love of parent and child, the roots in land and neighborhood—are transformed into hosts for the real presence of Christ. This too is grace. This too is reconciliation.

3. “As we forgive those who sin against us.” Central to Mennonite faith and self-understanding is a sense that the work of God in Jesus Christ is preeminently one of reconciling broken relationships with God, with neighbors, and even with enemies. The memory of sixteenth-century persecution at the hands of both Catholics and Protestants runs deep in the Mennonite psyche. But a Mennonite witness to the nonviolent love of God—extending even to enemies and reconciling what has been broken by sin—will fall short if it becomes the basis for defining ourselves in opposition to other Christians. We Mennonites cannot pray “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” if we do not live out this peacemaking vocation by reconnecting with the historic church from which we emerged.

I do not ask my Mennonite brothers and sisters to rejoin the Catholic communion quickly or *en masse*. Mennonite peace-builders around the world know that their task is long and arduous; peacemaking differs from war-making precisely in its refusal to adopt quick or simplistic solutions. What I ask is this: Please recognize that for some of us, exploring how to be Mennonites in full communion with the Catholic Church is itself a living out of our faith.

4. Church authority in a patristic mode. Sooner or later, any thinking Christian in the modern era must come to terms with the claims of tradition and authority. For help, we may turn again to Jewish precedents. Here the authority of the

Talmud is not sharply univocal. Rather, the Talmud authoritatively canonizes a complex and sometimes rancorous ongoing debate among trustworthy rabbinical voices who do not all agree, yet all are considered legitimate interpreters of the Torah.

Taken as a whole and traced over centuries, the Catholic tradition has functioned in a surprisingly Talmudic fashion. The foundation for magisterial deliberation can be found in the writings of the church fathers. Though not so neatly and definitively packaged as the Talmud, the patristic corpus continues to function as Christianity's Talmud. Peter Abelard recognized this when he lined up selections from the fathers in his *Sic et Non*, which immersed students in the conversation of Christian theology by challenging them to reconcile apparent contradictions. Thomas Aquinas achieved the church's greatest theological synthesis of patristic thought, yet even he did not flatten out the conversation or turn it into a monologue; every article of his *Summa* proceeds in conversation with the most salient rival positions known at the time. Inadequate positions and outright heresies remain on the record, functioning like dissenting opinions in a Supreme Court judgment, and thus living on for future consideration.

The twentieth-century *ressourcement* that reached its climax in Vatican II, and that has done so much to reinvigorate Catholic theology, stands in deep continuity with this quasi-Talmudic patristic and Thomistic tradition. The carefully balanced nuances of almost all papal encyclicals hint that their own pronouncements are forged in just such conversation. In actual practice, then, the functioning of Catholic authority provides an organic, living alternative to the stultifying rigidities of both Enlightenment rationalism and rationalistic Protestant fundamentalism.

5. Better one pope than millions. Papal authority remains a sticking point for many Evangelicals and other Protestants—and I must admit that so far I have been able to live with papal authority but not as its ready defender. The problem that neither the mainline nor the radical Reformation has been able to solve, however, is the tendency to make every Christian into his or her own pope. This is the root of the very individualism that modern culture embraces, to the detriment of our civic and community life.

Paradoxical as it might seem, either to the Roman church's more vocal dissidents or to its resurgent ultramontanists, loyal dissenters within the church have done more than anyone else to propose Catholic alternatives to modern individualism. An Yves Congar, a Dorothy Day, or a Joan Chittister stays with the church despite frustrations—and does so precisely where Protestants would have the ready option to go church shopping or start yet another denomination. Such dogged loyalty witnesses to the virtues that every Christian communion needs if its members are to remain with one another long enough to discern God's will, both as local churches and as a global Christian community.

6. The coming of global Christianity. The reality of global Christianity is arguably the most significant development in the last two centuries of church history. The modern missionary movement has now planted Christian communities in all regions of the world. Furthermore, every major tradition that emerged from the sixteenth century now puts more resources into instituting structures of international Christian cooperation and communion than it does into guarding the doctrinal emphases that historically defined its identity. Looking back at Vatican II late in his life, Karl Rahner identified the coming of a truly global Christianity as the council's greatest recognition. He ventured that the council would come to mark a new epoch in Christian history, one against which sixteenth-century reformations will, in retrospect, pale in significance.

The ability of the bishop of Rome to set an agenda for global Christian conversation is no small resource. Certainly, the promise of Vatican II still needs to be fulfilled in a stable, creative, and vibrant relationship among the pope, the college of bishops, local churches, and the laity. But, with its millennia-old sense of being an international and not merely a territorial church, the Roman Church enjoys deep resources for becoming a truly global church. Only the day-by-day local ecclesiastical skirmishes prevent us from recognizing the church's epoch-making potential in this regard.

7. Catholicities and their mutual need. Though theologically erratic, Pentecostalism often seems to be the greatest force in global Christianity. With its free-church ecclesiology, its openness to the emergence of leadership from among the laity, and its vibrant missionary dynamic, some interpreters see Pentecostalism as a twentieth-century descendant of the Radical Reformation. While Pentecostal leaders might not use the language of "catholicity" to name the dynamic of their global movement, the free-church tradition that runs from the Anabaptists through twentieth-century Pentecostalism represents a kind of catholicity-from-below. Its faith is that as the Holy Spirit works to create and guide Christians from diverse cultures, classes, and backgrounds gathered around Scripture, the Spirit will be leading them "into all truth." Trusting that God is at work through this messy grass-roots catholicity-from-below takes faith of course—just like the faith Catholics sometimes need to trust that God's Spirit is speaking through the hierarchical institutions that represent catholicity-from-above.

Too often in church history, we have chosen one option at the expense of the other: messy Pentecostal vibrancy versus institutional continuity; free-church participation by all members versus accountability to longstanding apostolic traditions. The fact is, the renewal movements in the church with the most lasting impact are those that have joined catholicity-from-below with catholicity-from-above.

Four Sonnets by Marie Ponsot

Burn, or speak your mind. For the oak to untruss
its passion it must explode as fire or leaves.
The delicious tongue we speak with speaks us.
A liquor of sweetness where its root cleaves
ripens fluent, as it runs for the desirous
reason, the touching sense. The infant says, "I"
like earthquake and wavers as place takes voice.
Earth steadies smiling around her, in reply
to her finding of pronoun, her focal choice,
& waits: while sun sucks earth juices up from wry
root-runs tangled under dark, while the girl
no longer vegetal, steps into view
a moving speaker, an "I" the air whirls
toward the green exuberance of "You."

Only to themselves are the passionate
hot. To the objects of their passion they
are cold. What Yeats knew. They eradicate
what they notice; the thumb hard-crams the clay
impressionable under it, to lie flat,
apt to the shape a cold-steel scribe may
cut or spurn it to. Yet they know passion
must drown to ripen sweet & give fair play
to the whole life hot passion speeds us from.

Clay, be glass. Cling to the crystals of sand
that tell you, centuries of soil will come.
Not-heart, translate root-ends the planter's hand
cut & abandoned, to slow chrysanthemum.
Heart of felt life, drop your guard, be still, be slow,
easing all you long for toward all you know.

8. Meeting in exile. Old habits die hard. Whether Baptist, Mennonite, or Pentecostal, Christians in the free-church tradition remain deeply suspicious of “mainstream,” “institutional,” and “established” churches, of which the archetype is Roman Catholicism. For their part, Catholics, from bishops to prolife street activists, still have trouble imagining how they might faithfully evangelize the social order without creating an explicitly “Christian” culture—one dependent on quasi-Constantinian relations with the state.

Yet the Constantinian era is over; even conservative Catholic thinkers recognize this. Like it or not, our various Christian traditions are meeting in exile. My Anabaptist ancestors went into a similar exile when they concluded that magisterial Reformers and Catholic prelates alike were too beholden to the civil authorities. Now Catholics and mainline Protestants find that they can no longer depend on the good graces of the state or on the church’s cultural hegemony to promote their values and further their missions.

This realization is in fact a great opportunity, filled with exciting (albeit daunting) possibilities. The secularization of the West and the minority status of many Christians around the world should force Christians to recognize that we have always been a diaspora people. However great and proper may be our commitment to a cultural engagement that serves the earthly city, our homeland remains elsewhere. As Cyprian said, Christians can live as strangers even in

their own city precisely because “the whole of this world” is their home.

9. Enacted in the Eucharist. Both the eschatological “already” and the here-and-now “not yet” of everything I have written is made real and present in the Eucharist. In this time of great stress in Catholicism, Catholics continue to share the Eucharist with one another, even those they disagree with. St. Paul, of course, warned against partaking unworthily, in a spirit of bickering and competition for places of influence in the church. The way to come worthily to the table is to recognize that none are worthy—that none may boast of their own special rectitude when all find the source of life and salvation in Christ Jesus. Precisely as we embrace one another in the awareness that we are “not yet” the fully realized body of Christ, we nonetheless celebrate God “already” having completed salvation. All this converges in the Eucharist. It is bread for those making exodus, as we pause and rest amid the haste of flight from every captivity. It is also a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, where we will praise the victorious Lamb from every tribe, nation, and tongue. Above all, it is Christ made present: the Lord who becomes our servant, the guest who becomes our host, the broken one who becomes our unity, feeding us on the journey. But perhaps I am now beginning to give reasons that one can know only through participation itself. ■

The place of language is the place between me
and the worlds of presences I have lost
—complex country, not flat. Its elements free-
float, coherent, for luck to come across;
its lines curve as in a mental orrery
implicit with stars in active orbit,
only their slowness or swiftness lost to sense.
The will dissolves here. It becomes the infinite
air of imagination that stirs immense
among losses and leaves me less desolate.
It finds me spotting a sentence or a name,
telescoped, charted for recovery,
to say against the daily sinking flame
& the shrinking waters of the mortal sea.

Spelled out in the body, history is slow.
My label reads: cryptic amateur, adept
at dailyness. Crowsfeet, muscles, scars have kept
the record of waves rising then lying low:
Sun-squint breakfasts as foreplay. The intense
hungers of no funds. Tubs of linen sheeting
heavy, scrubbed and hung. Songs. Triumphs and
defeats.

The broken kitchen. Free-born words. A fence
of my own. The right to vote. The open air
of common walkways.

I read the

honey-striped
turn of body caught off guard, its full text ripe.
It gave birth to keep its word in good repair.
Grateful, grateful, my hand slow to turn the page
turns it, labeled grateful, already engaged.