

Title Page

A GIFT OF LOVE

The Joys and Treasures of a New Catholic

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To Father Guy Carriere,
a true son of St. Isidore of Seville
and my Sponsor,
to whose tough and tender love
Carolyn and I till be forever in debt

To the Most Rev. Thomas Collins,
Archbishop of Edmonton,
whose love for Jesus and whose desire to serve
only Him and His people are palpable

To Father Nestor Watin
and God's faithful people of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish
and
to Pastor Larry Soveran
and God's faithful people
of Zion Lutheran Church
in
Bashaw, Alberta
whom we love
and who love one another

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WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

It seems hardly possible that it was only a little over a year ago when a dear Anglican friend said to us on learning that we were about to become Catholics, “My prayer is that you will experience to the full all the riches of the Catholic Church.”

A Gift of Love is our testimony to the aptness of her kind and perceptive prayer which meant so much to us at that stressful time.

This little book is, in fact, saturated with love and thankfulness from start to finish. My hope is that all who read it will feel very loved and that God and all His saints will also accept it as a modest offering of my love in response to Theirs.

Perhaps only a neophyte can write a book like this, a simple Act of Thanksgiving for the new joys and treasures which Carolyn and I found waiting for us when, as life-long Christians who greatly appreciated our Lutheran heritage, we were drawn over the threshold into the universe of the Catholic Church. Some of these joys and treasures were anticipated, but many of them came as surprises.

It is struggle enough under the best of circumstances to be a faithful follower of Jesus and member of the household of God in these God-denying times. But now our hearts go out to our beloved Protestant brothers and sisters whose struggle we have come to realize has been made so much more difficult for them by the loss of many of the treasures of grace entrusted to the Catholic Church. If any reader finds this statement offensive, I ask your forgiveness and beseech you to withhold judgement until you have prayerfully considered what I have to share with you in these pages.

Indeed, my hope is that every Christian who reads this book, both Catholic and non-Catholic, will experience joy. Everything it celebrates is, after all, evidence of the goodness and love of our God. Catholics should experience joy in the reminder that even in these years of turmoil and chaos new Catholics can find such blessing in coming into the Catholic Church. Non-Catholics might well experience joy in the awareness that if they are afraid that their particular Protestant expression of the faith may prove unequal to the task of living out the Gospel in the face of the corrosive power of evil in the world, there is an alternative to despair and bitterness! As a non-Catholic I myself was often consoled, for example, by the mere thought of a Pope John Paul II even when I dismissed the Petrine office as a pious fabrication, and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, even when I resisted embracing her as the Mother of the faithful, and of a Mother Teresa of Calcutta even when I was put off by her piety. Those Catholics who seem so envious of Protestants have little sense of the extent to which Protestants truly depend

on them. This is not surprising inasmuch as many Protestants have never acknowledged this dependency to themselves.

Now, as the tribute of a Catholic neophyte there are some things this modest book cannot be.

It cannot be a believable “apologia”, a defense of the faith against its detractors.

It cannot be a blow-by-blow description of the tortuous path that led us at length into the Catholic Church, although such a description could easily be distilled from notes and journal entries reaching back for 35 years or more.

Nor can this book be a “What’s Right with the Catholic Church”. No neophyte can pretend to speak credibly on that subject.

Still less can this be a detailed theological treatment of each of the treasures for which we shall here give thanks one by one. A good place to begin for that kind of treatment is The Catechism of the Catholic Church, now available everywhere.

Moreover, in lifting up these treasures of the Church I am not attempting thereby to gloss over the sin, the moral failures, the ugliness, the pettiness, the abuses, the sordid episodes in her history, the times when the Holy has been and still is being trivialized, or the battles over the host of contemporary “-isms” that wound the Church and sap her strength. Far from it! But over against these grim realities her treasures stand out all the more brilliantly. Perhaps it takes a neophyte to point out this all-too-obvious fact both to jaded and battle-weary Catholics and to outsiders exposed only to the scandals that make the headlines.

And one thing more.

Perhaps this book can also serve as a love gift to Catholics and Protestants in another sense. A new Catholic who has been a life-long Lutheran soon becomes acutely aware of some amazing misunderstandings that run in both directions, unspoken assumptions that can be both misleading and dangerous if they are not exposed and acknowledged.

Catholics, for example, tend to take for granted much of what is in this book, and they assume that it is part of the universal Christian patrimony shared by all who name the Name of Christ. They would be alarmed to discover how untrue this assumption is. Their dialogue with Protestants, both formal and informal, would never be quite the same again. Not that it would be less loving or less willing to affirm common ground in Christ and a common call to His redeeming mission in the world, but rather less naïve, more cautious, much more appreciative of the limitations faced by any

Protestant who wants to be faithful to Jesus from within his/her own particular heritage

Protestants, on the other hand, tend to take it for granted that nothing important was lost and much was gained by them through the Reformation. It is a major breakthrough for Protestants to come to realize that they have anything at all to learn from Catholics. “Nous n’avons rien à apprendre des catholiques” (We have nothing to learn from Catholics) is how one of my seminary professors, a renowned historical theologian! expressed the mind of most of his fellow-Protestants in the early 1960’s and of many of them to this very day. Dialogue can be good, as they see it, because Catholics might learn something from Protestants at last.

This little book will challenge both of these assumptions. It will surprise Catholics to discover how much of their world is all but absent from any Protestant outlook. It may well shock Protestants to learn that, for all the undeniable benefits of the Reformation, it also bequeathed to them a great and manifold impoverishment, an obsession with one part of the total picture which has led to a debilitating blindness to most of the rest of the picture.

This is not to say that Catholics have nothing to learn from Protestants. This point is too obvious to belabour. Indeed, some would argue that in recent decades Catholics in some settings have been all too willing to “learn” from Protestants! If they are correct, then, as we see it, it’s high time for the flow to reverse, for the good of all.

This is not easy. Liberal Protestantism especially seems to have invented “political correctness”, whereas the Catholic Church in our time seems to be stuck in perpetual political incorrectness, with all the derision which this entails, as well as the difficulty in getting a serious hearing from her “cultured despisers”. Indeed, it turns out to be the Catholic treasures themselves which keep the Church at odds with so much of contemporary culture, whereas it is the Protestant impoverishments that make it easy for many Protestants to embrace causes just because they are politically correct. This also explains why those Protestants who cannot bring themselves to embrace such causes feel so very alienated from their own church and so helpless.

Moreover, this is the very reason why many Protestants are afraid of the Catholic Church and why some Catholics are ashamed of it. Some Catholics, deeply embroiled in the perhaps jaded by the internal battles that have from the earliest times tarnished the Church’s life and witness, will, if they both to read this book at all, be tempted to regard it as puerile idealism. But I invite them to read on and at the conclusion of each chapter to ask themselves these two questions: 1) Is there substance and truth in the point made in this chapter? And 2), Does this not give me reason to be deeply thankful to be a child of the Catholic Church?

Well then, what are some of these “treasures”?

Before we try to look at them one by one, the reader needs to know that in these pages s/he is in the presence of a little child, a little child exploring in wonder the world round about. It is a world in which almost everything on which the eye alights seems marvelous and unique. Whatever the author may have been, or have been held to be in the past, there is literal truth these days for him in Jesus’ words about being converted and becoming like a child (Matthew 18:3). Surveying the world from this vantage point once again after more than half a century, he hardly knows where to begin to describe what he is seeing. But like a little child, and like St. John the Seer before him (Revelation 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, etc.), he has to give it a try anyhow.

This truly is a gift of love from him to God and, he hopes, to you. And it is a source of great joy to him that Carolyn, his wife and soulmate, joins him in giving it.

Joseph R. Jacobson
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CHAPTER ONE

Saturated with Scripture

One of the first things that come as a real surprise to most Protestants is the degree to which the life of a practicing Catholic is saturated with Scripture. This is doubly true of Catholic leaders whether ordained, consecrated, or lay. This fact fully accounts for why Catholic leaders think and speak in scriptural categories so naturally and so consistently and why they mistakenly assume that their Protestant counterparts in ecumenical dialogues and gatherings must be thinking in them, too.

On the whole, Catholic leaders have as little idea of how “fringe” scriptural thinking is in the daily life of the average Protestant leader as Protestant leaders have of how central and shaping it is in the daily life of the average Catholic leader. After all, aren’t Protestants the “Word Alone” people, and aren’t Catholics all bogged down in rituals and tradition?

Ironically, it turns out that the Church’s commitment to Tradition has kept the Word central for Catholics and their leaders, whereas it has been the disdain of Tradition which has allowed the Word to slip away almost unnoticed from its central place in the daily life of most Protestant leaders.

To be saturated is to be filled with as much of something as you can hold. How does it happen that Catholic leaders are saturated with Scripture to the point where they instinctively think and respond in scriptural categories?

Chalk one up for Tradition!

There is nothing that requires Protestant leaders to expose themselves to more than one text per week, the sermon text for Sunday. I have discovered over the years that this is in fact the usual case, not the exception. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly common to treat that one text as a pretext for the preacher’s personal agenda, detached from the context and overall message of Scripture. It is much easier to slip into this pattern if you are encountering only one text per week instead of the dozen or so per day which Catholic Tradition mandates of its ordained ministers and its consecrated religious.

In fact, the daily Scriptural fare of Catholic leaders could not stand in sharper contrast to the fare of their Protestant counterparts. They celebrate the Eucharist every day, each celebration with its own set of appointed scripture texts and its own homily based on them. In addition, the Office of Readings combined with either Morning Prayer or

both, is standard daily fare, replete with Psalms, Canticles from Old and New Testament, and both long and short Scripture lessons. On top of this, the Office of Readings includes some of the most stimulating and perceptive reflections on these passages produced by saints and scholars of the whole Christian era. All of these are embedded in the framework of the prayer and adoration of the universal Church.

From a Protestant perspective this is truly remarkable. It means that Catholic leaders come face to face with the revelation of God in the midst of human history repeatedly on a daily basis in the context of focused worship and attentive listening. But most of all it means that these leaders are being shaped and reshaped continually so that they can serve as vehicles for the shaping and reshaping of the entire faithful Community. Immersed in the fallen world which they are called to love and serve, they are constantly being transformed in heart and mind by the Word and Sacraments of God, so that their vision for people and the world is renewed ever and again by God's vision for people and the world.

What impresses a new Catholic is the large number of Catholic leaders about whom the foregoing is an accurate description, not the small number of them about whom it is not. The new Catholic has in all likelihood been used to life in a church body in which the ratio is very different, and the difference is really obvious. Other Catholics seem to take it as a matter of course that their bishops, priests and deacons will be saturated with Scripture. They do not accuse them, as Protestants often do their devout leaders, of being in the pietist fringe because of it. Catholics expect to find their kind of leadership at the very centre of the Church. They pray for God to grant the Church "holy vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life", little suspecting that such a prayer in most Protestant settings would be regarded as quaint at best, if not downright dangerous. But for Catholics it is what leadership in Christ's Church is all about.

So, though there are plenty of lay Catholics who are not as saturated with Scripture as they could and should be, at least they are likely to have spiritual leaders who are really at home in the environment of the Word of God and are not likely to mislead them on that account.

We have found that for many new Catholics, accustomed as they have become over the years to a more or less secularized clergy, whether liberal or conservative, evangelical or charismatic, this is a brand-new experience. Have you ever noticed that even "secularized" Catholic priests seem to be steeped in the Word of God in contrast to their Protestant counterparts?

There's a reason for it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mark of the Supernatural

I read an article recently which pointed out that one of the distinguishing marks of the Catholic Church is that it views all of life from a supernatural perspective. This most assuredly does distinguish the Catholic Church from what typical Protestantism has become. It explains why the average Catholic is more at home in the world view of a Bach Church Cantata than is the typical Lutheran these days.

Perhaps this Catholic perspective comes from being so steeped in Scripture and so rooted in the long Tradition of the Church, perhaps from having continual access to so many ways of maintaining a vital link to the realm of the spirit and to the Church Suffering and Triumphant (as we shall gratefully note in due course). Some non-Catholics are drawn to the Church by its unfailingly supernatural perspective, some are strongly repelled by it, and some even envy it from a safe distance. But few can ignore it. For a new Catholic it is almost like breathing the air of Heaven.

The whole world gets some exposure on a regular basis to the Church's supernatural view of all things through the eyes of Christ whose mystical extension in time and space she knows herself to be. Every time people like the Holy Father, Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Bishop Bilo and their like make public utterances, the world is exposed to a striking alternative view of reality. It is a view that is hard to ignore, even though it defies the logic of the age, because it is uttered by people whose relationship to our age has been so wholesome and admirable. They are a real puzzle for many. It is clear to all that the Reality out of which they and the Church are living extends way beyond this world, and yet that Reality seems to be the very reason why their lives touch this world in such an extraordinarily effective way.

This jars the sensibilities of the largely secularized public which has been taught to write off those who "are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good". What's going on here with these heavenly-minded Catholics?

Meanwhile, many faithful rank and file Protestants wonder why their own spiritual leaders don't act and talk like that, while others write them off when they try to.

It is the way the supernatural perspective distinguishes the entire Church from top to bottom and inside out that astonishes the new Catholic, especially if you have come from a mainline Protestant milieu. And if you have been trying to survive in that milieu with a consistent

supernatural perspective akin to that of Jesus, Paul or Luther, it is also a huge relief. Just as you have always known it ought be, you find here that the Church which lives vitally connected to the Kingdom of Heaven and the realm of the spirit receives an irrepressible crucifixion and resurrection energy for bringing healing to the many woes of the world. The source of the Church's resilience and indomitable hope in this world is precisely her life in God, her connection to the supernatural.

What are the first signs of the supernatural that strike a new Catholic on entering the Church?

First, there is the reverence for the Holy. Many Catholics lament the erosion of this reverence in North America and Europe over the past several decades. But to a former Protestant, what remains of it is manna to the soul: The holy water that marks you as you enter and leave the church, the genuflecting before the eucharistic Jesus in the Tabernacle, the kneeling, the sign of the cross, the votive candles, the silence before worship, the mystery of the Mass, even the prayers of the faithful for priests who before all else are holy men.

Then there is the vivid communal awareness of God (and the angels and saints!) that you have been used to finding only around the edges of modern Protestantism, in populist renewal movements or elitist liturgical societies. Here it is, at the very heart of the Church and in every part of it, offered to all in the same integrated and "natural" way that Jesus embodied and offered it to all.

You see it immediately also in the fearless way in which moral and ethical issues are assessed from a consistently supernatural vantage point. Accountability to God takes precedence over all lesser considerations in the knowledge that only thus are the best interests of people truly served. And so a Mother Teresa can say to a President Clinton at a White House sponsored Prayer Breakfast, "It is a very great poverty to decide that a child must die so that you may live as you wish." When almost no one else is willing or perhaps able to tackle issues like abortion, euthanasia, marriage, suffering, sexual morality, birth control, and family life in any way that challenges individuals to consider the good of others ahead of their own, the Catholic Church keeps pressing the prior claim of God on us for our own greater good and the greater good of all.

And the Pope keeps canonizing new saints! He keeps telling the Church and the world that there are people like us who are now closer to God than we are and who are eager to help and guide us on our way to God. He tells us how they have demonstrated their ability to do this through a rigorous screening process which involves, among other thing, verifiable miracles of intervention. There are thousands of them, and Catholics

turn to them as naturally as a Protestant might turn to a trusted neighbour for help. Talk about a supernatural perspective!

There's another thing you notice right away. You seldom have to wonder whether the Church press is going to make every effort to present the viewpoint of the Kingdom of God or is going to end up apologizing for it because it doesn't suit the mood of the times. A variety of views will be aired in the Church press, but in our experience there is never any doubt left about the Church's commitment to God's revealed will as expressed through the Church's Teaching Authority ordained by Christ. A strong sense of accountability to Christ and to His apostles in our time pervades the overall outlook and dispels any fear of being "politically incorrect" in the eyes of the world. The Church press, as we have come to know it, gives good coverage to special interest groups, but seeks to draw them into the larger picture, again for their own good and the good of all. This is a fair and healthy approach that honours both the Church's nature as community and her supernatural call. This may not seem like much to a long-time Catholic, but to us it has been a source of amazement and relief.

In the following chapters you will also find many other distinctive expressions of the Catholic Church's supernatural perspective on all aspects of life. I hope as we consider each of them in turn you will sense some of the joy and thanksgiving that fill our hearts.

CHAPTER THREE

The Shepherd Who Speaks for Jesus

“You are Peter (Rock), and on this rock I will build My Church,” Jesus said to Simon Bar-Jona. (Matthew 16:17)

And Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Feed My lambs Tend My Sheep.” (John 21:15ff.)

“You are Peter. Feed My lambs.”

This chapter celebrates what it means to this former Lutheran to belong now to the Church that sees herself as the flock whose Chief Undershepherd has for nearly 2000 years heard these words of Jesus as directed specifically to him.

The contrast is stark. These days most Protestant leaders have trouble speaking publicly about Jesus, and none would presume to speak for Him in public.

But this is exactly what the Holy Father does. And he does it so unassumingly and so authentically that non-Catholics who would never endorse the Petrine office are often heard to say that he speaks for them, not noticing that he can speak that way only by virtue of the Petrine office.

Because of the Petrine office, the Holy Father is placed under the strictest faithfulness to Jesus and he lives this out in a humble and natural way. He does this not because he is overreaching himself but because he accepts that this is Jesus’ will for the Church. It is his duty to do it, and to do it right, even though this means that his way on earth is one long Way of the Cross. The office he exercises, created by Jesus as a service to the Church in its life and mission on earth, requires this of him. It comes supplied by Jesus with the graces needed to achieve His purposes in the varying conditions of each succeeding generation, precisely through weak human beings like Peter, Giovanni Roncalli and Karol Wojtyla. (Cf. Matthew 16:19, 23; John 21:18-19; Pope John Paul II’s appeal in “Ut Unum Sint” etc.)

This is not the place to describe in detail the long process that led this Lutheran, along with an impressive array of contemporary Protestant Bible scholars starting with Oscar Cullmann, to see that the rock Jesus is talking about in Matthew 16:18 can only be Peter. To be sure, it is Peter confessing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But it is also Peter personally graced for this confession not by flesh and blood, his own or anyone else’s but by the specific revelation given to him by

Jesus' Father in Heaven (Matthew 16:17). It is this Peter the mortal (John 21:19), Peter the sinner (Luke 5:8), Peter the bumbler (John 13:8), Peter on Satan's side (Matthew 16:23), Peter the cowardly (Matthew 26:69-75, (Galatians 2:11-14), Peter the corrigible (Luke 22:31-32), whom Jesus calls to serve as the rock on whom He will build His Church.

Nor is this the place to describe the long process that led me in addition to concede that St. Irenaeus of Lyons in the Second Century was right. He was, perhaps, the first person to point out that Peter's role in the Church could not have ended with his martyrdom, that the Church at Rome fell heir to that role, and that the Keys of the Kingdom had to pass into the hands of successors because the universal Church could not survive on its foundation without them and without knowing who held them.

Furthermore, I will not here try to make excuses for the more infamous holders of the Petrine office or for its sometimes chequered history. It is sufficient to indicate that an office is not destroyed by an unworthy office-holder. Judas betrayed but did not destroy his office. It was still there for the Lord to fill with a Matthias (Acts 2:15-26). Likewise, the Borgias and the Medicis may have disgraced but they could not destroy the Petrine office.

Rather, we celebrate the incalculable blessings that have accrued both to the world and to the Church every time a faithful and humble successor to Peter has accepted his role as Jesus' Chief spokesman for his time and courageously upheld the Kingdom of God and confronted evil.

It should be obvious from a New Testament perspective that Jesus did not intend the apostles of His Church just to speak about Him but to speak for Him (e.g. Luke 10:16). But if the Church in any time or place lacks people who are acknowledged to be Jesus' designated spokespersons, the Church cannot and usually does not even try to do this. No wonder Bible-believing Protestants so often have an uneasy feeling that something vital is missing in their particular expression of the Church. No wonder that, despite themselves, they are so often relieved and grateful when the Holy Father says just what they wish their leaders would or could say.

But they can't say it because they aren't authorized to say it and people pay little attention when they do say it. When, on the other hand, the successor to Peter speaks in the name of Jesus, people may not like what he says, but few question his right to say it.

Seeing this for the first time was for me a virtual revelation. At that point I stopped trying to figure out how Lutherans could start doing at all what the Pope and the College of Bishops do so well.

They can't. That's all there is to it. No one can invent what exists only because Jesus gave it. Protestants may complain about some aspects of the Catholic Church's living Magisterium (Teaching Office, way of exercising the Office of the Keys), but in its place they have only a void. Paraphrasing the words of Dwight L. Moody, we might summarize the admission made some years ago by the Lutheran dialogue partners to their Catholic colleagues as follows: "We may not be comfortable with all aspects of how you exercise the Teaching Office, but we have to admit that your way of doing it is better than our way of not doing it." Anglican members of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) more recently have even concluded that only a return to communion with the Bishop of Rome can fill the Anglican void in this area.

There are risks attached to Jesus' way of building His Church, to be sure. But I have come to the conviction that especially in our times those risks are much smaller than the Protestant alternative. (Here I should mention that in my view the most effective alternative currently in operation is one that in many significant ways embodies the Petrine model on a smaller scale. I refer to the role of the Coptic Pope within the Coptic Orthodox church. The rationale is different. But this office, which from the time of the Council of Chalcedon and the subsequent Muslim conquest has developed in isolation from Rome, also has history on its side and is taken very seriously both by Coptic and by non-Christian Egyptians.) By scrapping the Petrine office the Protestant reformers thought they were rescuing the Gospel from abuse. Sadly, they succeeded only in opening the door to far worse abuses. So much was lost, so little gained in return. Today more than ever, children of the Reformation need to come to grips with this dismal truth. Attempts to replace rather than to renew the foundation Christ laid for His Church have proved disastrous. As we speak, the "new and improved" foundations are crumbling out from under those who are relying on them, often in good faith. The situation is desperate.

Some Catholics, in North America and Europe especially, are fond of complaining about the "authoritarianism" of Rome. Hearing this kind of continuous whining among his academic colleagues, a university professor who recently converted to the Catholic Church responded by advising them that there are all kinds of Protestant churches to try out if they want to see how things go without the Pope. I too am certain that few Catholics appreciate adequately what the Petrine office has preserved them from and what it has preserved them for. If they did, their complaints would be more tempered. Perhaps it is the role of neophytes to remind them gently of this.

It is certainly the role of us neophytes to love the Holy Father and to love Jesus for giving him to us. It is our role to pray for him always and to be thankful for the strong foundation Jesus has laid for His Church against

which the gates of hell cannot prevail. And also for the Keys of the Kingdom entrusted to bumbling and beautiful Peter for our sake! Perhaps our thankfulness will even rub off on some fellow-Catholics and move them to count their blessings before complaining.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bishops and Priests Who are Shepherds

A new Catholic who has been a life-long Protestant is in for some real surprises when it comes to the role of bishop and priest. (For Anglicans the surprise is somewhat less dramatic.)

On the appointment of a new Catholic bishop the headline in the diocesan newspaper is apt to read, "OUR NEW SHEPHERD".

In a Protestant church paper the election of a new bishop or president is apt to read, "JONES WINS BY 3 VOTES ON FIFTH BALLOT".

This really tells you all you need to know about what these churches expect of their leaders and what most of the leaders expect of themselves.

Whether you are Protestant or Catholic, try to imagine the difference it makes. One community of faith is being led by a politician/administrator serving at the pleasure of the electors. And the other is being led by a shepherd/father in Christ serving at the pleasure of his Lord and of his fellow-shepherds. Try to imagine the difference it makes to the leaders to see themselves in the one role or the other.

What does it mean for leaders to see themselves as accountable to God and to one another for the people they serve (Acts 20:28, Hebrews 13:17, I Peter 5:1-4, etc.) rather than accountable to the people for God (II Timothy 4:3-4)?

What lay people expect of the ordained, and what the ordained expect of themselves, is much more closely related to the health of the community than most people realize. And for Protestants, the hard if not impossible lesson to learn about this is that it's not up to us to decide what those expectations should be. Not if we see ourselves as Christ's Church.

We cannot blithely claim for ourselves Jesus' promise to preserve His Church from being swallowed up by the gates of hell and at the same time usurp from Him the right to decide what kind of leaders we should have and to whom they should be accountable.

One major Protestant denomination in the United States recently redefined its understanding of ordained ministry along more politically correct lines. Challenged by an ordained minister to square this change with that denomination's avowed commitment to the norm of Scripture, the executive in charge of the process said ruefully, "There is a North American cultural bias against the New Testament bottom line on ordained ministry." In Protestant circles, that settles the matter.

Entering the Catholic Church is, for many former Protestants, like stepping back onto solid ground after years of watching your church struggle for footing in loose sand. Even more important, it's like returning to a family environment after years of surviving on the street. This is true not because of some kind of superficial congeniality or the practice of proven community-building techniques (Protestants usually do this better). It is true because something much deeper is there, something akin to the blood-ties of a family. Relationships seem to be intrinsic, seem to move from the inside toward the outside, no matter how disparate the community may be. Here are God our Father, Jesus our Brother, the Holy Spirit our Comforter, the Blessed Virgin Mary our Mother, the holy angels our guardians, the saints our siblings. Not only do all of us Catholics have them in common from The Other Side, but we also have in common their chosen earthly counterparts on this side – the Holy Father, our bishop, our priest, our consecrated women and men, Holy Mother Church herself, all of whom make it very natural for us to treat one another within the Church family, including the stranger, as sisters and brothers.

None of this is, of course, “politically correct”. No human community these days would democratically choose to set itself up like that.

But it works.

And from the standpoint of an ex-Lutheran it works beautifully! Yes, it has its defects. But all attempts to correct those defects by dismantling the system rather than by repairing the defect in accordance with New Testament principles have led among Protestants either to wooden rigidity in which real-live shepherds are replaced by the rule of procedures or to chaos in which “each man is his own pope” and no one expects to be shepherded or is expected to shepherd anyone else.

As a result, few Protestants believe deeply that the gates of hell will not prevail against their denomination. They are often, in fact, filled with misgivings on that very point.

On the other hand, few Catholics, complain as they may, have any misgivings about it at all.

There is a very good reason for this difference. And once again it is all tied up with Peter and the apostles and their role in the Church today as determined by Jesus, not by our current cultural biases. This reality breeds confidence in God's people, a confidence few Catholics would really wish to trade away for freedoms not envisioned by Jesus for His Church. Such “freedoms” sound too much to a Catholic like the poor exchange Adam and Eve made in Eden when they found themselves, not freer, but in bondage and on the outside.

For the new Catholic, life at the level of the parish offers some real surprises.

In the typical Protestant congregation, governing authority is vested in the people and their elected councils or boards. In some very significant ways, this makes them the pastor and their ordained minister the flock. S/he is in any case their employee. They make the decisions. S/he is paid to do the work.

In the Catholic parish, governing authority is vested in the priest as the bishop's representative. This makes him the pastor and the people the flock. He is, to shift the analogy, the head of the family and has the final word on all decisions taken by the parish council or anyone else. Everyone takes this for granted. The result? When Father asks you to take on a responsibility, you have full authority from him to carry it out, and you are answerable to Jesus through your priest for the job you do.

So the irony is this, immediately evident to a new Catholic: Protestant lay people have the power (usurped from the ordained) and do less. Furthermore, for obvious reasons they typically feel less confident about what they do, less authorized, less "empowered". At the same time their clergy are required to do much of what lay people are doing in most Catholic parishes. "After all, what are we paying them for?" So the "politically incorrect" way turns out in practice to be far more participatory and community-building than the "politically correct" way, the very stated goals of political correctness!

This is due in large part to the fact that the Catholic way honours Jesus' provision for His Church and the Protestant way "improves" on it.

Bishops are seen and see themselves in much the same light. The truth is, Catholics see their priests the way they do because they see their bishops that way in the first instance (a revolutionary thought to many Protestants).

Among the many ways a Catholic bishop tends and feeds the flock that is his charge (I Peter 5:2), none is more important than the Teaching Office. This is his flock's staple diet, the rations that will determine if the flock will thrive, barely survive, or die out. As a direct successor to the apostles, every Catholic bishop knows that Jesus had him in mind when He told the Eleven, ". . .Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commended you. . ." Every Catholic bishop know this. For who else's benefit did Jesus add, "For, lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the world"? (Matthew 28:19-20)

So when, in collaboration with fellow bishops in communion with the Holy Father, your bishop teaches, he is doing for you and the Church

exactly what Jesus has put him there to do. You pay close attention as a faithful Catholic. This is Jesus' provision for you, the source of your health and stamina in Christ's service.

Again, the contrast is stark. The new Catholic is coming from a situation where one person's opinion means no more than the next person's, and if you as a Protestant pastor or bishop (trying to take seriously such apostolic exhortations as Paul's in Acts 20:28) should ever forget that fact, there are always plenty of people to remind you of it. Unconnected to Peter and the apostles in any acknowledged way, even a Protestant bishop has nothing more to go on than his/her own personal charism and persuasiveness.

Of course, the truth of Christ is true no matter who speaks or lives it. But Jesus knew what He was doing when He entrusted the special responsibility for speaking it to His called and appointed undershepherds, accountable to one another and to Peter.

We once witnessed a clear, though non-Catholic, illustration of the effectiveness of such "authorized" teaching within the Church.

One evening in Cairo we watched His Holiness Pope Shenouda III teach a packed house of some 5000 members of his flock on the subject, "What It Means to Know God, according to St. John". It was a probing and superb study. The people hung on every word. Afterwards both Carolyn and I had the same thought: The truth of what His Holiness was teaching touched the people so deeply not just because of its own intrinsic truthfulness but because of who their teacher was to them. Someone like me could have said the very same things to them, but with much less effect. Why? Because they would not have seen someone like me as God's mouthpiece for them, whereas that's exactly how they viewed His Holiness. He, not someone else, was Jesus' apostle to them. He was exercising the Teaching Office. Anyone else would simply have been teaching. There is a difference!

God has given us a truly priceless treasure in our time. It amounts to a complete life-support system for surviving and thriving in our alien and hostile environment. Our bishops and priests, true shepherds in Christ's flock, are themselves a large part of that treasure. When sexual scandals, financial improprieties and other disgraceful practices tarnish this treasure and even for some people destroy it altogether, the tragedy is so great precisely because something so beautiful, so strong, and so life-giving has been betrayed by someone who has held it as a sacred trust. As tragic as these betrayals always are, they can remind us forcefully of the value of the gift someone ruined for others by his sin. And they make us doubly grateful for the faithful and holy men and women Jesus continues to call into His service for our sake!

CHAPTER FIVE

A Sand Dune is Not a Rock

This chapter is the most difficult. You may want to skip it or to read it last. Our daughter, however, found it the most interesting.

It has become an axiom among Christian bodies outside of the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches that their highest earthly authority in matters of doctrine and morality is “the church in convention”. Depending on the group and its polity, this can be a single local congregation, a regional or national entity, or occasionally even a transnational entity. At whatever level the defining jurisdiction is situated, in gatherings of duly constituted voters everything stands or falls.

This is true in spite of all built-in precautions and hedges against the possibility of some future gathering of voters deciding to move the denomination clean off its distinctive foundations. There is nothing to stop voters from rewriting the denomination’s standard of faith and morality either directly or more often by default. The so-called “inalterable clauses” in their constitutions and charter documents which are usually intended to ensure permanent loyalty to Scripture, confessional commitments, and long-standing traditions are easy to circumvent while professing adherence to them in spirit. No voters’ assembly can successfully bind subsequent assemblies forever.

This can be a good thing. Even the most self-consistent community needs to be able to develop and adapt.

What is devastating to a denomination is to have the authority to make changes and adaptations lodged in the hands of the wrong people. And among Protestants there is no way of avoiding this. I knew I needed to become a Catholic the moment it dawned on me that the whole Protestant movement in all its parts is in a state of permanent rebellion against Jesus Himself in this area. There is no way of fixing it short of moving back into communion with the Chair of Peter. I and many others have tried hard, but even at our cleverest and our most alert, nothing we contrived to construct was able to replace what Jesus gave us. It is impossible for any of us to invent our own personally tailored Peter-substitute.

Protestant denominational leaders have over and over again tried to appeal to the promise of Jesus about the gates of hell never prevailing against Christ’s Church in an effort to buoy up the sinking spirits of the faithful who feel they have been betrayed by their own church. There’s a quiet desperation about this within leaders and people

alike as they watch the “unassailable” tenets of their faith melt away one by one. It gets pretty old to keep appealing to this promise of Jesus in such circumstances, when everyone knows that the person and teaching of Jesus are themselves among the tenets most up for grabs these days.

The whole dilemma comes down to the fact that Protestantism by definition operates on the basis of a usurped authority and then wonders why it isn't working and why Jesus doesn't hold up His end.

Some Catholics would like to be able to change things as easily as Protestants do, to be “more democratic” in every way. They fail to appreciate how awful it can be to be a usurper. If you have any sense of integrity at all it makes you positively sick. Thus, a typical Protestant assembly can hum along smoothly dealing with house-keeping matters, reports, minor election, community-building events, and the like. And then suddenly the delegates are faced with a huge question that reaches way beyond their competence. But they are the competent authority! There's a confusing debate and then somebody calls on the Holy Spirit to guide the vote, and everyone is supposed to live with the result. God has spoken.

This can leave you as a delegate with a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach, but nobody has a better plan. It can be just as disquieting for you to see the “right” decision win by a slim majority as to see the “wrong” decision carry the day and throw you into a crisis of conscience with nowhere really to turn. Something seems fundamentally wrong with how your church is going about this, but what is more hallowed than the will of the inclusive majority?

It is only when we begin to take this last question with all literal seriousness that there is hope for any real answer. And when the answer does come, it tells you that there can be no answer within Protestantism. The disease is endemic to the body.

For many reasons most Protestants dismiss out of hand the Catholic “alternative”. The most intractable reason is their unquestioning faith in the rule of egalitarian democracy. But there are also other reasons such as attitudes held over from past disputes, the noise some Catholics are making about Rome's slowness to change, and deeply held Protestant misunderstandings of many Catholic teachings, including some considered in this book.

And yet as the Holy Father and the College of Bishops guide the storm-tossed ship of the Church over the wild seas of our time, with a sure sense of Jesus' presence and help, who can fail to note the contrast? The ship he is steering is still on course despite the mutiny of some of its

crew. This is in no small measure due to the fact that the sailors have not taken control of the rudder.

If the Protestants are to board that ship and join its crew with the intent of trusting its captain, a thorough change of mind-set is required. Such a change must be compelled by more than the desperation born of fleeing their own sinking ship for one that is still afloat. There has to be some sense that this ship is floating and will stay afloat for the very good reason that Jesus is on board (cf. Mark 4:35-41) and that it is on course only because its captain is the very one Jesus Himself has picked for the job (cf. Matthew 14:28-33).

The change in mind-set can be facilitated by imagining yourself to be the Pope. Try it once. Your mandate at all times is the ministry which Jesus entrusted to Peter. You are as personally responsible to Jesus today as Peter was in his day for the role within the Church which He spells out so clearly in Matthew 16, Luke 22, and John 21, as we have noted already.

It can also help to put yourself mentally into the place of a Catholic bishop. Your mandate at all times is now the ministry Jesus entrusted to the Twelve in Matthew 18, Matthew 28, John 13, John 20, etc.

Mentally putting ourselves into the position in which the Pope and the bishops actually find themselves before Jesus can help us understand why authority continues to work in the Catholic Church even in our unruly times. Not perfectly, but better than it works anywhere else. It works because it is being exercised by those whom Jesus has invested with it. They know it and the whole Church knows it. Even to a large extent the gainsayers know it. Jesus is calling the Pope and the bishops to be His foremost martyrs in our culture of self-worship, pleasure, and death, and they know that, too. Their accountability to Jesus and to one another for this martyrdom is their paramount preoccupation. If you think this is an exaggeration, you do not know very many of them either singly or as a college, and you are probably operating out of pre-conceptions dating from a much different era.

The joy in this for a new Catholic is not in some romantic notion of a Church isolated from the trials and turmoil of our age. The joy lies rather in the fact that in the Catholic Church the centre is capable of holding against all assaults from within and from without, the rock remains solid against all the blows that could crush it. For that centre and that rock is Jesus Christ Himself operating through His chosen apostles and Peter. The Church, thank God! has resisted all efforts to improve on Jesus' provision for ensuring that He will remain her centre and her rock throughout all ages, come what may.

After experiencing the helplessness and hopelessness which have invaded the faith-communities of most non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christians, the new Catholic feels on entering the Church like a diver whose lungs are about to burst, finally coming up for air.

A welcome by-product of being part of the Church built on the rock, not sinking in the sand, is the relief you experience at assemblies and gatherings, even when they fall short of what they could be. The relief is two-fold. First, you know that anything you are going to be asked as a group to plan or to decide is more than likely to lie within your proper competence. And you also know that prayer, worship, the Word, and the Eucharist will be central to the gathering, its heart-beat and substance. Maintaining this kind of focus is, frankly, feasible only when the leaders are charged with responsibility for it, when the people expect it of them, and when agendas are designed around it.

Cradle Catholics seem to take all of this for granted.

New Catholics like us never will.

CHAPTER SIX

Daily Eucharist

For a new Catholic, being able to participate in a daily Eucharist or celebration of the Mass almost anywhere you go opens a whole new world of closer ties with God on His terms, of integration into the family reunited in Jesus, of continual renewal and sharpening up of your discipleship to Him in the world through Word and Sacrament.

What it means to a struggling sinner to receive daily the Body and Blood of the Saviour in that context can scarcely be imagined until it becomes a real possibility in your life. Far from keeping you groveling in your sins, it prevents them from dominating you either openly or subliminally. Call it a spiritual dialysis, if you will. Sinners accumulate poison in their system which, if unremoved, saps energy, creates lethargy, and is acted out in destructive ways. The daily Eucharist at the foot of the cross drains off the poisons and restores the vision and motivation to love and care about others as Jesus loves and cares about us all. In fact, it centres your whole life in Jesus.

You usually don't have to look far to find a daily Eucharist. We had been Catholics for only three days when, on a trip to visit family far from our home, we stayed overnight in a motel in Dillon, Montana. A block away St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church beckoned to us. With little effort we discovered there would be a morning Mass at 8:00 a.m. the next day. We were there. And so were some 18 or 20 other people and Fr. Robert Porter. It was a holy place, graced with subdued light that entered through stained glass windows, and with a chancel, altar and tabernacle that spoke of God's holiness, presence and love. In the soft morning light we worshipped with our new brothers and sisters, listened as the lay readers among them proclaimed the Word, watched them present the gifts on our behalf, heard them offer their prayer intentions as we offered ours, and received Our Lord's Body and Blood from the priest's hands and from theirs. Fr. Porter's homily was not too brief and not too long. He led special prayers for a dear elderly member of the parish who had suddenly found herself at death's door. After Mass he welcomed us without putting us on the spot. It was an aethereal moment for us. We resumed our journey with the Word of God in our heads and the joy of Heaven in our hearts.

What it has done to most Protestant communities to have trivialized and sidelined the Eucharist is too sad to describe. It has left you pretty much on your own as a Protestant in your relationship with Jesus and there is much less cohesive force at the centre of the community of faith. Communities break down and break up easily because they have never

been very close together at the level where it really counts. All of this hits a new Catholic hard.

If your travels bring you into the vicinity of a cathedral, you will probably have several choices on a daily basis, morning, mid-day, and evening. You may even have several styles, spoken or sung, with contemporary music or traditional, almost always faithful to the Church's norms and offering the joy of Jesus' gift in the Spirit to His people. Some will be preceded by Rosary Prayers or sung Psalms. They will be well attended, with good lay participation and a brief but pointed homily. This is a real treasure.

If long-time Catholics think worship has deteriorated badly over recent decades, they may well be right. But to this new Catholic what remains is rich beyond anything previously known on a regular basis. Being there is almost irresistible if you know it's happening somewhere near you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Presence (Shekinah)

Martin Luther took it for granted that every serious Christian who has a parish church will be in it every day, both for corporate worship in the early morning and for personal prayers throughout the day. Such prayers for him always began with the Creed and the Our Father spoken fervently as often as necessary until the heart was once again warm to God.

For a new Catholic the attraction of the parish church is so strong not just because it is a House of Prayer but especially because of Jesus' personal Presence in the Tabernacle. If the red sanctuary lamp is burning you know Our Lord is sacramentally at home in the Tabernacle and you can visit Him there.

Already as a Lutheran I was granted three vivid and extraordinary encounters with Jesus in His sacramental Presence which have left me in perpetual awe of Him there. The redeeming and healing power Our Lord wields for us from the poor and humble garb with which He here clothes Himself is little less amazing than His work in the flesh and blood in which He clothed Himself for our sake some 2000 years ago. All three of my encounters involved other people. They included a dramatic and unexpected physical healing, a spiritual healing by way of a vision granted to a non-visionary person, and a violent reaction to the Blood of Our Lord on the part of a demon-possessed woman at the moment of the elevation of the chalice.

Lutherans profess to be second to none in their acceptance of the Real Presence of the full Christ in the Eucharistic elements. And yet the casual and flippant manner in which the sacred elements were routinely treated by often well-meaning but ill-trained celebrants was most painful to me as a Lutheran bishop. I often lamented that "what we tell others we believe about the Eucharist is belied by how we treat Our Lord in it."

Some Catholic liturgical specialists think that by reverencing the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Eucharistic elements we run the risk of overlooking His mystical presence in the assembled people of God. In my view, one does not achieve more of the latter by encouraging less of the former. When people lose the awareness of the Holy the first victims of such desecration, after Our Lord, are themselves, the Church, and all other people.

For a new Catholic, the attraction of Jesus at home in the Tabernacle in the midst of the community is hard to resist. It is like the force that

drew Mary, Martha's sister, to sit at the feet of Jesus, even when it meant

setting aside lesser duties (Luke 10:38-42). Many fine written aids are available to help us open our hearts and minds to what Jesus can do for us when we spend time with Him in the midst of our often harried lives.

Has anyone more convincingly lived out the essential connection between the sacramental Presence of Jesus and His presence in discarded people than has Mother Teresa of Calcutta? She and her sisters see Jesus in the dying poor, but their vision of Him there is sustained by hours spent with Him in the lowly and unlikely elements of consecrated bread and wine. She regarded this as so essential to the strength of love available within her spiritual daughters for the destitute poor that she made the practice of Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration mandatory in all her communities – usually 24 hours around the clock every day. Almost single-handedly she turned the tide that was washing out this traditional devotion from Catholic Churches in the 1970's and 1980's. She understood all too well that the effort to redirect our love away from Jesus in the Sacrament and toward Jesus in "the Community" was effectively cutting such love off at its source.

I mentioned that there are aids to the practice of Eucharistic Adoration. One of the best is Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen's article, "The Most Important Hour of the Day". He is another person no one has ever accused of sacrificing his commitment to Christ in the Community for the sake of his commitment to Christ in the Tabernacle. The same is true of that irrepressible educator, Fr. John A. Hardon. He not only wrote several very helpful articles on Eucharistic Adoration but he served as Mother Teresa's spiritual director and assisted her in establishing sites for Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration everywhere, even in Russia.

A little gem of a book that grew out of her encounters with Jesus both in the Tabernacles that were then on the altars of all Catholic churches and elsewhere in her daily life over many years is entitled simply He and I, (Lui et moi in French), by actress Gabrielle Bossis. The prominent Church historian Henri Daniel-Rops ranked it among "the most authentic masterpieces of spiritual literature". Any who savour this book will, I believe, soon come to appreciate the connection between Adoration and daily life. It has touched and transformed the lives of the great and the small, the learned and the simple, the wealthy (as she was) and the poor. It has unlocked the treasure of Eucharistic Adoration for countless believers in its unpretentious way. I owe a real debt to the brother who gave me my copy of it.

The genius of the daily Hour of Adoration lies in its power to keep us sitting around Jesus. That's where Jesus told people to look if they wanted to see His real family (Mark 3:31-35). He equated the value of two things that for most of us look very contradictory at first sight –

sitting around with Him and others quietly in a room apart, and doing the will of God. The quiet hour reported by Mark in this passage came on the heels of a hectic day of activity filled with the stress of serious confrontation. Such a day can have great potential for doing God's will, but also for veering wide of it in the heat of the moment. Jesus says there is only one way for His "family" to avoid being thrown off course by all this activity without even realizing it, all in God's service. And that way is to sit down quietly with Him each and every day, preferably in the company of other brothers and sisters, so that He can process and re-centre our life in Him.

What further incentive do we need than the example of these remarkable saints and the word of Our Lord Himself to induce us to make the Hour of Adoration the most important hour in our day also?

For a new Catholic, none at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Repetition, Vain or Productive?

It was in the former Soviet Union in 1987 that I learned there is a difference in prayer between “vain repetition” or “heaping up empty phrases” (Matthew 6:7) and productive repetition or heaping up full phrases. Most Protestants have a knee-jerk reaction to all repetition which, they have been conditioned to believe, is by definition “vain”. I learned that repetition can be the means of achieving something vital to worship which can scarcely be achieved in any other way and that such repetition is by no means the kind of prayer Jesus is targeting in the famous passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

In the Soviet Union I observed the power of the incessant “Lord, have mercy” prayers in the Byzantine Liturgy to bring worshippers to the point of crying out for mercy. I could see that they weren’t just singing about it “with dignity”, as the rubrics of one Lutheran liturgy advise. I then began to take note of other “acceptable” precedents for repetition which had always been a part of my own heritage: Psalm 136, the Hallelujah Chorus, the Amen Spirituals, antiphonal hymns with recurring lines like “May Jesus Christ be praised!”, refrains in general. These had never bothered me in the least. And then I remembered that, according to Revelation 4:8, in Heaven itself the Four Living Creatures “never cease to sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come!’” apparently without ever tiring of it. I recalled the prayer which transported St. Francis of Assisi to the gates of Heaven as he repeated with increasing fervour all night long: “Who art Thou, my Lord?. . . And who am I?. . .” And I remembered my own previous discovery that if I prayed the same Psalm five or six times in a row, I found myself just starting to get inside the Psalm on the fourth or fifth time through it.

The liturgy I grew up with followed the same general pattern as the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, but in a greatly compacted manner. You went through the same steps, but too rapidly for the heart to keep pace with the mind, for the whole of you to get on board before moving on to the next step. I saw how the Byzantine repetitions enabled the heart to catch up with the mind before ushering you into the next level of worship. When the time came for hearing God’s Word, you and every other worshipper were panting for it. God had your full attention. You were straining to catch every nuance.

This is not “vain” repetition by anyone’s definition of it.

This prepared me for a fresh appreciation of the ancient practice of repeating the “Jesus Prayer” of which the “Lord, have mercy” is itself one form. The Jesus Prayer is based on a combination of two New Testament

prayers, both of which were repeated over and over again in their original contexts. The first is the cry of blind Bar-Timaeus who kept shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” until Jesus stopped and called for him (Mark 10:46ff.). (One wonders what Bar-Timaeus would have achieved if compunction had permitted him to utter his prayer only once!) The second is the prayer of the tax collector who went home justified because he had stood afar off beating his breast and repeating, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Its briefest form is a simple “Jesus” exhaled with each breath. Having no reservations about prayer to Jesus (as opposed to prayer to Mary and the other saints), and having overcome my inherited resistance to repetition, I was now ready for the Jesus Prayer to open up for me new heights and depths in prayer. As I prayed it, our Saviour seemed to draw me ever closer to Him and to all His loved ones while sharpening my awareness both of good and of evil. (Many years later I was given a Prayer Rope of the Byzantine Tradition which uses the Jesus Prayer where the Rosary uses the “Hail Mary”.)

The next step was discovering how central the Rosary is in the life of a man whose spiritual credentials were beyond dispute in my mind – Pope John Paul II. I reasoned that if something that meant so little to me could mean so much to him, the problem was mine, not his. One day I even heard him credit Mary and the Rosary with whatever consistency of attachment to Jesus he possessed. Since this consistency was what I admired most about him, I was challenged to the roots by his acknowledgement that Mary and the Rosary were the primary reasons for it. Not only would I never have made this connection: I would have seen them as hindrances to a person’s attachment to Jesus!

Looking back, I can’t really say whether the Rosary led us to Mary or Mary to the Rosary, or whether the Holy Father led us to both. For Carolyn and me as new Catholics, both have been quite a discovery. At one point I had even wondered if Mary and the Rosary were going to be liabilities to us, examples of what our son meant by his remark, “When the Catholic Church is so much more right about most things than its alternatives are, you can just swallow hard and live with the rest of it.”

Little did we suspect that these two “liabilities” were about to become such treasures.

CHAPTER NINE

The Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus' Mother and Ours

The truth is that some 25 years ago, as I was preparing to preach at a Tre Ore Good Friday Service on Our Lord's Third Word from the Cross ("Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother." John 19:26-27), I -- your quintessential non-dreamer -- had an extraordinary dream. I was at Calvary, near the foot of the Cross. And when Jesus spoke those last three words, "Behold your mother," He was speaking to John and also to me.

I awoke transfixed. It is not too strong, if it is not too trite, to call what happened to me at that moment a "paradigm shift". It was certainly one of those rare moments that have altered forever the spiritual landscape of my journey to God. I couldn't get it out of my head for weeks. And I have never been able to see that text in the old way again, the way that sees no more in it than a touching expression of a dying son's concern for his mother's well-being.

Of course, it all came out a few days later in the Good Friday sermon, of which I still have the notes. From a lesson in the psychology of a dying holy man, these words became the creation of a new relationship. Jesus was giving the gift of His mother to every beloved disciple, including me, and He was giving every beloved disciple, including me, into the care of His mother!

It came as a considerable surprise for me to learn, some years later, that this is in fact the teaching and the practice of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. But it lay quietly on the shelf in my mind for many years, except during Holy Week, unintegrated into either my prayers or my efforts to be faithful to Jesus.

Once during those years, however, Jaroslav Pelikan (the great historical theologian, then Lutheran, now Orthodox) forced me to take it down and dust it off when he reminded me in one of his books of the reason why the Council of Ephesus had given Mary the title Theotokos (the God-Bearer, the Mother of God). It was not to extol Mary but to extol Jesus. The Council was attempting to ensure that people of every time and place would always be introduced to Jesus in the same way that Luke and Matthew introduce us to Him, as the Son of God and the Son of Mary, conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. You cannot call Mary the theotokos without calling Jesus theos. It is the surest way of keeping what is most important about Jesus in Himself also most important about Him to us. How true this has proved to be! What group of Christians has been more prone to reduce Jesus to just one holy man among many than some of the Protestant sons and daughters of the very Reformers who

began by alleging that attention paid to Mary derogates from the worship that belongs only to Jesus? It is much easier for you to regard Jesus as less than theos if Mary is not theotokos. The original Reformers, of course, had no objection to calling her theotokos as long as you didn't make much of it. But before long most Protestants felt vaguely guilty about calling her the Mother of God. And if you stop calling her "blessed" (Luke 1:48), it is not long before even that modest title seems inappropriate. When Mary becomes nobody to you, it's easy to take her Son down several notches, too. If, on the other hand, you honour her as Mother of God and Queen of Heaven (Revelation 12), what must you then believe and confess about her Son?

So now I had two new gems of truth about Mary floating around inside me – a vivid awareness that somehow Jesus has made her our mother and us her children at the Cross (cf. Revelation 12:17) and an insight that Mary's role in God's saving work involves pressing on an often unwilling and unbelieving humanity the truth that Jesus, her Son, is the incarnate Son of God.

The story of what gave those "floating gems" something to attach themselves to, a home in my mind if you will, is also interesting.

In the late 1980's I invited Coptic Orthodox Bishop Antonios Markos to serve as the keynote speaker for our Bishop's Study Conference for Pastors. After one of his presentations someone asked him, "What accounts for the remarkable growth of the Coptic Church in Egypt over the last thirty or forty years?" He replied that there were two factors, as he saw it. The first is the Sunday School Movement initiated by Pope Kyrillos VI and the second is the apparitions of the Mother of God in the 1960's seen by at least a million people, including himself, which occurred in the Zeitoun District of Cairo on the roof of an old church.

Now, with a group of Lutheran clergy the first answer went down very well – more Christian education. But the second answer seemed to stun people and bounce right off. It left most of us cold, some of us puzzled, a few of us curious, and at least one of us mightily prodded. Especially when His Grace told us that in these silent but brilliant apparitions, much photographed and repeatedly authenticated, the Blessed Virgin pointed the masses, Muslim and Christian, to her Son and to the Cross over and over again.

Both the Coptic Church and the Catholic Church were quick to confirm the genuineness of these apparitions. Seldom has anything like them been so well documented. Carolyn and I had the privilege of visiting Zeitoun in 1992. In its own way it ranks with Guadalupe, Fatima, and Lourdes as holy sites for our times, and it is much less commercialized. The whole story, with many photographs, is available to anyone on the Internet just by keying in "Zeitoun" or Zeitun".

The evidence of the impact of this event on me was the wrestling sessions I had with God over the next several years. How should I be relating to Mary? How can I be a Lutheran if I relate to her at all? I can't just go on with life as though she were of no importance. That would be dishonest. And ungrateful. Still, there were no outward changes in my life for some eight years more.

Then came the Holy Father's Apostolic Letter in 1999 calling for the re-evangelization of the Americas, and especially his appeal to Our Lady of Guadalupe to take the lead once more as she had done some 450 years ago at the time of the first evangelization of the Americas. (That would place it during Luther's own lifetime!) What in the world was he talking about? Everything else in that letter made so much sense. Had Guadalupe been another Zeitoun?

The discovery of the answer to that question has left me marveling that Christians of all kinds, including "evangelicals" who feel called to turn people completely away from Mary, aren't praising God for what happened at Guadalupe and for what continues to happen there to this day. The fact that there are some who name the Name of Jesus and still cannot rejoice in what Our Lady achieved for Him among and between the Indians and the Spanish at that time is a tragic mystery to me. Protestants should be first in line to celebrate this unparalleled work of saving grace and tender love with as much ardour as Catholics do. What's preventing them?

Then came an Internet research project into other authenticated apparitions and what distinguishes them from all the hoaxes, followed by an examination of the story of Fatima and its messages and miracle, painstakingly and lovingly documented by the careful historian William Thomas Walsh. In fact, I found the Internet an excellent source of further reliable information during a two-week period when I had access to it. I was astounded by what I learned about the apparitions of Our Lady ("Gospa" in Croatian) Queen of Peace to six young residents of Medjugorje in Bosnia. They have been recurring on a daily basis since June 24, 1981. I wondered why the whole world was not paying close attention to this phenomenon which has all the earmarks of both scientific and evangelical truth and is all the more convincing because the six visionaries are as ingenuous and normal as human beings get. The number of conversions resulting from this prolonged appeal to humanity is now estimated in the millions. This, along with a revitalized Church, is the declared purpose of Our Lord in permitting these apparitions. And more. We learned that one day when the visionaries asked Our Lady who was the holiest person in the village, they were surprised by her response that a good example was a Moslem lady who lived there. As a result of what we were learning we were beginning to think that no Christian, no human being, could

afford to ignore Medjugorje and similar accredited witnesses in our own time in Africa, South America, and Asia.

As you can tell, by now I was ready to pick up a Rosary with reverence, an open mind, and an expectant heart, still wondering why Our Lady had recommended it so insistently at Fatima and on other occasions. What could the Rosary possibly give us that we couldn't receive just as well without it? In our first year as Catholics we have found the Marian festivals to be very helpful in moving us toward a fuller appreciation of Our Lady's role in the life of the Church and the world in our time.

True, we have seen signs of fanaticism here and there. For good reason the Church advises the faithful to exercise a measure of caution, fully respecting the Church's key role in determining what is, what may be, and what is definitely not authentic. But the actual extent of fanaticism connected with devotion to Mary has been blown all out of proportion by Protestants for whom any devotion at all is by definition fanatical.

For us the stamp of authentic Marian devotion is its power to keep Christians united in and to Jesus and to draw the needy and unbelieving to Him. Knowing Mary as our mother is beautiful in many other ways, too, all of which either bring us to Jesus or bring us something vital from Him through the Holy Spirit.

She truly is Jesus' gift to us from the Cross. For a new Catholic this discovery is a priceless treasure to be received with reverence, love and gratitude.

CHAPTER TEN

The Holy Rosary

The first thing a new Catholic discovers when praying the prayers of the Rosary with devout Catholics comes as a surprise – it is evident that, whatever else it may be, the Rosary is above all an act of love.

It is an act of love for the Father with Mary. It is an act of love for Jesus with Mary. It is an act of love for Mary herself, our Mother. It is an act of love for the perfected saints in Heaven and for the saints being perfected in Purgatory and on earth. It is an act of love for sinners in need of conversion, especially those whose need is most desperate.

It is an act of love of the purest kind, of heart and of mind, of lips and of life. It is nothing but love, through and through.

It pours love into people and it draws love out of people.

The use of repetition intensifies that love. Outsiders who haven't caught on to that point have missed the whole point. The Fifteen Mysteries of our Redemption recalled in the Rosary focus that love on the Redeemer and on the redeemed, including Mary, intensely, reciprocally, on struggling seekers and on those who don't or won't or can't seek, on the almost lost and the very lost, on followers and wanderers, on loved ones who are thriving or hurting or courting danger, and on ourselves. There is redeeming love here for us all. In our prayers we lift others up and bathe them in it. In the process, we ourselves are bathed in it.

What is unique about the Rosary?

Perhaps, more than anything else, it is the movement of the Mysteries of our Redemption from the realm of the mind, where we often just keep them in cold storage, to the realm of the warm heart of our life where they belong. The Rosary transports us with His mother into the very presence of Christ in the act of redeeming us, like Peter denying Jesus not at a safe distance but within earshot of Him (Luke 22:61). Sometimes like Paul (Colossians 1:24, Acts 9:16, etc.) we find ourselves side by side with Him in a particular Mystery. Sometimes, however, we find ourselves ranged against Him among His tormentors because of how we are living. Sometimes we identify with Mary, the model of redeemed humanity, both in her earthly journey and in her heavenly mission. In all these ways, the Rosary, prayed daily alone or with others, keeps us focused on the true centre of our life in God and enables God to shape our identity more and more by it. Do we need anything more than we need this?

I am convinced that the stakes are very high these days in the matter of staying centred on the centre. What a gift the Rosary is to God's people in this world of mass media, competing values, denial of sin, and relentless distractions! No wonder the Pope prays the Rosary so faithfully and loves it so much, just as his predecessors have done.

The new Catholic discovers that the Rosary recalls the Fifteen Mysteries of our Redemption in such a way that the thoughtful worshipper is drawn well into each of them before moving on to the next one, at the rate normally of five Mysteries a day. The Five Joyful Mysteries that take us from the Annunciation to the Finding of Jesus in His Father's House are followed by the Five Sorrowful Mysteries which take us from Gethsemane to the Cross. Then come the Five Glorious Mysteries, from the Resurrection to the Crowning of Mary. As our archbishop likes to say, this is the perfect mixture for a disciple of Jesus -- one part sorrow and contrition to two parts joy and hope.

We truly never expected the Rosary to do this for us when we became Catholic. But the grace of being drawn back on centre and back into the heart of the real action day after day has been a rich blessing, not always without pain. We sense that we are much more grounded in Jesus' truth and work, in Jesus Himself. And on top of that, we have come to love the companionship of Mary and to know her love for us through the Rosary.

In the words of one little guide to the Rosary, our "love for this devotion" has truly increased with its daily practice.

Catholics often attach "prayer intentions" to their recitation of the Rosary. Here is another unexpected blessing. It is an instance of the Holy Spirit helping us in our weakness. Much as we may want to pray for others, we so often truly "do not know how to pray (for them) as we ought" (Romans 8:26). What do we ask for? Can we be sure we are not asking God for something He knows they shouldn't have?

The more centred we are on the Mysteries of our Redemption, the clearer it becomes in any given situation which concerns and needs are paramount and which are peripheral. To attach a person or a concern to one of the Mysteries is often to see that person or concern in a whole new light. It is to be given the Spirit's help to pray more nearly as we ought. An entire chapter could be devoted to only this on the basis of our brief experience to date. This seems to be intercession at its best.

Reciting the Rosary in private can be an event of intense meditation and concentrated intercession. Reciting it with your spouse or family, in a Cenacle, or with your parish as a preparation for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass or as a component of an Hour of Adoration can draw people together in love, transform them inwardly and direct them outward in a movement of divine love. While the "Hail Mary's" and the "Our Father's"

are rolling off our tongues, our hearts and minds are, in contrast, slowly easing their way into one of the Mysteries, all in the company of Mary, our blessed Mother.

One also discovers that there are many methods of praying the Rosary, each worthwhile in its own way. Little guidebooks abound. One I especially appreciate is called Through the Rosary with Fra Angelico by Domenico Marcucci. I especially love Fra Angelico's spiritually sensitive depiction of each Mystery. (Catholics often pray the Rosary with their eyes open in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, a crucifix, an icon, a statue, or a stained glass window.) An old prayerbook from the Diocese of Paderborn, rescued by a friend from a thrift shop some years ago, offers us rich meditations, prayer, and hymns attached to each Mystery.

I no longer wonder why people as brilliant and profound as the Holy Father, Mother Teresa, and our own archbishop are devoted to the Holy Rosary. They have all described for us their reasons. It boils down to this: The human soul has an absolute need to stay centred on Jesus Christ, the living Word, and to stay connected to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, if it is to be or become healthy and useful in the world. The Eucharist and the Rosary rank at the very top of God's ways of keeping that miracle going in our lives from day to harried day.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Communion of Saints

Just try to think of it from a Protestant perspective in which the saints play no active role at all and hardly anyone ever thinks of them. But here is the Catholic Church which has in place a sophisticated and exhaustive process developed over centuries of experience for determining which of our departed sisters and brothers are presently in a position to offer us the benefit of their companionship (koinonia) and prayers.

Here is the Catholic Church that speaks as naturally about the present work of people who have been “dead” for centuries as others speak about the evening news and that refers to these people in the present tense, not in the past tense. And the whole Church does this, from the Pope to the peasant.

Here, the notion that those who have gone before us into “the Eternal Habitations” (Luke 16:9) really care about us and respond to us is not a whimsy of wishful thinking but a matter of sober definition and settled conviction. Among the Catholic (and the Orthodox) faithful the “communion of saints” is just that, a communion uniting God’s redeemed children across the thresholds that demarcate the three concurrent phases of the one Mystical Body of Christ which is the Church – militant on earth, suffering in Purgatory, and triumphant in Heaven. This reality prevents devout Catholics from ever feeling alone or isolated.

Now, if you are a “cradle Catholic”, this does not seem at all unusual to you. From the earliest moments of life you have consulted and appealed to the saints as naturally as you speak to your neighbour. You have never questioned their interest in you.

But if you have been a Protestant, this is a brand new world for you. Few faithful Catholics have ever taken stock of what it feels like to have no working connection to the angels and saints or how helpless it feels to be cut off completely from loved ones who have gone on ahead. As a Protestant you can’t even pray for them without feeling guilty. This is no exaggeration. The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in the United States discovered the dimensions of this disparity and wrestled with it for years in the 1980’s and 1990’s. The Lutherans had to struggle mightily just to get their minds around something that is second nature to Catholic and Orthodox Christians, intrinsic to their experience of being the Church.

The practical ramifications of this are revealing. Some years ago I went out of my way to visit an Orthodox friend living in exile from her

predominantly Muslim homeland. She had received word from back home that her mother to whom she was very close had just died. As I began to express my condolences she cut me off with a broad smile on her face. "Oh, that's OK. She's much closer to me now than she could be over there. And now she can really help me!"

At a funeral this difference is positively palpable. No matter what the state of the deceased, you can always pray for them. And it will do some real good for them if they have not died in mortal sin, which only God knows. You can help them get through any time of purification required before they can be welcomed into Heaven. You can pray the Rosary on their behalf, have them remembered in the Sacrifice of the Mass, reach out to them helpfully in a host of other loving ways. And depending on where they stand with God on the Other Side, they can reach back even more helpfully to you.

This is another area, of course, where the human penchant to try to manipulate God can and does create abuses. But driving the saints right out of the picture has surely been the worst abuse of all! It has certainly not rid Protestants of the penchant to manipulate God. It has merely shifted its object from the saints to Jesus or the Holy Spirit, which is even more dangerous. The privilege of relating to the saints within the Mystical Body of Christ is a high and holy one. The "cure" for its abuse which would cut us off from them and relegate "the cloud of witnesses" by which we are surrounded (Hebrews 12:1) to the status of a theological abstraction rather than a description of our actual spiritual geography is surely worse than the disease.

The true cure for all who manipulate their friends, whether this side of the grave or that side of it, lies in learning new and healthier ways of relating to them through the rough and tumble of life. No one is cured by being deprived of all contact with friends! This only worsens the conditions that lead to abuse.

Those who have a prejudiced view of the matter should expose themselves to some of the excellent guidelines developed within the Catholic Church to assist us sinful saints-in-the-making on earth as we relate to saints in Heaven and saints-in-the-making in Purgatory. Any who follow these guidelines are no more likely to abuse the friendship of a saint in glory than of the neighbour next door. Try, for example, the little tract "Novena Prayers in Honor of St. Anthony" (Franciscan Mission Associates, P.O. Box 598, Mount Vernon, NY 10551-0598). Ask for Tract #R-41. If you choose to follow this guideline you will be led to seek and to accept the will of God and to follow the example of St. Anthony's childlike trust in laying his cares on the One who cares for us (I Peter 5:7). You will, in other words, be taught how not to try to manipulate God.

The saints do not encourage manipulation. They embody the absence of it, indeed the fear of it. They make excellent models for us. That's why the Holy Father has canonized many new saints, to help counteract the dearth of good role models in our time. (Canonizing does not make someone a saint. It acknowledges his or her sainthood on the basis of available evidence. There are doubtless many uncanonized saints in glory, too.)

True as this is for us in our everyday life, it is also true for us in extremis. It is a fact that a large proportion of saints both ancient and modern became saints through terrible ordeals suffered for Jesus' sake. They too are our role models. As Catholics, we remember many of them each year on their feast day. This prepares us for our own martyrdom in accordance with God's will for us. We learn to recognize that it is truly a privilege to suffer and die for Jesus' sake and that, should it be required of us, He can be counted on to keep His promise to give us the same divine strength He has given them. Indeed, knowing and loving the saints helps us to see all of life as a daily martyrdom, both of the spirit and of the body. A healthy not a morbid martyrdom becomes the norm for all Christians, the crown of faithful disciples, not their curse. Catholics learn this truth over and over again from the saints.

A "cradle Catholic" has trouble imagining what it means for a Protestant to seem to be entering a peopled universe by entering the Catholic Church. Catholic and Orthodox Christians reach back and forth across the conquered death barrier as unselfconsciously as Christians have done since the first days of the Faith. They have no trouble understanding that the death of a person in a state of grace opens up the soul instantly to a life of dramatically heightened awareness, which will be heightened still further when we receive our spiritual bodies at the Resurrection. They have no clue that for Protestants this is all a closed off area or that Protestants view what little they know of it with deep suspicion. For the average Protestant all the action and interaction comes to a dead halt at death, only to be resumed at some far-off Day of Resurrection. Any other version of what happens at death seems like a fairy tale to them. For some, even the resurrection itself seems like a fairy tale because it is so unconnected in time and space from our present reality. For some people it can have only a symbolic meaning confined to this side of the grave.

Once again, there is a treasure here which Catholics are apt to take for granted. Wherever the Catholic Faith is alive, from the papal chambers to the prison camps of China, no Catholic lives as though the saints not surrounding God's people and cheering us on at all times. Of course, His faithful Protestants are also surrounded by cheering saints and ministering angels, but, sadly, almost no Protestant seems at all aware of them. It's a little like receiving a love letter in jail but never opening it, or rather a whole truckload of them.

For a new Catholic, it is impossible to overstate the difference it makes to enter into the full reality of the Communion of Saints and to take up our rightful place within it. It's like coming in out of the dark and turning on the lights.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Purgatory

We have already mentioned Purgatory several times. Here at last, one might suppose, is an area of embarrassment, certainly not a treasure or a joy, especially when coupled with the notion of Indulgences. Many Protestants who will tolerate some Catholic variances from their position on other issues draw the line here. Merely raising the topic evokes the shades of Tetzl and the trading in souls that scandalously financed the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

Abuses there were, to be sure. As it happens, the Council of Trent during the Reformation Era itself addressed the most serious abuses incisively. In our time Pope Paul VI in his Doctrina Indulgentiarum freed Catholic prayerbooks of their constant reference to indulgenced prayers. He correctly, I think, understood how counterproductive it can be to inform the faithful after each prayer what merits they have earned by praying it. After all, we accrue merits only when we are properly disposed, and no one is properly disposed whose goal is only to chalk up merits!

Between him and Pope John Paul II a scripturally sound teaching on both Purgatory and Indulgences has emerged based on the work of the Second Vatican Council and expressed succinctly in The Catechism of the Catholic Church.

As a result, for some thoughtful Protestants the teaching of the Church on Purgatory and Indulgences has something of "the ring of truth" to it now. In fact, some pastors and teachers I know could be called "crypto-Catholics" in this area. I certainly was. And for years wherever I felt free to broach the subject I found others who were, too. There's a good reason why.

You see, there is a two-fold problem with the normal Protestant view that there is only Heaven or hell awaiting us after this life. To sustain that view one has first of all to ignore or explain away the natural sense of a troubling number of passages throughout the New Testament. Honest people will always find this difficult. And secondly, one has to suppose that at death God suddenly ceases to transform us "organically" that is, by a continuous self-consistent growth process involving our responsible interaction with the events of life, and instead at the resurrection somehow instantly re-creates us and perfects us without violating our integrity as children created in His own image.

We all agree that God has saved us through His grace in Jesus received in faith. This instantly, normally through Holy Baptism, changes our

status from children of Sin and Satan into children of God and little brothers and sisters of Jesus. We also agree that this change in status frees us from Sin as our lord and puts us under the lordship of Christ, a status we retain unless we are living with unconfessed mortal sin, or what Luther also calls deliberate sin. Our new status does not, however, free us of sin in our lives. That's a process that takes time and the active cooperation of our reborn will (to use the language of the Lutheran Formula of Concord). No longer slaves of Sin but of God, in the strong language of Romans 6:20-22, we are now in a position to resist the sin that still adheres to "our members" and to make real headway against it. In God we can go to work on all the ways that slavery to Sin has deformed us. We do this as people already freed from Sin who now belong to God, a fact of which we have to remind ourselves constantly if we are going to make any progress against sin in our lives (Romans 6:11). Thus far, traditional Protestants and Catholics largely agree.

Put simply, Catholics recognize that if that process has not been completed before we die, it goes right on until it is completed. Protestants don't, or at least they say they don't. That's part of what lends such an air of unreality both to their call to grow in holiness in this earthly life and to their sense of what happens to them after death. When someone dies we normally are quite aware of a considerable discontinuity between who that dear but sinful person has been in this life and who s/he will be as a sinless saint in Heaven. Without Purgatory there's nothing to bridge this gap, to make the transformation believable, nothing to ensure that the person I meet there will be recognizable as the person I have known and perhaps loved here. The issue becomes even more pointed when I think of myself. Most of us approach death well aware of how much more work God has to do on us. Remember the lapel button that warns others to "Be patient with me. God isn't finished with me yet"? Few of us reach the end of this life with any sense that we are ready now to remove the button. Without a place in their spiritual furniture for the role of Purgatory in completing the process, a lot of Protestants approach death with unnecessary foreboding solely because they know full well they are not yet fit for Heaven, but don't really know what God can still do about it.

Are not concerns like these the reason why in Dante's great Trilogy most of us saints-in-the-making find it so much easier to identify with his description of Purgatory than with his description of the Inferno or of Paradise? Purgatory is where we're at and where we expect to be when we die! The good news is that we are on our way through it towards Paradise. It's a way station. It makes us fit for our permanent home. The advantage we will have in Purgatory over our struggle to grow in Christ in this world is that there we won't be contending with Sin (Satan) any more. That will be a relief. That's what our loved ones are experiencing who are struggling there right now. Moreover, in Purgatory our final salvation is assured, whereas here it is not. No one presently in

Purgatory would ever choose to return to life on earth. Unlike our suffering on earth, our suffering in Purgatory can draw us only closer to God. Such suffering, even in this world, is a joy.

As a Lutheran pastor I found time and again that, without telling them I was teaching them about Purgatory, it was helpful to share with the dying and the bereaved the Scriptures that open up this perspective. (See the list at the end of the book.) It seemed to remove the element of fantasy from the process of dying and what comes next, to ground it in reality. It was like adding the missing pieces of a puzzle which enabled them to visualize the picture as a whole and to be more at peace with what they saw.

As a Catholic I don't have to do this surreptitiously any more. And the element of speculation is gone: It's all right there in the Catechism. The pieces are all in place.

As for indulgences, we have learned that their history in the Church is much longer than we thought, extending back into the era of the early martyrs. When cleansed of accumulated abuses the practice underscores the indispensable role of grace in the life of God's redeemed people. It tells me that all through life, more often than I care to admit, I am dependent on the gifts of loving people who don't ask me if I deserve those gifts or expect me to produce for myself something that is beyond my present ability. And so my need and their love come together in Jesus, in His Mystical Body, the Church. I move closer to God by benefiting from the virtues of those who are already closer to Him. This happens within the Church on earth all the time, as long as my eyes are fixed on Jesus and I am open to the help of others whose eyes are also fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2), brothers and sisters who at this point in their journey to God can see more than I can. It should come as no surprise then that my brothers and sisters in Glory are even more willing and able to do this for me, or that the Church should count it a privilege to make this connection between them and me as fruitful as possible.

There are some things I shall never be able to do for myself in any foreseeable future. If they are to be done for me now I shall have to receive them purely as a gift of love on the part of someone who is able to do them for me. The Latin verb indulgere means simply to be kind and generous. An indulgence, then, is nothing but an act of kindness offered to me by God's saints through the Church. I need only to be willing and open to receive it. The Church's role in the process is to teach me how to be willing and open so that their kindness to me is not offered in vain.

It's not really much of a stretch for someone who has been a Lutheran all his life to accept the special grace of indulgences in this light. It means that saints in Heaven who were helped on their way at a time when they

were as limited as I am, now want to help me on my way. I accept such help every day from my brothers and sisters on earth. And so the Church's teaching now makes sense to me. It's even starting to look like a treasure.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

This is the new name for what used to be called Penance or Confession and still goes by those names in conversation.

In this chapter we will not be considering the history of “Private Confession”, its proper use and its misuse over the years, or its virtual eclipse in some places in the Church within the last generation just when there is more enslaving sin to be confessed, cleansed away, and left behind than ever.

In promoting the call of the Second Vatican Council for a renewed understanding of the purpose and role of this Sacrament in the life of the faithful, Pope John Paul II has also called for an energetic restoration of its frequent practice on the part of all Catholics. Carolyn and I, as new Catholics, appreciate his concern. This Sacrament is a true treasure of the Church. It cannot be allowed to slip away by default as though it were a matter of indifference. We ought to consider how much the saints of the past have been aided by this Sacrament in their growth in holiness into the image of Christ. Our need for this today is even greater than theirs was.

Like all true treasures, the Sacrament of Reconciliation proves its value only to those who do not neglect it. And that is entirely a question of how much we desire to live a reconciled life. The more fed up we are with living an unreconciled life (unreconciled to God, others, creation, and/or self), the more likely we are to heed the call of the Holy Father. That’s when the real adventure begins.

Over the years as a Lutheran I myself practiced “private confession” on a sporadic basis and as a pastor and bishop I was always serving as someone’s confessor in the formal sense of the word. While there was some value in this, considerable value in a few cases, the whole exercise suffered from a lack of discipline, the absence of church-wide standards and expectations. It also suffered, frankly, from the prevalent trend to confuse “cheap grace” with “free grace”, which seems to blind people to the devastating effect of unconfessed and unrepented sin in the life of individuals and communities. In such an environment the practice of Confession, both in its more usual public form and in its private form, has become the very thing Lutherans once disdained Catholics for promoting – a licence to sin as much as you want. After all, you can always be declared sinless unconditionally every week in the General Absolution. Since 1978 Lutheran liturgies in North America have even dropped all reference to the need to be “truly repentant”, for fear of constricting the flow of grace. Luther’s own exhortation to

“the impenitent and unbelieving” to come to true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ “ere the day of grace be ended” has been deleted in its entirety.

I mention this to underscore, especially for Catholics, the high value of the sound theology and discipline with which the Church undergirds the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Do not take them for granted. Do not despise them. They breathe the same spirit which the Church of the first apostles breathed, and for new Catholics like us that is truly the breath of life. The wrestling of conscience we endured as we tried to reconcile contemporary Lutheran practice with the practice of the apostolic community is now largely over for us. We needed only to embrace heart and soul the current standards of the Catholic Church.

Which is, of course, the problem for many Catholics. If the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to work for you, you need to be engaged all the way. And so does your confessor, usually your priest. Most of the confessors we have had as new Catholics have been dedicated to this ministry and diligent in making it available. No one should underrate the amount of time, prayer, and hard work it takes to be a good confessor. Our impression is that many priests today are putting the required effort into it because they have listened to the Holy Father and now realize how much is at stake. Our archbishop is certainly doing all he can to encourage understanding and compliance before it's too late.

What makes the Sacrament of Reconciliation a breath of fresh air for us?

This is not easy to discuss in satisfying detail because of its private nature. But a few indications may prove useful.

Every Catholic (and non-Catholic!) Christian should begin by grappling with the clear and helpful official teaching on the Sacrament of Reconciliation found in The Catechism of the Catholic Church. In particular, we benefited from the teaching on mortal and venial sin and on what constitutes a valid confession.

In practice, most Protestants ignore or even deny the distinction between mortal and venial sin, citing James 2:10 in defence of their position and overlooking all the passages of Scripture that come to pointed expression in I John 5:16-17. They also pass over the consistent understanding of the early Church, the Fathers, and even of Martin Luther (whose teaching on “deliberate sin” is, if anything, even stronger than the Church's in its insistence that salvation can be lost through unconfessed sin in the life of a Christian). We can think of mortal sin as a choice I make to disobey the Moral Law (the Ten Commandments). Through this choice I expel the Holy Spirit from my soul, or rather, I expel my soul from the bosom of the Holy Spirit. My return is possible. But like the return of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11ff.), it must come through sorrow

for my sin at the level at least of recognition of what I have forfeited, leading to Confession and Absolution, normally in the context of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Furthermore, such Absolution, in Catholic teaching, is not blanket (it never has been!) but is valid only if, in seeking it, the sinner has no intention of repeating the sin and every intention of avoiding it. Interestingly enough, this was once the standard Lutheran approach as well, as witnessed in the liturgies which stood for centuries until 1978.

Why is it important to get this straight and to put it into practice in accordance with the Church's teaching? I can tell you what it has begun to do for me. It has enabled me to take responsibility for those choices for which I am fully capable of taking responsibility, while relying on Christ's redeeming love from the Cross to deal with my failures, blindspots, and unwitting sins. There is no question that what I once regarded as my "besetting sins" are no longer exercising the same mastery over me they once exercised. These are the patterns of sinful behaviour I once regarded as beyond my control, irresistibly a part of who I am, patterns that brought much harm to others and to myself. The Church's teaching does not allow me to fool myself into thinking that they are not grave or mortal sins and that I have no control over them. Nor will the Church allow me to come for Absolution if I persist in fooling myself like that. On the other hand, the Church knows very well that I can't resist these sins on my own. When I receive Absolution as a result of making the sincerest Confession of which I am capable, it comes fully supplied with the gift of the Holy Spirit to reconnect me to the Power Source from which I have severed myself by my deliberate sin.

This precisely, by the way, is what Luther also taught.

When severed from the Holy Spirit I am easy prey for besetting (i.e. habitual) sins. When connected, I have what it takes to resist and avoid them. Let no one be deluded. When roadblocks like this are removed from our pathway to God, it makes a big difference. We can begin following Jesus more faithfully in the practice of the Beatitudes and of patterning our life more nearly on His each day. This truly is walking in grace. Isn't it exactly what Paul wants for the whole Christian community (Galatians 5)?

At a minimum I can confidently state that the regular practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation seems to have broken up a log jam in me. I no longer see myself as helplessly at the mercy of besetting sins, because I'm not. It's that straightforward. This has also been Carolyn's experience in her own way.

This too has been another adventure of a lifetime for us. We often look at each other, shake our heads, and wonder how many such adventures we can handle in one lifetime.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Priestly and the Consecrated Life

For Protestants it's unthinkable, one of the best reasons for not taking the Catholic Church seriously.

Clergy (except for deacons) are still expected to forego marriage in the Latin Rite or to accept strict regulations surrounding it in the Eastern Rites.

Not only that, but the Church expects its priests and bishops to be satisfied with provisions for their temporal needs that are no more than adequate. The Church requires them and members of most religious orders to make the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours the normal hub of their daily life and work. In short, the Church sees no reason to expect less commitment from pastors and servants of the Gospel today than in the past. Why? Because Jesus expects no less, and this is His Church.

Granted, one can always point to the failures – sins of impurity or worse, avarice, negligence, self-indulgence, flippancy, addiction, a rebellious spirit.

The failures do not change the standard. But they certainly clarify the need for it. The Church's norm has not been adjusted down to accommodate the general laxity of our times. She still prays for holy and self-sacrificing priests, sisters, and brothers dedicated to a life of prayer and service to God's people and to God's world in intimate union with Jesus and His blessed Mother.

The principle is that the Church is better served by having devout priests in short supply than by having tepid priests in abundance.

As for the moral failures noted above, if there is one thing to be learned from the Protestant experience it is that the lowering of standards does not improve the overall success rate. In some cases it actually aggravates it. Studies show that sins of impurity and abuse are at least as common among married clergy as they are overall among celibate clergy (there are pockets of exception). Moreover, many Protestant clergy, but not all, have come to regard it as their inalienable right to be as well remunerated as other "professionals" of their level of education. Equal remuneration has even been termed a "justice issue", passing off raw greed and an utter disregard for Jesus' standards of service as the moral high ground! Ordained Ministry is seldom referred to as one's "vocation" any more: it's your "career path". How can we avoid seeing

the parallels here with Ezekiel 34? How can we not grieve deeply for the Lord's flock?

The level of dedication on the part of most priests and religious strikes a new Catholic at once. Most lay Catholics, and many priests and consecrated women and men as well, seem to take their level of dedication for granted. They see it as essential to the very life of the Church, and they seldom question the Church's right to require it. Yet it is completely counter-cultural. There are vocal exceptions, of course. But what amazes a new Catholic is how prevalent the norm remains across the Church.

As a matter of fact, to the annoyance of some, the Church in its continuing prayer and discernment for vocations seems to have discovered that the times call for raised, not lowered standards. How wise! Our Lord will be well served only by candidates for the priesthood who are wholehearted in their response to Jesus' call and fully intent upon leading a life of holiness, prayer, and service as His faithful undershepherds. Our Lord will be well served only by candidates for the consecrated life who are not driven by ulterior motives, sexual hang-ups, or chips on the shoulder. Religious orders that are more, not less, stringent in their screening process and more, not less, committed to their special charism seem to be the ones that are thriving or reviving, as is only logical.

For a new Catholic the joy is to find these dynamics operating at the centre of the Church, not just in its "pietistic fringe". It is so gratifying to find a serious effort being made to adhere to the norms for the ministry of Jesus and the apostles on the basis that Jesus intends them for His Church as much now as He did 2000 years ago. This fact is more responsible than most people realize for the vitality that other Christians seem surprised to find in the Catholic Church, for the Church's ability, that is, to be prophetic and a credible sign of hope in an often hopeless world. Those who think the Church is not vital or prophetic or hopeful enough are, of course, correct. But watch what would happen to it if its standards for the ordained and the consecrated life were cut back to the Protestant norm!

Incidentally, some Protestant clergy are just as troubled about these trends within Protestantism as I have been. And while this chapter is not a defence of clerical celibacy *per se*, nor a claim that all clergy should necessarily be "as Paul was" (I Corinthians 7:7), it is a call from a new Catholic not to sell short its worth and certainly not to entertain the illusion that more problems would be solved than created by its removal.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eastern Catholic Churches

My real introduction to “Byzantine” and other “Eastern” Catholics came in 1987 when I traveled to the USSR, mostly Ukraine, with a tour group and served as the public shield for two Ukrainian Catholic leaders from Canada on a mission of contact and support for what was then the underground Ukrainian Catholic Church. It was a crash course for me if there ever was one. Some of what I learned from this experience found its way into the Eastern Churches Journal, Vol. 1, No 2, in an article entitled, “What Lutherans Can Learn from the Orthodox”.

The next significant boost to my appreciation for the Eastern Catholic treasure came from none other than the Pope whose encyclical Orientale Lumen I read on the heels of our pilgrimage to Coptic Egypt. By that time I was able to resonate with every word of the Holy Father’s courageous, even passionate, appeal to Western Christendom to look to the Christian East for much of the light it so badly needs in its present darkness. He particularly called attention to holiness in worship, the life of prayer, and a renewed monasticism as the heartbeat of a renewed Church. He sees these gifts from the East as a much needed antidote to the deadening secularism that surrounds and shapes us. To show that he meant business he entrusted the preparation of the last section of The Catechism of the Catholic Church to an Eastern Catholic priest, the section on Prayer. For many, this section is the crowning jewel of an already rich and beautiful work.

Setting aside for present purposes any consideration of the tangled histories and current relationships between Eastern Catholics and their Orthodox neighbours, I want to lift up something that is really worth celebrating: A Catholic is welcome equally in both the Western and the Eastern expression of the Catholic Church! Here we have a treasure that is too often truly hidden in a field, often just next door or down the street from us, and it is ours for the asking. Many of us have an opportunity right at our doorstep to implement some of the Holy Father’s urgent recommendations, an opportunity we would, frankly, be fools to ignore. Even when we consider that through attrition and, sadly, persecution the Eastern Catholic Churches in our midst are sometimes mere shadows of their true selves, they retain substance enough to bless us richly. Moreover, by the grace of God, some of these Churches are experiencing a new lease on life on Western soil.

Many years ago when Orthodox Churches began joining the World Council of Churches, Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, its Lutheran president; often remarked, “The Orthodox have taught us that you do not trip lightly into the presence of the Almighty. The way we Protestants

worship gives the impression that by standing on our tiptoes we think we can look God straight in the eye.”

That observation gets at some of the Holy Father’s concern.

Eastern Catholic worship, which is Orthodox in essence, is above all the blending of the most intimate tenderness and the most exalted adoration. It is incarnational in the only proper sense of the word, fully divine and fully human. It is incarnational in the sense that allows us to wash Jesus’ feet with our tears of love and repentance (Luke 7) and at the same time to cringe in fear of Who He really is (Matthew 14), incarnational in the sense that allows Him to wash our feet as He loves and serves us to the end and at the same time to expect us to revere Him as our Master and Lord (John 13). To Easterners, if our worship disconnects these two aspects of the truth about Jesus it falsifies them both and betrays the essence of our God-given incarnational faith.

Sometimes we Westerners lose patience with the careful definitions of the early Ecumenical Councils. But their worth is proved by the Byzantine liturgies to which they contributed so much content. These liturgies have succeeded where many others fail – they shape worshippers around the fundamental mysteries of the Christian revelation. All too often in Western Protestant liturgies, especially in recent times, the fundamental mysteries of Christian revelation are shaped around the “worshippers”. This means that worshippers are changed but little, whereas the fundamental mysteries can be changed to the point of disappearing altogether.

Again, this is not the place to offer teaching on icons as “theology in colour” or “visible Word of God”, or on the harmonies of music as the native language of Heaven, or on the House of God as the Gate of Heaven, or on the Divine Liturgy as subject only to slow and organic development from within, or on any of the numerous special features of each particular Eastern Catholic Church. Still less is it the place to explore the value of appointing bishops from among celibate monks only, while still allowing for married parish priests, or the way these Churches are able to be in full communion with the Bishop of Rome and still retain as sacrosanct their own Tradition and their own Canon Law distinct from that of the Latin Church.

But as new Catholics Carolyn and I are simply overwhelmed by the joy of being able to participate fully, eucharistically, unrestrictedly in the worship life of the Ukrainian Catholic Parishes in our area. After all these years of growing in our love and admiration of the Eastern Tradition, this is a priceless privilege for us. And to think that we can do this without in any way putting into jeopardy our status and participation in the life of our own local Roman Catholic parish! We note a considerable sprinkling of other “Latin Catholics” amongst our

Ukrainian brothers and sisters, a trend the Holy Father would certainly approve. The only puzzle to us is that there are not more.

For many years and for many reasons, some good and some bad, Roman Catholic parishes have been absorbing and “neutralizing” Ukrainian and Eastern Catholics as if they were doing God a favour by making Latin Catholics of them. Not only has the Pope called a halt to this: he has called for a sort of reversal of it.

For all the reasons cited above, we couldn’t agree more.

And as new Catholics we can do more than just agree with the Holy Father. We can enter into the Eastern Tradition all the way and drink in its life-giving waters at any time, thanks to all the Eastern Catholic Churches in our midst.

How we wish this were also possible for our beloved Lutheran brothers and sisters who would also benefit greatly from a spiritual infusion for the Christian East.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Social Doctrine

The first thing to celebrate here is that there is such a thing as Catholic Social Doctrine at all and that it is articulated so clearly and accessibly in The Catechism of the Catholic Church!

I join the Orthodox prelate about whom I read recently who exclaimed to his colleagues that there is nothing comparable to it on the face of the earth. He did not hesitate to commend it to them as a unique and priceless contribution to the whole Church from the Western Patriarchate (*i.e.* the See of Rome). It began, for all practical purposes, with the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII towards the end of the Nineteenth Century and has been evolving ever since.

It is of great importance that in an effort to provide moral and ethical guidance to the now rudderless Russian society, the entire Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church recently adopted a carefully crafted omnibus document on social doctrine that in many ways resembles, if it is not in fact patterned on, that of the Catholic Church.

There was a time when the social doctrine, such as it was, of the various Protestant bodies could have been said to bear a family resemblance to Catholic social doctrine. But no more.

The Twentieth Century saw a gradual and at times a rapid erosion of the principle on which all forms of Christian social doctrine, even the most diverse, were once based. It seemed self-evident to all Christians until recently that the good of the community takes precedence over the rights claimed by any individual within the community. Individual rights were always developed with the good of the whole in view. No Christian ever supposed that any individual had a right to behaviours that were detrimental to the true good of the community. It's not that non-Catholics have declared themselves against the true good of the community. It's just that in coming to terms with specific issues involving the rights claimed by individual groups they have stopped asking the question. Often they appear not even to understand the question. I think that this has come about because claimed rights are easy to define and the true good of the community is not. It's easy to agree on what individuals are demanding for themselves, not so easy to agree on what these demands will do to the community over time. That, of course, does not stop them from doing it if they are granted. Almost alone, the Catholic Church insists on confronting society (and other Christians!) with the question they forget and are annoyed at being asked to face: What is the true good of the community at stake in this

issue? And almost alone the Catholic Church in its social doctrine offers society time-tested principles to use in getting at some real answers.

By doing this the Church has isolated itself not only from pressure groups of all kinds who cannot or will not see beyond themselves, but also from most Protestant bodies who have simply given up on asking the larger, unpopular, but ultimately most critical question.

In describing his Church's ethical position on several such issues to the group of clergy mentioned earlier, Coptic Bishop Antonios Markos put into a memorable aphorism what he took to be a fundamental biblical principle with universal application: **You do not destroy the many for the sake of the few.**

Sadly, for many in that gathering this was a quite novel idea.

But it goes even further than this. Among Protestants it is now common to favour sacrificing the basic rights of the many in order to guarantee that the rights demanded by the few will never be sacrificed. This leads to absurdities which have come to be accepted as inevitable, large injustices created in order to prevent smaller ones. It works like this: In order to guarantee that no woman with a "legitimate" need to procure an abortion is ever without access to it we have put every unborn baby at the complete mercy of its mother and stopped asking what is legitimate. Similarly, in order to guarantee that no homosexual person ever experiences inappropriate discrimination we have put our youth at the complete mercy of their propaganda and stopped asking what is inappropriate. And the list goes on. It's as if we have stopped caring about how many people we wound in order to heal one person. We don't even dare to raise the question as to whether at so great a cost to so many other people we have in fact healed the wounded one at all! Or have we just covered the wound?

Lutherans talk a lot about "evangelical freedom" in relation to ethical matters and church discipline. It once amounted to leaving a large area for pastoral discretion in responding to moral failures, on the principle that room should be provided for true repentance and a new start. It worked fairly well as long as pastors and bishops were diligent in their responsibility and supported one another in the exercise of it. In practice, however, "evangelical freedom" has in recent years come to mean overlooking moral failures and dismissing the need for repentance altogether. It is now possible for sinners to assert their "right" to skip all of that and move straight into making a new start (which, without repentance, can only be a repetition of the old pattern that failed), all in the name of "grace". Church discipline has become virtually unenforceable in anything but the most extreme cases. "Evangelical freedom" has provided a home in these churches for the reigning narcissism of our culture, a rationale for abandoning wholesale

the Gospel call for disciples of Christ to sacrifice joyfully their personal “rights” for the love of God and the well-being of the community. Within a generation or two, Catholic and Protestant ethics and the respective social doctrines that derive from them have grown poles apart. And it’s not the Catholic doctrine that has moved. It is a great relief for new Catholics like us to see Gospel values, not prevailing cultural values, undergirding the Church’s social doctrine at every point. You don’t have to cringe every time your church makes a new pronouncement on a social issue. You don’t have to feel helpless any longer in the face of the erosion of Christ’s Gospel within “my” church, wondering how you are going to remain faithful when your faith family is not. How grateful we are that the Catholic Church consistently holds high the truths and values of the Gospel whatever the cost, with consummate love and with every expectation that, though ridiculed now, in the end they can only prevail since their source is in God.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Catholicity

To the new Catholic the sheer catholicity of the Church is mindboggling at first, especially if you have emerged from, let us say, a Danish Lutheran, a Scottish Presbyterian, or even a Church of England background.

Drop in on almost any urban parish (except the specifically ethnic parishes) for weekday Mass, Reconciliation on Saturday, or the Sunday liturgy and you will think you are at the United Nations. The easy mingling of many nationalities and tongues, colours and ages will warm your heart. This is as true of the priests and their lay helpers as it is of the gathered assembly. Even the ethnic parishes (Hispanic, Chinese, Italian, Vietnamese, Polish, French, Croatian, German, Hungarian, and on and on) are tied closely to the diocese, not off on their own.

Amazing as this is, it only begins to touch what catholicity is all about. Religious orders, associations, confraternities, societies, institutions of mercy and education, movements of various kinds, each with its own “charism” or gift to the Church as a whole and to the Church’s mission in the world, some waxing, some waning, some in full bloom – who knows how many? It is a heady mix, a variety so diverse as to make one marvel that these can all be Catholic.

But they are! So rare are defecting splinter groups that actually leave or are dismissed en masse from the Church that when it happens it scandalizes everyone. Among practising Catholics (and a lot of non-practising Catholics, too), loyalty to the Church runs so deep that even those who are in flagrant rebellion against the Pope and the Teaching Office (Magisterium) seldom consider leaving the Church, or starting a new church, as an option. Some might choose to join an appealing brand of Protestantism if pushed to it, but they don’t attempt to create a new brand of Catholic. (Some Catholics, of course, join Protestant churches for other reasons, like marriage, renewal of a lapsed faith, refuge from a bad priest, and other understandable reasons.)

Operating from within the parameters of the Church’s catholicity, though sometimes on opposite sides of it, are such orders as the Dominicans whose “charism” is based on loyalty to and proclamation of the teaching of the Church and the Franciscans whose “charism” can include testing the limits and pushing them as far as possible. So the Dominicans uphold the centre and the Franciscans poke at the periphery, sometimes on the faculty of the same Catholic university (though just to make things interesting the reverse has been known to happen, too). This is typical of the creative tension, usually amicable, which exists in

many forms throughout the length and breadth of the Church. Few Protestant bodies could survive such tensions without spawning splinter bodies on all sides. A new Catholic marvels that it doesn't all fall apart, but also understands from within why it doesn't.

Some Protestant bodies do incorporate a lot of diversity without falling completely apart, but for a very different reason. They have little or no definable centre and no definable limits or boundaries. Almost anything goes.

Other bodies have a strong centre and rigid boundaries and achieve their unity by discouraging all diversity. Dissent is tolerated only in trivial matters.

A new Catholic is amazed at how firm the Church's centre is, how generally acknowledged its boundaries are, and how many currents and cross-currents there are within the Church. Because the centre is firm and the boundaries are clear, the variety and the tensions it produces are usually more enriching than alarming.

Catholics who question this should move about in Protestant circles for a while. For all the good people they would meet and the good things they would experience, they would soon find themselves eucharistically undernourished and fed up with dilettantism in worship. They would wonder where the Word is in these "churches of the Word" and when it is that people actually pray in these houses of prayer. Soon they would be only too glad to come home to annoying rabble like themselves who count on Eucharist and centring Word at every daily Mass to draw them back into communion with Jesus, one another, their bishop, and the Holy Father. They might even become nearly as grateful for this as a new Catholic is.

Beyond this, the Church's catholicity conditions its outlook on the world at large and its approach to cross-cultural mission. It is not easy in times like ours to hold together the two sides of Christian truth – the unique work and lordship of Jesus Christ for all people in all times and places and the universal love of God for everyone everywhere. Yet, in the face of misunderstanding and charges of bigotry, the Church never tires of proclaiming and living out both parts of the truth all the time, epitomized in the words and deeds of the Pope himself. This is amazing.

In the middle of the Twentieth Century, before the Second Vatican Council, a renowned priest was silenced by Rome for preaching that only Catholics would be saved. The dogmatic constitution Lumen Gentium from Vatican II is crisp and eloquent in its proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Saviour of all, and also in its grateful recognition that His saving grace is at work in other Christian bodies and, wherever possible, in other religions, too. It does this while affirming the Catholic

Church as the source of divine grace in its fullness and as Our Lord's sacrament of salvation for the whole world.

The Holy Father has consistently held forth the universal and ultimate nature of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, of Who He is and of what He has come into the world to do for humanity. And he has welcomed all evidence of His person and work beyond the visible confines of the Catholic Church.

A magnificent document, Dominus Jesus (The Lord Jesus), was released during the Jubilee Year, 2000 AD, as the Church's crowning proclamation of Jesus' unique gift of life for the whole human race. Many were offended by its contents. Some people, including a few Catholics, registered surprise that the Church should still present Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), not simply as a way, a truth, and a life among other equally valid ways, truths, and lives. Protestants, not content to be addressed as Ecclesial Communities, protested that they were not put into the Sister Church category by which the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have addressed each other since their mutual anathemas were lifted by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras.

Dominus Jesus warrants a careful and appreciative reading by all. Its severest critics to whom I have been exposed have never seen it. It is, in fact, an assurance that the Catholic Church is unwavering in her consecration to Jesus as Lord and Saviour of all, in her dedication to living out her commission from Him to the close of the age (Matthew 28:16ff.), and in her joyful acknowledgement that His grace and saving power embrace willing people in redemptive ways everywhere.

While on the one side some flatten out their Jesus to the level of just one more religious leader among many, and on the other side still others proclaim a Jesus who is too small to embrace anyone but "true Christians", the Church lives out of her constant experience of His transcendent and incarnate love, her Eucharistic centre.

A new Catholic stands in awe of the Church's persistence in her dedication to Jesus just as He is and realizes that this dedication is the work of Jesus Himself in her midst through the Eucharistic encounter in which He daily nourishes her on His Holy Word and His Holy Body and Blood.

Because of this, and only because of this, it's much more difficult in the Catholic Church for people to remodel Jesus to make Him palatable to modern tastes than it is for Jesus to remodel modern people to make them palatable to God. Without it, the results are predictable. And, sadly, much of present-day Protestantism is proof of it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Living Word

This is in some ways the most important treasure of all, and the most difficult to describe to a non-Catholic.

It boils down to this: If Jesus meant what He said to Peter and the apostles, then there will always be within the Church a living Teaching Office, right down to the end of time. That is, there will always be an apostolic office in the Church whose holders, real people, guided by the Spirit and acknowledged by the Church in the exercise of their call, will interpret and proclaim the Word of God reliably “until the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). That’s the job to which they have been called and for which they have been equipped by the Lord Jesus.

Self-evident as this is to Catholics (and it is!), it is a real stone of stumbling to Protestants who used to say, all of them, that this was the job of the Bible and who now say, most of them, that there really is no identifiable holder of this job. But because it is a job that can’t be avoided, voters’ assemblies have been forced to take it on, whether they feel right about it or no, as we have seen.

What happened to bring about this huge difference between Catholics and Protestants?

There is no doubt that the Protestant Reformation breathed new life into preaching which in the late Middle Ages had all but died out at the parish level. The sermons of Luther and his disciples, and even of his antagonists in the reforming movement, were gripping, life-changing, faith-generating. They sought to expose everyone in every parish to this preaching drawn from Scripture on at least a weekly basis, confident that this would result in a living encounter with God. And it often did.

But this approach had its down side, as well.

In much of the Protestant world preaching became so central that it crowded out most other aspects of worship. Congregational singing was introduced mainly as an educational tool at first. It took about 100 years for preaching to shove the Eucharist aside just as in an earlier age the Eucharist had shoved preaching aside. This happened because now preaching, not the Eucharist, was the new climax of worship, and so the Eucharist could be lopped off the end of the Mass and be little missed. Pastors became orators, eloquence replaced holiness, the perfectly composed sermon became the measure of a good minister. This required him to spend most of his time insulated from his flock to prepare a worthy message for them each week which could take an hour

or two to deliver. There were, of course, pastorally and liturgically sensitive exceptions to this prevailing model, like Wilhelm Loehe in the Nineteenth Century, but they proved the rule. Nearly everyone saw them as threats to the status quo, odd birds.

As late as 1963 I discovered as a student in Strasbourg, France, that half the Protestant clergy had never bothered to be ordained, nor did this pose any obstacle whatever to their appointment to a parish if they were academically qualified and could compose learned sermons. In practice, this narrow focus on the preached Word has over the centuries done more to drive people away from the Gospel than its relative absence in the Middle Ages ever did. For the sermon is even more vulnerable to the short-comings of the preacher than the Mass is to the short-comings of the priest. Pastors who read a lot and preach but can't pray or worship God or nurture others are lethal to the flock, especially when getting an education often amounts to identifying with the latest intellectual trends and making your sermon a platform for them. Remember, there is little else happening in the worship service to provide a balance or corrective. The whole experience for everyone is at the pleasure of the preacher.

Thus, relying on the preached Word alone to sustain the Christian community has proved to be far from adequate. The loss of meaningful liturgy and regular Holy Communion has been disastrous. Recent efforts to redress this imbalance have helped a little, but for reasons whose description lies outside the scope of this book it has been too little too late.

You may say that you rely on the Bible alone to supply God's Word to God's people. This sounds good. After all, there is only one Bible. But there is a different interpreter in each and every pulpit, each laying claim to the authority of Scripture for the assertions being made. A church body may have standards of interpretation, but who enforces them, and by those authority?

Even that is not the worst problem in connection with confining the living Word to the Bible and preaching in general. What is to be made of Jesus' promise to the apostles?

If you are a new Catholic who has been a teacher and interpreter of Scripture for years, you step into another world in the Catholic Church, no matter what kind of Protestant community you come from.

If you come from a traditional Protestant community you have until now been in a world in which Divine Revelation stopped at the end of the New Testament era. In that world, it doesn't matter if everything that has happened in the Church since then is a blur to you. God has had nothing more to tell the world than what appears in Scripture. You have believed that the primary job of the Holy Spirit is to transport you back

in time to the New Testament era and make it come alive for you. You haven't noticed until now that this has required you to believe that the Holy Spirit went through a personality change after the time of the Acts of the Apostles and their epistles. For you no longer expected that it was possible for the Church's apostolic leaders to say to Christians today what they said then in regard to a contemporary controversial issue, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28)

But now you belong to the Catholic Church which has never stopped saying that and which is just as compelled to say it today as it was then. This is a new world for you.

If you as a new Catholic happen to have come out of a post-modern Protestant tradition you have been in a world in which Divine Revelation and Human Development have been essentially equated. For you, the Holy Spirit and the spirit of the times have virtually merged into one. Unlike traditional Protestantism, your type of Protestantism has had little concern about Divine Revelation past or present. In fact, the whole question of revelation has been something of an embarrassment to it. The New Testament can make sense in the light of Human Development only to the extent that it can be purged of all references to and conclusions drawn from Divine Revelation. It's the human story that emerges from a purged Bible that may continue to have some small significance for the post-modern Christian. Until now, Incarnation has for you really been Apotheosis. That is, God did not really become human to redeem us and transform us into His children again. We are divine already. And we are the ones who define who God is.

No matter which type of Protestant community you come from, or any blended type of community in the space between these two ends of the spectrum, you are in for a major jolt as a new Catholic. If you have been a traditional Protestant, you couldn't ask for a more reverent attitude toward Scripture or more commitment to its teachings than you find in the Catholic Church. And yet the Church acts as if Jesus really meant what He said to the apostles about the Spirit leading them into all truth after His departure (John 16:13, cf. 14:26 and 15:26). The Church steadfastly maintains that nothing can be true that conflicts with God's Self-disclosure and Word of truth in Sacred Scripture, supremely in Jesus Christ. But every Catholic knows that Jesus has kept His promise. The Spirit is now and has always been very active in the Church, shaping and reshaping people with redemptive initiatives that extol Jesus and draw them into His merciful heart. Many of these initiatives occur among the little and the lowly (e.g. Guadalupe, Lourdes, Fatima, Amsterdam, Japan, China, Medjugorje, Damascus, Rwanda, South Korea, several in Latin America, etc.). They must be authenticated, as always in Scripture, by the Church (cf. I Corinthians 14:29-33) and its apostolic leaders (cf. I Corinthians 14:37-38) before being offered as trustworthy to the faithful. In some of these instances of

divine initiative the entire testimony is a matter wide open public record and can prove to be of immeasurable worth to anyone in our perplexing times who is still open to the Church's continuing witness to God's work, within humble souls (e.g. in addition to the foregoing, St. Therese of Lisieux, the "Little Flower", and her Story of a Soul; St. Faustina of Poland and her Divine Mercy in My Soul; St. Maximilian Kolbe, in his work, his writings, and his martyrdom; St. Padre Pio, and countless others in our own time.) I just don't grasp how Protestants (and some embarrassed Catholics) can ignore the witness of these saints of our age. I grieve for them deeply because of it.

This indeed is a whole new world for a new Catholic. No matter how well you think you know Church history, it's a real eye-opener to see it from within the Catholic family, virtually studded with divine interventions and revelations all along the way. You are now a part of the Church which not only believes that God continues to act in self-disclosing and redeeming ways in history but has also developed careful and biblically shaped criteria for distinguishing truth from illusion which it applies on an on-going basis. You had better get used to it. Everything from Papal Encyclicals to this week's Parish Bulletin is filled with it, just like the pages of the New Testament. Why should this be a new world to any Christian?

In short, God is neither dead nor asleep. Nor has the Most Holy Trinity moved aside to make room for the latest version of the Most Holy Community. In the Church the latter is always the child of the Former, never Its parent. This, of course, makes Human Community so much stronger, more alive, more enduring than it can ever be when cut off from its source in God. This is the shock that awaits a post-modern Protestant in the Catholic Church. It blows away so many assumptions. God is real. Indeed, God is Reality. Everything does emanate from God and revolve around Him. And every human being who is given the grace to recognize this is stronger and better and more alive because of it. The Church will never stop saying this because it is her very life.

Among Catholic Christians the Word of God has thus retained a truly living quality because it is received by the Church entrusted by Jesus with the living Magisterium, a living quality which even the best expressions of Protestantism have lost. This is no exaggeration. When the Church lives from the Scriptures as God intends her to do, and does not try to make them do what only His apostles can do, then like every creature of God they are at their best and achieve His purposes most effectively.

Cradle Catholics don't realize how good they have it. And most Protestants don't realize how good it can be!

A Few Closing Words

All the gems we have been considering in these brief chapters do add up to quite a treasure.

It would be wrong to suggest that non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christians lead an impoverished existence, except in a relative sense. Indeed, Christian faith in any reasonably authentic form is always a treasure compared to its absence.

But I grieve over what I came to regard over the years as “Lutheran reductionism” or “minimalism”. Some other Protestants are plagued with even more exaggerated forms of it. It’s the principle that less is always better than more. Why would anyone bother with wanting more than the minimum? Don’t you know that if you have a desire for more than the bare essentials of faith it can induce deadly pride and self-righteousness in your soul?

I long to see my Lutheran brothers and sisters whom I have loved and served for a lifetime move beyond this crippling mind-set and lay claim to these treasures that are also rightly theirs. Are not Lutherans really just Catholics in protest? Is it possible that the time to protest is over and the time to profess has come?

Compared to the various forms of reductionism that resulted from the Reformation, the controlled organic profusion of the Catholic Church is a marvel to behold. Instead of the mind-set that is always asking, “How little do we need of this to survive?” the question is rather one of fullness: “How much of this does God want us to have?”. As mentioned above, for many Protestants, seeking more than the bare minimum seems dangerous, as though the desire to experience more than the bare essentials of life in God inevitably harms us. For a Catholic or Orthodox Christian, settling for the absolute minimum is like going through life half-starved when God has set a banquet before you. Perhaps you can survive on a few scraps, but God’s portions are generous. Don’t you fear offending the Host by rejecting so much of His provision for you? Don’t you think He knows best what you need to combat the evil one successfully and to stay strong in Him as you bear the cross that goes with being Jesus’ follower?

There is indeed something ungrateful about needlessly depriving oneself and others as God’s guests at the banquet of faith. What is so virtuous about being obsessed with minimum requirements? Are we afraid we might lose control if we accept more than we require just to survive? Are we afraid of becoming too dependant? And what virtue is there in our obsession with questions like, “How little does it take to be a true Church?” “How little holiness can I get by with?” “How little Scripture

do I have to take seriously before I sacrifice the core of the Gospel?” “What are the bare essentials of ordained ministry, and how little does the Church need of it in order to survive?” “How little attention can I get away with paying to Mary and the saints?”

In contrast, the Catholic question is, “How can we open ourselves to receive these gifts of God and enter more fully into them?”

Sometimes the Church has to spell out minimum requirements for survival, but she does so very reluctantly, alerting the faithful that they risk cheating themselves and others if they choose to settle only for them. (See, for example, the discussion of the Church’s precepts in The Catechism of the Catholic Church.)

And this is the Church that strikes many outsiders (and some half-hearted Catholics) as restrictive, rule-bound, authoritarian, and out of step with the times! You don’t have to be a genius to see that what seem like restrictions are actually the key to the abundant life of following Jesus to your cross and resurrection, whereas what looks like freedom is in fact the choice to decline the invitation to the banquet and then wonder why you’re so hungry.

If you are a Catholic, I hope these pages have made you even more grateful than ever for the many treasures that are uniquely ours as Catholics. If you are a Protestant I hope you realize why we can’t just say, “We all worship one God,” and shrug off everything celebrated in these pages as insignificant.

With all my heart I urge you to explore for yourself the treasures lifted up in these pages. Talk about them with Catholic friends. Don’t be afraid to think hard and pray about them. God won’t love you more if you do that, but you may love Him more and be more aware of how much He loves you.

It was scary for us to think about this.

Now it’s scary for us to think about where we’d be if we hadn’t

Is God calling you to a similar journey?

“What Can I Read After This?”

The best list of books I know of is found at the end of Patrick Madrid’s fine book, Search and Rescue (Manchester NH, 2001)

For us the following works have been especially illuminating, and we discover more all the time.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church. Available everywhere, this is the basic resource for all authentic teaching of the Church.

The Documents of Vatican II. Available everywhere. The Church’s teaching on which much of the Catechism is based.

The Encyclicals and Apostolic Letters of Pope John Paul II, and all the recent popes, are all easily available through Catholic Book Stores.

Dominus Jesus, The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, 2000. Available through Catholic Book Stores and Diocesan Offices.

Bossis, Gabrielle, He and I, Sherbrooke, 1985 (Brown, Evelyn M. trans.) Dialogues between Jesus and His “little girl” in the course of Holy Hour, Mass, and daily life.

Johnston, Francis, The Wonders of Guadalupe, Rockford, 1981.

Varghese, Roy Abraham, God-Sent, A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary, New York, 2000. I wish every Protestant would read this book with an open mind. Its bibliography is an excellent source for finding trustworthy books that deal with the very significant contemporary apparitions of the Blessed Mother at Medjugorje and elsewhere.

Walsh, William Thomas, Our Lady of Fatima, New York, 1990.

In addition, any of the works by Scott Hahn, Patrick Madrid, Thomas Howard, Richard John Neuhaus, James Akin, David Armstrong, Robert L. Wilkens, and a host of others from our own time, or of G.K. Chesterton, Hugh Benson, Cardinal Newman from previous generations, can be useful to those who wonder if God is calling them to become Catholic.

For basic instruction in Catholic life and faith the works of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen and Father John A. Hardon, SJ, are hard to beat.

On a more academic level, but still highly readable, try the works of Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ.

If you have access to the Internet, you will find a wealth of material in every imaginable Catholic area of interest, listed by subject, author and/or source. Fr. Guy Carriere has diligently compiled a detailed index of worthwhile articles and websites.

As promised in Chapter 12, here are some New Testament passages that make best sense if there is a space between our death and our entrance into Heaven for something like Purgatory:

I Peter 3:18-20, also 1:7
Luke 12:47-48
I Corinthians 3:12-15, also 15:29
Matthew 5:25-26; 12:32
Mark 3:28-30
The whole perspective of Philippians 3:9-14
Revelation 20:13
Possibly Luke 16:23; etc.

Please note that in October, 2002, (a year and a half after the foregoing text was completed) the Holy Father issued an encyclical entitled Rosarium Virginis Mariae (The Rosary of the Virgin Mary) and declared October 2002 through October 2003 “The Year of the Rosary”. In it he adds a fourth set of Mysteries, “The Luminous Mysteries”, covering the life and ministry of Jesus and inserts it in second place right after “The Joyful Mysteries” and ahead of the “The Sorrowful Mysteries” and “The Glorious Mysteries”. This encyclical is a very readable explanation of the history, purpose and power of the Rosary and its important role in the life of the Christian in today’s world.

