

# The Eucharist Converted Me!

Kenneth J. Howell

As I knelt in St. Peter's Cathedral at daily Mass, my heart struggled to know what God wanted me to do. The past year had opened my eyes to the beauties of the Mass and to the truths of the Catholic faith, but I just could not become a Catholic. How could I give up what I had worked so hard to achieve? Now that I was successful in what I had always wanted to do, wouldn't it be foolish to walk away from it all? And what if my wife would not or could not follow me in my spiritual journey, should I jeopardize my marriage or put our children in confusion? I simply didn't know what to do or where I was going in my life. That day the Mass was the same as I had come to know it over the past year. What had seemed foreign and strange was now precious and inviting. So inviting was it that I felt as if a gigantic magnet was drawing me into something greater than myself. When we came to the Communion Rite, the priest held up the host for all to see and said these words, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper!" How many times I had seen this host before! And how many times I had believed those words with my mind! But today was different. As I looked at the host in the hands of the priest, the words welled up from my soul reaching to my lips. With a small whisper I said to myself, "I really believe that. This is truly the Son of God, the Lamb of sacrifice who takes away my sins." With a new and deeper meaning I said with the congregation, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed." As I left St. Peter's in Jackson, Mississippi that day, I knew deep in my heart that someday I had to become Catholic. That day was a culmination and a commencement. I had been studying the Eucharist intensely for about two years. I had come to believe that Christ had intended his words, "This is my body" to be taken seriously and I knew that the Christian Faith was not an academic theory, but that it must be pursued and followed with all the vigor I could muster. Since 1988 I had been teaching at a Presbyterian seminary. Ten years earlier, I had been ordained a Presbyterian minister after completing college and seminary. During those ten years my wife and I were the recipients of three wonderful gifts: Rebekah, Colin, and Rachel. Those same years had seen us moving around as I was pastor of two small churches, one in Florida and one in Indiana. My most intense work in that period, however, was obtaining a doctoral degree in linguistics. Upon completing the Ph.D. my childhood pastor, who was now Dean of a Presbyterian seminary, called me and asked if I had any interest in teaching biblical languages and literature at his graduate school of theology. As we packed our things in August 1988, I was convinced that I was on the verge of doing exactly what I had wanted to do all my life. I wanted to teach young men and women who were preparing for various forms of ministry in the Presbyterian tradition. Becoming a Catholic was the furthest thing from my mind. I was born and raised in Tampa, Florida, the third of four children. My parents raised us in the Presbyterian church and I was actively involved in our vibrant youth group during my teen years. In my last year of high school I had a genuine conversion experience. From that time on, I was determined to become a Presbyterian minister although my intellectual bent always suggested an academic calling as a theologian. I assumed that my inclination toward and gifts for learning languages was a sure confirmation of that calling since I knew that theologians had to be conversant with ancient languages. For two years I attended Covenant College, an experience that deepened my spiritual life considerably. I was surrounded by devout Christians who knew the Bible well. All my professors encouraged me in my movement toward theology. Most importantly, I met my wife of twenty-eight years on the first day of our freshman initiation. It didn't take long for me to fall in love with Sharon Canfield and her family. After being separated for the last two years of our college

career, Sharon and I were married on December 21, 1974 in the largest Presbyterian church in Florida, the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church. During the ensuing years, Sharon would prove to be as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. Like all married couples we had our moments, but her faithfulness, her even-tempered personality, and her tender love proved to be the quiet source of strength that I so desperately needed. As I look back on it now, she was a far better wife to me than I was a husband to her. In ways I could not then articulate, I was being provided with an example of faithfulness that taught me almost imperceptibly how to follow Christ. During the time of my pastoral ministries, Sharon gave freely of her time and efforts to support and buttress my work. Many people who would have otherwise been lost to my influence were won over by her gentle and loving manner. And she was happy when we moved to Mississippi in 1988 because she knew that teaching in higher education was what I always wanted to do.

### A Catholic Heart and A Protestant Head

During those years of pastoral ministry (1978-1988), two important events stand out which would be harbingers of my future journey to the Catholic Church. The first was a sermon I preached at Hope Presbyterian Church in Bradenton, Florida. One Sunday, I was preaching on Psalm 100 and I focused on the words of verse four, "Enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name." Since I longed for my congregation to understand the true nature of Christian worship, I asked them to close their eyes and to imagine themselves in heaven with God. There they would find an innumerable company of angels. And there they would join all the saints, the Christians of past generations who had served God faithfully. There they would hear the unceasing song of praise that lauded the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Then, I asked them to imagine the roof our little church opening up and this heavenly throng of angels and saints descending into our midst. This union of heaven and earth, I told them, was the essence of Christian worship. At the time I had no idea that this understanding of worship was the Catholic Church's teaching on the Mass. I thought that the only way for us Christians to experience this kind of worship was for us to feel it deep in our hearts. The second event was a conversation that took place around 1986. A Catholic couple had been attending our Presbyterian church in Bloomington, Indiana for some time. I think it was because they enjoyed my Bible teaching as well as the friendship that my wife had developed with the woman. When I visited in their home one evening, they told that they were Catholic and that they had been going to Mass every week as well as attending our worship services. When I heard that, I responded by telling them that we Presbyterians were catholic too. They were puzzled. I went on to explain that at the heart of the Protestant Reformation was the question, "Who are the true catholics?" I told them that I didn't reject the title "catholic" at all. In fact, I said, it was the Roman Catholics who departed from the ancient catholic faith. I gave them the version of history that I had learned in seminary. The purpose of the Reformation was not to break from the church but to bring it back to its original purpose of preaching the Gospel. The first few centuries of Christianity were more like modern Evangelical churches than like the modern Roman Catholic Church, I insisted. If they wanted to be true catholics, they should become Presbyterian. That was what St. Paul and the other apostles had taught. Calvinism, as one prominent Presbyterian theologian put it, was Christianity come into its own. I sincerely believed that I was catholic, that I was following in the footsteps of St. Paul in the line of true believers in the early church like St. Augustine. I did not despise church history; I honored it. Only later would I come to realize that what I honored was a Protestant version of that history. In my heart, I wanted to be a true catholic, but the beliefs in my head did not allow me.

## Exploring the Eucharist

Around 1990 I began teaching a course at Reformed Theological Seminary called “Advanced Biblical Exegesis” which I was free to organize in any way I chose. Since the sacraments typically played a minor role in Presbyterian churches, I wanted my students to have a deeper appreciation for the Lord’s Supper, the name used for the Eucharist in most Protestant traditions. My original intentions had nothing to do with becoming Catholic. I simply wanted to explore the biblical and historical foundations of this sacrament. During that course, I and my students translated relevant portions of the Scriptures from Hebrew and Greek. We read the history of Christian doctrine on this sacrament. We began with the earliest Church Fathers like Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr. We read the medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure. We read Lutherans, Calvinists and modern Roman Catholics. The last historical document we read was Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on the Eucharist entitled *Mysterium Fidei*. The effect of this research and teaching was completely unexpected. I delved into the historical background of the institution passages in the gospels (Matt 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22). I concluded that it was impossible to dismiss the idea of sacrifice from the Eucharist. I knew that the Reformed tradition had rejected the Mass as a true sacrifice because it saw the Mass as competing with the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. Further, I came to see that Paul had meant Christian worship to be sacrificial when he said in I Corinthians 10:14-16, “Therefore, my beloved, flee idolatry. I speak to those who are wise. Judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a communion with the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?” This text was in the context of Paul talking about eating sacrificial meals in pagan temples. His exhortation not to partake in those meals was based on the Eucharistic meal. It is as if Paul were saying that we Christians had our own sacrificial meal. I asked myself how my own Reformed tradition could reject the association of sacrifice with the Eucharist if it was so deeply implicated in the biblical texts. What especially impressed me was how the earliest available Christian documents on the Eucharist taught so much of what the Catholic Church teaches today. As I translated chapters 9 and 14 of the *Didache* for my students, I saw the author linking the Eucharist to prayer for Christian unity, “As this broken bread was scattered over the mountains and gathered into one, so let your church be gathered from the four corners of the earth into your kingdom.” The analogy between the wheat gathered into one and the union of God’s people into his eternal kingdom suggested to me that early Christian practice of the Eucharist involved a desire for unity. Since my days in college I had been troubled by the disunity and disagreements among my Protestant friends. In reading John 17 I knew that Jesus wanted his people to be one in communion with the Father. But Christians were so divided; believing different doctrines, worshiping in different ways, holding different moral positions. Something had to be wrong. The *Didache* also grabbed my attention in another regard. It is common among evangelicals today to allow anyone who professes to be a Christian to receive communion even though that person is not a member of the serving church. In that 9th chapter, the author says “Let only those who are baptized in the name of the Lord eat or drink from your Eucharist.” Since there was only one real Church at that time, this meant in effect that the Church leaders had an obligation to ensure that the communicants were members of that one true church. This kind of pastoral care, once common in mainstream Protestant churches, is now almost totally absent. The gap between contemporary evangelicalism and ancient Christianity was impressing itself on me more and more. At this point in my journey different aspects of the Christian faith were beginning to come together into a coherent whole. First, I began to realize that my desire to be truly catholic was not being fulfilled in my American evangelical experience nor even in my Reformed heritage. What I had expressed to that Catholic couple back in 1986 was coming back to haunt me. If my desire to follow the ancient catholic faith could be found within the confines of

Presbyterianism, then why did the Reformed tradition reject the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist that was implicit in the biblical texts I was studying? And why did the earliest Christian documents such as the Didache and Ignatius of Antioch seem to have view of the Eucharist that was closer to Roman Catholicism than to my Reformed heritage? For example, how could St. Ignatius of Antioch say, “the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in his goodness raised?” I was beginning to doubt that my understanding of early Christian history was accurate. A second question raised its head again. I began to see that Christian unity was intimately linked with the Eucharist. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul asked those two rhetorical questions that I quoted earlier (“Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a communion with the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?”). He goes on in verse 17 to say, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread?” Here Paul seems to teach that it is the Eucharist which yields unity among believers. This was a relatively new concept for me but it made me recall the sermon that I preached years before. If true Christian worship was a union of heaven and earth, and if the Eucharist was the very center of Christian worship, as implied in the Didache, then that meant that there could be no true unity without the Eucharist. Furthermore, the unity that these early Christians espoused was a not a general feeling of love for one another but a sacramental and organizational unity.

This seemed confirmed by St. Ignatius of Antioch who said several times in his letters that a valid Eucharist could only be had by being in union with one’s bishop. Speaking of those who held heretical teachings, Ignatius included their views of the Eucharist. He spoke of “judgment for those who do not believe in the blood of Christ.” Their sins were twofold: schism and heresy. They abstain from the Eucharist and from times of prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in his goodness raised. Those who oppose the gift of God with their disputes will die. (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 7:1).

These early Christian leaders didn’t mince words. Ignatius seems a clear witness to the early belief in the real presence of Christ. If the earliest Christian documents testified to belief in the real presence, I reasoned, how could my Presbyterian tradition truly represent ancient Christian belief? Coming to believe in the real bodily presence of Christ made me ask another question. Where can I find this Eucharist? Could it be found in the Presbyterian church or was it to be found in another church? [Where Can a Valid Eucharist Be Found?](#)

During the year or so that I attended Catholic Mass almost daily — before that day of epiphany that I described earlier — I was searching for an answer to this question. What churches have a valid Eucharist? All? If only some, which ones? And how do I recognize a valid Eucharist from one that is not? At the beginning of my study I had wanted to know what different churches taught about the sacrament, but now I wanted to know what churches had this real presence no matter whether they believed they did or not. Believing that they had the real presence did not mean that they truly did. I reasoned, quite naturally, that those churches which did not teach the real bodily presence of Christ probably do not have it. How do we know whether any given church has a valid Eucharist or not? That was the question that now beat inside my head. From my studies I knew that only three or four churches really believed in Christ’s bodily presence: the Lutheran, the Anglican, the Orthodox and the Catholic. Of these four the most objectionable in my Presbyterian community was the Catholic. I couldn’t become Lutheran because it would exclude my now partial Reformed beliefs. Since the Orthodox and Catholic traditions were out of the question, only one option remained. During the same year that I attended Catholic Mass I also attended a Eucharist at the traditional Anglican church every Friday. I was strongly tempted to become an Anglican, especially when the

priest at this church suggested that I could become an Anglican priest without much difficulty. On special feast days like Holy Week, I took my family to the Episcopal Cathedral in downtown Jackson, Mississippi where I found beautiful liturgies that enticed me even more. So strong was this pull that one day I had a conversation with the President of my seminary who had caught wind of my peregrinations and asked me to talk. As he could see my leanings toward "high church" liturgy, I asked him frankly if there would be any problem in me becoming an Episcopalian minister. He graciously suggested that evangelical Anglicanism would not be a problem. Here was the answer to my dilemma. I could stay in a teaching job that I loved and be a minister in a church with beautiful liturgy.

But the old questions still nagged me. While I felt the appeal of beautiful liturgy, I knew that the question of a valid Eucharist was the central question. As I was beginning to see in many other respects, I saw that the earliest Christians wrestled with this very question. Ignatius of Antioch again testifies to this problem: Therefore, be diligent to employ only one Eucharist. For there is only one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ and there is only one cup for unity in his blood. There is one altar as there is one bishop together with the presbytery and the deacons my fellow servants. The purpose of all this is so that your practices will be in accord with God's intention. (Letter to the Philadelphians 4:1). Ignatius's words assume that some in his day attempted to celebrate the Eucharist apart from the authority of the united Church which was symbolized and made concrete in the bishop. He stresses that those celebrations which are pleasing to God are those which are submitted to legitimate authority. That authority is rooted in the supernatural reality of Christ's bodily Presence. Since there is only one real body and blood of Christ, we must know that the Eucharist we celebrate contains in fact that true body and blood. And the only way to know that is if the celebration is in accord with God's will. And the only way to know the latter is if the celebration is in union with the authority of the bishop. This understanding is the only way to make sense of his urgency ("be diligent"). Without this true Eucharist there is no way to have "unity in his blood." Now the questions were beginning to converge in my mind. The question of a valid Eucharist depended on a valid priesthood under the rightful authority of a bishop which extended back to the apostles. To have a valid Eucharist there had to be a historical connection with the apostles. In other words, what churches in our day believed in and possessed apostolic succession? That excluded the Lutheran tradition because they did not believe that a valid Eucharist depended on apostolic succession. What about the Anglican or Episcopalian tradition? While some in the Anglican tradition believed in apostolic succession, others did not. Furthermore, even if it was a doctrine stated in their official creeds, that did not mean that the Anglican priesthood was in fact valid. In my mind, this evaluation left only two choices: Catholic or Orthodox. Help Along the Way

At this point, my journey to the Catholic Church was aided by many faithful Catholics. One day, out of the blue, a California businessman called me. Scott Butler was ten years my younger who, although he had grown up Catholic, had spent his young adult years in evangelical churches. After having returned to the Church, he made his personal mission to help as many Protestant ministers as he could find their way to the Catholic Church. After several months of sending me tapes and books by Catholic authors, Scott surprised me even more one day when he offered to pay my way to a Catholic conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio. All that I knew of this university was that a well-known convert named Scott Hahn was teaching there. By this time, I had read some of Dr. Hahn's articles and books as well as listened to his tapes. When I heard that he was speaking at the conference, I was intrigued and agreed to attend. The conference was amazing. I was overwhelmed by the articulate and Spirit-led speakers who laid out the Catholic faith in clear detail. Although I cannot recall much of the specifics said that weekend, I remember being impressed with the character and holiness of men like Karl Keating, Dr. Alan Schreck, Thomas Howard and Peter Kreeft. In one of the question and

answer periods, Fr. Ray Ryland said something that always stuck with me. For more than twenty years I had been concerned about Christian unity. I had many times lamented divisions among Christians, but I saw little hope for ever overcoming those divisions. In my Presbyterian mode of thinking, all that I could hope for was a greater love across denominational boundaries. The differences in belief among Protestant Christians just seemed too great to expect any unity in an organizational sense. Someone asked Fr. Ryland if it was necessary to play down Catholic distinctives in order to achieve greater Christian unity. I fully expected Fr. Ryland to say YES because in my way of thinking there simply was no other way. I was surprised when Fr. Ryland stressed that it was not only not necessary but actually harmful to play down elements of Catholic doctrine in order to win other Christians. He went on to say that unity can only be achieved when Christians of all stripes submit themselves to the truth taught by Christ. Outside of Christ there can be no true Christian unity. And since Catholics believed that the Catholic faith represented the fullness of Christianity, it would be harmful to other Christians to omit anything that Christ taught. Though shocked at first, I found myself happy that he was so honest and straightforward. Later, I reflected on a verse of St. Paul that I remembered reading in my college days: I Cor 1:10, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you may all agree, and that there may be no divisions among you, but that you would be knit together in the same mind and in the same view." Paul's solution to the divisions in the church at Corinth was not to play down differences among the Christians, but to stress the need to seek unity of belief or doctrine. I heard Fr. Ryland confirm something that I had already suspected. The Catholic faith was not about compromising the truth - though I had heard other Catholic priests watering down the faith - but it was about embracing the fullness of Jesus's teaching. This depth of conviction appealed to me. It strengthened my resolve to find the church that Christ had founded, the church that taught the fullness of faith. My summer trek to Steubenville brought two other unexpected surprises. One day at lunch in the university cafeteria I sat down and began talking with a man about certain theological points I had heard earlier that morning. When I mentioned something that Fr. Bernard Lonergan had written, he had no idea who I was talking about. I naively assumed that any Catholic should have heard of this great Dominican theologian. Beside me sat an older woman who knew of Lonergan's work and began to articulate points of Catholic doctrine in a winsome manner. Marie Jutras was just the person I needed to meet at that point in my life. Not only was she knowledgeable of theology, but she was a warm and accepting human being. She affirmed the work of the Holy Spirit in my life; in fact, she could see it better than I. Somehow this impressed me as a truly Catholic way to do evangelism, affirming what was good and patiently answering questions. Over the next few years, Marie Jutras would become the most important Catholic in my journey to the Church. She faithfully called our home on a monthly basis to offer whatever assistance she could. I have no doubt that her prayers, material gifts and personal kindness were what allowed the truths I was learning with my head to seep down into the recesses of my heart. No matter how much we may be convinced of truth in our head, we must see it lived out in people around us. The other person I met that summer was Marcus Grodi, another Presbyterian minister who was just on the verge of joining the Church. Over the course of the next few years, Marcus reached out to me offering constant support and friendship. His experience as a Presbyterian minister more than once brought me just the listening ear that I needed because he could understand the struggles in a way that is very difficult unless one has been in a similar position. Marcus knew the back-and-forth vacillations, the doubts even of one's own integrity, and the fears of the unknown future which face ministers who contemplate becoming Catholic. These faithful Catholics were like little "sacraments" to me, embodiments of God's love helping along the way. Still, I knew that the personal kindness of people, no matter how endearing or enticing, could not be the ultimate basis for my decision. I needed to know the truth. Nothing less would suffice.

## From Success to Suffering

The Winter of 1993 saw another dimension to my journey that I never would have dreamed. I met a priest who wisely offered to give me spiritual direction and introduced me to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. By now, my spiritual hunger was so intense that devoured books on Catholic spirituality. I had never encountered the depths of spiritual insight in my own tradition that I found in these books. By the summer of 1993 I was ready for an Ignatian retreat. Being a family man with multiple responsibilities I simply could not take thirty days for a retreat like a Jesuit priest. Still, my heart burned for time to encounter Jesus the way that Ignatius described. I had to find a way. In God's providence I came across a book by Andre Ravier entitled *Do-It-At-Home Spiritual Exercises*. This was the solution to my dilemma. Over the course of thirty days in the summer of 1993, my wife and I walked through a self-directed Ignatian retreat, meditating daily on the life of our Lord Jesus. As Ignatius taught, we begged God for a grace to know the heart of Christ and for the fortitude to follow him. In the third week of the retreat we meditated on the Passion of our Lord, on his sufferings and his pain. I was especially moved when it came to the meditation on Jesus's agony in Gethsemane (Mark 14: 32-42). For some reason, I had long been attracted to this particular event in the life of Jesus since my conversion as a teen over twenty years before. It was only during that Ignatian retreat that I understood why. I began to see that Jesus wanted me to enter into his suffering and to share his Passion. I had long believed that Jesus's agony was his suffering for me; I now came to see that his agony was also intended as his suffering in me. My heart now began to feel his struggle, his human frailty, and his determination to do the will of his Father (cf. Mk 14: 36). While meditating on Jesus's agony I wrote something like this in my prayer journal:

Lord, I am a little over forty years old and I have never really know any suffering. And what suffering I have endured I have believed only that you would deliver me from it. Now I understand that sharing in your suffering is a privilege. I want to be with you in your agony if it will bring me closer to you. Lord, let me share your sufferings.

That prayer was unimaginably comforting and enormously dangerous. It would take two years to understand fully what it meant. After the next academic year (1993-1994), my family and I left Jackson, Mississippi. The reason was quiet but painful. My Catholic sympathies had become so obvious that the seminary could no longer tolerate me being a teacher. No one was unkind but we all knew that I was beginning to be an embarrassment to the seminary. They simply could not have someone teaching there who believed what I did. I understood their impossible situation. On my side, I would longer subscribe to the oath of fidelity that the professors were required to sign every year. In my conscience I could not subscribe to the Reformed Creeds. It was time to go.

## Family Troubles

It could not have been a more inconvenient time. Our children were now fifteen, thirteen, and eleven. To uproot them and move to another place was as upsetting as anything we have ever done. Yet there was no choice. As we attempted to reestablish our home in Bloomington, Indiana, in the summer of 1994, the only two real choices for me were Catholic or Orthodox. But that was easier said than done. One of the most difficult obstacles in this journey was my wife's reluctance to move to either Catholicism or Orthodoxy. At times, this put a great distance between us, a distance that was as painful to her as it was to me. Still, we both believed that our marital unity was of the greatest importance. No matter what form of Christianity we were going to embrace, we knew God wanted us to be a faithful couple, faithful to one another and most of all to Him. We

still continued to pray together as couple and as a family but the tensions in theology as well as the turbulent years of raising teenagers brought confusion to our home. Part of that confusion was the uncertainty our children felt about our religious identity. At that point, all I could safely say was that we were Christian. I could tell that they wanted something more specific and definite but I could not give it to them at that point. This brought my wife and me a sadness we had never known before. My wife's and my conversations had led my wife to see the importance of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but she still had many questions. We both wanted a church that was more sacramental than the Presbyterian but she was not comfortable with being Catholic. Our compromise was to attend the Lutheran (Missouri Synod) church in town. Here we found a welcoming community of faithful Christians with a pastor whom I count as one of the finest Christians I have ever known. Most the people at the Lutheran church did not know anything of my inner spiritual journey. Since we attended the services of the church faithfully, we became good friends with many people. A few who knew that I had been a Presbyterian minister even suggested that I consider becoming a Lutheran pastor. Most just considered me an academic. For the sake of family peace, my wife occasionally asked if I could be happy with the greater sacramentalism of the Lutheran church. And if family peace were my highest goal, that would have been a fine choice. I knew that I could not become a Lutheran in good conscience, no matter how much I appreciated the fine people of that congregation, for I sincerely believed in apostolic succession. The next church I joined would be one that taught and had a succession of priests reaching back to the apostles. There were only two choices: Catholic or Orthodox. During the academic year 1994-1995 I consolidated my understanding of the apostolic nature of the church by studying the issue of the Papacy. Daily Mass continued to be a part of my life. I grew to know and love the daily Mass goes at the three Bloomington parishes. In many ways I was an integral part of the Catholic community, but that only strengthened the pain I felt because I could not join in the highest expression of the Catholic life on earth — participation in Holy Communion. This period was marked by rather intense suffering in our family. Our oldest daughter became quite ill and it was difficult to care for her. As we tried to maintain some semblance of normal family life, money was beginning to run out. I was doing historical research writing a dissertation for a second doctoral degree. This treatise would later be turned into a book on science and religion.

### The Last Hurdle? The Papacy

I went back to four key passages in the New Testament that bore on the issue of the Papacy. For a long time, I thought that only in Matthew 16:13-20 could one find any remote reference to the Papacy, but then I began to examine other passages as well. The other passages were Matthew 18:15-20; John 21:15-19, and Luke 22:31-34. I can only indicate a few features of these texts which led me to see the legitimacy of the Papacy. Most of all, I was struck by the singular position of Peter among the apostles. The Catholic Church believes that Peter was singled out from all the apostles to lead them in the pastoral responsibilities of the Church. The Popes have continued this universal pastoral ministry down through the ages. This Petrine ministry is one of the distinguishing features of the Catholic Church because the Orthodox Churches do not recognize a primacy of jurisdiction for the Bishop of Rome. I knew that in wrestling with these texts I was coming close to deciding whether to be Orthodox or Catholic. The classic text in Matthew 16:13-20 seems to suggest that Jesus is making Peter the rock or foundation upon which the church is built. Peter identifies Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." (Verse 16). In turn, Jesus identifies Peter as the rock on which the church is built. Of course, I was aware of all the Protestant interpretations which suggested that Peter is not the rock. Now, I was ready to evaluate them with an open mind. I could easily reject the most feeble argument against a distinctive Petrine ministry based on the difference between

Petros (Peter's name) and petra.(rock). The objection is that Jesus is drawing a distinction between Peter and the rock on which the church is built by using two different words. But most scholars, even evangelical scholars, see this as an erroneous interpretation. The true reason that Jesus uses the masculine form Petros is that you cannot call a man by a feminine title in ancient Greek. So, because Jesus wanted to call Peter a rock, he made the normal word feminine word petra masculine (petros) to create a play on words. Verse 18 might be translated this way to bring out the word play, "You are Rocky, and on this rock I will build my church." I also realized that the rest of the passage would not make sense if Peter is not being identified as the rock. In Matthew 16:19 we see Jesus giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, "I will give to you (soi) the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." If Jesus did not mean that Peter was to be the rock, then why would he give him the keys of the kingdom? The Greek pronoun soi is singular referring only to Peter. The power of the keys is given to Peter alone in this passage. The phrase "binding and loosing" connotes jurisdiction, not just a primacy of example or honor. No wonder that Peter is identified as the rock of the church if Jesus's intention was for him to exercise the power of the keys, that is, universal jurisdiction over the whole church. Of course, I was also aware of the Protestant argument from history. For example, at one point in his writings, St. Augustine interpreted "the rock" as the confession of faith that Peter had given. From this, Protestant interpreters said that the confession of faith is the rock, and so anyone who follows Peter's example by professing Christ as the Son of God also becomes a rock. At this point, I thought hard about tendencies among Catholics and Protestants in reading Scripture. The Protestant tendency, evident in my Reformed heritage, was to read the text as either/or. Either Peter must be the rock or the confessions must be. I asked myself why we should read the text this way. Why can it not be both/and? Can't it be true that the content of Peter's profession of Christ is the doctrinal foundation of the church while Peter himself is the governmental foundation? Or better, why can't we see Christ as the cornerstone of the church, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:20, and that this one foundation has doctrinal and governmental manifestations? This discussion could go on interminably, but I concluded that Jesus did intend to establish a church with Peter as its head. I realized long before that I was not going to read Scripture reductionistically. Rather, I would look for the fullness of meaning, not the least possible. The original Greek of Luke 22:31-34 was also compelling. Jesus says in verse 31, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat." The word you is plural in Greek indicating that Satan desires to sift is more than one person; it is all the apostles who are with Jesus at the Last Supper. Jesus continued, "But I myself have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." Here the you is singular indicating only Peter. The natural question is: if Satan wanted to destroy all the apostles, why does Jesus only pray for Peter? Isn't he concerned about the other apostles? His next statement explains it, "And you, when you have turned, strengthen your brothers." In other words, Jesus intends to strengthen all the apostles through the ministry of Peter. He will have a unique position among the apostles whose purpose will be to lead and guide the apostolic college in ministry. This sounded exactly like the language that the Popes have used in speaking of the Petrine ministry. The uniqueness of Peter among the apostles, as indicated in Matthew 16 and in Luke 22, seemed to make sense of the passage in John 21:15-19 too. This is the well-known passage where Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Most expositors agree that the threefold question corresponds to Peter's threefold denial of Christ during his passion. For our purposes now, we need only note Jesus's emphasis on the pastoral role which Jesus has for Peter when he commands him three times, "Feed my sheep." (vs 15 -17). Peter needs to understand the connection between loving Jesus and his role as pastor. The pertinent question is why Jesus singles out Peter. Is it simply because he is the one who denied Jesus? Or was Jesus intending to show Peter that he must take his place as the chief human shepherd of the earthly church under the authority of the

divine chief shepherd Christ? (Cf. 1 Peter 5:4). I concluded that there was much evidence in the New Testament for the Petrine ministry. Though there were still many questions and nuances to handle, I came to believe that our Lord Jesus intended for there to be one pastor who would have jurisdiction over the whole church. This position was at odds with historic Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This recognition also helped me realize how unity could be achieved. I had long ago decried the fragmentation of Protestant Christianity, but now I also saw why Orthodoxy failed to achieve the kind of unity evident in the Catholic church. For me, there was only one way to have the fullness of Christian faith in one body that spanned the globe. It required recognizing the center of the church under one shepherd, the Bishop of Rome. As I was overcoming the last hurdles to becoming Catholic in my mind, I was struggling in my emotional life on many fronts. The emotional life of our entire family was at an all time low. Easter Sunday that year, 1995, was anything but joyful. Here was the day of the entire Christian year which should bring joy into our hearts, but all we could muster was to go to Church as dead weight. Thankfully, by Pentecost of 1995, we were beginning to see our way out of the maze that we felt caught in. Our daughter was recovering and our family was finding a surer stability. Then, in one just day, our lives took another turn toward darkness.

### A Turn Toward Darkness

June 3, 1995 was a bright and cheerful Saturday. That afternoon, I was making my way to my office at Indiana University to clear up some papers left over from the previous semester. As I passed a young man sitting on the curb, as best I remember, I noticed that he was dressed in a heavy winter coat, an odd thing given that it was such a warm day. As I got past him about fifteen feet, I discovered the reason. Suddenly, I heard one of the loudest sounds I have ever heard in my life. I turned around to see what made that enormous pop. There stood that young man with a nine millimeter semi-automatic pointing at my face. He shot again. This time the bullet went through my neck. I didn't have time to think. I took off running down the side of the building where he couldn't see me. Little did I know at the time but he came after me, shooting three more times in a concerted effort to kill me. Five shots, only one hit me. But it certainly did its damage. The bullet traveled through my neck missing my carotid artery by only two millimeters. As the doctor later told me, if that bullet had passed through that main artery, I would have been dead in minutes. As it was, the bullet severed my vocal cords destroying the cartilage that holds the vocal flaps to my inner throat. Late in the afternoon that June day, I laid in the emergency room of Bloomington hospital with my family standing around in dismay. They had all been rounded up and brought there by our faithful Lutheran pastor. At that moment, with my voice gone, all I could do was write on a tablet the words, "I love you!" It wasn't until four days later when I awoke from sedation that I began to realize the enormity of what had happened. My wife told me that I woke up many times during those four days, and said various things, some coherent, some incoherent. But I did not remember any of them. I do recall waking up and seeing my parents next to me. "Mom, Dad, what are you doing here?" I asked. Over the next week I would learn how much my parents cared as they faithfully stayed by me after having flown up from Florida. Nothing more impressed my soul during those days than the persevering and tender love of the woman that I married twenty-one years before. Sharon did not leave my side the entire time that I was under sedatives. She ate, slept, and sat by me with her heart tied to mine. Her love imprinted itself on my heart in a new way when I saw on the night table beside me all my Catholic paraphernalia which she had brought from home: my missal, my rosary, my prayer cards etc. Though she could not use these spiritual aids for her own faith journey, she knew how much they meant to me. To me that spoke volumes and it was then that I knew beyond doubt that all our struggles over the truths of the Christian faith would never separate us. Our children all reacted differently. Rebekah was seventeen and she

expressed confidence in God's saving me for a purpose. Colin was fifteen. Though he was quieter about the events, I saw definitive signs of love for me that I cherished because his teen years had sometimes placed a distance between him and me. But in the ensuing days his deeper kindness showed itself. Sharon's younger brother, Steve Canfield, was a police officer in Florida. He flew up to be whatever help he could for our family. Since the local police were unable to find many clues as to the identity of the shooter, Steve and Colin went out one day to the site of the shooting to see if they could find any clues. Together they discovered some bullet shells and it was through these that the police were able to identify the type of weapon involved. Later, at home, Colin acted in a manly way by helping his scared and ailing father to get into the house. Rachel was thirteen at the time and not sure what to think. But I recall having a beautiful conversation one day at the home of my in-laws, John and June Canfield. Sharon's parents urged us to stay at their home for at least a week because the local newspaper had printed our address in a story the day after the shooting. Fearing that the assailant might try to return and to finish what he started, they provided us with protection and comfort. One evening, Rachel sat on the floor next to my chair. She wondered out loud how I could trust God so much in the midst of this suffering. And she asked why she could not love God as she thought I was doing. I told her that I had been walking with God for many years and she was only thirteen. If she continued to seek God, I told her, she would grow in holiness.

#### An Answer to Prayer?

Quite naturally, I tried to make sense of this event as I lay in the hospital bed. In my spiritual journey into Catholic spirituality, I had come to understand the notion of redemptive suffering. Although I never shirked suffering as a Christian before, somehow Catholic ideas about this spiritual truth seemed richer and deeper. So why did God allow this in my life? I began to recall many truths I had encountered in my spiritual searching. I remembered how I had prayed in 1993 that I would be willing to share in Christ's sufferings if they helped another soul to come closer to God. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:10 came back to me, "We always carry around in our body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." The apostle's repeating of the words "in our body" suggested to me that my physical suffering was a means of revealing the power of His resurrection life to others. This thought brought a flood of joy into my soul. I felt sure that this event, no matter how tragic it may appear, was in fact an answer to my prayer two years before. I also thought it divinely strange that the bullet struck my vocal cords. Almost my entire livelihood depended on my voice. Teacher, preacher, traveling speaker. They all meant having a strong voice. And further, I had been blessed with a mello tenor voice that could sing high and powerfully. My wife and family members can tell you how I often afflicted them with my forceful voice as I would sing arias from Italian operas, art songs from famous composers, and most of all beloved Christian hymns. No place, public or private, was exempt as I belted out Fs and Gs at the top of my lungs. But no place was more sacred to my singing than the beloved shower. Many times my wife would ask me in consternation to please, please, not sing in the shower while our young children were napping. And the inevitable accompaniment of musical talent conjoined with original sin was pride. The Lord did not hate my voice, but He was loving enough to get at the one thing that could keep me out of the Kingdom of Heaven — my arrogance. Today, my voice has been partially restored. I can and do speak of the things of heaven — and sometimes in a less than heavenly way — but I cannot sing in the lofty and overpowering tones that I once did. But that's all right because now I have a constant reminder that I am in need of that one virtue that always seems to elude me, humility. The shooting also brought to light a third aspect of my journey, Christian unity. I had been so concerned and consternated by the lack of unity among Christians. I had come to believe that it may be the single greatest scandal in

Christendom today, a view that seems to be shared by one of the greatest popes of modern times, John Paul II. When Christian friends learned of this tragedy, they reached out with unbelievable compassion. Our Lutheran pastor came to comfort my wife and family at least once a day. Only later did I learn that he and his wife had also known much suffering. Many years before, their third daughter had been born with Down's syndrome. His own compassion grew out of his suffering. Several Evangelical pastors came to visit, including the one who now headed the local Presbyterian church that I had started ten years earlier. Many Catholic friends came too. All the local priests that I knew including a couple of the monks from St. Meinrad's monastery in southern Indiana. The pastor of the parish where I mostly attended daily and Saturday vigil Masses came to administer the sacrament of anointing to me. Old seminary students were there in spirit and communicating through mail. Marie Jutras, my Canadian companion on the journey, let all her spiritual cohorts north of the border know. Through friends of friends, I had people on almost every continent praying for me. What happens when people sincerely pray for others? They are joined in a mystical union with one another through Christ's unique mediation. And so I knew then that in some small measure my sufferings meant that Christians had been drawn to one another more closely through being united in prayer for me. That made me very happy. The shooting occurred just a few weeks before the annual conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville was to take place, the same conference I had attended a couple of years earlier. Marcus Grodi called to say that the priests at the university, headed by Fr. Michael Scanlon, had decided to offer the evening sacrifice of the Mass at the conference for me and my intentions. I shot off a letter of thanks to all there, and Dr. Scott Hahn was kind enough to include part of that letter in his speech at the conference that weekend. After about a month this event, my brother kindly invited our whole family down to Florida to recuperate. He is a devoted Christian husband and father. He reminded me more than once of my need to forgive the man who shot me and to pray for him. My brother's advice struck home. Without forgiving those who sin against us, we cannot expect to receive mercy because it is only the merciful who will obtain mercy, (cf. Matt. 5:7). During my reprieve from daily life, Dr. Hahn again called to offer his support and encouragement. By the time that we returned to Bloomington, I was ready to become a Catholic in both mind and in heart.

### What Are You Waiting For?

After the traumatic event of the shooting, I was inclined to think that life should give me some comfort. The initial spiritual graces that I received the wake of the event seemed to fade. I noticed within myself a decided tendency to want to prolong the intense attention I was receiving from other people. I had definite temptations toward self-pity. But once we settled back into daily life in Bloomington, things continued on in a fashion that they had before our family crisis. In fact, in many ways life was becoming harder. My teaching was more laborious; my academic research was toilsome. Our children were beginning to show negative effects of this trauma. I was much more scared about daily life than I had ever been. And while I knew that I wanted to be a Catholic, I seemed to be stuck in a rut, not able to move ahead. One evening at the dinner table, our sixteen year old son announced that he was wanted to go skydiving. My wife did not find that funny. Why would you want to jump out of a perfectly good airplane? But something struck a responsive chord in me. I was fearful about life. I knew that I had do something about it. Was I going to remain a victim all my life or was I going to overcome the odds and get my life back on track? After a moment's thought, I told our son that I'd like to go with him. It was something we could do together and at the same time challenge myself to face my fears. So, one Saturday morning we pack up our things and drove to the skydiving site. As we went up in that little plane that day, I could feel the fear in my soul. Even more challenging was when I had to get out of the plane 2500 feet above the ground and stand

on the little platform. Yes, I was afraid but I knew I had to do it. That day was like a spiritual exercise for me. It helped me listen better to Jesus who so often said, "Do not be afraid!" Fall turn into Winter and Winter into Spring. I noticed my desire to move ahead coming back. The sense of urgency about being Catholic grew, but it also increased my pain because my wife did not seem to be growing any closer to the church. We prayed together; we attended church together; we loved each other, but I wanted us to become Catholics together. Yet she simply could not in good conscience. We were at an impasse.

In the early Spring of 1996 my brother called from Florida to tell me that he thought I should move back to Florida to be closer to our family. I am the only child who ever left Tampa. He emphasized that he thought God wanted me to do this. I told him that I would pray about it. Sharon and I talked and prayed about this possible move for over a month. I was becoming convinced that it was something we should do. Late one night I couldn't sleep so I drove over to St. Charles Borromeo Church to pray. Alone in the sanctuary, kneeling before our Lord in the tabernacle, I asked, "Lord, what do you want me to do? Do you want us to move to Florida?" I said, "I don't really want to move to Florida but if you want us to do that, I will." In the quiet of that night, it seemed as if God was asking me, "Ken, I know you want to do my will. But the real question here is what you want. In the depths of your heart, Ken, what is it that you most want?" I didn't have to hesitate for a moment. I said, "Lord, I don't care if I ever move back to Florida, but more than anything in the world, I want to become a Catholic." Then a simple question broke through my indecision, "Well, then, what are waiting for?"

#### A Trinitarian Day

That still small voice energized me. I had to move ahead. I spoke with the pastor, Father Charles Cheeseborough and we set the date of June 1. But before the day arrived, I had to have one of the most important and difficult conversations of my marriage. Sharon and I sat down on our couch as I told her that I had no longer any choice. I was convinced that the Holy, Catholic Church was the true church was Jesus founded, and that I would be disobedient to God if I did not enter into it. My conscience was bound. I could not refuse. I told her that I knew this would be painful but somehow she too knew that I had to join. We both felt extremely sad, but she felt that she would be standing in the way of God's work if she tried to stand in my way. We decided that she would continue to attend the vigil Masses with me on Saturday evenings (as she had for two years), and that I would attend the Lutheran church with her. We felt that this was an inevitable "separation" but one that would not last forever. I told my Catholic friends who had prayed so long for us. They were overjoyed. Marie Jutras, the devout Catholic woman I met at Steubenville, said she was coming. She brought a friend with her, a fellow Catholic school teacher who was about to enter the seminary to study for the priesthood. June 1, 1996 was a beautiful summer day. Almost one year after the tragic shooting and more than four years after that day I had knelt in St. Peter's in Jackson, Mississippi, my desire to be Catholic was coming true. Three important events came together to make that a very special day. It was my forty-fourth birthday. And with grateful hearts, we rejoiced that our oldest daughter, Rebekah, was graduating from high school. Most of all, that day I was received and confirmed in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church at St. Charles Borromeo parish by my pastor, Father Charles Cheeseborough. Many of my Catholic friends attended. What pleasantly surprised me was that some of my Protestant friends attended, including Sharon's older brother to whom I have grown very close over the years. Later that evening, My in-laws hosted a celebration in their home for these three events. I had so many reasons to be thankful that day: my life, my wife, my children, and my wider family. All were (and are) precious gifts! Most special that day was to receive Holy Communion for the first time as a Catholic. The Eucharist that had drawn me and converted me was now my treasured possession. Long before I had

begun to make the sign of the cross, but on this day this simple gesture took on a profound significance as I knew now I was home at last. Now I was inside the ark of the covenant, the bark of Peter, as the Church Fathers called the Church. Now I was more fully incorporated into the mystery that is God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.