

Drifting Across the Tiber: A Theological Reflection on an Evangelical's (Re)Turn to Rome

In hindsight, going to Rome for me was a calling, a calling from within and from without, although I did not frame it in this way until after the fact. Along the way, the notion of going to Rome never really surfaced in my thoughts, much like going to Mars isn't something you normally consider doing. Hence the title, *Drifting Across the Tiber*. In the following presentation, you will see that I am not one for triumphalism; I sincerely believe not everyone has this same call. I admit to groping in the dark for years, thrashing around for any glimmer of light. Though I am happy to be Catholic, and pleasantly surprised to be a priest, I feel like I have not "arrived" at all, and seem to myself to be far from complete in my faith. Moreover, though I have traveled long distances, I have never let go of all the good charisms of the traditions through which I passed; I am a little bit of many things.

It all started with a building and a dream. Built in 1911 in the Neo-Gothic style, the old Baptist Church I went to in my most early years made a huge impression on me. Long steep steps had to be ascended to approach its doorway with ornate façade. To the right of the vestibule, there was a finely crafted wooden staircase leading up to the balcony above, and leading down to the chambers beneath. The sanctuary itself was lined on the left wall with stained glass windows of a predominating green color. I remember luscious soft wood tones everywhere, the massive pipe organ, and of course, the pulpit in the front with mighty clergy chairs lined behind it in front of the choir loft. For years, beginning when I was too young to read, I visited this place in my dreams, dreams that were always soul ravishing, filling me with deep, deep longings.

My pastor hated the building and conspired from the beginning to tear it down. He was thoroughly and consistently Baptist, and resented the fact that the Romanticism of the 18th century and the Oxford Movement inspired such gothic monstrosities in churches that should rightly be plain and purely functional. When he finally succeeded in tearing it down in the late 1960s, I acquired a piece of the stained glass window and one of the pulpit chairs, and I have them to this day. Years later, I was reminiscing with him and mentioned the old church with fondness, and he could only stare wordlessly at me. He visited Martyn Lloyd-Jones in England during the 1970s, and they both agreed that these fancy old churches were the beginning of the end of the pure old-time gospel denominations.

For me though, the old building instilled in my soul the image of sacred space. I did not know it then, but sacred space in ecclesiastical structures is symbolic of the universe; when you enter the church, you were entering the world made right. The Temple in the Old Testament, built in 7 years, was a microcosm of creation, which was completed in 6 days, and functional on the 7th for worship and communion with God, as the Wheaton scholars Beale and Walton tell us.¹

Moreover, when I gazed into that old sanctuary, I was gazing into my own soul. The soul, like the sacred space before me, is a microcosm of the creation itself. This jumped out at me when reading Origen on Leviticus, "Understand that you are another world in miniature and that there is within you the sun, the moon, and the stars."² It has only been recently, corresponding to my movement towards Catholicism, that I became aware of a cosmology that fits together like Russian nesting dolls: my soul as temple and microcosm of the church building in union with

fellow believers, which in turn is a microcosm of the universe, which in turn is a microcosm of spiritual realities of saints and angels beyond.

But we get ahead of ourselves. My family was old-time Gospel Baptist, and our church fiercely independent. It was not all the way to fundamentalist; my dear pastor preferred to preach God rather than the dos and don'ts. Yes, he was an orator, and preaching was a sacrament, every sermon anagogy; he took us to the throne of God. It was assumed, however, that the Pope was the anti-Christ, and although there may be a few "saved" Catholics, they were, by and large, headed for Hell. Yet while growing up I wistfully looked over the fence. I felt alienated and alone, and I longed to belong. I knew very little of Catholics, but associated them with large tight-knit family groups that attended parish churches and had their own schools, and back then, even lived in "Catholic neighborhoods." What I felt was what has been coined "the sacred Canopy" by Peter Berger, though it was falling apart in the 1960s. I was a victim of modern western individualism.

I sensed something "earthy" in Catholics as well. They seemed to enjoy the material world with a non-apologetic gusto. They drank, danced, and even smoked; I imagined Italian families gathered around 7 course meals with mounds of pasta, and the Irish telling bawdy stories over pints in pubs. I was taught that this was the "worldliness" of the Catholics—obvious evidence that they were not truly Christians, which was confirmed in my own psyche when I witnessed the end of the movie *The Godfather I*, where Michael Corleone was having his children baptized while hit men were mowing down his enemies. This earthiness and worldliness contrasted with my rather platonic sensitivity that spirituality has to do with pure spiritual enlightenment, being "born again," and not being of this world. I did not know what to do with the material world other than enjoy it on the sly as far as I could without getting into trouble. Later it dawned on me that in Catholicism, spirituality is often very earthy and uncomfortably incarnational.

As time went on I began to feel a bit on the outs with my Baptist heritage in High School and especially college. It was during the 1970s when, out of the blue, I encountered God unexpectedly on a church-sponsored wilderness trip in Colorado. (Later I realized that this happened during the time of the Charismatic Renewal, but I did not know much about it.) I didn't speak in tongues or manifest unusual behavior, but my life was deeply changed. I felt different from my Baptist peers in that they seemed to think in terms of correct doctrine, focused on that one-time moment of being "born again," and evangelism. I, however, never knew a moment of conversion; I never experienced being "born again." As far as I knew, I was a Christian as far back as I could remember, praying to God to save my soul since I first began to speak. I knew I was "saved," but now, how could someone "saved" like me have multiple encounters with God that set my heart on fire, changing the way I experience life? I knew of no one who could explain such a phenomenon. I needed some answers.

By God's sovereign grace I ran into the young John Piper in my junior year at College, fresh from Germany with his doctorate, all aflame with the love of God and learning. I had never experienced such passion in a scholar, and though I resisted his Calvinism at first, I quickly fell under his spell. I was a "Piper pup" before there was such a thing; or perhaps, a prototype of what was to come later. He opened my heart to the glory of God and the deep need for grace.

These fit well with my encounters with Transcendence and the promises these encounters inspired in my soul: that God could make use of me, such a lowly person in so many ways.

Piper told us that his favorite teacher, Daniel Fuller, suggested to him that he read daily one great theologian for the rest of his life so as to master him. He picked Jonathan Edwards. I tried Edwards for a while, but it was St. Augustine who captured my imagination. Though I didn't read him every day, I read quite a bit of Augustine over the ensuing years, mesmerized by his *Letters*, his *Commentary on John, On the Trinity*, and, of course, the *Confessions*, especially chapter 10 on the imagination. I must have read Peter Brown's biography of him 4 or 5 times over. As I remember it, Piper read the *Confessions* for his summer reading between my junior and senior year and confessed that he didn't get much out of it.³ Looking back, I stand in great debt to John Piper. To this day I model my teaching after him, beginning class with a short devotional thought that weaves into the main idea of the session. I caught from his passion that I should never teach anything I was not willing to die for. He motivated me to study hard for the first time in my life.

After college, I attended Westminster Theological Seminary. For me it was a spiritual wasteland, but this may have been more a reflection on me than on the seminary, for I found myself in a dark place spiritually. My junior and senior years in college had been full of God and exultation of soul, but from the week of graduation, and extending for seven whole years my heart was desolate, seemingly abandoned by God. In this condition I remained a Baptist in the face of the strong Reformed climate in which I was immersed. But something was missing, and I could not place my finger on it. Looking back, my mind was not advanced enough to formulate questions, let alone look for answers. The courses seemed dry, and I found not one instructor I could connect with like I connected with Piper.

I did find a bright spot in the bookstore where I discovered the Puritans,⁴ and I immersed myself in them for a number of years. I found gems of spiritual insight here, but one had to pan through so much verbiage for one golden nugget! Then, a chance glance down on a shelf in that bookstore turned out to be of more lasting importance to me; the moment my eyes fell upon St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul*, it was in my hands. Immediately I knew there was someone who understood my encounters and my desolation. He was my first entryway into the strange and beautiful treasures of Catholic mysticism.

For some odd reason I remembered one particular conversation I overheard in seminary. A senior student who seemed to speak with some authority offhandedly remarked that the logical outcome of Reformed theology is the Roman Catholic Church. I did not understand this statement at the time, but now I see that they both work from the same covenantal structure. Again, I was a Baptist at the time and embraced the covenantal approach to Scripture strictly in contrast to the dispensationalism I grew up with and rejected. I had no affinity whatever with the remnants of the sacramental world view that still lingered in Reformed covenantal theology, specifically in Baptism and the Eucharist as a means of grace. If one truly embraced these elements, which I refused to do at this time, then why not embrace the totality of the sacramental view of Roman Catholicism that Reformed Theology broke away from? Yet strange to say, although my mind rejected the sacramental, at this time and even earlier, in my late college

years, there was something deeper within me than my intellect that flirted with becoming Anglican. Now, I believe it was my interior search for sacred space.

Be this as it may, I count it one of my great blessings in life to go to the Dropsie College to study Hebrew Bible under Dr. Stephen Geller. The first thing he told me was, “Mr. Worgul, you do not know how to think!” Frightened like a young schoolboy, I did not know what to say. For some unknown reason, this great scholar took an interest in me and worked with me through years of tutorials. I wrote him a card in the end thanking him for being my professor Higgins, and I, his Liza Doolittle. He taught me how to think, but it was a moment of illumination in a course he taught in Apocalyptic Literature that revolutionized the way I read the Bible. Geller was developing the idea of the major motifs of the apocalyptic so we could gain a grasp of this genre. It occurred to me then and there that the whole of the Old Testament theology could be presented through motifs, or concrete images of everyday life, such as mountain/temple, rivers/watery deep, darkness/light, Holy War, and so forth. This initiated a major paradigm shift in my thinking. I now saw theology as it was done by the ancients.⁵ The Old Testament came alive to me through its visual images that develop and merge together; the material world became revelatory through the lens of the Old Testament. Little did I know that this sparked in me the beginnings of a sacramental world view where creation and matter were channels of light and insight.

In 1987, upon receiving my Doctorate, I went to work for the newly founded Seminary of the East, built on a then-revolutionary model of adult educational principles, mentoring, and bringing the Seminary and the local church together. Those were heady days for us; we were re-inventing the wheel and we were free to think outside of the box. The seminary was so small that there was only one professor per department. The usual compartmentalization that inevitably and necessarily comes with the modern academic model birthed in 19th Century Germany did not exist with us.⁶ There was open exchange of ideas between all the disciplines, and we all were intensely integrating our own disciplines with spiritual formation. We felt free to frolic and play anywhere we wanted to in the two-thousand year old spiritual treasure-house of the Church. There was one very strange innovation for a Baptist seminary: the whole curriculum began with the doctrine of the Church, and not, for instance, the doctrine of Scripture.⁷ Only later did it hit me that it all comes down to this, “by whose authority?” Does the Church have authority; if so, what does this look like? Be this as it may, the experiment became diluted over the years until it was unrecognizable, and the last surviving remnant of the seminary was finally laid to rest this last fall.⁸

Eventually, there were two courses I was asked to teach that were outside of my field that put loose ends together for me. After teaching the Old Testament for years through its motifs and symbols, I was asked to teach hermeneutics. My experience with hermeneutics in Seminary back in the late seventies was not good. One portion of the course was the typical fare that we find along the lines of the Evangelical Council for Biblical Inerrancy,⁹ which assumes that if you have the right methods of approaching a text, one objective truth will surely spring forth. The other portion was the then nascent beginnings of what would become *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*¹⁰ built on modern linguistic theory, and since I had no linguistic background back then, I remember that I was thoroughly lost. Now years later, building on linguistic studies from my doctoral work in the eighties, I started to build a course. However, I

could not find a method to put it all together in a practical way for the students. Finally, I came upon Henri deLubac's *Medieval Exegesis*,¹¹ and with joy discovered that the ancient four-fold structure beginning with the historical/grammatical, then to the allegorical, then to the tropological/ethical, and culminating with the anagogical, was essentially what I was doing in my exegesis courses all along. I now read Origen, the favorite "whipping boy" in Protestant seminaries, with sympathy. Without allegory, the Old Testament is no longer a Christian document, and it is crystal clear that the early Church considered the Old Testament a Christian documents with Christ the grid through which it must be approached. I was Catholic in my approach to Scripture years before I became Catholic!¹²

With this hermeneutic, along with years of studying the biblical text with all of its problems in the original languages, the idea of perspicuity of Scriptures made no sense to me at all. Parallel to this, I always thought the doctrines of verbal and plenary inerrancy were not very convincing, something thought up to prop up the authority of Scripture in the face of modernism. I was glad to let go of it, and the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* crumbled before me. It seemed clear to me that every independent church or denomination operated with a *magisterium* on some level, and not just the Roman Catholic Church. I could not get away from the authority of the Church; the question only remained "what Church, and who gave them authority?"

The other course was Romans. I had studied the epistle in Greek with Hodge's commentary before, and came out completely dry and unmoved with a suspicion that there must be something more, but I was just not getting it. So a colleague suggested that I listen to a series of tapes on Romans by N.T. Wright. Oh, the joy I experienced as I listened to these lectures! For the first time Romans, and the Apostle Paul himself, made sense to me. To this Old Testament student, his interpretation of Paul dealing with the overarching problem of God's vindication in the face of Israel's failure made complete sense.¹³ Personally, I needed to be freed from the 16th century lenses that determined how I viewed this book, and were making it incomprehensible to me. I came to the conclusion that if one would ask St. Paul, "Are we justified by works?" I believe he would answer, "It depends on what you mean by this ... If you mean a presumptuous attitude of works righteousness, then the answer is no. If you mean 'those who by patience in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,' the answer is yes" (Rom. 2:6-11). For me, the law/grace divide simply could not stand the test of careful exegesis of either the Old Testament or the New. *Sola Gratia* made sense to me, for God is behind both our faith and our works, but the last pillar of the Reformation, *sola fide*, crumbled before me.

At this time we were living in Lansdowne, PA with two pre-school kids, and very dissatisfied with our church situation. Kathy, my wife, was working, and if we were going to send our kids to a Christian school, we were in danger of the family splitting into separate worlds. One day she and I looked at each other and said, "This will not do!" We heard about a religious community in Maryland that was loosely modeled on the Benedictine Rule, and combined the "three streams" of the evangelical, liturgical/sacramental, and charismatic into its worship. To make a long story short, we joined this community in the year 2000 and became professed members of it. I was ordained a priest in 2001, and function primarily as the dean of a small seminary centered there in the community. For eight years I broadly taught subjects which were way out of my field, especially theology, the church fathers, and Eastern Orthodoxy. It was during this time, reading a particularly lucid presentation of the idea of "alien righteousness" in

Alistair McGrath,¹⁴ that I definitively rejected this doctrine. Its twin doctrine of “total depravity” I had jettisoned years before. I was no longer Protestant in heart or mind, but I had no thought of becoming Catholic.

One book in particular influenced me, titled *The Cosmic Liturgy* by Urs von Balthazar.¹⁵ We cannot go into this very dense work here, but what it did for me was solidified in my mind the importance of intentionality when it comes to cosmology. We all operate with a cosmology whether we are aware of it or not, and for most Christians, it is a conglomeration of bits and pieces we get from the Bible and our culture at large, and often we cannot separate them. It is this cosmology that determines what we see in Scripture and what we do not see. Protestantism and Catholicism are worlds apart in their cosmologies. Particular doctrines of one seem so alien to the other and vice versa. If one thoroughly studies the other’s cosmology, then one can begin to understand the doctrines and why one would believe in such a way. This begs the question, “what cosmology is closer to the ancient cosmology of Scripture?” For my part, it was beginning to dawn on me that my Protestant cosmology was deeply influenced by western philosophical movements since the Renaissance, and especially the Enlightenment. I wanted to break free of this, but it is very difficult to do so, for our cosmologies are not mere ideas, but are part of our interior machinery that we rely on for processing meaning in life. We do not let them go casually or easily.

When the community folded in 2009 I went to serve at Christ the King Church in Towson Maryland. We joined the Anglican Church in America because it was in dialogue with Rome and hoped to have some relationship. That same year Pope Benedict XVI wrote the Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus* (Concerning the Congregation of Anglicans) which outlined the provisions for an Anglican “house” in the Roman Catholic Church with its own patrimony, liturgy, and customs called an “Ordinariate.” The American Ordinariate, called the Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter, was created on January 1, 2012. As a congregation we decided to join; I let go of my Anglican orders and became a lay Catholic in the Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter in June 2012. Rome accepted my application for the priesthood and I was ordained on September 23, 2013.

I titled this paper “Drifting across the Tiber” because I literally did not know that I would become Catholic until a year before the event, although looking back along the way I traveled, I can see that it was the trajectory of my life for a long time. The Roman Catholic Church is old and vast, a universe in itself. So much of it I cannot fathom, and parts of it I do not feel comfortable with. This doesn’t bother me because I learned long ago Church is not necessarily a place to feel comfortable. It goes far beyond the shape of my personality, beyond the parts of my expanding cosmology that I have traveled to and visited so far.

However, I have found in Rome a home for my natural mystical temperament. So many of the great mystics were Roman Catholic. The worship at Mass is a mystery. I need sacred space and symbols; the altar is the center of my life. In Rome I found a hermeneutic and a doctrine of Scripture that makes sense to me. Also, Rome has a clear moral theology built upon centuries of brilliant thinkers, a rock of absolutes in a world sinking in subjectivity and moral relativism. The Catechism is a wonderful document of the faith; if you want to know what this massive Church believes, or should believe, it is there clearly written.

Finally, if it were not for the documents of Vatican II that deal with many of my old time prejudices, I could never have become Catholic. Fortunately, these issues I held against the Roman Catholic Church, such as juridicism (good Catholics live by rules), triumphalism (the Roman Catholic Church is the only Church where there is salvation), clericalism (laity is not a true priesthood), hierarchialism (priests have higher call to holiness than laity) and institutionalism (more emphasis on structure than relationship with God), were resolved by the Church herself.¹⁶ This is true about the Marian doctrines as well, where Mary is firmly placed in the Church, always pointing to Jesus, and is not part of the Holy Trinity. As it is, I find myself part of a movement in the Church, referred to as the “New Evangelism,” which I am very familiar with from my Baptist days. Recent Popes have fully realized that there are many nominal Catholics that need to be evangelized and acquainted with the vast spiritual treasures of their Church, not the least of which is the Bible. I believe that it is the fulfillment of my lifelong call to serve in this new movement in whatever little way I can.

Just recently, my sister Karen told me a story that amazed me and helped me put my strange journey into perspective. Before my mother died, she was sitting in her rocking chair musing over life and out of the blue she said to her, “You know, Karen, John is a Catholic now.” Karen responded, “Yes, I know.” Then she said, “I often thought that if I had not married Ernie (my father), I would have become Catholic as well.” This was shocking to me, for although I knew she resented the noisy Baptist chatter in the church before the service, she never breathed a word that revealed this inward longing. It seems to me that she, too, was longing for sacred space, the holy, and the mysterious. If so, then perhaps I am not so much a rebel after all, but came by it honestly.

¹ G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) and John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

² Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1-16*, trans. by Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

³ As I remember it, Piper did say that he was moved by the famous quote in chapter 10, section 29 “For he loves you insufficiently who loves something else with you which he does not love for your sake.” *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

⁴ My courses with Piper were exegetical, and to my memory, he did not promote Puritan theology in these courses.

⁵ Elements of this idea of thinking theology through “motifs” and the organic growth of theological concepts in time were presented to me at Westminster through my studies in biblical theology. However, it was not presented to me in a way where I could see the meta-narrative, the whole and how the parts come together. It could be that it was there and I just didn’t get it. I suspect, however, that it has more to do with the western theological grids applied to the texts that obscured the meta-narrative of the Bible to me.

⁶ See David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). In 1998, before I read this book, I wrote in my journal “I do not belong to Athens or her academy; I belong to Jerusalem, her river whose streams make glad, her walls, her King, are home to me.”

⁷ The reason for starting the curriculum with the doctrine of the Church was to integrate the Church back into theological education in a meaningful way, for it was felt that the seminaries and the Church had parted ways. The seminary was not to be over the Church, but the Church over the seminary.

⁸ Seminary of the East began as the “Conservative Baptist Seminary of the East” in the mid 1980s. In time, due to financial pressures, Bethel Seminary in St. Paul took it over so that Bethel could have a presence on the east coast as it already did in San Diego (late 1990s). Bethel began to shut down what was left of Seminary of the East in the fall, 2013.

⁹ The Evangelical Council of Inerrancy was championed by Earl Rodmacher and Robert Preus, eds. of *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

¹⁰ Moises Silva, ed. *Six Volumes in One* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, S.J. Vol 1 *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. by Marc SeBanc (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1998 Eng. Trans).

¹² See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part One, #101-119 and the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of Vatican II. The Catholic Church has preserved the ancient Church conviction that the OT is fundamentally a Christian document and must be interpreted through the messianic grid of Jesus Christ. While affirming the historical grammatical study of the text, one must then necessarily apply the typological and allegorical (spiritual) approach to see Jesus in it. This must be done before the moral/tropological so that the commentator or expositor of the text is speaking with the authority of Christ, otherwise our exegesis degrades to mere moral maxims. The Protestant world in general has avoided the typological/allegorical approach, with the outcome that the OT, apart from the Psalms, is felt to be somewhat foreign to its experience of Christ. Broadly speaking, the OT tends to be associated with law and works, and the NT with grace and love. Liberals see the OT essentially in the history of religions perspective, and dispensationalists see it as property of the ancient Hebrews, the prophecies of which will be fulfilled literally for the Jews in the Millennium. I have sensed mild forms of Marcionism in Protestantism in general.

¹³ That is, the phrase “the righteousness of God,” is to be understood primarily as a subjective genitive concerned with God’s righteousness in the face of human failure. Therefore, the book of Romans is not primarily about how an individual is “saved” by appropriating the righteousness of Christ through faith, however important that is, but about God and His vindication in human history through Christ.

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007, 4th ed.), pp. 377-380.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. by Brian E. Daley, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Especially, *Lumen Gentium* dealt with many of my issues.