

How to Become a Catholic

A guide for the interested

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Introduction

"She turned." We use such silly language to describe it. Did "she turn" like a pint of milk left in the sun? "He came over." "He went over." Where did he "come" or "go"? "She made her submission! " How? Why? Human language seems to fail in describing one of the most wonderful events that can happen in a person's life, homecoming to the Catholic Church. Perhaps; there is one phrase which sums it up best, "They were reconciled."

Reconciliation. This immediately brings marriage, relationship, love, friendship to mind. This is the way we can best describe and understand the mystery and adventure of conversion. This is how we will discover the problems and gradual steps of conversion.

But first I must put one obvious question. Why are you reading this booklet? Obviously this whole question must interest you in some way. Perhaps you are already a Catholic Christian, but you know someone who is in the process of entering Christ's Church. You want to know exactly what is happening to your friend or relative. Perhaps you are wondering whether you should take that final drastic step into the Church. Perhaps you are not a Catholic, but you intend to marry a Catholic and want to investigate what becoming a Catholic involves. Perhaps you are just curious.

Many people are curious about Catholicism today. From the outside they see the greatest institution in the world involved in great struggles of inner change and renewal. They see that this Catholic Church can change and yet remain changeless. They see the Church moving into a new era, the age after the Second Vatican Council. They are puzzled that the most cumbersome and gigantic of all Christian communities should prove to be the most flexible and agile. What is this hidden power within Catholicism which can make such sudden changes and yet preserve the authority and truth of the Church? Men were once attracted to Catholicism because of the changeless Church. Then, over the decade of the Nineteen Sixties the number of conversions dropped. Now there is a swing back to the Church after this brief period of uncertainty and change. The new attraction is the new dynamic element of lively change in a great Body which is still essentially the same. What a mystery this Catholic Church is! For two thousand years it has been loved, despised, patronised, praised and persecuted. It always awakens a violent emotional reaction in us. People who decide to be reconciled to this Church also bring very marked emotional reactions among their friends and relatives. Why all this fuss? Why become a Catholic anyway?

1. Why Become a Catholic?

The first reason people are attracted to the Church is simple. The Church is always open. It is the open society. It is true that full membership is clearly defined. But the Church is always open to

receive and reconcile men and women of all races, all ages, at all times in all places. Anyone, of any class or intelligence, is able to enter this original and authentic Christian People.

But there is a deeper reason people are attracted to the Church. They are drawn by a Person. They are attracted by a personal God who became one of us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

God's Plan for Time

We cannot understand what Jesus means to Catholic Christians unless we clear up what God wants for human beings. God has a plan for all time.

Most people believe there is a God. It is not hard to believe there is a God. Even many so-called atheists believe there is some sort of God, or at least they put something in his place. But Christians do not simply believe that there is a God. Christians believe in God.

"Don't just believe me," says the husband to his doubting wife, "Believe in me!" In other words - trust me, really take my word, accept me and stick by me. Christians believe that God wants us to believe in him in this very intimate way.

We believe this because we know that God is deliberately involved in this beautiful yet tragic little planet of ours. He has shown Himself to men as a Friend. He has entered our time on our terms and He has made a family of people who want to know Him and follow his plans.

God created the race of men with freedom. But because God made men to be free, He gave men the freedom to reject Him. God did not make puppets. He took a risk because He loved us too much to leave us on the level of animals. The risk He took was of rebellion, and man rebelled, turning from God and falling back into himself. Men preferred to act as savage beasts rather than as friends of God.

But God did not abandon men to this infection. At a chosen time he created a new People, known today as the Jews. At a later chosen time he brought the turbulent story of this People to a climax. He actually entered our world as one of us. This is where Jesus Christ comes in.

Jesus Christ - The Centre of It All

The Person of Jesus is the hidden power attracting people to the Church. This requires some explanation. There are various strange words which express the power of Jesus. He is called "Saviour", "Lord", "Redeemer", "Mediator", "King", "Lover", "Liberator". These are human words which try to spell out what the coming of Jesus means to believers in God.

Let us briefly run through the coming of Jesus. He was born, probably about four B.C. on our calendar. His birth was unique - he was conceived by the Power of God, born of a Virgin Jewess, Mary. For most of his life he followed his foster father's trade of carpentry. When he was about thirty he suddenly stepped onto the public scene of Jewish life under the Roman occupation. In three years he set in motion the most powerful single force in human history. In three years he gave men values, morals, truths and hopes which few had even dared dream of until his coming.

The climax of his short life came in his collision with the political and religious establishment. The leaders of religion and society knew that he came with more than pleasant messages about brotherly love. Jesus was framed, tried and executed by being crucified.

Jesus Christ - The Meaning of It All

The People who followed Jesus knew that he was the God Man. They came to realize that he died for each and every person who has ever existed and will ever exist. They know today that he came to reconcile a world in rebellion, a race of men infected and always falling. In some mysterious way his perfect death was the generous action of love which makes up for all the evil in this world.

The People who followed Jesus knew that his death was not the end. They knew that on the third day after execution he defeated death, man's terror and fate. He came to life again. Physically he rose from the grave, to a new and eternal life which he promises to any man, woman or child who follows in his Way.

Jesus Christ - The Way of It All

This is the challenge of conversion to Jesus Christ. Are you ready to follow his Way?

Are you ready to give yourself to Him, to commit yourself to this Jesus as your personal Saviour and Lord? Are you ready to go further than this? You can invite him into your life. He will probably wreck your life as you know it now, he will upturn it and raise it up again. He will not promise an easy path, quick returns, soft comforts. He will promise you a destiny which even death cannot destroy.

This is simply what Christian conversion involves. It is the Way of Jesus. But complete Christian conversion involves something beyond this act of commitment. If you take Christ seriously, believing in his Cross and his Resurrection, you must take seriously what he taught and how he intended his teaching and power to continue. This is where conversion means the Catholic Church.

God's New People

Jesus did not come simply to set up soup kitchens, to spread nice ideals or give moral advice. He did not come to provide a private Way for individuals, a secret "religion" for the best people, a philosophy of life where we can pick and choose which of his teachings suit our digestion. He did something far more tangible. He created a People.

God's new People were first gathered in around Jesus. They were various members of God's first People, the Jewish nation, those whom Jesus called personally, his disciples and friends.

But we must remember the hard fact of why Christ came. This planet faced God in a state of rebellion. God did not solve this by destroying man or by forcing him to be good. He continued his risk of love. He allowed men the freedom even to reject his own Son.

Jesus did not force men and women to follow him. He worked quietly and gently. Often he failed. Where he succeeded, with that band of fishermen and tradesmen, he gave the teaching and the basic structure of his new People, his new "assembly" - in Greek "ekklesia" - which simply means "Church". The Church is the assembly of those whom God has gathered in to be his own People. The Church is the People who follow the Way of Christ, obedient to his teachings, preserving and developing his teachings for all time.

Where is this New People?

There was nothing secret about the Way Christ revealed. Just as Jesus Christ was tangible and visible, so his People who continue his life and work would be tangible and visible too.

Jesus once said that a city set on a hill is not hidden. He referred to his Church. But he provided various signs to make it easy to identify his own Church, a visible society of human beings. He

established his People on one man, Peter the fisherman, whose successors govern the whole Church on earth, being known as "the Popes". His people, his Church, can only be entered by one way, by the new birth of Baptism. His Church lives around the central sacrifice-meal, the Mass. His Church alone can do what men can never do, wipe away human sin completely, continuing and passing on the work of Jesus. His Church alone can speak, teach and properly develop the authority of the living Christ. It alone dares to claim this power - and to act on it.

Men recognise this Church, even if they reject it. They know it is unique. It is for all men. It is "universal", so men have always called it "Catholic". In any neighbourhood, in any time, it has been a simple matter to get directed to the Catholic church. Even the most hostile anti-Catholics seem to have an inkling that this People sees itself as the original, continuous and authentic community of believers. Not out of pride, but obliged by history and faith, we Catholics know that we are the central Church of the whole Christian community, that all Christians are related to us by the Faith they share with us, or the regrettable division from our fellowship.

To Be a Catholic

The Church is a People. It is not a loose association. To be part of the Church you have to be one of God's People, a "member" of the Church. If you become a member of the Church, wherever you go the Church goes.

This is why Catholicism is being someone. It is not just believing doctrines or doing things. The word "Catholicism" is misleading. A member of the authentic continuous Church is not someone who believes in an "-ism". A Catholic is someone new, a human being who has been made new, a new person in God's new People.

If someone became a Catholic just by believing things or doing things, then anyone who said the rosary or agreed with the Pope would be a Catholic. There are some good people who claim the name "Catholic" in the same sense as the Church uses it, and yet they have never sought full and normal membership in the Church. There are other Christians who give various different definitions for the words "Catholic Church". We respect these theories, but we agree to differ. These theories raise a difficulty.

If I claim to be a member of a society which says I am not a member, can I really claim membership? Surely that society decides who is a part of it and who is an associate member and who is not a member at all. You cannot become a Catholic in the Church's sense of that word "catholic" just by thinking you are a Catholic. Catholicism is being someone. It is becoming a new person.

To become the new person who is a Catholic Christian I must be received and welcomed by the Church, God's new People, I must be reconciled to God in and through his community. Again we return to that sound description of becoming a Catholic - Reconciliation.

We would think a man a very strange husband if he left his wife and then "came back" to her simply by writing to tell her about his new friendly state of mind. Reconciliation involves much more than a change of mind. It is an action. It restores unity in a relationship. It leads to new united life with someone else.

We have seen that Jesus came into time and space, into our flesh, to reconcile this world with God, to unravel that rebellion. He invites each man and woman to be reconciled through him to God. He has always intended men to do this as individuals - but in a community. This is why his own prayer

begins "Our Father..." not "My Father..". It is men and women in a community, entering a community, living in a community, who are the new People reconciled with God. This is why anyone thinking about being reconciled to Jesus Christ must turn to his authentic Church. This is why anyone thinking about being reconciled to that Catholic Church must turn first and foremost to Jesus Christ.

2. The Gift of Faith

Reason, or plain "common sense", has led many people to turn to Jesus Christ and his Church. But when they have turned to Christ and his People, they find something which seems to be beyond ordinary human thinking - the demand that we must "have Faith".

You must "have Faith" to become a Catholic. What is "Faith"? I suppose there are hundreds of definitions, descriptions and studies of Faith. The Bible is rich with many aspects of Faith. We Catholics think of a Bible figure, the first Jew, as "our father in Faith". This figure was Abraham.

Faith as Life

You can define Faith. You can explain it away. You can respect it in others. Abraham lived it. He set out with a sort of blind obedience in a God he hardly knew. He risked everything the world values for the sake of God. He obeyed and trusted God in all the adventure and suffering of a nomad life, drawn on through desert lands by a strange vision, the dream of a People in a land of their own, the dream of a People living in harmony with the God who brought this whole universe out of nothing. Abraham's dream came true.

Abraham had to take a plunge in Faith. He not only had to believe in God but to live out his belief. This is where Faith is so practical. Even those who never encounter God in a personal way have to live by Faith. Daily life rests on thousands of acts of Faith - faith in machines, people, time, weather, your own ability, work procedure, recipes, advice. But, for the true believer, Faith goes even further than human faith. It takes a plunge. It risks. It says "Yes!" to a radical new life. It says "Yes" to growth and the future. To live by Faith is to fall in love with God. It is the open way of living - for Him, not for yourself. It is a generous trust. It is a relationship which is so intimate as to endure for ever.

Faith Saves

All this would be fine words and little else except for one fact. Abraham's People, God's first People, the Jews, lived out their Faith as obedience to a moral Law from God. But this was not enough. It did not work. Men relied on good deeds to appear good before God. Naturally they fell into a swamp of pride. Then came Christ our Lord.

He raised Faith beyond this obedience to moral Law. He made Faith into something higher and more open to all men. He made Faith become a personal relationship with him, an acceptance and trusting in him. He did this by making wider and deeper promises than those which led Abraham to father a new nation. Jesus made promises which burst into a living reality in his new People the Catholic Church. He promised eternal life as the goal and fruit of Faith.

The Church has experienced this for two thousand years now. Attempts to describe "Faith" are not merely fine words to God's People. They experience Faith. Common sense, reason, ordinary human faith - all these are taken on into the adventure of living in a direct personal relationship with God, through his Son, the God Man. By experience we know that this Faith is a Gift.

Faith as Gift

You are no doubt aware of the words "Holy Spirit". On the lips of a Christian these words call upon the Third Person of the Trinity, not some vague power, not merely another way God acts, but a Person. Again we return to the deep experience of God's People as evidence for the presence and life of the Holy Spirit. God the Spirit came upon the frightened group of disciples of Jesus and raised them up to be the first men in the new People. It all began nine days after the risen Lord Jesus had farewelled his followers and returned to his Father. A "worthless" bunch of frightened men received the Spirit promised by Jesus. The Catholic Church was born.

They received the strength of Faith with the coming of the Spirit. You can receive that strength. It is a Gift. We do not earn it. We do not work it up with fancy prayers or lucky charms. We do not find it by losing our common sense or running away from daily life. We are not born with it. We do not naturally grow into it. We receive it.

If you strive to be as honest, patient and clear minded as you can, seeking God and his own People, that Gift will come to you.

The Truths of Faith

There seem to be two simple ways of laying oneself open to the Gift.

(a) By praying, by taking the initiative and opening a relationship with God. "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." "Lord, if you will, show me your way." Speak with yourself: blunt, honest, to the point. God hears.

(b) By studying what God reveals to us through Jesus and the events of his life and through his People the Church. The acts and teachings of Jesus continue in his Church. You will find the basic teachings of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and you will see how the Church firmly holds these teachings. Examine the doctrines of the Church with respect, carefully, with an open mind and the will to understand. You are seeking truth.

Where is Truth?

Jesus is the Truth - "I am the way, the truth and the life" he said. He continues as Truth in his Body, the Church. This is why the Catholic Church alone so confidently claims the authority of God. To continue the mission of Jesus Christ now and until time ends, we Catholics must proclaim his truths with the certainty of Faith.

There is a kind of "certainty" in Faith. It is hard to define. A husband may find it hard, even impossible, to define his love for his wife. But he is certain he loves her. He is still quite certain of his love, even if he is lost for words when someone asks him to define it.

But at this point I must be blunt. If you become a Catholic you are putting yourself under authority. Some people dislike this. Does not authority destroy personal freedom? But authority in God's People, the Church, is not the force or compulsion of worldly authority. It is an authority to protect people so that they can be truly free, just as a wise government protects its citizens from interference so they can enjoy freedom.

The authority of the Church is Truth. "...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," says Jesus Christ. In the People - who have entered God's new agreement with men, Jesus the Truth still speaks, through the Pope, the Bishops, the priests, and through the Catholic people as they live

in this world. To know this Way of truth is to find the freedom to grow, to become fully human, to see the world as it really is, to overcome its evil powers, to enjoy and build up its goodness.

You are Unique

We will complete our thinking about the Gift of Faith with one obvious, but important, point. Every convert is different. Each convert has temperament, background, intellect, emotions. etc. which make him or her unique. For this reason, the Gift of Faith will "happen" in a distinctly different way for each individual.

There have been some converts who have simply made a steady rational study of Catholic doctrine and practice, and then quietly entered the Church. They discovered that Catholicism, the most "extreme" form of Christianity, also happens to be the most rational and normal form. Other converts have passed through harrowing emotional and spiritual struggles before entering the Church. Others have thought and prayed for many years, and then, just as if someone had clicked on a light, everything fell into place, the way home was clear. Others have stumbled along for a lifetime, until their final conversion was more like a surrender or an inevitable homecoming after much wandering. But there are many other experiences of the Gift of Faith - as many experiences as there are and have been converts to Christ's Way.

At this stage I will admit my own distaste for the word "convert". "New Catholic" would sound better, that is, someone who has made the adult decision to enter the Church. But for convenience, out of common usage, we will stick to the word "convert". Let us never forget, however, that every practicing Catholic is really a "convert". This may shock the cradle Catholic, who may say, "But I was born a Catholic!" The only person who was ever "born a Catholic", if we use those words, was Mary, the Mother of Christ. She enjoyed the Gift of Baptism from the first instant of her existence. Baptism is birth as a Catholic Christian. Baptism is initiation into the life of Faith. Many people baptised as Catholics when they were young only come to an adult decision to follow Christ in his Church in later life.

But before we bring our convert to the point of reconciliation, to initiation into the new People, we have to face hard realities. This booklet would be incomplete without some frank discussion of the various problems of the conversion process.

3. Problems of a Convert

Each convert is unique. On the other hand there is something very similar in each conversion. It is a familiar way. Many have passed along it. Many more will pass along it. Certain difficulties arise, varying from person to person. They must be faced. They must be foreseen. Your own difficulties may seem unique to you. But somewhere, at some time, someone else has had to face the same difficulty in similar conditions of life.

A basic problem is the weak human worry we all have about so many decisions in life - "What will people say?" They will say many things about reconciliation with the Church. Converts are invariably misunderstood. But let this not lead to proud notions of being persecuted for the truth. At times converts give false impressions or say intemperate things. This is only natural. Anyone in an emotional decisive situation acts this way.

If you are involved in your own decision to become a Catholic you must take great care with other people who cannot understand your predicament. There are many people who cannot appreciate Catholicism. There are many who are quite content to remain outside the Church. There are some

with clear and honest reasons for their position. Therefore, let us settle here and now the problem of conversion to Catholicism and the Ecumenical movement.

Ecumenical Problems

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has stepped into the forefront of ecumenical action. The Catholic Church works and prays for unity between all Christians. But the Catholic Church continues her claim to be "the one true Church". Surely there is a terrible contradiction here. But is there a contradiction here?

It may seem strange, but the very basis for Catholic strivings for Church unity is the bold claim to be "the one, true Church". Today we do not use that blunt phrase in the old exclusive sense. We do not argue that unity is simply a matter or the Church sitting still while all the wanderers come back to Rome. That was a narrow and arrogant attitude aimed against equally narrow and arrogant attitudes among Protestants.

Today our claim to be "the one true, Church" is seen as a solemn obligation on every Catholic to get out into the ecumenical movement. If we make up the united, authentic and original Christian Body, we are obliged to be the first to admit mistakes, to make loving initiatives for unity, to act in humble charity to our separated brethren. This is obviously not going to lead to a drive to convert non-Catholics. But it does not rule out the continual stream of individuals who choose full communion with Rome.

Every conversion to Catholicism, made with sincerity and clear conscience, is part of the process of unity. People will say, "Why bother to become a Catholic in these ecumenical days? That 'one, true Church' caste of mind is out of date now!" But the convert has seen how the Catholic Church embodies the central unity of all Christians. His step is an ecumenical decision today, for he does not come into the Church empty handed. He brings his past experience with him, whether it was Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Humanist, Agnostic or Atheist. He adds to the whole Church's understanding of that community in which he felt the call to unity. He is bound to involve himself in ecumenism as a Catholic. He has decided for unity.

Justifying the Step

Do you have to justify yourself to other people? This problem is especially related to conversion from another Christian community. Obviously a convert does not have to put forward lurid self justifications to people who lack any interest in the matter. In circles of friends and family there is a need to explain simply what your question of conscience involves. But you will know that precisely because it is a question of conscience, your own conscience, that complete explanation is impossible.

But several facts about the Church must be affirmed to remove grave misunderstanding and false judgements.

- (a) The Church does not teach that non-Catholics are damned.
- (b) The Church does not deny Grace and Truth in other Churches.
- (c) The Church does not demand converts to renounce all past beliefs, or to deny Grace and Truth received in another Christian community.

The misunderstandings over these points are as rife today as all the terrible fantasies and lies about convents were rife a generation ago. One of the hardest tasks facing some converts is to convince

friends and relatives that conversion is not a fraud, that a convert is not "being got at" by scheming Jesuits or turned into a "lackey of the priest". A good burst of candid humour can help here, indeed if you can laugh at yourself and make charitable fun of nonsense then the problem of other people's reactions will be solved.

Security?

Sometimes you hear people say, "Oh, she was attracted to Catholicism because she wanted security." Many people have been attracted to the Church by security. One way of putting that would be to say that they wanted to save their souls. Properly understood, there is nothing wrong with that, unless personal salvation became something selfish and narrow. The Church does not encourage a private "soul cultivation" religion.

Another simpler form of security which attracts some is membership in a huge international organisation, an ancient society which has moulded and which preserves all that is best in civilisation. There is nothing wrong with this attitude. However, a snob would find that Catholicism has more social disadvantages than benefits. A person who relished good taste would have to learn at least to tolerate the homely customs and regions of bad taste one naturally finds in the Church which is for everyone. A person with international ideals will discover in Catholicism much local variety, many local traditions, so that the Church in Sydney is very different from the Church in Manila or Amsterdam, and that there are even strong groups of Catholics who worship with Eastern Liturgies, utterly different from Mass in an average parish.

But let us bring security to a cruder level. Some converts may want the security of uniformity of opinions, rigid authority, set discipline, rules and rituals. Obviously that sort of convert will get a shock or two in the Church today! But even in the past, this security of rules and rituals was grossly over-rated, often by people who admired or criticised the Church from the outside, and who had never experienced her life. The Church does dare to speak with authority. She does lay down rules, discipline and she does regulate how Mass is offered and the Sacraments are given. But the Church requires much personal responsibility of those who make up God's People. You do not surrender your mind, your responsibility, when you become part of the Church. You do not become lost in a system or a cog in a machine.

True Security

Security can be misunderstood so easily. The possible convert must ask, "Am I considering this step just to get security?" You can answer "yes" to this question, and proceed confidently into the Church. But you could answer "yes" and hesitate because you know you have a false idea of security.

False security brings many types of people to mind. We may think of a selfish, prosperous person, "very comfortable", encased in self-centred security. We may think of a young man who refuses to risk a promotion just because he cherishes present security. We will think of the superstitious type of person, a prisoner in false security, protected by ignorance and fantasy. But there is a true and a good form of security.

Conversion to the Way of Christ offers this true security. It is so different from the variety we condemn. We could compare it to that noble security which a good father will fight to provide for his wife and children. It is that noble security which God the Father won for mankind when He gave

his only Son to die on a Cross for our peace and salvation. It is the peace which destroys fear because death has been conquered. It is union with God, through the living Christ.

At times this true security shows itself in ways which people can misinterpret. It is found in the warmth, the friendship, fellowship and exciting sense of our mission, the unity and rich variety which exists among Catholics. But this security in the Faith of millions is always open to the future. It is an exciting freedom. It is the freedom of that family who know that their Father has liberated them from the terrors of death and the chains of time. We can define it more personally.

A rocket must rest perfectly secure in its launching pad before it can hurtle forward. Its security has a future purpose. This is just what Christ's security gives us, a "launching pad", a direction, a foundation so that a man or woman can live fully in every challenge of life. The great convert St. Paul cried out with confidence in this true security, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8: 38, 39).

Peace of Soul

The phrase "peace of soul" is commonly associated with security. People really mean "peace of mind" when they say, "So and so became an R.C. to get peace of soul." They cannot appreciate the words they use.

The peace of the convert is difficult to pin down. It varies from person to person. For some people it is a positive power to face life in a new way. For others it is like a definition given by the convert Cardinal Newman in his novel about conversion, *Loss and Gain*. "It was more like the stillness which almost sensibly affects the ears, when a bell which had long been tolling stops, or when a vessel, after much tossing at sea, finds itself in harbour."

But it would be wrong to imagine that this peace of soul was - like floating in a warm bath of helpless cosiness. True peace of soul is that Peace of Christ which the world can never understand or destroy. It is the knowledge that God accepts us, each one of us with our warts, weaknesses and stupidities, with our secrets, our pretence, our refusal to be generous in love. With the assurance that God accepts us, Jesus could say, "My peace I give you, not as the world gives..."

Peace as the World Gives

The world gives various forms of "peace". It will provide you with the peace of oblivion - by drugs, pleasures, alcohol etc. The world can give peace which is simply a lack of war between people, when a "cold war" freezes love out of fear of fresh hostilities. The world will give the peace of falsehood, telling you that there is no God, that Christ was deluded and that his Church is simply a tyranny. Armed with this particular "peace" a man must fall back into belief in something else. First he will believe in himself. When this fails, for we usually grow out of it, he will believe "in human nature". When this lets him down he will be driven to belief in force, in political perversions, or some unscientific notion of science, or material possessions and the greed to possess. So it continues. Peace has perished.

Because it is only escapism, never facing the problem of our own inner faults - our fallen nature, the "peace" of this world fails. It leads to terrible anxiety for fear that its little gifts will vanish. It can lead to boredom, a vegetable existence. It can lead off into frantic activity all the time, feverish

attempts to cling to "peace", attempts which explode in terror or despair when it suddenly turns to dust in our hands.

Harmony in Myself

Let no-one compare the peace of your reconciliation to the Church with the "peace" of the world. Christ's peace only comes after we face up to his teachings. He ruthlessly unmasks the fraud and hypocrisy of fallen mankind and his fallen world. But he confidently raises that same fallen mankind and that fallen world to an active hope and courage of which martyrs, leaders and lovers are made. That is the story of the Church, rolling back across the centuries. Christ gives his People the wisdom to know themselves, the world as it can be, and the way to make it free.

With the saving wisdom of Jesus, even the most simple soul can live in genuine peace. He will be (a) at harmony with himself, because he knows what he really is, what he was, what he can become, (b) at harmony with others, because he can see himself, weakness and strength, in others and still love other people for what they are. He will learn the true meaning of the golden command. "Love your neighbour as yourself". To love yourself properly is perhaps the hardest task we can achieve in modern life. Perhaps this task is at the heart of Christ's call for you to enter his authentic People.

The world will give you peace to escape from the hard elements of life. Christ will give you peace in his Church to live through the hard elements of life. Jesus once said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Patience

It would be very irritating to arrive at a party, to knock at the door, and then to be made to wait and wait. Inside I can hear music, laughter and feasting. But still I wait. The door is shut fast. I have been forgotten, left in the cold, shuffling on the doormat, hurt and impatient.

For some people the final process of conversion is just like this. You came towards Christ and his Church. You studied Catholic doctrine, attended Mass, certainly you began a life of prayer. But something went wrong. You could not make that final step. You were held back, by circumstances, friends, a job, family, a relationship, problems. You wait at the door. It seems to be shut. Inside you can hear the music, laughter and feasting...

Patience is difficult. That is the whole point of it. In the process of conversion patience is very different from the serene hands clasped notion we usually have of it. It can come to the stage of emotional depression, of feelings that we have been let down, that God does not really care after all, or perhaps it does not matter whether we take that final step or not. "After all," we can say, "there are plenty of good people who never think of becoming a Catholic - so why pick on me? Why turn my life upside down and then dump me on the doorstep?"

All you can do is wait - and suffer. That is real patience. Even your accusing words about "being dumped" are genuine prayer. Many converts have found that the real Gift of Faith, that toughening Grace, was given in that dismal half-world when one is poised on the doorstep of the Church, before an apparently closed door.

I think now of a girl I knew who had to wait for two years, until she was twenty one, before she was free from family interference in her matter of conscience. That interference went on until she was reconciled. But it was all part of God's plan for her. He used this suffering to purify her intention, to

toughen her, to mature her for that moment when the door was found to be really open all the time, when she came home in the Household of Faith.

Risk

We will consider one final problem - risk. The potential convert has to be honest about the future. Many areas of life must change. You will risk friendships. You will risk talk and false accusation. People will blithely give various weird motives for your decision. You may risk family problems. You will risk much that is familiar and cherished - and all for the sake of what Jesus called "the Kingdom of Heaven".

There is one great risk which surpasses all. The moment you commit yourself to the Catholic Church your whole future will be completely uncertain, unpredictable. I suppose it is at this point that all the nonsense about "seeking security" falls to pieces. "Taking the plunge" might well be a more accurate summary of the final step.

"Have I the courage for this final step?" You may doubt it. But if it is to be God's Way for you, the last period of time before reconciliation may prove much easier than all the wondering and soul searching which set you on this path.

It is a well worn path you walk on. Thousands have passed this way before. Thousands will pass this way in years to come. In that sense there is nothing special about you or your decision. But in another deeper sense you are very special. At this moment of time you are held in God's care in a unique way. Do you really think He will let you down?

4. Reconciliation

Let us say that the decision has been taken. Let us move forward to the end of this process. There are two practical steps which together make up "the plunge", reconciliation with Christ in his Church.

(a) Taking formal Instruction in the Catholic Faith.

(b) Reception into the Church.

Instruction

Before becoming a Catholic, there is the formal process of Instruction for the possible convert. You approach a priest. You ask him to instruct you. But there is much more to it than a simple learning process.

This can be seen in many conversions as the real point of decision. In other forms of conversion people take Instruction just to see if Catholicism is in accord with their conscience. This latter approach is not always satisfactory. Perhaps this form of Instruction would be better worked out in a course of reading and informal meetings worked out by the enquirer and a priest or lay catechist. The correspondence course provided "with no strings attached" by the Catholic Enquiry Centre (address: P.O. Box 363, Maroubra, N.S.W., 2035. Australia) is a useful private means of self instruction before the decision to take personal Instruction from a priest.

Let us assume that the final decisive course of Instruction has been requested. At regular times, for a specific period, you will see the priest. Follow his advice and guidance. Rely on him and trust him in a relaxed confident way. He is well trained to answer your questions, to listen to you, to make your "Instruction" into a dialogue with the teaching Church.

If some complicated problems arise during instruction, the priest may choose to refer you to an expert in some field of Catholic belief. This is rather unlikely. For most of us, the instruction given by the priest will meet our needs and answer our questions. However, if difficulties arise, approach Instruction with genuine humility. The difficulties may rest in your own prejudices and misunderstandings. I am not advocating a submissive slavish obedience - be prepared to argue, to question, even to fight to the last ditch to defend objections in your mind against Catholic beliefs. God will use all this for his purposes in your life. He knows what He is about.

Sacraments of Initiation

Under instruction a convert learns how Christ reconciles us by the visible actions of his Sacraments. Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, in that order, are the Sacraments of Christian Initiation. These three Sacraments make a Christian, and incorporate that person into the Catholic Church, when ministered by clergy in communion with the Pope.

When you take instruction, you study the meaning and power of the Sacraments. When you decide to enter the Church, you are not merely studying the Sacraments. You are preparing to receive them, to celebrate them, to be involved completely in them. You are preparing to live a sacramental life, which takes you into communion with God.

Once you understand the Sacraments, you understand what reception into the Church involves. Simple human actions, washing, eating, speaking, are changed into the actions of God. Ordinary visible things, water, wine, bread, oil are transformed into the means of God's Life coming to us, here and now. These Sacraments of Christian Initiation complete that gradual change of conversion. They make you a Catholic Christian.

The whole of this booklet finds its full meaning in the Sacraments. "How do I become a Catholic?" - When I receive the Sacraments in Faith, when I openly declare my Faith, when I am reconciled to God the Father by His Son through the Holy Spirit. Through this divine action, God reaching out to me in love, I become one of His People.

Only the Sacraments can make you a Catholic. However there are three different ways of entering the Church, depending on three different situations.

(a) If you have never been baptized, and you seek reception into the Church, you are a catechumen, an old word for someone preparing for complete Christian Initiation. Your instruction will take you through several stages leading to the final ceremony. You finally become a Catholic during a special Mass, when you are baptized, confirmed and receive Communion. Complete Christian Initiation is celebrated in these three Sacraments, Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, three steps:

- (1). cleansing from sin, re-birth to new life in God's family,
- (2). receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit as power to live that new life.
- (3). full communion with Jesus Christ our Food for that new life. Even as a catechumen, you are already directly associated with the Church because you desire Baptism and intend to be baptized.

(b) If you have already been baptized in another Church, you will be received into the Catholic Church in a similar ceremony, usually a Mass. Your Baptism cannot be repeated. But it will be renewed perfectly in an adult way by the Sacrament of Penance, your first confession. This takes place quietly at some convenient time before the ceremony. During that ceremony, private or public according to your choice, one or two sponsors will witness your personal act of faith, made before the priest. This is the Nicene Creed, which we say at Sunday Mass. To it you add these words of

your own commitment to the Church: "I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God." After this act of Faith, the pattern is the same as in 1. You are confirmed, receiving the Gift of the Holy Spirit to live this new life. You receive your first Holy Communion, Jesus Christ the Food to nourish that new life. This second procedure is the most common way of entering the Church in our society today.

(c) If you have already been baptized and validly confirmed in another Church, the procedure will be the same as in 2., but obviously the Sacrament of Confirmation would be omitted. This is the rarest form of reconciliation with the Church.

Let us look more closely at the basic sacramental steps.

Baptism

Your priest will explain what Baptism means, what God does, what response he expects. Baptism makes a Christian. It is the way to a new life because it washes away all sin. It destroys that curse which infects all human beings. This way of "being born again" is the only way into the Church.

In Baptism, two events happen at once. You are washed clean by the supernatural power of Grace. You are incorporated into the community of the Church, where everyone has been re-born, made inwardly and truly good ("justified") and adopted as son or daughter of God.

Baptism cannot be repeated, because it has a permanent effect once received. However, there may be cases of reasonable doubt as to whether Baptism was properly received. There may be no written evidence for your Baptism as a baby. It may have been given in a doubtful fashion. You may have some personal doubt or scruple as to whether you are truly baptized.

In these cases, the Church takes great care because she values Baptism so much. In these doubtful cases, a short and strictly private "conditional Baptism" is given just before that first confession. In these days, conditional Baptism is never given without some good reason. Do not be puzzled or hurt if this is required.

The Catholic Church is not intending to insult any other Christian Church by taking this reverent care for Baptism. Other Churches are often just as strict on this matter when receiving new members.

Confession

A catechumen, one who has never been baptized, does not have to go to confession when being initiated into the Church. Why? Adult Baptism removes and forgives all sin, the original sin we inherit as human beings, the sins we commit on our journey through life. However, after a catechumen has become a Catholic Christian, sins committed after Baptism will need to be absolved through going to confession to the priest.

Most converts in our society are not catechumens. Therefore, they go to first confession, to renew the grace of Baptism, just before being received into the Church. You may say to yourself, "Confession! I wouldn't know what to say!" You may say, however, "I wouldn't know where to begin!"

Confession is really a great joy, a deep peace. The adult convert experiences this inner peace. It is good. It is a complete freedom from guilt, from the evil in ourselves, from the evil of a world in

rebellion against God. It is reconciliation the ending of that rebellion, a personal making of peace with God and with other people.

Jesus Christ gave his Church power to wipe away sins in his Name. When we go to confession, we experience this reconciliation. The convert knows that his first confession completely wipes out everything that ever went wrong in the past. G. K. Chesterton, that famous convert and great scholar admitted that this forgiveness of sin was the real reason why he finally entered the Church.

The priest will help you prepare for this first confession. Part of this process is self examination, an honest look back across your life, so that you can remember and put before God anything that was bad. Is this morbid or unhealthy? No. It is realistic. It is honest. You seek a new life, a new beginning, a new hope which comes as you hear the words of the priest, "I absolve you from your sins." Christ forgives your sins. The priest speaks for him.

When you enter the place for confession for the first time, place yourself in the prayerful guidance of the priest. He welcomes you. Bring before him all serious sins that come to mind. Do not leave anything serious out - anything serious to you personally, or in the light of some printed guide for self-examination which you used. The priest cannot be shocked. He is not there to tell you off. But there is no need for fine detail, and there must be no mention of names of others. There is no cause for fear. You are in the Hands of Love.

You may be nervous. That is quite natural, and to be expected. The priest knows that you may be nervous. He is trained to help people with such problems. He understands different personalities, and he goes to confession himself, because he too is a sinful human being. But God accepts sinners. He knows what we are and accepts us for what we are, when we confess and feel the healing touch of his mercy, when we are surprised by joy.

Confirmation

In Confirmation, you receive the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit himself. Baptism (or Penance) has cleansed you. Now you receive strength to be an active Christian. You will need this permanent Gift of the Spirit in the daily hum-drum pattern of life, where you seek to live out Christ's command to love others to fight for justice, truth and freedom. You did not become a Catholic to retreat from the world. You became a Catholic to extend Christ's Presence in this world to change this world.

Confirmation is given by the Bishop or a priest he has deputized, the priest who receives you into the Church. You are anointed with sacred oil, chrism, a Cross on the forehead, as he says. "Be sealed with the Gift of the Holy Spirit."

This permanent mark of "seal", makes you an active reflection of Christ. If a new Catholic truly strives to reflect Christ, people will see a changed person in their midst. As Our Lord said, you will be like the yeast in the dough, a presence stirring society to new life. You will have the power to be generous, a man or woman of self sacrifice. You may find that some vocation in the Church is made clear to you, and you have the strength to follow that path. In that same strength of the Holy Spirit, God's People will endure until time is complete and Christ comes to claim his own.

First Holy Communion

In Baptism and Penance, God reconciled you to himself. In Confirmation he poured forth his Holy Spirit as the vital power of your new life. But there remains one third step, the Holy Eucharist. To be completely united to God, as completely as we can be in this life, and to be completely united to

his community, the Church, you are called to that high point of your reception into the Church. This is your first Holy Communion, the first time you share in the Blessed Eucharist as a forgiven and initiated Christian.

During the course of instruction, the priest will have guided you in understanding the centre of the life of the Church in this world - Holy Mass. It is that same Sacrifice which Jesus Christ offered perfectly to his Father on the Cross. It is that same Sacrifice which is always at the Heart of God. It is the Sacrifice which Jesus extended to his People in the natural and human form of a holy meal.

Where Christ is present, there his Sacrifice is present. Obedient to his command to "do this", the Church, acting through her priest who represents Christ, takes bread and wine and these become the Body and Blood of Christ. He is really present as our Food, uniting us to himself, nourishing us with God's Life. By this Holy Communion, you enter communion with God, and at the same time you are in communion with God's community, the Church. We all share this one Food. We are made one by this Food. A new member is finally incorporated into our family by sharing this Food.

What a privilege it is for the adult convert to receive this Food for the first time. For most Catholics, first Communion is only a distant childhood memory. For the adult convert it can be a supreme conscious moment when he or she makes an offering of self to God, in God's own way. We offer our selves most perfectly at Mass when we receive the Lord, for we join his offering, "...my body, which will be given up for you."

As it completes your initiation and reception into the Church, as it reconciles you to God and his People, so this first reception of the Eucharist marks the beginning of your eucharistic life. You will accept the discipline of the Church which requires to be faithful to regular Sunday Mass. Frequent Communion, enriched by regular confession, will be the nourishment of your new life as a Catholic.

The Mass, like Faith, is a Gift from God. The convert will be moved by the power and drama of the Mass, the way it is so central to Catholic life. It does not depend on outward forms. Sung with solemn ceremony in a cathedral or celebrated for a family at home, the Mass is essentially the same. It is the bond of union, of communion, within the Church.

The convert also discovers the eucharistic Gift always present in Catholic churches, because this Blessed Sacrament is kept in the tabernacle, a shrine in the form of a metal safe. From each tabernacle, Christ our Food can be taken to the sick and aged. In the tabernacle, Christ our Food is adored and loved in the prayers of his People, as they come before him day by day. This adoration strengthens that eucharistic life which opens up before the new Catholic.

On the Brink

Here it all is. You have the Sacraments, the Instruction, the new way of unselfish living, membership in the authentic centre of Christianity. But perhaps conversion seems too much for you. Yes, Christ does make demands, but he never demands too much. His call into the Church is also his Gift. However much we muddle up that Gift, or fail to respond properly to it, God will still accept us.

Yet, in uncertainty you may hover on the brink of reception. You may delay reception, putting it off or worrying about it too much. You may fear an anti-climax. Perhaps that is exactly what it will be, an anti-climax. But you do not know. Because we are all different, each convert experiences the occasion of reception in a different way. For some it is joyous lighthearted homecoming. For others

there is no emotion at all. For some it is even a painful experience with a streak of tragedy through it. Perhaps this last variety of converts is really much more lucky and more greatly blessed than those who enjoy their reception into God's People. How can that be? Let us never forget that God's real toughening Gift comes in patient suffering, that emotionalism and nice feelings are not essential to genuine Christian decision. Later on, gradually, those who experienced a conversion with little emotion or even suffering will find that joy of Catholic life which no-one can take from them. Perhaps this is similar to a marriage where the couple only come to love one another deeply as they grow older.

But you cannot live in uncertainty. That is not living at all. You cannot face the terrible self accusation of a lifetime, "I should have become a Catholic, but I did not..." I have known a few sad and regretful people who have found themselves in that aimless predicament. Jesus would urge us on, over the brink, with his sharp challenge - "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62).

Settling Down

Let us say that you have taken the plunge, that now you are a new member of Christ's Church. You will have to settle down. This is easy. It is just a matter of taking your Christian duties carefully, of not getting carried away, of not trying to rush into as many areas of Catholic life as you can.

You will become accustomed to the practices of the Church. The regular pace of life, Sunday Mass, frequent Communion, regular Confession, will become part of you. Sometimes it will inconvenience you. At times it will bore you. Sometimes you will worry that you have lost your "fervour", that you are not as keen as you were at reception. But all this is quite natural and to be expected. Only certain insane people can live at a high pitch of intensity all the time. Most of us vary in our emotions and reactions from day to day, and emotions are not everything.

But as you settle down you will discover more and more of the variety and happiness of Catholic life. Your own past experiences will help you to appreciate this life, and you will help other Catholics to understand what is good and true beyond communion with Rome. But do not fall for the trap of trying to teach "cradle Catholics" various points about the Faith and its practice. Perhaps you do happen to know more about some aspects of the Faith. Converts often do, because they have learnt it as adults. But in this area care and humility should be your guide. It is also important to realize that quite a few Catholics will be puzzled or offended at your natural enthusiasm for things Catholic. They take these things for granted. Do not pass judgement on them for this attitude, because they may treasure in a quiet mature way elements in the Church which you are only beginning to discover. It is a large Household into which you have been called. There are many rooms and there is room for all mankind.

As you settle down into the Church, you should take care not to abandon that life of personal prayer which developed before Reception. You should also keep reading the Bible, perhaps following the Mass readings carefully. But there is one special person who you should come to know. This is the Mother of Christ, Mary. Perhaps, and I write from experience, Mary stood by you, and you learnt a deep love for her, as you drew near to the Church. Never let yourself be drawn from a personal devotion to her, for in her fellowship your Catholic life will never falter. The Mother of God stands in the life of God's People as the member of our human race most perfectly redeemed. Therefore Mary will always be your example and your ever present help.

Open Future

There is much else that could be examined in the process of settling down in the Church. Warnings could be set out, to avoid becoming smug, not to attempt to "convert" others in your own way, not to parade religion... But let us not become preoccupied with the future. In reconciliation to the living Christ in his Church, the future is open. Your future is God's future now. You do not have to live in the future as so many people do, saying, "I'll do this, I'll get that." You are now called to live in the present moment. Think on Cardinal Newman's words, ...the new convert... so happy in the Present, that he has no thoughts either for the Past or the Future." Reconciliation.

In time this may come for you. If you are reading these pages for yourself, you will know this or you may know otherwise. If you are reading these pages for someone else, then perhaps you will be able to watch their journey into the Church, to share in it, to understand. If you are reading out of plain curiosity, may this curiosity continue into an honest seeking of truth.

Christ said. "I am the truth." Christ founded a living Church on Peter. Christ also cried out to men. "Follow me!" Christ has called. He awaits an answer.
