

Out Of The Wilderness

A Conversion Story

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Augustine Joseph Roth, a former Baptist minister, tells the story of his conversion in booklet, "Out of the Wilderness," Our Sunday Visitor, in answer to critics:

Among the many letters I received from former friends in the Protestant ministry, after it became known that I was to be received into the Catholic Church, was one from Dr. Wallace Sharpe, an instructor of a seminary that I had attended. I do not question the sincerity that prompted my preceptor to write me; however, there is one part of his letter that cannot go unchallenged. If Dr. Sharpe is sincere, he is absolutely ignorant of what he writes, and I sincerely hope that this article will enlighten him for the future. I quote part of his letter:

"You have not been fair with yourself in this matter. Instead of going to impartial sources for information, you went to a Catholic priest, and instead of an impartial informant, you found a fox only too willing to praise the beauty of his own tail. I dare say that had you gone to other men of intelligence, not necessarily Baptists, you would have met so very different a story, that you could not, conscientiously, become a Catholic. The entire student body agrees on this."

I believe that I was a fairly intelligent non-Catholic of the kind my former professor has reference to; and had any Protestant come to me to learn something about the Catholic Church, I would have given him the so-called intelligent argument. Somewhere I had read "The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk." Elsewhere I had read "Thirty Years in Hell," by one who repudiated his book before he died (Bernard Fresenborg); and at another time, I wasted good time on a volume entitled "Crimes Against the Jesuits." Fortified with this abundant supply of knowledge of the Catholic Church, I set out to warn the unsuspecting of the dangers of Catholicism. I had personally purchased and distributed no less than a hundred copies of Maria Monk and perhaps as many of the others. Whenever I was asked anything about the Catholic Church, I tipped back on my heels and swelled up like a pouter pigeon, for I considered myself a living encyclopedia and the source of all information about the Catholics. At the end of my discourse, I gave the inquirer a copy of one of these books, and strutted off like a peacock, honestly believing that I had accomplished something worth while.

For years I followed this method of dealing intelligently in regards to the Catholic Church, and regardless of my sincerity, I am sure that I turned back many an honest seeker of the Truth. It is impossible to estimate the number of Protestant ministers, using this same method of intelligently instructing others concerning the Catholic Church, and who are keeping others from the joy of the true Faith.

Their Sincerity Is Not Questioned.

The sincerity of these men does not help matters one iota. I have often heard these words: "Oh, well, they are sincere;" and I cannot find it in myself to condone such sincerity any more than I can condone the sincerity of the thief who steals the savings of the widow and orphan. My own brother, a well-known Baptist minister, will have nothing whatever to do with me since I became a Catholic, claiming, as he does, that I have disgraced the family. My own sister, a prominent business woman of New York, will not so much as answer a letter, charging me, as she does, with bringing shame on her by becoming a Catholic. Sincere? No doubt; but a sincerity bred of bigotry and hatred is not to be respected. A man may be quite sincere, and yet be quite wrong, just as wrong as I was in taking to heart the sinful lies of the infamous "Maria Monk" — and just as wrong, as I shall attempt to prove in this pamphlet, as my former professor is in believing that non-Catholic men and women of intelligence, are sure to speak ill of the Catholic Church.

Nor does it necessarily follow that because the faculty and the entire student body agree in what Dr. Sharpe says, that it must be so. I agree that the majority rules, but I do not agree that the majority is always right. Let me give one illustration in this respect. Yonder in prison is Barabbas; here stands Christ. Now which shall it be: Thief, murderer, inciter of riots, or, Jesus the Savior of Men, the Prince of Peace? The majority cry, "Release Barabbas and crucify Christ." The voice of the rabble, the majority, carried that day, but, who today will admit that the majority was right? In your own student body there are Methodists who think you are wrong; there are Presbyterians who think you are both wrong; there are Campbellites who think the three of you are wrong. You cannot agree among yourselves on hardly one point of Christian doctrine, but you are all united in one thing, that I am wrong because I became a Catholic.

Fair-Minded Ministers Agree.

You claim that I should have gone to non-Catholics for my information about Catholics but, the Rev. J. B. Hemmeon, a Methodist minister, does not agree with you, for he says:

"It is a strange and lamentable fact that not one Protestant in ten thousand knows the truth about the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church. Many do not know there was any other Christian Church from the first or second century until the 'Reformation', or for about one thousand four hundred years. And they believe that there was then, virtually, a new Revelation.

"When a person of common sense wishes to obtain information about anything, whether political, religious, scientific, or it matters not what it may be, he goes to headquarters for authentic information — never to those who seek to destroy, or who are the enemies of that which he wishes to study. Not one Protestant in thousands ever seeks information concerning the Catholic Church from Catholic sources. The history from the Apostles to the fifteenth century is not taught in any Protestant seminary, nor anywhere else amongst Protestants, as far as I know. Nor is it possessed by Protestants... I studied theology, passed my examinations for the Methodist Church, and knew absolutely nothing of Christianity, or whether there was any, during this period. When I awoke to the fact of my dense ignorance, I felt resentment; and I confess I do to this day."

Nor is Dr. Hemmeon alone in his opinion. Says Dr. Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist of Columbus, Ohio:

"Among non-Catholics, even men of education are woefully ignorant of the Catholic Church."

And Dr. Nightengale, a Methodist, in his, "Religions of All Nations," has this to say:

“In scarcely a single instance has a case concerning them (Catholics) been fairly stated; the channels of history, not grossly corrupted.”

But it is not my wish to show you how many men of intelligence among the non-Catholic clergy, disagree with you. I wish to show you and those who share your opinion, that non-Catholics of intelligence, have been most outspoken in their praise of the Catholic Church, and that Protestant ministers and well-known laymen, have been most outspoken in voicing their disapproval of the Protestant Church. Let us hear what informed non-Catholics have to say.

Well-Informed Ministers Speak Out.

Rev. A. M. Courtney, a Methodist, of Chillicothe, Ohio:

“If I could destroy the Catholic Church tomorrow as easily as I could turn over my hand I should not do so, for it has a great mission to perform and it performs it as the Protestant Church could not do. It finds a place for every person, be he the religious enthusiast, the worker for mercy, the distributor of charity, or the recluse. It places these persons where they may do the most good, and that the Protestant Church does not do. Its writers and theologians, Thomas Aquinas, for instance, are the font of inspiration to all Christianity and its organization is the most perfect in existence. The Protestant Church owes all that is best in it to the Catholic Church.”

Rev. T. B. Thompson, Congregationalist minister of Chicago, Illinois:

“To contemplate her history is to admire her. Reformations, wars, empires, and kingdoms have been arrayed against her. After all these centuries she stands so strong and so firmly rooted in the lives of millions that she commands our highest respect. As an institution she is the most splendid the world has ever seen. Governments have risen and gone to the grave of nations since her advent. Peoples of every tongue have worshipped at her altars... The Roman Catholic Church has stood solid for law and order... When she speaks, legislators, statesmen, politicians, and governments stop to listen, often to obey. In the realm of worship, her ministry has been of the highest... her cathedrals are the shrines of all pilgrims.”

Rev. James Benninger, a Methodist of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania:

“The reason the Catholic Church succeeds, in spite of our misgivings, is because she is true to the central fact of revelation. She makes the death of Jesus the center of her devotion, around that point she organizes all her activities. When you see a company of Catholic people on the way to church, you can be assured of this: they are not going for the sake of fine music; they are not going to hear an eloquent dissertation on ‘Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde’. They are going to that place of worship to attend Mass. What is the celebration of the Mass? It is what we call the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. That fact is kept prominently before the mind of every Catholic. What is the first thing you see as you approach the Catholic Church? A cross. What is the first thing you see as you enter that church? A cross. What is the first thing you see a Catholic do as he seats himself in that church? Make the sign of a cross. What is the last thing held before the eyes of a dying Catholic? A cross. He comes into the Church in childhood imbued with the death of Jesus; he goes out of the world thinking of the death of Jesus.”

Rev. Madison C. Peters, a Baptist minister of New York, N. Y.:

“Catholics teach us a lesson of constant attendance upon public worship. Protestants go when the weather is just to their liking. Who has not heard early on Sunday mornings the tramp, tramp, of

people, with a hard week's work behind them, while we are asleep, hastening to the Catholic Church, with prayer book in hand?... Our religion is too much talk. We have too many women's meetings and not enough Sisters of Charity."

Rev. J. S. Thompson, Independent Church, Los Angeles, California:

"The providential purpose of the Roman Church is unity and continuity. The Catholic Church is the grandest organization in the world. It has a place of consecrated duty for all types or groups of mind. The poor, the common, and the rich meet together in that Church, as children of the same common Father. The poor, hard-working man and woman are found in that Church. It is an ancient Church. It was the ancient Church before the birth of Protestantism. It has cohesion and unity and continuity. The very fact of its great age is proof of its providential purpose. It traces its descent to the founder of our common Christianity. The gates of Hades have not been able to destroy it. It stands today a victor over the opposition of centuries. It is the strongest religious force in Christendom."

Rev. Dr. T. Moffatt, a Congregationalist of Newark, New Jersey:

"What do I admire in the Catholic Church? There are seven things which the Protestant Church might imitate and which I admire in the Catholic Church, and they are these: First, emphasis of the sanctity of the marriage vow; second, the pomp and dignity and parade of the Church; third, the central unifying authority of the Church; fourth, the tone of conviction; fifth, femininity, as exemplified in the honor paid the Blessed Virgin Mary; sixth, purgatory; and lastly, confession."

Rev. B. P. Dimmick, a Methodist, of Columbus, Ohio:

"For centuries the Roman Church was the only organized representation of Christianity in the world. During all this time, she stood as a bulwark of defense against all foes that assaulted our holy Christianity. But for her, the Church of God would have perished from off the earth. During all the centuries of darkness and heathenism in the world, this Church preserved the essentials of the doctrines of Christianity. We have the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, such as belief in One True God and His Son, Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord. A Church that has given the world the example of so many holy saints as the Roman Church has made a contribution to the uplift of the race that is incalculable."

Rev. N. Schuyler, Protestant Episcopal, of Trenton, New Jersey:

"Roman Catholicism lays great stress upon the performance of outward acts, while Protestantism affects to make light of such things. In this attitude, I am firmly convinced that Roman Catholicism is right and Protestantism wholly wrong. A genuine religion must manifest itself in some outward way."

Non-Catholic Laymen Also Speak Fairly.

So far, I have quoted only non-Catholic ministers. The list is not exhausted by far, but space will not permit more here. However, there are others who have been no less outspoken and among these are:

The Late Senator (Mark) Hanna:

"There is a crisis coming which will have to be met and the sooner the better. There is no place in this country for anarchy and treason. In this connection, I once said that in the day of trouble the United States must look to the Supreme Court and to the Roman Catholic Church. I will go further

now and say that I believe the best friend and protector the people and the flag shall have in its hour of trial will be the Roman Church, always conservative and fair and loyal. This is the power that shall save us."

John D. Rockefeller, writing in "World's Work," says:

"I fully appreciate the splendid service done by others in the field, but I have seen the organization of the Roman Catholic Church secure better results with a given sum of money than any other church organizations are accustomed to secure from the same expenditures."

The Hon. Stanley Matthews of the Superior Court of Cincinnati, Ohio:

"I will say that from the study which I have made, as time and opportunity have given me, of the doctrinal basis of the Roman Catholic Church, I am bound to say that it is not an ignorant superstition, but a scheme of well-conducted logic, which he is a bold man who says he can easily answer. Give them one proposition, concede to them one single premise and the whole of their faith follows most legitimately and logically."

The Hon. W. E. Gladstone:

"The Catholic Church has marched for more than fifteen hundred years at the head of human civilization; and has harnessed to her chariot, as the horses of a triumphal car, the chief intellectual and material forces of the world."

Nathaniel Hawthorne:

"I have always envied the Catholics in that sweet, sacred Virgin Mother who stands between them and the Deity; intercepting somewhat of His awful splendor, but permitting His love to stream on the worshipper more intelligibly to human comprehension through the medium of a woman's tenderness."

Oliver Wendell Holmes:

"So far as I have observed persons nearing the end of life, the Roman Catholics understand the business of dying better than Protestants. I have seen a good many Roman Catholics on their deathbeds and it always appeared to me that they accept the inevitable with composure which showed that their belief, whether or not the best to live by, was a better one to die by than most of the harder ones that have replaced it."

The great metaphysician, Heinrich Heine, in his "Confessions," says:

"I know too well my own intellectual caliber not to be aware that, with my most furious onslaughts, I could inflict but little injury on such a Colossus as the Church of St. Peter. Many a new recruit will break his head against its walls. As a thinker, a metaphysician, I was always forced to pay the homage of my admiration to the logical consistency of the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church."

Even Ernest Renan, writing from Rome in 1849, says:

"I came to this country singularly prejudiced against the religion of the south. I had in my mind set phrases as to this sensual, unwholesome, and subtle worship. To me Rome was the perversion of the religious instinct. I intended to ridicule freely the permanental ingenuity of the Church of Christ and of the superstitious of this land. Well, my friend, the Madonna has conquered me."

