

What I Found

Ex-Anglican's Conversion Story

By Owen Francis Dudley.

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Born in 1882.

Became Anglican minister in 1911.

Received into the Catholic Church in 1915.

Ordained a priest in 1917.

Chaplain of British Army.

Saw service on the French and Italian fronts and was wounded.

Active in Catholic Missionary Society after that war.

Elected Superior of the Catholic Missionary Society 1933.

World Lecturer. Novelist.

Wrote: "Will Men Be Like Gods?", "Shadows on the Earth", "The Masterful Monk", "Pageant of Life and The Coming of the Monster", "The Tremaynes and the Masterful Monk" and "Michael".

Father Dudley had and has probably as wide a reading audience in America as in Great Britain and his works have gone through many editions.

My first introduction to the Catholic Church was being spat in the eye by a Roman Catholic boy at school. He was bigger than I; so I let it pass. But I remembered he was a Roman Catholic. My next was at a magic-lantern entertainment to which I was taken by my mother. In the course of it there appeared on the screen the picture of a very old man in a large hat and a long white soutane. I must have asked my mother who it was, and been informed briefly that it was the "Pope of Rome." I don't quite know how, but the impression left in my mind was that there was something fishy about the "Pope of Rome." At school, I learned in English history (which I discovered later was not altogether English and not altogether history) that there was something fishy not only about the Pope of Rome, but about the whole of the Pope's Church.

I gathered that for a thousand years or more the Pope had held all England in his grip, and not only England but all Europe; also that during that period the "Roman," "Romish," or "Roman Catholic" Church had become more and more corrupt, until finally the original Christianity of Christ had almost disappeared; that idols were worshipped instead of God; that everywhere superstition held sway. No education; no science. Everything and everybody priest-ridden. I read of how at last the

"Glorious Reformation" had come; how the light of the Morning Star had burst upon the darkness; how the Pope's yoke had been flung off, and with it all the trappings and corruptions of popery; of the triumph of the Reformation in England; of the restoration of the primitive doctrines of Christ and the "light of the pure Gospel"; of the progress and prosperity that followed in the reign of "good Queen Bess"; of the freeing of men's minds and the expansion of thought released from the tyranny of Rome. All this, as an English schoolboy, I drank in. And I believed it. Next I did a thing that we all have to do: I grew up. And I grew up without questioning the truth of what I had been taught.

The time came when I decided to become a Church of England clergyman. For this purpose I entered an Anglican theological college. And there I must confess I began to get somewhat muddled; for I could not find out what I should have to teach when I became an Anglican clergyman. Even to my youthful mind it became abundantly clear that my various tutors were contradicting each other on vital matters of Christian doctrine. My own fellow students were perpetually arguing on most fundamental points of religion. I finally emerged from that theological college feeling somewhat like an addled egg, and only dimly realizing that the Church of England had given me no theology. I appreciated later that it had no system of theology to give. It was during that period at college that I first of all went out to Rome, on a holiday. And while there I managed to see no less a person than the Pope of Rome himself. It was Pope Pius X — being borne into St. Peter's on the "sedia gestatoria". He passed quite close to where I was standing, and I could see his face very clearly. It was the face of a saint. I could only suppose that somehow he had managed to keep good in spite of being the Pope of Rome. That incident left a deeper impression on my mind than I was aware of at the time. I kept a diary of all that I saw in Rome, and wrote in it: "I can quite imagine a susceptible young man being carried away by all this, and wanting to become a Roman Catholic." I myself was safe from the lure of popery, of course. [Pope Pius X has, of course, since been canonized.]

As a full-fledged Anglican clergyman I first of all worked in a country parish. At the end of a year, however, my vicar and I came to the conclusion that it would be wiser to part company; for we were disagreed as to what the Christian religion was.

I then went to a parish in the East End of London, down among the costermongers, hop pickers, and dock laborers. I went down there full of zeal, determined to set the Thames on fire. I very soon discovered, though, that the vast mass of East Enders had no interest at all in the religion that I professed. Out of the six thousand or so in the parish not more than one or two hundred even came near the church. Our hoppers' socials in the Parish Hall were well patronized, however. Great nights, and a thrilling din of barrel organ, dancing, and singing. I found the Donkey Row hoppers immensely lovable and affectionate. We had wonderful days with them each September in the hop-fields of Kent. It was social work. The mass of them we could not even touch with religion. I grew somewhat "extreme" in this parish under the influence of my vicar, to whom at first I was too "Protestant." I remember he disliked the hat I arrived in — a round, flat one. The vicarage dog ate the hat, and I bought a more "priestly" one.

For a year or two things went fairly smoothly and I suffered from no qualms about the Anglican religion. How far I sincerely believed that I was a "Catholic" during that period I find it difficult to estimate now. Sufficiently at any rate to argue heatedly with Low Church and "modernist" clergy in defense of my claim. And sufficiently to be thoroughly annoyed with a Roman Catholic lady who, whenever we met, told me she was praying for my conversion to the "True Church," and a Franciscan friar in the hop-fields who told me the same. I felt like telling them they could pray until

they were black in the face. I remember, too, that whenever I met a Roman Catholic priest I experienced a sense of inferiority and a vague feeling of not quite being the real thing, or at least of there being an indefinable but marked difference between us. It was when I could no longer avoid certain unpleasant facts with which I was confronted in my work as an Anglican clergyman that the first uneasiness came. One day I was in the house of a certain dock laborer who lived exactly opposite our church but never darkened its doors. I chose the occasion to ask him why not? His reply flattened me out; it was to the effect that he could see no valid reason for believing what I taught in preference to what the "Low Church bloke down the road" taught. I could not give a satisfactory answer to his challenge. I don't suppose he believed in either of us really; but he had placed me in a quandary. We were both Anglican clergymen, and we were both flatly contradicting each other from our respective pulpits.

It set a question simmering in my mind: "Why should ANYBODY believe what I taught?" And a further question: "What authority had I for what I was teaching?" I began, for the first time with real anxiety, to examine the Anglican Church. And with that examination I found I could no longer blind myself to certain patent facts, which hitherto I had brushed aside.

The Established Church was a church of contradictions, of parties, each of which had an equal claim to represent it, and all of which were destructive of its general claim to be part of the Church of Christ — directly one affirmed its unity. As far as authority was concerned, it was possible to believe anything or nothing without ecclesiastical interference. You could be an extreme "Anglo-Catholic" and hold all the doctrines of the Catholic Church except the inconvenient ones like papal infallibility; you could be an extreme modernist and deny (while retaining Christian terms) all the doctrines of the Christian religion. No bishop said yes or no imperatively to any party. The bishops were as divided as the parties. For practical purposes, if bishops did interfere, they were ignored, even by their own clergy. If the Holy Ghost, as claimed, was with the Church of England then logically the Holy Ghost was the author of contradictions: for each party claimed His guidance.

These facts presented me with a quandary which appeared insurmountable, and which remained insurmountable. I have often been asked, since my conversion, how, in view of them, Anglican clergy can be sincere in remaining where they are. My reply has been — they ARE sincere. There is a state of mental blindness in which one is incapable of seeing the plain logic of facts. I only know that it was over a year before I acted on those facts myself. And I honestly believe I was sincere during that period. Only those who have been Protestants can appreciate the thick veil of prejudice, fear, and mistrust of "Rome" which hampers every groping toward the truth. It was about this time that there fell into my hands a book written by a Catholic priest, who himself had once been an Anglican clergyman, who had been faced by the same difficulties, and who had found the solution of them in the Catholic Church.

"But the Catholic Church CAN'T be the solution," I said. And there rose before my mind a vision of all I had been taught about her from my boyhood upward — her false teaching, her corruptions of the doctrines of Christ. The Catholic Church, though, was the church of the overwhelming majority of Christians, and always had been. If what I had been taught was true, then for nearly two thousand years the great mass of Christians had been deluded and deceived by lies. Could Christ have allowed a hoax, an imposture of that magnitude? In His name? The Catholic Church was either an imposture or — Or what?

I began to buy Catholic books. To study Catholic doctrines. To read history from the Catholic standpoint. The day came when I sat looking into the fire asking myself: "Is what the world says of the Catholic Church true? Or what the Catholic Church says of herself? Have I all these years been shaking my fist at a phantom of my own imagining, fed on prejudice and ignorance?" I compared her unity with the complete lack of it outside. Her authority with the absence of anything approaching real authority in the church of which I was a member and a minister. The unchangeable moral code she proclaimed with the wavering, shilly-shallying moral expediency that Protestantism allowed. She began to look so very much more like the church that God would have made, just as the Established Church began to look so very much more like the church that man would have made.

When I was passing Westminster Cathedral one day I went in and knelt for half an hour before the Blessed Sacrament. I came out terribly shaken — spiritually shaken. It is impossible to describe; but in that short half hour what, until now, I had contemplated as a problem had suddenly assumed an aspect of imperativeness. A problem that had to be solved, not played with. For within those four walls there had loomed up before my spiritual vision an immensity, a vast reality, before which everything else had shrunk away. The church whose clergyman I was seemed to have slipped from under my feet. I returned to the East End dazed. That night amongst the hoppers I felt like a stranger moving about. I went about for weeks in a state of uncertainty, undecided in my conscience as to whether I was morally bound to face things out or not — wretched under the suspicion that what "Rome" said might be true — that I was no priest; that my "Mass" was no Mass at all; that I was genuflecting before...? That my "absolutions" were worthless. The more I prayed about it, the more unreal my ministry appeared.

I decided to consult a certain very "extreme" clergyman, whom I believed to be sincere beyond question (as he was), and a man of deep spiritual piety. I had three or four talks with him in all, the general result of which was to leave me more confused intellectually than ever, but spiritually more at peace; though it took me months before I realized that this peace was a false one, and that I had shelved the matter not from its intellectual difficulties, but for worldly reasons. For those talks had opened for me an unpleasant vista of what might happen if I went "over to Rome" — the loss of my position, my salary, friends and all; not only the burning of all my boats but the wounding of my mother and father cruelly. Even more, "Rome" might not accept me for her priesthood; in any case it would be starting all over again, possibly from baptism. (In this last, I was completely mistaken. Whatever else, Anglicans, or Episcopalians as they are known in America, administer a valid Baptism.) If she did not want me for a priest, I should have to... My whole being revolted against the prospect. It was impossible — such a demand. I had been carried away by my emotions. It was a snare of Satan. I should be a traitor to the church of my baptism. God had placed me here in the Church of England. He was blessing my work as its minister. He had given me endless graces. I buried myself in that work again, and for a time succeeded in forgetting, or at least stifling, the fears that had been my torment — until the haphazard remark of a photographer (registering my features), an agnostic, I believe, opened my eyes to my inability honestly to defend the Established Church's position; it was to the effect that if Christianity were true, obviously the Roman Catholic Church, with her authority, was right. It was the testimony of a man who had no axe to grind.

A Jewish dentist made the same remark in effect to me shortly afterward. The man in the street testified the same with his: "If I were religious, I'd be a Roman Catholic." Whether it was the photographer or not, my fears were released once more from their repression, abruptly and acutely,

and this time I resolved that it should be a fight to the finish, either way — that no worldly or material considerations should interfere. The clergyman whom I had consulted had already made one thing clear in my mind — that the issue between Rome and Canterbury, the crux of the whole problem, was the claim of Rome to be the infallible teaching authority appointed by God, and the denial by Canterbury of that claim.

The whole question boiled down to the question of infallibility, and on that everything else hung. I entered upon an intensive study of the point. I read the history of the doctrine, the Fathers and the Councils of the Church, and what they had to say; examined its rationality. At the end of some months I came to this conclusion — that, as far as Holy Scripture, history, and reason were concerned, the Catholic Church could prove her claim to be God's infallible teacher up to the hilt. It is difficult after all these years to recapture the exact mode of its appeal to my reason; but it was the appeal that the doctrine of the infallibility of the Church inevitably presents to any man who is prepared to lay aside bias, prejudice, and preconceptions. I will try to state it in the fewest words possible. Infallibility is the only guarantee we have that the Christian religion is true. Actually, if I, at this moment, did not believe in an infallible teacher appointed by God then nothing on earth would induce me to believe in the Christian religion.

If, as outside the Catholic Church, Christian doctrines are a matter of private judgment, and therefore the Christian religion a mere matter of human opinion, then there is no obligation upon any living soul to believe in it. Why should I stake my immortal soul upon human opinion? For that is all you have if you refuse the infallible Church. In itself her claim may be reduced to this: the Catholic Church, when she defines a doctrine of faith or morals, when she tells us what to believe and what to do — in a word, what the Christian religion is — then, and then only, she is prevented by God from making a mistake, from teaching untruth. The Church is God's mouthpiece — His voice. Could God's voice speak untruth?

Protestantism, claiming the Holy Ghost and presenting a jumble of contradictions, declares, in effect, that God DOES speak untruth. And only blinded reason prevents its adherents from seeing and admitting that unpalatable fact. Sanity alone should compel every thinking man to halt before the Catholic Church's very claim. It is commonly assumed that submission to an infallible authority in religion involves slavery, that Catholics cannot think for themselves, that their reason is stifled, that they commit intellectual suicide. "No educated man could accept the medieval dogmas of the Catholic Church." Examined in the light of horse sense and human reason, that shibboleth of the modernist leaders is revealed in all its naked stupidity, as an irrational and unscientific piece of snobbery for gulling the masses and blinding them to the claims of the Catholic Church.

In intent, since the dogmas are the same today, it means: "No educated man could submit to what the Catholic Church claims to be infallibly true": or, more simply, "No educated man could submit to infallibility in the matter of religion." For acceptance involves submission to the one Church that claims it. The obvious reply is: "In the name of all that is sane — why not?" When in every other department of life he is submitting to infallible truth already? Is slavery involved; is reason stifled; is it intellectual suicide to submit to the infallible truth of the law of gravity; do men jump off cliffs on the chance of going up instead of down? To submit, as every scientist does, to the fixed data of science, believing them to be infallibly true; could he be a scientist at all, if he refused to submit? To submit, as every educated man does, by eating, to the infallible truth that the human body needs food? To submit, even if he was not there and never saw it, to the infallible truth of the Great War? To submit, as every mathematician does, to the multiplication table? To the axioms of Euclid? To

submit, as every honest businessman does, to the infallible principles of business honesty? As all businessmen do to the infallible requirements to conduct a business at all? Were a businessman to conduct his business as the modernists conduct their religion, he would close down as the modernists have closed down Christianity for themselves and their adherents.

Examples could be multiplied to show that in every department of life every rational being is already submitting to infallible truth. Is it rational or irrational to proclaim that no educated man could submit in the hundredth case, that of religion, when he submits in the other ninety-nine? On the face of it the rationality lies with those who submit in the hundredth and most vital case of all. Is it a sign of education to submit to human opinions in preference to the revealed truths of God, who Himself declared that they were to be taught and accepted or refused under pain of eternal damnation? To prefer the negations of modernism to the dogmas of the Church that must teach infallibly if she teaches Christianity, i.e., the revealed truths of God? Of the Church that must be infallible when she teaches truth, since truth is an infallible thing? When, as far as reason was concerned, I was satisfied as to the unique claim of Rome, upon which all else depended, I decided to present my case for no longer remaining in the Church of England to one or two prominent scholars among its clergy.

I did so. As far as I can recollect, the "refutation" given me made no impression whatever. Though easily my superiors in scholarship, I had sufficient knowledge and logic to perceive that the great chain of scriptural and historical evidence for the Catholic claim remained unbroken by excerpts from St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, and others, conveniently interpreted according to the will of the reader and not to the mind of the author. It is little less than amazing to me now that scholars of repute should endeavor to counter the vast weight of evidence against them with what they themselves must in honesty admit is the less likely interpretation — to fit the rock to the pebble rather than the pebble to the rock. To my case for leaving a church which was so plainly devoid, in view of its contradictions, of any divine teaching authority, I received no valid answer at all.

Every conceivable "argumentum ad hominem" was presented; sentiment, "Roman fever," "intellectual suicide," treachery to the "church of my baptism," "corruptions of Rome," the whole well-worn gamut of objections was paraded. I had read them all, though, already and found them untrue. The great facts about the Catholic Church were left standing — unassailable. And those facts demanded submission. I have been asked again and again, since I became a Catholic, why I left the Church of England, and often the implication behind the question, if not actually expressed, has been that my motive for doing so could not have been based on reason.

There is a prevalent idea that converts to Rome are in some mysterious manner "got hold of" or "caught" by "Roman priests." I would like to assure any non-Catholic who may happen to read this that converts are not "got hold of" or "caught." In my own case I had rarely even spoken to a "Roman priest," before, of my own free will and with my reason already convinced, I went to consult one at the London Oratory. It is true that in doing so I was still full of Protestant suspicion and imagined that he would be extremely gratified to "get hold of" a real live Anglican clergyman; I should make a splendid "catch." The priest in question received me most calmly. He showed no sign of excitement; he did not stand on his head or caper about. He did not even appear to regard me as a particularly good "catch." He answered my questions and invited me to come again, if I cared to, but no more. I left, feeling several sizes smaller. I learned many things, however, from that interview. It was so entirely different from the interviews with the Anglican scholars. For the priest there was no difficult case to bolster up. Not a single question that I put to him presented

"difficulties." There were no awkward corners to get around. I believe his candidness about the human side of the Catholic Church almost startled me.

Never once was he on the defense. All that I had been groping toward so painfully and laboriously was so obvious to him as to leave me wondering how it could ever have not been obvious to myself. I realized, too, from that interview that "going over to Rome" would be very much more than stepping out of a small boat onto an Atlantic liner. It would be no less than coming into the kingdom of God on earth — and the Catholic Church was that kingdom of God. I was not coming in on my own terms, but on hers. I was not conferring a privilege upon her; she was conferring an inestimable privilege upon me. I was not going to make myself a Catholic, the Catholic Church was going to make me one. There would be a formal course of instruction, a real testing of my faith, and finally, a real submission to a living authority — the living authority of God on earth.

I hope I am wrong, but I have sometimes suspected that there are some who have never made their submission to the Catholic Church, and yet who have reached the point at which I stood after seeing that priest; those whose reason has led them to entrance gates of the Kingdom of God, who have seen inscribed above them that word "Submission" in all its naked, uncompromising meaning — and turned away. I wonder if they can ever forget that they once looked into their mother's eyes — and refused. Reason may submit; the will may refuse. It is a matter of dispositions and the grace of God, once conviction of the reason has been attained.

Actually, it involves an UNCONDITIONAL surrender of the will to the will of God — no easy task for the Protestant whose whole outlook in the spiritual direction has been determined by likes and dislikes, who has been accustomed to a religion that costs him little and claims the right of private judgment, who has detested being TOLD what to believe and what to do; in a word, who has been habitually indisposed, mentally and spiritually, for anything approaching unconditional submission of the will. I have no intention of hurting feelings, but I am convinced that the supreme difficulty for most Anglicans who would "like to go over to Rome" but do not, is their (unconscious perhaps) inability even to contemplate submission to the one Church that demands it. When the late Archbishop of Canterbury publicly proclaimed that he and the adherents of the Established Church would never pass under a doorway upon whose lintel was inscribed the word "Submission" he was precisely expressing the Protestant mind. Mercifully he was unaware that submission to the Catholic Church is submission to God.

I claim no credit, in my own case, for submitting; but rather blame for delaying so long — for the moral cowardice that hesitates to lay the onus of the consequences upon Almighty God, to burn one's boats and take the plunge. When, by divine grace, I was ready, and had made my decision, there was only one thing to do. I told my vicar, packed my bags, and left the East End. At the London Oratory I placed myself under instruction and, later on, was received. I would like to mention that my Protestant vicar and a curate who succeeded me in the parish are now also, both of them — priests of the Catholic Church.

"Well — and what have you found?" I will tell you — and what I was told I should find. I was told that the Catholic Church always placed the Church before Christ — that Christ was kept in the background. I have found, on the contrary, that she places me in a personal relationship with Christ that can never be attained outside — that Christ is her very being, by Whom and for Whom she exists, and to Whom to unite her children is her one ceaseless care. I was told that if I became a Catholic my mind would be fettered, my reason stifled; I should no longer be able to think for

myself. I have found on the contrary that the Catholic Church places me on a platform of truth from which even a poor mind like mine can rise to fathomless heights. I have found the truth that sets men free. I was told that in the Catholic Church it was all decay and stagnation. I have found, however, the very life of God himself pulsing through every vein of His Mystical Body.

It was like coming out of a small stuffy room with all the windows closed and striding up to the top of some great hill with all the winds of heaven roaring round. I have found life. Instead of the hard spiritual tyranny of which I was told, I have found a loving Mother who supplies my every human need. Instead of corruption, sanctity unknown outside. And sinners, too. For the Church of Christ does not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. Like her Master, she ever seeks and saves that which is lost. She is big enough and loving enough to hold even sinners in the fold; if she did not, she would not be the Church of Christ. Instead of hatred, I have found compassion for those outside — for the sheep without a shepherd. And I would that I could show them right into the heart of him whom men call the Pope of Rome — the shepherd of the sheep, the Vicar of Christ on earth; for then I would show them no ambitious autocrat striving for worldly power, but a loving father loved by his children as no other man on earth is loved. And I have found the kingdom of Heaven on earth. The city of God. That city that "has no need of the sun, nor of the moon to shine in it; for the glory of God has enlightened it, and the Lamb is the lamp thereof."
