

# To Evangelicalism and Back

Francis Beckwith discusses the reasons for his reversion and reactions to it.

Interviewed by Tim Drake

**F**rancis Beckwith, associate professor of Church-State Studies at Baylor University and former president of the Evangelical Theological Society, rocked the evangelical world in May with his announcement that after 32 years as an Evangelical, he was returning to the Catholic faith of his youth. In part, because of the ensuing reaction to his reversion, he resigned as president of ETS on May 5, 2007. He serves as associate director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies and as associate editor of the *Journal of Church & State*. He spoke with CWR from his home in Waco, Texas about his return to Catholicism.

## Tell me about your family of origin.

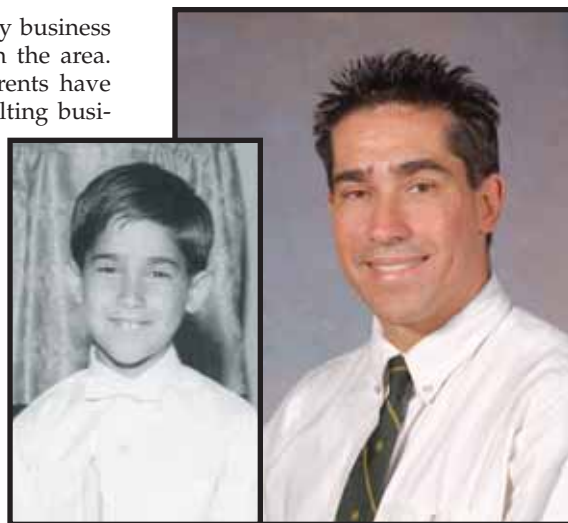
**Francis Beckwith:** I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960. My mother, Elizabeth, also born in Brooklyn, is Italian-American, whose father and four grandparents were several of the many Sicilian-Catholic immigrants that passed through Ellis Island in the early 20th century. My father, Harold Beckwith, was born in Connecticut. His mother, Bernadette, was a French-Canadian Catholic. His father, Francis, was of English descent and a baptized Episcopalian. His descendants arrived in America many years before the nation's founding.

In the mid-1960s we moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, where my father worked as an accountant and internal auditor at a number of hotels. In the late 1970s, both he and mother founded

Sweets of Las Vegas, a candy business that had two retail stores in the area. Since the late 1990s my parents have had a prosperous tax consulting business in southern Nevada.

I'm the eldest of their four children. My siblings are James (an optometrist in Las Vegas), Patrick (principal of Virginia City High School in Nevada), and Elizabeth (a writer, actress, and comic living in the Los Angeles area).

In 1987, I married Frankie Rozelle Dickerson, who is presently a catechumen and will soon be received into the Catholic Church.



Francis Beckwith

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## Were there weaknesses in the Catholic faith of your youth that led you to explore other options?

**Beckwith:** I didn't realize at the time, but I was part of the first generation of Catholics who would have no memory of the Church prior to Vatican II. This also meant that I grew up, and attended Catholic schools, during a time in which well-meaning Catholic leaders were testing all sorts of innovations in the Church, many of which were deleterious to the proper formation of young people.

On the other hand, there were some very important renewal movements in the Church at the time. The Catholic Charismatic Movement had a profound impact on me. During my middle school years, while attending Maranatha House, a Jesus People

church in downtown Las Vegas, I also frequented a Catholic Charismatic Bible study led by friends of my parents, the O'Donnells. Some of the folks at that Bible study were instrumental in bringing to my parents' parish three Dominican priests who offered a week-long evening seminar on the Bible and the Christian life. I attended that seminar and was very much taken by the Dominicans' erudition and deep spirituality, and the love of Jesus that was evident in the way they conducted themselves. But I was also impressed with the personal warmth and commitment to Scripture that I found among charismatic Protestants with which I had interacted at Maranatha House.

Looking back, and knowing what I know now, I believe that the Church's weakness was presenting the renewal movements as something new and not

part of the Church's theological traditions. For someone like me, who was interested in both the spiritual and intellectual grounding of the Christian faith, I didn't need the "folk Mass" with cute nuns and hip priests playing Kumbaya with guitars, tambourines and harmonicas. And it was all badly done. After all, we listened to the

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Byrds, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan, and we knew the Church just couldn't compete with them. But that's what the Church offered to the young people of my day: lousy pop music and a gutted Mass. If they were trying to make Catholicism unattractive to young and inquisitive Catholics, they were succeeding.

What I needed, and what many of us desired, were intelligent and winsome ambassadors for Christ who knew the intellectual basis for the Catholic faith, respected and understood the solemnity and theological truths behind the liturgy, and could explain the renewal movements in light of these.

**What prompted your departure from the Catholic Church at the age of 14?**

**Beckwith:** It was more of a process than a single moment in time. I still considered myself Catholic when I was 14, though I was attending both Protestant and Catholic services intermittently. But as I grew into my teens and the charismatic movement at my parents' church began to wane, I sought theological insight at the Catholic high school I attended. But the religion teachers did not seem to have a serious interest in theology. They were interested in exploring our feelings and contrived moral dilemmas and reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* and watching contemporary films. These are certainly not bad things to do. But they are no way to introduce young people to the study of Catholic theology and the foundations of the Christian faith. Remember, this was the mid-1970s and the American church was still trying to find itself after Vatican II. So, I don't

blame my religion teachers. They were doing the best they could under a confused and directionless American leadership. (I understand that things have changed at my alma mater, that the school's religion curriculum is much more intentionally Catholic and theological.)

So, I sought theological direction elsewhere. I began spending time at several Christian bookstores in Las Vegas and there I obtained materials from a variety of Evangelical scholars and popular writers. These authors exposed me to the thought of the Reformation as well as to the study of Christian apologetics. This was liberating to me. Here I had discovered serious people who believed that their faith is intellectually defensible. I began attending Evangelical churches, mostly non-denominational ones, that had outstanding Bible teachers. It was at that time that I began to learn the *solas* of the Reformation. Once I became fully convinced of them, I felt comfortable saying that I was no longer a Catholic. Even though I thought the Catholic Church had missed the boat on the Reformation and had incorporated some non-biblical ideas into its theology, I never engaged in anti-Catholic polemics. I knew too many serious Catholic believers who loved Jesus to believe that one could not be a practicing Catholic and a true Christian at the same time, which is what some Protestant Christians actually believe. My early experience in the Catholic Charismatic movement probably immunized me from aligning myself with rabid anti-Catholicism. In fact, I remember when the musician Keith Green and Last Days Ministries released a series of tracts called "The Catholic Chronicles." While all my Evangelical friends were praising them, I felt deeply uneasy about the literature. And it was not because I didn't think some of the tracts contained true facts. Rather, I was suspicious of their overall veracity and the quality of their reasoning, since they relied almost exclusively on a 1962 book by Lorraine Boettner. Although I was young, I knew enough about scholarship that you can't rely on just one book to explain or understand something as complex as the Catholic Church.

**How did your parents react?**

**Beckwith:** My parents, though concerned, never discouraged me from reading or exploring Evangelical litera-

ture and churches. They were very supportive when I published my first book in 1985, *Baha'I* (Bethany House), based on my MA thesis at Simon Greenleaf University, where I studied under Lutheran theologians Charles Manske and John Warwick Montgomery. I cannot speak for my parents, but I suspect that they did not see my Evangelical faith as too far a departure from their own. After all, I had not become an atheist or a Buddhist.

In the mid-1980s, when I attended Fordham University for my PhD in philosophy, I lived with my Italian grandmother, Frances Guido, a devout Catholic who was delighted that I was attending Fordham. Although she knew that I was Protestant, she seemed confident that some of my professor-priests would help steer me back to the Church. I left Fordham in 1987 and finished my dissertation in Nevada in November 1988.

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My experience at Fordham was terrific. I took memorable classes from some great philosophers. I took "Thomas Aquinas" and "Metaphysics" with W. Norris Clarke, "Medieval Humanism" with Gerald McCool, and "Plato," "Nietzsche," and "Hegel" with Quentin Lauer. In McCool's class we read Augustine's *Confessions* and in Clarke's Aquinas class we covered important sections of the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

Although it would be wrong to say that my experience at Fordham led me back to the Church, it is fair to say that because I studied under some of the finest philosophical minds American Catholicism had to offer, I acquired a deeper appreciation of the philosophical underpinnings of Catholic theology and its relationship to the histories of philosophy and Christian thought. This understanding helped form and shape my views on God's nature, the human person, and the natural moral law. But none of these views were inconsistent with Protestant theology, as the works of some Thomistic and Thomas-friendly Evangelical philosophers, such as Noman L. Geisler, Paul Copan, and J. P. Moreland, clearly show.

**You spent 32 years in the Evangelical world. What did you learn during your time as an Evangelical?**

**Beckwith:** I learned plenty, and for that reason I do not believe I ceased to be an Evangelical when I returned to the Church. What I ceased to be was a Protestant. For I believe, as Pope Benedict has preached, that the Church itself needs to nurture within it an evangelical spirit. There are, as we know, too many Catholics whose faith

sophical scaffolding that influenced the Church Fathers that developed the Catholic creeds as well as the Church's understanding of the Bible as God's Word. But these Evangelicals do so by using contemporary language and addressing contemporary concerns. This will help Catholics understand the reasoning behind the classical doctrines.

In terms of expository preaching as well as teaching the laity, Protestant Evangelicals are without peers in the

**your nephew asking you to be his confirmation sponsor that all worked to bring you back to the Church. Tell me what led you back?**

**Beckwith:** Yes, all those factors played a part. My nephew asking me to be his sponsor for his May 13 confirmation merely sped up what I had intended to do in November after my term as ETS president had ended.

I didn't fully realize it until the beginning of 2007 that I had assimilated much of a Catholic understanding of faith and reason, the nature of the human person, as well as the progress of dogma. Looking back, the beginning of my return to the Church, though I didn't realize at the time, probably occurred at a conference on John Paul II and Philosophy at Boston College in February 2006. Several months earlier I had published a small essay in the magazine, *Touchstone*: "Vatican Bible School: What John Paul II Can Teach Evangelicals." I incorporated portions of that essay in my BC paper in which I made a case for why anti-creedal Protestants hold to an incoherent point of view on faith, reason, and the nature of the Christian university. The first question from the audience came from Laura Garcia, a BC philosophy professor, who is a Catholic and former Evangelical Protestant. She asked, "Why aren't you a Catholic?" The question took me by surprise. I gave her an answer—if I remember correctly—that appealed to the doctrines of the Reformation as making all the difference to me. I also tried to account for the Church's continuity as being connected to the Reformers and their progeny as well as their predecessors in the Catholic Church. In this way, I could defend the creeds as Spirit-directed without conceding the present authority of Rome on these matters.

That episode at BC, nevertheless, got me thinking. So, I read *Truth and Tolerance* by Ratzinger and portions of his *Introduction to Christianity*. Out of curiosity I picked up a book I saw while browsing the stacks at a local bookstore: David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born-Again Catholic*. I was not entirely convinced by all his arguments, but he did raise some issues about the Church Fathers and the Catholic doctrines of the Eucharist and Infant Baptist that led me to more scholarly sources.

In October 2006, I gave an invited



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**Francis Beckwith and family**

needs to be renewed and emboldened.

There is much that I learned as a Protestant Evangelical that has left an indelible mark on me and formed the person I am today. For that reason, it accompanies me back to the Church. For instance, because Protestant Evangelicals accept much of the Great Tradition that Catholics take for granted—such as the Catholic creeds and the inspiration of Scripture—but without recourse to the Church's authority, they have produced important and significant works in systematic theology and philosophical theology. Catholics would do well to plumb these works, since in them Protestant Evangelicals often provide the biblical and philo-

Christian world. For instance, it is not unusual for Evangelical churches to host major conferences on theological issues in which leading scholars address lay audiences in order to equip them to share their faith with their neighbors, friends, etc. Works by Evangelical philosophers and theologians such as Moreland, Copan, and William Lane Craig, should be in the library of any serious Catholic who wants to be equipped to respond to contemporary challenges to the Christian faith.

**I've read that it was the Apostolic Fathers, reading Pope Benedict, the issue of justification, and**

lecture at the University of Dallas for the annual meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists. I was asked to reply to a plenary address by Jay Budziszewski, a friend who had been received into the Catholic Church three years earlier. The morning after the lectures, my wife and I had breakfast with Jay and his wife Sandy. It must have

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lasted three hours. Both Frankie and I asked Jay and Sandy a lot of questions about Catholicism. Our questions focused on several theological issues that prevented us from becoming Catholic and seemed insurmountable: justification, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the teaching authority of the Church, and the primacy of the Pope. As his style, Jay offered us eloquent answers. He strongly encouraged us to read the Early Church Fathers as well as the Catholic Catechism. I still remained unmoved, but I took Jay's advice.

In mid-November, I was elected president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) while still embracing Reformation theology on the four key issues I just mentioned. While at the ETS conference in Washington, D.C., I went to a bookstore by the hotel and purchased three small books by Ratzinger: *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures*, *In the Beginning*, and *Values in a Time of Upheaval*. I bought them because I was working on a new book on politics and Christianity and I wanted to glean from the Pope's insights on Christianity and culture. I read two of the three books on the flight home to Texas.

In early January 2007, I began reading the Early Church Fathers and the Catechism, focusing on the doctrines that I thought were key. I also read Mark Noll's book, *Is the Reformation Over?* This led me to read the Joint Declaration on Justification by Lutheran and Catholic scholars. While consulting these sources, I read portions of a book by my friends Norm Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. It is a fair-

minded book. But some of the points that Norm and Ralph made really shook me up and were instrumental in facilitating my return to the Church. For example, in their section on salvation, they write: "Although the forensic aspect of justification stressed by Reformation theology is scarcely found prior to the Reformation, there is continuity between medieval Catholicism and the Reformers." Then when I read the Fathers, those closest to the Apostles, the Reformation doctrine was just not there. To be sure, salvation by grace was there. To be sure, the necessity of faith was there. And to be sure, works righteousness apart from God's grace was denied. But what was present was a profound understanding of how saving faith was not a singular event that took place "on a Wednesday," to quote a famous Gospel song, but that it was the grace of God working through me as I acquiesced to God's spirit to allow his grace to shape and mold my character so that I may be conformed to the image of Christ. I also found it in the Catechism.

And there was an aesthetic aspect to this as well: the Catholic view of justification elegantly tied together James and Paul and the teachings of Jesus that put a premium on a believer's faithful practice of Christian charity. Catholicism does not teach "works righteousness." It teaches faith in action as a manifestation of God's grace in one's life. That's why Abraham's faith results in righteousness only when he attempts to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God.

Then I read the Council of Trent, which some Protestant friends had suggested I do. What I found was shocking. I found a document that had been nearly universally misrepresented by many Protestants, including some friends. I do not believe, however, that the misrepresentation is the result of purposeful deception. But rather, it is the result of reading Trent with Protestant assumptions and without a charitable disposition. For example, Trent talks about the four causes of justification, which correspond somewhat to Aristotle's four causes. None of these causes is the work of the individual Christian. For, according to Trent, God's grace does all the work. However, Trent does condemn "faith alone," but what it means is mere intellectual assent without allowing God's

grace to be manifested in one's actions and communion with the Church. This is why Trent also condemns justification by works.

This is why I am convinced that the typical "Council of Trent" rant found on anti-Catholic Web sites is the Protestant equivalent of the secular urban legend that everyone prior to Columbus believed in a flat earth.

I returned again to the Fathers and found in them, very early on, the Real Presence, infant baptism, and apostolic succession as well as other "Catholic" doctrines. Even in the cases where these doctrines were not articulated in their contemporary formulations, their primitive versions were surely there. But what was shocking to me is that one never finds in the Fathers claims that these doctrines are "unbiblical" or "apostate" or "not Christian," as one finds in contemporary anti-Catholic

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fundamentalist literature. So, at worst, I thought, the Catholic doctrines were considered legitimate options early on in Church history by the men who were disciplined by the Apostles and/or the Apostles' disciples. At best, the Catholic doctrines are part of the deposit of faith passed on to the successors of the Apostles and preserved by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church. I then purchased and read, Ratzinger's *Called to Communion* and Scott and Kimberly Hahn's *Rome Sweet Rome*.

At this point, I thought, if I reject the Catholic Church, there is good reason for one to believe I am rejecting the Church that Christ himself established. That's not a risk I was willing to make. After all, if I return to the Church and participate in the Sacraments, I lose nothing, since I would still be a follower of Jesus and believe everything that the Catholic creeds teach, as I have always believed. But if the Church is right about itself and the Sacraments, I acquire graces I would have not otherwise received. So, on March 23, 2007 my wife and I met with a local priest and told him of our intent to seek full communion with the Church. We decided that I would go through RCIA

with my wife and that we would both be received into the Church at the end of my ETS presidency in November.

A week later I attended a special executive meeting of the ETS in Fort Worth. I was torn up about telling my friends on the committee. But since the meeting was for the exclusive purpose of charting for the future the group's administrative structure, I knew that if I told my colleagues of what I had planned to do in November after my presidency that we would never address the important business at hand. So, the meeting went as planned. However, after that meeting, I sought counsel with numerous friends, both Protestants and Catholics, about what I should do about my ETS presidency and membership. I shared those deliberations on a May 5 entry on the blog to which I contribute, Right Reason.

### **Have you been surprised by the hostility of some of the reactions to your reversion?**

**Beckwith:** Some of the hostility was not surprising. For some of it came from well-meaning Protestants who simply do not have a good grounding in Christian history or the Catholic catechism. Many of these well-meaning folks, unfortunately, have sat under the teachings of less-than-careful Bible-church preachers and pastors who approach Catholicism with a cluster of flawed categories that make even a charitable reading of the catechism almost impossible.

But supportive comments far outweighed the negative ones. My wife and I received many kind and encouraging messages from Protestant Evangelicals as well as Catholics. In fact, several notable Evangelical scholars and teachers—whom I will not name—privately told me that they understood why we returned to the Catholic Church, but for a variety of reasons, including serious theological ones, they could not follow us. Two Evangelical ministries with which I am associated told me that my status with them would not change. One of them will retain me on its editorial board, refusing to accept my resignation, which I proffered several months ago for their protection. I was deeply touched by their generous spirit. And the other ministry will keep me as a lecturer for the seminars it offers. Because this ministry just requires its staff to affirm the Apostles' Creed,

there was no problem with me remaining on its faculty.

I will tell you what was surprising: some of the vitriol unleashed by scholars for whom I had higher expectations. For example, one friend, a scholar I deeply respect, commented on my blog that my move to the Church was

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likely the result of my not being sufficiently well-versed in Reformation theology. His assumption, of course, is that my return to the Church was the result of ignorance. I understand why he has to believe that. For if I am sufficiently adept at Reformation theology, this would mean that reasonable people can disagree on how to understand the contested questions of the Reformation. But then it follows that "the Gospel" is not reducible to one theory of justification, one theory of ecclesiology, or one theory of scripture's sufficiency. For someone like my friend, who equates the Gospel with the doctrines that arise in Christianity for the first time in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a unified and interdependent set of beliefs, the thought that one may have the Gospel without the Reformation is conceptually unfathomable. Unlike my friend, I do not believe one is saved by a theory of justification. One is saved by Jesus Christ and his grace.

Paul tells us what the Gospel is in II Corinthians 15:1-8: "Now I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living,

though some have fallen asleep. After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me." That means that both Catholicism and Protestantism have the Gospel. But the acceptance of the Gospel is just the beginning of the journey, and that's why I returned to the Catholic Church. For as Paul states, "Through it [the Gospel] you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain."

### **What can Evangelicals and Catholics learn from one another?**

**Beckwith:** As I have already noted, I believe that Catholics can learn from Evangelical Protestants how to preach, teach, and offer support for doctrines and beliefs that Catholics often just leave to authority. Evangelicals can learn from Catholics that Christianity is an historical faith that did not vanish from the Earth between the second and 16<sup>th</sup>-centuries. That is what I mean by "learning from the Great Tradition." Much of what Evangelicals think of as the odd beliefs of Catholics have their roots deep in Christian history. This, of course, may not convince a Protestant that these views are correct. But what it will do is help the Protestant to appreciate that the very same Christians that deliberated over the content of the Biblical canon also believed in the Real Presence, purgatory, intercession of the Saints, and indulgences. If these Christians, who knew the Bible far better than we, did not think these practices and beliefs "unbiblical," one should not be so quick to dismiss these practices and beliefs simply because they are outside of one's Protestant experience. On the other hand, the fact that many Catholic parishes do not offer the expository preaching and theological teaching to their members found in the best Protestant churches, should force Catholics to reflect critically on whether they are adequately evangelizing and equipping their own people to enter a world hostile to the Christian worldview.

We have much to learn from each other. ■

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