

Influence of the Fathers of the Church as Reflected in Recent Catholic Conversion Narratives

By Steven A. Kiczek

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s there has been a series of published conversion stories from people who have converted to the Catholic Church. These self-authored narrative accounts of these conversions are not scholarly works. They reflect the thinking of ordinary church members in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In a sense these writings are primary source materials for the history of the Church in this period. They reflect an important contemporary trend in inter-Christian relations. Understanding this phenomenon is important for religious studies and theology. It signals a change taking place in the religious landscape, a change that is having a deep influence in the Catholic Church as more converts take on positions of importance in the Church.

The specific focus of this essay is the influence of the writings of the Church Fathers, as reflected in these conversion accounts. All the authors examined cite the Church Fathers as a major, and, in some cases, a deciding factor changing their thinking and attitudes regarding the Catholic Church. In their accounts of their conversions, the Apostolic Fathers, that is those who were either directly taught by the apostles or by the immediate students of the apostles, including Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna, as well as the anonymous authors of the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, are a particularly influential subgroup. Due to their closeness in time to the events recorded in the New Testament and their evangelization by the apostles themselves, these figures and their writings speak with authority and play a central role in conversion narratives featured in this essay.

This essay is intended to make a contribution to current Church history and religious sociology. In dealing with this ecumenically sensitive topic, it is not my intention to offer a piece of apologetics. Rather, I hope to present an objective account of the important role that the Church Fathers continue to have in shaping contemporary religious belief. The converts to the Catholic faith featured in this article wrestled with many issues and questions. By highlighting the role of the Fathers in their conversions, I do not mean to diminish the importance of other factors at work in their conversions. Nor do I mean to imply that the Church Fathers play a crucial role in most contemporary Catholic conversions. Scott Hahn's conversion story, *Rome Sweet Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), coauthored with his wife Kimberley, is probably the most influential of recent conversion stories, yet it does not point to the Church Fathers as a central influence. Nevertheless, the enduring influence of the Church Fathers for many struggling with the question of authentic Christianity is worthy of scholarly notice and further study.¹

CONVERT'S NARRATIVES

ALEX JONES

In his spiritual autobiography *No Price Too High: a Pentecostal Preacher Becomes a Catholic: the Inspirational Story of Alex Jones, as Told to Diane Marie Morey Hanson* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), Alex Jones, an African-American former Pentecostal minister in Detroit, relates how he came into contact with the Apostolic Fathers. He

¹ Other factors that play an important role in these conversions include the influence of the Catholic magisterium in interpreting Scripture, personal witness, Catholic liturgical life, spousal influence, and Catholic media (e.g., EWTN, especially Marcus Grodi's *Journey Home* program, and Catholic Answers' radio broadcasts).

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had been struggling with Catholic influences that he was discovering and subsequently trying to put into practice in his Pentecostal congregation, especially regarding worship. He decided that he had to find what the Church Fathers taught, especially the earliest ones. He remembered what Karl Keating, president and founder of Catholic Answers, said in a debate.

Karl ended the debate by asking ..., “Who [sic] would you believe to relay the details of an event accurately—an eyewitness—or someone who came along fifteen hundred years later and told you what he thought had happened?” ... Karl Keating’s point was suddenly very relevant. This truly was the Christianity of the apostles, told by the eyewitnesses.²

Remembering this comment by Keating prompted him to read heavily in patristic writings, and it was the Apostolic Fathers, as well as Justin Martyr and St. Irenaeus, who most influenced him. The issues that concerned him were worship, especially the Eucharist and ordered services; authority and the structure of the hierarchy; personal connections with the Apostles; the role of Scripture and its interpretation; tradition, especially as it relates to the Bible; and personal morality. Jones reflects on the pastoral relevance of these writers:

These were holy men. These were men who knew the apostles. And it was this emphasis on personal holiness and the Christian’s influence in the world that drew me into a more serious reading of the early Church Fathers. After twenty years of teaching against modern Christian materialism, I finally felt vindicated. There, before me, I had the faith of the apostles as it had been handed to the next generation of apostolic Fathers, and this apostolic Christianity did not define itself in terms of material prosperity or embrace a “Christ-for-cash” Gospel.³

Two sources among the Apostolic Fathers especially influenced Jones: St. Ignatius of Antioch and the *Didache*. Jones summarizes the features of early Christian worship that were discoveries for him:

First I discovered that the early Church’s worship was both charismatic *and* liturgical. By the time of Ignatius, the liturgical aspect of the Church was in ascendancy, and the charismatic aspect was subordinate to it. In the *Didache*, I not only read about apostles and prophets and their roles in the early Church, but I also read about Christian worship that was liturgical. The *Didache* spoke of a pure sacrifice, prescribed prayers, and of Holy Communion as the Eucharist.⁴

From Ignatius, Jones also learned about the very early development of the three-fold hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, and the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, as well as the first mention of the phrase “Catholic Church.” To someone raised in the Catholic faith these are givens, but to someone raised in the anti-Catholic atmosphere of Pentecostalism they are revolutionary. Jones, along with his family and some members of his Pentecostal congregation, converted to Catholicism on April 14, 2001. Jones was ordained a deacon of the Archdiocese of Detroit on October 1, 2005.

ROD BENNETT

In *Four Witnesses: the Early Church in Her Own Words* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002) Rod Bennett relates the story of his own conversion to the Catholic Church from Evangelicalism. The “Four Witnesses” in his title are Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyons. In the “Afterword” he relates how

² Jones, 2.

³ Jones, 78-79.

⁴ Jones, 80-81.

these four Fathers opened him to the reality of the Catholic Church and its faith. A key issue for Bennett is the nature of primitive Christianity. He describes his original viewpoint:

Catholicism represented to me the very opposite of primitive Christianity. The idea that anything remotely like it should be found in the first or second centuries was laughable, preposterous. I knew, like everyone else, that the early Church was a loose fraternity of simple, autonomous, spontaneous believers, with no rituals, no organization, who got their beliefs from the Bible only and who always, therefore, got it right ... like me. I also knew that the object of the Christian game, here in the modern world, is to “put things back to the way they were in the early Church”... So, as you might guess, finding apostolic succession in A.D. 96, or the Sacrifice of the Altar in 150, did my settled Evangelical way of life no good at all.⁵

Bennett’s idea of the nature of the first few Christian centuries is very common among Evangelicals. For Bennett, while everything was passed through this filter, he resisted any openness to a Catholic view. In 1992, however, he began to seriously consider the Catholic Church after he read a series of passages from the newly promulgated *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Chicago, IL; [distributed by] Loyola University Press, 1994) regarding the nature of the Church and its Magisterium, specifically, sections 765, 771, 861-862, and 888-890. Concerning those passages Bennett comments:

I recognized it immediately: *this* was the faith I had found with Clement and Ignatius, with Justin and Irenaeus. And if the Catholic Church in the late twentieth century was saying things my four witnesses had said in the first and second, I knew I was in big, big trouble. Especially since I also recognized something else—that my Evangelical brothers and sisters were not saying these things. And so, incredibly, my own cherished principles seemed to demand it: I needed (in my own life, at any rate) to “put things back to the way they were in the early Church.”⁶

On April 6, 1996, Bennett entered the Catholic Church. He credited the “four witnesses” also with changing his view of the nature of the Church: “[W]hat the four witnesses had offered to me was the story of another miracle—*another incarnation*. I knew, and already believed with all my heart, that the Son of God had become Man at Bethlehem for my salvation; ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). But now I could see that the early Fathers believed more: *They believed that His Bride had become flesh too.*”⁷ What Bennett refers to is the visible, institutionally embodied Church, with visible and tangible sacraments, a visible community, and institutional governance, in contrast with an invisible, spiritual church.

TERRY L. FRAZIER

In his essay “Into the Crimson Light” (in *Surprised by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic*, ed. Patrick Madrid; San Diego: Basilica Press, 1994, pp.181-209), Terry L. Frazier recounts his conversion to Catholicism. He describes how he got involved with various Evangelical para-church organizations (e.g., Young Life and Campus Crusade for Christ), then later became a Baptist. Prior to his conversion to the Catholic Church he was struggling with various Baptist doctrines and practices as to whether they agreed with the Bible. He realized that he needed to interpret the Bible “not as a twentieth century American but as a first

⁵ Bennett, 281-282.

⁶ Bennett, 289-290.

⁷ Bennett, 298.

century Easterner in Galatia or Syrian Antioch would.”⁸ In a library he found a book, which he does not identify, containing ancient Christian literature. He was especially interested in the theology of the second century, and he mentions in passing the influence of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache*, but he devotes more attention to the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch and the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* of Clement of Rome. Coming from a fundamentalist background, he admits to being shocked by what he found. Two connected issues, in particular, stood out for him: the Eucharist and the authority of the bishop. He notes that Ignatius wrote to the Smyrnaeans, condemning the Gnostics for their disbelief in the Incarnation, and he quotes Ignatius about the Gnostics’ refusal to pray with the Church and their refusal to believe that the Eucharist is the actual flesh of Christ. Frazier describes his reaction to Ignatius’s statement about the Eucharist:

I believe I nearly suffered cardiac arrest.... This was a man who had heard the Good News from the lips of the Apostle John himself, the very Apostle who had written that graphic Eucharistic passage in the Gospel (John 6:48-58). Writing merely ten or fifteen years after the death of St. John, Ignatius refers to the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist as though it were common knowledge throughout the Church! Indeed, if Christ weren’t really present in the Eucharist, Ignatius’ whole apologetic argument would have come to naught.⁹

A little further he describes what shocked him most as a fundamentalist: “I had been taught that salvation was centered on praying a ‘sinner’s prayer,’ yet the early Christians were teaching we ‘live in Jesus Christ for evermore’ in the Eucharist, which is called the ‘medicine of immortality.’ This was patently intolerable to my Fundamentalist temperament.”¹⁰ After quoting Ignatius’s *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* (8:1-2), in which Ignatius deals with the necessity of the bishop’s approval for a valid Eucharist and in which he calls the Church “Catholic” (the first literary instance of this word’s being applied to the Church), he further states:

That Ignatius called the Church “Catholic” had a profound psychological effect on an anti-Catholic like myself. I suspected some diabolical mischief was afoot to subvert the true Evangelical Faith, and so I decided to make a thorough study of all the early Christian literature I could find. Much to my shock, not one Christian writing in the early Church viewed the Lord’s Supper as a mere symbol that failed to do what it symbolized. Indeed, the early Christians had a very “Catholic” sacramental theology.¹¹

The next Church Father that he mentions as having a significant influence on him is Clement of Rome, especially his account of papal authority. Frazier states:

It was one of the Church’s earliest Popes, St. Clement, writing to the church at Corinth around A.D. 96, who left little question in my mind that the ancient Church regarded the succession of bishops from the Apostles as highly important. Clement appeals to the memory of the two martyrs, Peter and Paul, and explicitly states that the Apostles appointed bishops and made provision for their succession....¹²

⁸ Frazier, 195.

⁹ Frazier, 196.

¹⁰ Frazier, 196-197.

¹¹ Frazier, 197.

¹² Frazier, 203.

He notes that Clement told the Corinthians that he spoke by the authority of the Holy Spirit and that disobedience to his word would involve them in great spiritual danger.

Immediately after dealing with Clement, Frazier returns to Ignatius of Antioch and dwells on Ignatius's greeting to the Roman church, noting Ignatius's strong deference to the Roman church and the many qualities he attributes to that church which go far beyond the greeting he gives to any other local church. With regard to traditional deference to Rome in matters of doctrine, Frazier appeals to the writings of St. Irenaeus. He was very impressed by Irenaeus's insistence, in his *Against Heresies*, on the doctrinal authority of the Roman church, the necessity that all churches agree with the Roman church, and on the apostolic succession of the Roman bishops. The faith was handed on (the literal meaning of the word "tradition") by its transmission from generation to generation and guaranteed by the continuous succession of the Church's bishops. For Frazier, the Fathers of the first two centuries, especially Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, and Irenaeus, were decisive influences in his conversion to Catholicism.

KENNETH NOAKES

Fr. Noakes is a former Anglican clergyman who struggled with the issues of women's ordination and its consequences in the Church of England. He was one of the roughly 500 Anglican clergymen to convert to Catholicism after the Church of England's decision in 1992 to ordain women as priests. He also was one of the married Anglican clergymen who were allowed to be ordained as Catholic priests. He was ordained in July 1996. His essay "Echoes of the Early Church: the Testimony of the Church Fathers" appears in *The Path to Rome: Modern Journeys to the Catholic Church* (ed. Dwight Longenecker; Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1999, pp.62-75), a volume dedicated chiefly to Catholic converts from Anglicanism. In his essay Noakes relates how the influence of the Fathers permeated his life and education as an Anglican: "What did I value in the Fathers which eventually forced me to change my allegiance? There were three aspects of the Fathers' thought which were especially compelling: the emphasis on continuity, the emphasis on coherence and the emphasis on sacramentality."¹³ In regard to the issue of continuity, Noakes remarks that it has both chronological and geographic aspects, both centered in Rome. He mentions the Donatist schism, and that St. Augustine scorned the Donatists' claim that they in northwest Africa were the only true Christians. That led Noakes to wonder why Anglicans were separated from the main body of western Christians. He was also influenced regarding continuity by the writings of John Henry Newman, who came to identify the Catholic Church of antiquity with the modern Roman Catholic Church, and Monophysitism (the fifth-century heresy that held Christ to be possessed only of divine nature as opposed to His having both divine and human natures united in one person) with Anglicanism. Noakes remarks on his thinking at the time: "Any convert would rightly hesitate to compare himself with Newman, but in my case, as in his, questions of continuity and identity raised by the study of the Fathers played their part in the process."¹⁴ The second decisive aspect that Noakes mentions is coherence, which was impressed upon him when he read the works of St. Irenaeus of Lyons. This Father's writings emphasize redemption, the relationship between the new and old covenants, creation, typology, the divine plan of salvation, and the coherence of Christian doctrine. Regarding this aspect of coherence, Noakes describes its attraction: "The coherence of Catholicism is immensely attractive. We are not required to swallow a whole range of disparate dogmas, but rather to explore with loyal faith and sensitivity the proportions and interconnections of the one Catholic Faith."¹⁵

¹³ Noakes, 64.

¹⁴ Noakes, 66.

¹⁵ Noakes, 68.

Another major issue that deeply concerned Noakes, sacramentality, also had strong patristic roots. He quotes Leo the Great and Ambrose, and he mentions the understanding of Church as communion as rooted in the Fathers. Noakes understands sacramentality broadly, not as only the seven sacraments strictly speaking. For example, the idea of communion with one's bishop is important to him, and he considers this relationship between bishop and priest as sacramental since it expresses the nature of Holy Orders. The relationship between a priest and his bishop is a spiritual bond which is inherent to Holy Orders.

Noakes tried very hard to live the Anglican ideal of the "via media," and he was very hopeful that the ecumenical cooperation and accomplishments of the post-conciliar period would lead eventually to a reunion between Anglicanism and the Catholic Church. He was favorably impressed that the insights of Justin Martyr, Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch were incorporated into joint Anglican-Catholic statements on the Eucharist.¹⁶ These statements were evaluated with reservation by the Catholic Church, and this negative verdict caused a great deal of consternation to Anglicans and Catholics with high hopes for eventual reunion, including Noakes. The decision by the Church of England in 1992 to ordain women as priests was the last straw. Noakes sums up his reasoning as follows:

By this decision which was to lead to the first ordination of women as priests in 1994, three blows had been cast at those fundamental emphases that I had found in the Fathers – continuity, coherence and sacramentality. With regard to continuity, the Church of England was deliberately setting aside its claim to share the threefold ministry established from the early centuries and to have no ministry of its own, just as it had no confessional creeds of its own. From now on the Church of England would have a distinctive ministry of its own. The explicit warnings against "going it alone" in this matter which had been issued by Rome and the Eastern Orthodox had not been heeded.¹⁷

KENNETH R. GUINDON

Kenneth R. Guindon differs from the others featured in this article in that he underwent a series of conversions. Guindon was raised as a Catholic, converted to Evangelicalism, converted back to the Roman Catholic Church, converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church, then converted back to Evangelicalism, and finally re-converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. He relates his conversions, with the exception of the last, in *History is Not Enough! Why Do Ancient Churches Attract Evangelicals* (Richmond, VA: Xulon Press, 2007).¹⁸ This book is chiefly a polemical and apologetic defense of Evangelicalism and a strident attack on both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. It is of interest for our purposes because Guindon recognizes the importance of appeals to the Church Fathers in conversions to Catholicism and Orthodoxy and attempts to confront them directly in order to undermine them. Relying on the general Protestant claim, and especially the strong Evangelical version of it, that the Church very quickly departed from the Apostolic teaching and fell into apostasy, Guindon challenges the value of appeals to the teachings of Fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Augustine, and several others. Guindon is especially concerned to attack the Apostolic Fathers since they are closest in time to the Apostles. By questioning their legitimacy as true and faithful voices of apostolic doctrine, he tries to undermine the appeal to history and tradition

¹⁶ Noakes, 71-72.

¹⁷ Noakes, 72-73.

¹⁸ Guindon illustrates the very fluid situation of contemporary intra-Christian conversions. Only two years after publishing his book, he returned to the Eastern Orthodox Church in 2009, as detailed on the Catholic blog *Articuli Fidei* (<http://articulifidei.blogspot.com/2009/07/setting-record-straight-public.html>). In the blog entry he explicitly renounced all the contents of *History is Not Enough!*, and he lists his reasons for leaving returning to the Eastern Orthodox Church.

that has attracted many Evangelicals to the “ancient liturgical churches,” as he often describes them. His book deals in depth with many of the Catholic and Orthodox doctrines and practices that Protestant Evangelicals reject: baptismal regeneration, the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the nature and practices of worship, Mary, purgatory, the role of tradition in relation to the Bible, justification and sanctification, the priesthood, and the Eucharist as sacrifice. He examines how the Fathers dealt with these matters and maintains that they were in many ways influenced by their surrounding religious culture, whether Jewish or pagan. Many times, he maintains, they did not even realize to what extent they were thus influenced and they unwittingly (or deliberately) imported alien ideas and practices into pure, Evangelical Christianity, and thus corrupted it. In this short essay a few examples will have to suffice. He criticizes Justin Martyr regarding his views on Baptism and the Eucharist. Justin uses the Greek word *photizo* [to illuminate] to describe baptism, but Guindon maintains that Justin is confusing matters. By describing baptism as spiritual regeneration and illumination, he says that Justin is attributing to baptism a power that it doesn't have. In regard to the Eucharist, he charges Justin with confusing emblems, bread and wine, with reality. Guindon states:

It is tempting to ask whether Justin reproduces what Christians held universally or whether he is innovating, introducing new ideas along mystical and philosophical lines. Clearly Justin appears to have moved away from the simplicity of the biblical doctrine. Is he calling the types by the names of what is typified? In other words, Christ's flesh and blood in heaven are typified by the emblems of bread and wine on the table of the Lord's Supper.¹⁹

Justin Martyr is often mentioned in Catholic conversion accounts as an important source regarding the doctrine and place of the Eucharist in the early church. Guindon attempts here to undercut his authority by stating that he confused matters in his doctrine.

Another major early Father, Ignatius of Antioch, is handled a bit more gingerly in regard to the Eucharist. Guindon quotes several of Ignatius's remarks on the Eucharist, and then comments: “Nothing in Ignatius' writings on the Eucharist goes against an Evangelical understanding of the Lord's Supper, as I have demonstrated. The reading and understanding of these passages clearly depend upon one's presuppositions. His language is flowery, full of images, and truthfully, could be a step in the direction of sacramentalism. It is the culture and context that will be determinative.”²⁰ The charge of “sacramentalism” is one of Guindon's most vehement arguments against the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. He considers it a corrupting influence that can be traced back to the very first century, quickly gaining ground in the earliest Fathers. For the Evangelical Guindon, history and the Fathers of the Church are subtle snares to be avoided; for the Eastern Orthodox Guindon they are to be embraced.

STEPHEN K. RAY (POPULARLY KNOWN AS STEVE RAY)

Steve Ray is a former Southern Baptist, the son of a Baptist deacon. He tells the story of his, and his wife's, conversion to the Catholic faith in his book *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997). The Church Fathers are a pervasive influence in Ray's conversion. Speaking in general of ancient Christian writings, he states:

For me, reading these ancient writings of the primitive Church was a revolutionary endeavor, especially as I was a Protestant who had never been confronted with the reality of these historical documents.

¹⁹ Guindon, 52-53.

²⁰ Guindon, 51.

It was especially enlightening for me because I had always considered these first Christians to be Evangelical like me, adhering to the same “Protestant” teachings that I held so dear. It seems that the Protestant denominations, as a whole, have been sheltered from the first centuries of the Church, considering them “Catholic history.”²¹

Ray highlights the assumptions that many, perhaps most, fundamentalist Protestants hold regarding the Church Fathers and early Christianity in general and sheds light on why some convert to the Catholic or the Eastern Orthodox Churches when they encounter these texts. Ray relates:

I approached the teachings of the Catholic Church as a cautious Evangelical; I firmly believed I would find my favorite Protestant ideas central in the writings of the Fathers. I assumed the Fathers would be devoid of Catholic doctrines and that “Catholic” corruptions had crept in like cockroaches in the night, infiltrating the primitive and pristine New Testament Church. I was in for a big surprise! These were a part of the studies that helped me span the great divide, the gapping [sic] chasm between Fundamentalist Protestantism and the Catholic Church.²²

The second section of *Crossing the Tiber* includes lengthy thematic quotations from the Fathers which are heavily annotated by Ray. An example of this is his footnote regarding Ignatius of Antioch’s *Ephesians* 20:

These are incredible and powerful words, with no ambiguity. Do we find a record of anyone chastising Ignatius for any deviation from *faith alone* or for his “overly enthusiastic exaggerations?” No, in fact he is utterly respected and emulated by all contemporary and later Christians. Representing apostolic Christianity, he was a mouthpiece for orthodox Christian teaching and practice as laid down by Jesus and the apostles.²³

In addition to the stated doctrines of the Fathers, Ray finds their silences also to be significant. In these early Christians he had expected to find confirmation of his Evangelical beliefs. “As an Evangelical anxious to disprove the Catholic Church’s dogmas, I searched in vain for the Fathers who would come to my rescue, but I found none. The more I read, the more I realized that the early Church was Catholic and did not support my Evangelical conclusions. What the Church does *not* say and write is as significant as what she *does* say and write. Silence speaks as loudly as words.”²⁴ The silence of which Ray speaks refers to the absence of patristic condemnations of doctrines such as the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the sacrificial nature of the Mass. If these doctrines were truly heretical some Fathers would have strenuously denounced them, just as Athanasius fought against Arian doctrine concerning the deity of Christ.

Since his conversion to the Catholic Church in 1994 Steve Ray has been a full-time apologist, appearing often on EWTN television and radio, publishing books and videos (especially his ten-part video series *The Footprints of God*), and serving as an official tour guide in the Holy Land.

BRUCE SULLIVAN

Bruce Sullivan is a former minister of the Church of Christ who, together with his family, converted to the Catholic Church in 1995. He tells his story in his book *Christ in His Fullness* (Zanesville, OH: CHResources,

²¹ Ray, 48.

²² Ray, 94.

²³ Ray, 219.

²⁴ Ray, 272.

2007). The Church Fathers play a prominent role in his account of his conversion. The very early witnesses of Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr and their realistic descriptions and teaching on the Eucharist made a strong impression on him. He also remarks on the views of Protestants regarding the Fathers in general:

It needs to be mentioned that when referring to the Fathers of the Church, Catholics do not pit the Fathers against the Scriptures, as some might suggest. Keep in mind that these are the Christians who were taught by the Apostles themselves or their immediate successors. Keep in mind, also, that these are the Christians who became the early martyrs whom all Christians venerate. Doesn't it make sense that we should at least consider how *they* understood the words of Scripture?²⁵

An issue that Sullivan had to confront was the identity of the true Church, specifically his own denomination's arguments about Catholic apostasy and the revival of the Church in the nineteenth-century Stone-Campbellite movement which launched the Church of Christ. All Protestant denominations presume a Catholic apostasy at one time or another, although there is no consensus as to when it was supposed to have occurred. But, such an apostasy is a given, even if the details differ. As he struggled to come to terms with his denomination's version of the Church's identity, he sought for answers in the Church Fathers. In his book he relates how his thinking changed:

It was while reading the *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* and the works of St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Justin Martyr, and St. Irenaeus of Lyons that I came face-to-face with the reality that the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church reflect the beliefs of the most ancient Christian writers on record.... While this realization was troubling to me, in some respects it also brought with it a rather unexpected, almost subconscious, sigh of relief. This was rooted in the awareness that if the beliefs of the Catholic Church could, in fact, be traced back through all the centuries of the Christian era, back even to Apostolic times, then there were no gaps in the life of the Church. Christ had established His Church, and the gates of hell have not prevailed against it (Matthew 16:18ff). It was there all along, but my prejudices and preconceived ideas had obscured it from my sight. The family of God had proven to be far more extensive than I had previously imagined.²⁶

As Steve Ray did in his book, Sullivan compiled a series of quotes from the Fathers on various topics of concern to Protestants.²⁷ As in Ray's case, these quotations show the extent of the Church Fathers' influence on him and of other converts' beliefs and decisions.

MARK SHEA

Mark Shea details the role of the Church Fathers in his conversion in *By What Authority? An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1996). Chapter 8, on tradition, begins with his comparing the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, and its implications, with the Catholic appeal to tradition. He assumed that Protestant Evangelicalism relied solely upon the Bible and that it had no need of tradition. He came to realize that it indeed had its own tradition(s) involving practices and interpretation. He approached his study of the early Church Fathers, especially of the first two centuries, with much skepticism and suspicion. He began to change his mind as he examined the Biblical teaching and practice of appointing successors to continue the Apostles' authority and work. Then he read Clement of Rome's firm statements about the formal procedure of continuing to appoint men to carry on the same work. Shea compared the Evangelical viewpoint

²⁵ Sullivan, 104-105.

²⁶ Sullivan, 120.

²⁷ Sullivan, 151-169.

about extra-Biblical traditions, such as “altar calls,” with Catholic teaching about tradition, and came to realize that he had to apply the same standard to the Catholic Church. As he tells it,

If we Evangelicals could hold a Big T extra-biblical Tradition like the canon of Scripture or the closure of public revelation to be revelation handed down from the apostles, why did I automatically assume that Clement’s, Ignatius’s, and Irenaeus’s extra-biblical traditions were anti-biblical? To be sure, they *might* be. But I had not proven this simply by asserting that these traditions were extra-biblical. I had merely assumed it (as I had once assumed that all tradition was human tradition).²⁸

Making this admission was a big step towards Shea’s accepting the Christian validity of the post-Biblical Fathers and their teachings. Shea went on to study the writings of Irenaeus, Polycarp, Papias of Hierapolis, and others, and noticed that, for example, Evangelicals based their affirmation of the identity of the authors of the Gospels on the witness of such men.

Two further major issues that vexed Shea were the Catholic teachings on Mary and the Sacrifice of the Mass. He saw these teachings as “pagan gunk,” as major instances of the “Pagan Creep” theory so prevalent in his background. But as he read the early Fathers of the first two centuries he realized that they wholeheartedly taught, without contemporary contradiction within the Church, what Protestant Evangelicals considered pagan and/or heretical. As he pondered Irenaeus’s teachings on Mary, he came to a realization:

At this, I recalled my crack about “two thousand years of pagan gunk” and realized for the first time a problem with my reasoning: men like Irenaeus, Polycarp, Ignatius, and Clement didn’t *have* two thousand years to add pagan gunk. They wrote anywhere from ten years before to ninety years after the death of the Apostle John, and often well within the lifetime of the many thousands of devoted disciples who had heard the apostles with their own ears.²⁹

Ignatius, with his teaching on the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, also influenced Shea.

Another factor that impressed Shea was the fact that these men and their hearers were willing to die for their beliefs. Since many of them were converts from paganism, it made no sense for them to embrace pagan beliefs and practices. So, Shea finally admitted: “It was beginning to look as though there was a very good reason these and many other Catholic beliefs had ‘crept into’ the Church so rapidly after John died: they crept in via the apostles themselves and been preserved in the Church’s tradition.”³⁰

After wrestling with several issues connected with tradition, Shea eventually joined the Catholic Church. He came to the conclusion that the writings of the Fathers were not anti-Biblical, though they were indeed extra-Biblical. They complemented and illumined the Bible’s meaning, and they were very close in time to the Biblical writings. Ultimately the Church Fathers played a key role in Shea’s conversion, but not before being subjected to a rigorous interrogation.

SUMMARY

The narratives featured in this article all show how ancient Christian writings influenced contemporary lives. The authors represent a significant trend of Protestant-to-Catholic conversion that has affected Christian life in

²⁸ Shea, 138.

²⁹ Shea, 147.

³⁰ Shea, 152.

the recent decades, especially in the English-speaking world. Some of them, especially Steve Ray and Mark Shea, have become prominent in conservative Catholic media apostolates, both in print and on the Internet. Alex Jones is a deacon in the Archdiocese of Detroit and has appeared on EWTN. These three are the most prominent as public figures, but regardless of their public importance in the Church, all of their narratives are representative of a manner of thinking prompted by examination of some of the earliest Fathers of the Church. The writings discussed in this article indicate some of the intellectual and spiritual struggles that these people undergo. For these authors the influence of early Christianity, especially the writings of the earliest Church Fathers, was decisive. The chief issues they wrestled with were the nature of the Eucharist (the Real Presence and sacrifice), liturgical worship, Baptism, salvation and the place of works, the priesthood, the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, and the validity of extra-Biblical tradition, especially the authority of the Church Fathers. As Protestants these issues presented stumbling blocks, and it took much intellectual struggle before they were willing to consider Catholic doctrines, let alone accept them. By examining the writings of the Church Fathers, especially those of the first through third centuries, these men decided that there is continuity of doctrine from the New Testament to the present-day Catholic Church, and this discovery played a pivotal role in their conversions.