

My church loyalties: Why I am not yet a Catholic

by [D. Stephen Long](#) in the [August 6, 2014](#) issue



Vatican City as seen from across the Tiber. Photo by [Jean-Pol Grandmont](#).

In 2005, after Benedict XVI was elected pope, I wrote an essay for the Century titled “In need of a pope?” That essay cost me a job at a Protestant evangelical institution. A Catholic friend told me at the time that I should think of that result as a gracious preemptive strike.

Since then I have repeatedly been asked, “Why are you not Catholic?”

The main reason I am not (yet) Catholic and remain a Methodist and an ordained Methodist elder is that I do not know how to become Catholic without betraying the people who taught me to love God, pray, worship, desire the Eucharist, take delight in scripture, and so on. How can I leave the people I love?

I remember my pastor, Lloyd Willert, who tended to me when I had major surgery at the age of 19 and was in a body cast for three months. He visited me and prayed with me. When I went to seminary, his wife gave me books from his library. I still cherish them.

Then there was Cleveland Tennyson, a self-educated African-Caribbean Methodist preacher whom I worked with in Honduras for a year. His sermons brought me into the presence of God in such a way that I felt you had to take off your shoes when he preached because you were standing on holy ground.

Geraldine Ingram was the first Methodist preacher I worked with in an official capacity. Her celebration of the Eucharist was beautiful and inspiring. It made me

see the incarnation in a new light.

Then there are numerous friends and family members who have asked me not to convert. How could I walk away from those who gather with me on Wednesday nights to be accountable in our discipleship, attend to Sunday's lectionary Gospel lesson, and celebrate the Lord's Supper together? Should I abandon them? It is not what I am against that keeps me Methodist; it is what I am for.

On two occasions over the past decade I decided to become Catholic and initiated the process, largely out of frustration with Protestant sentimentality. On both occasions I had to wait because I had also been asked to lead a retreat, preach or preside at a Methodist church, teach a Sunday school class, lecture to a Methodist audience, or otherwise work in a congregation. In Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*, a less than admirable whiskey-loving priest becomes holy, and possibly a saint, simply because he had too much going on to leave Mexico after a revolution ousted the Catholic Church, even though he had begun to question most of the church's teachings. I sometimes think I'm like a whiskey-loving Methodist preacher. I just never get around to leaving; I always have something to do for the Methodists, and I cannot figure out how to leave without betraying people I love.

Two things prompted that 2005 essay. First, I was moved that so many Protestant leaders felt compelled to attend John Paul II's funeral. The papacy no longer seemed to be a decisive point of contention if so many Protestants wanted to be present at the funeral mass. Second, I was moved by Benedict XVI's smile when he was presented to the world as pope. It hit me that Protestant efforts to create authority through texts, laws, and regulations lacked this humanity. So I thought out loud, without thinking of all the ramifications, about how Protestants might come to find a way to affirm the bishop of Rome and other aspects of Catholicism that once were thought to be nonnegotiable dividing lines.

How might Protestants reform Protestantism? I do not think Protestants can do so if their identity is bound up with "protest." If all that holds them together as Protestants is what they are against, then they actually depend on what they supposedly oppose for their identity rather than on what they are for. The end result of that "protest" will be solipsism or nihilism.

Of course, many Protestant conversions to Catholicism are themselves *protestant* conversions. On one occasion when I was tempted to convert to Catholicism, I did so

because I was angry at the silliness of activities like puppet-and-clown Eucharists. A friend and pastor asked me to wait one year to make sure that I was not converting because of what I was protesting against. Wouldn't such a conversion be one more act of protest? It was good Ignatian counsel. I waited the year and then went through spiritual direction with a Jesuit to discern whether I should convert. He did not think I was ready.

How thorough is a Protestant conversion to Catholicism if the convert harbors an animus toward Protestantism that violates Roman Catholic teaching? In my 2005 essay I quoted the Catholic catechism to remind Protestants that the Roman Catholic Church does not consider Protestants to be heretics, apostates, or non-Christians: "I would not deny that Protestants already share to an extent in the Catholic unity. In fact, this is the official teaching of the Catholic Church itself. Its catechism states that 'one cannot charge with the sin of separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers.' Those of us who came to love God through these separated communions are correct to declare our faith in the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.'" So even on Catholic grounds, I am not considered as a Protestant to be protesting against the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

I am willing to concede, as Roman Catholicism states, that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church "subsists" in it. That may be too much for many Protestants, but it is not for me. I am even willing to agree that whatever is found of faith in the "separated communions" has as its cause—in some mysterious sense—in the unity Catholicism has maintained. But I cannot conclude that by remaining Methodist I am protesting against the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In fact, it is my love for and faith in that church that keeps me Methodist.

The "counter" identities that began in the 16th century have damaged Christian witness and brought God's judgment of secularity against us. But God has not seen fit simply to do away with Protestants or take the fruit and gifts of the Spirit from us, so it will not suffice simply for Protestants to cease to exist, which I fear seems to be some Catholic converts' (perhaps Protestant?) solution. I am not a Methodist because I am in protest. I want to find a way forward without having to replay the countermeasures of the 16th century.

I do think the church stands in need of constant reform. This is not a Protestant-versus-Catholic position. In fact, Catholics have often been better at reform than Protestants, as Karl Barth acknowledged after Vatican II. So let me directly state what I do find troubling in Catholicism. None of this is so troubling that it would keep me from embracing Catholicism, because I know none of it identifies the whole or breadth of the Catholic faith; nor do I think that similar, if not deeper, problems cannot be found in Protestantism.

Nevertheless, I find the absence of women in leadership deeply problematic. I sometimes wish Catholic bishops would at least run some of their statements past their mothers or sisters before releasing them to the public. This would help to avoid public relations gaffes that make it look like the Catholic Church has a “war on women” (in fact, I don’t think Catholicism has any such intention).

I support women’s ordination. I don’t have any grand theory about it; I have simply seen it. I grew up with women preachers whose sermons bore the fruit of the Holy Spirit. They bring a unique perspective to the church that I think the church lacks if it denies them the exercise of their gifts. I think it matters that women were the first proclaimers of the resurrection and that the first person to make God present in his materiality was Jesus’ mother.

Second, I am concerned about abuses of authority and power that occur and have occurred in Roman Catholicism. Who could possibly deny this? Here, of course, I would find an ally in the Orthodox Church, which would question any easy Catholic answer as to where the true catholic church resides. I don’t think this problem has to do with the papacy per se or the primacy of the bishop of Rome. But I am concerned about habits of power that prompt Roman Catholic leadership toward secrecy or to use the instruments of government to impose a way of life that Catholic laypeople themselves refuse to adopt.

Let me give an example of the latter. I largely support, with some qualifications, the Affordable Care Act. Providing health care for everyone seems to me to be fulfilling a command Jesus gave to us to love our neighbor. I do not recognize abortion or contraception as having to do with health care. I want Catholic institutions to be allowed to opt out of any mandatory requirements. However, that Catholic (and Protestant) leaders have made this a question of persecution is dishonest. Many Catholic institutions were already providing contraceptive options for their employees prior to the Affordable Care Act—a fact that is widely known.

Rather than taking on the federal government, Catholic leadership (bishops, theologians, laity) would have been more truthful if they said to the Catholic people: Artificial contraception is a question of mortal sin. We refuse to admit to the Eucharist or receive money from any Catholic who violates this teaching. We will take the name “Catholic” away from every institution already involved in this practice.

It’s not that I think Catholic leaders should do this; it would be imprudent. I like the fact that Catholicism has an earthy paganism to it that can incorporate all kinds of messiness into its life. But if Catholic leaders are going to howl about persecution because they are asked to do something by the federal government that Catholic people are already doing, then their witness rings hollow. I worry about a Catholic defensiveness that finds persecution when its moral teachings are not honored or implemented by governmental power but looks the other way when Catholic laypeople do not abide by them.

Third, I struggle to affirm Catholic teaching on contraception. I served as a pastor in Honduras in a village with many Catholics and Methodists. A Catholic priest from Miami would fly in every other month, drive to the Catholic church in his Mercedes, unlock the church, hold mass, lock the building, and drive off. He was one of those priests who declared the “cafeteria was closed” when it came to matters of church teaching. I remember a poor Catholic woman in her early thirties who gave birth to her tenth child on a dirt path on her way to the clinic my wife operated. She was faithful to the church, but there was no one there to attend to her, to help her with her poverty, or teach her natural family planning.

I also recall a conversation I once had with a young priest over dinner. He was going on and on about how everything in Western society declined once contraception was permitted. (I was thinking to myself: So contraception is the defining sin—not slavery, genocide, Jim Crow laws, total warfare, racism, patriarchy?) I finally confessed to him that I had been married for two decades, that I did not follow Catholic teaching, and that I didn’t think my marriage embodied any of the consequences he thought inevitable from failing to do so. He turned to me and said, “Your marriage lacks the fullness it could otherwise have.” I admit I was offended and wondered how he could make such a snap judgment without knowing me, my wife, or our biological realities.

I agree with Protestant ethicist Paul Ramsey that a marriage must be open to children or it is not a fulfillment of the Christian vocation to marriage. I teach this view when I do marital counseling. However, I do not think every act of sexual intercourse has to be open to the propagation of children. On this point I don't think I differ that far from Catholic teaching. "Natural family planning" is itself a natural contraceptive practice that requires certain artificial instruments for its employment (thermometers, calendars, etc.). It is unclear to me that it bears a different intentionality from certain other forms of "artificial" contraception. So if this teaching is necessary for someone to be Catholic, I am not Catholic.

I would express one more concern I have about Catholic teaching. I address ethical issues from a christological perspective more than a natural one. Many Catholic colleagues tell me this is a Protestant position. I used to argue with them, but now I have come to accept their criticism. I often worry that Catholic theologians can say "nature" much more easily than they can say "Jesus," and I think this is tied up with my three concerns noted above. Those concerns are not unique to Catholicism. Bad practice by Catholic priests does not invalidate all Catholicism any more than bad practice by Protestant ministers invalidates all of Protestantism.

Every good Protestant Christian must be willing to return to Rome for the sake of the unity of the church once the "Reformation" is over. The Reformation should always be understood as a temporary measure. Perhaps the time for reunion will come in my lifetime. In the meantime, those individuals who return to Rome prior to that day must not deepen the divide and therefore bear witness against that future reunion.

How Catholics receive Protestant converts (and vice versa) will have an effect on this effort. If converts are seen as booty in a cultural war, then they are not being faithfully received. One of my close friends, my son's godmother, recently left the Methodists and became Catholic. I was surprised because she had feminist commitments—but she found a place in Catholicism where those commitments were honored. I am pleased she found a home and rejoice with her. A Catholic friend wrote to her and said, "Welcome home. Sorry we left the house in such a mess."

On the day we are reconciled, I hope the Catholic Church will welcome us with this kind of humility.