

Evangelical society president quits, returns to Catholicism: Beckwith returns to the faith of his youth

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A Baylor University scholar serving this year as president of the Evangelical Theological Society shocked colleagues by returning to the Catholic faith of his youth and college years.

Francis Beckwith, associate professor of church-state studies at Baylor, announced last month on his Internet blog that he was resigning as president of the 4,100-member Evangelical Theological Society. He resigned as an ETS member two days later.

“My work in philosophy, ethics and theology has always been Catholic- friendly, but I would have never predicted that I would return to the church, for there seemed to me too many theological and ecclesiastical issues that appeared insurmountable,” Beckwith wrote in the May 5 posting on his “Right Reason” blog.

In his announcement, Beckwith said he had recently read the writings of the early church fathers and found Christianity’s roots to be “more Catholic than Protestant.” He became convinced that he should reunite with the Catholic faith, in which he had been baptized and confirmed and received communion as a youth.

Beckwith, noted for his arguments against abortion and in favor of “intelligent design,” has drawn protests from moderate Baptists for his questioning of church-state separation. He served as associate director of Baylor’s J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies from 2003 to early 2007, despite opposition from descendants of the institute’s namesake. His application for tenure at Baylor was first denied but granted on appeal.

The choice made by Beckwith, 46, took his academic colleagues by surprise in the theologically conservative organization. “It was not at all anticipated or expected,”

said Darrell Bock, a New Testament professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and a former ETS president. Bock and another ex-ETS president, Craig Blaising, said that they consider Beckwith to be a friend but that it no longer makes theological sense for him to be a member of the scholarly association.

Beckwith explained in his blog that both he and his wife, Frankie, a Presbyterian, decided in late March to join the Catholic Church. He had grappled with when to return to the church and “asked the Lord to provide to me clear direction.”

In mid-April, his teenage nephew called and asked him to be his sponsor at his confirmation in mid-May. That prompted Beckwith to take the steps necessary for a public rejoining of the Catholic Church on April 28.

Prior to joining evangelical circles, Beckwith had attended Catholic elementary and high schools and received two advanced degrees from Fordham University, a Jesuit school in New York. *-Religion News Service*