

Conversion: The goal of ecumenism

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

Jason Byassee's account of [six Protestant theologians](#) who made the journey to the Roman Catholic Church made me reflect on my own experience of Catholicism. My Presbyterian and Methodist ancestors viewed Rome with suspicion and thinly veiled hostility, though they maintained cordial friendships with individual Catholics. My grandmother was fairly certain that there was a Roman Catholic conspiracy to take over the world. My father clenched his teeth when he said the part of the creed about believing in the holy catholic church.

But in my own life and ministry I have come to appreciate the deep spirituality of Roman Catholic priests and their loyalty to a visible historical institution, and to appreciate as well the Catholic practice of confession, which Presbyterians thinly replicate in a weekly corporate prayer resisted by many who do not think they need to confess. And what mainline Protestant hasn't, on occasion at least, been a little envious of the Catholics' authoritative decision-making process?

I once had lunch with a Catholic priest and a Methodist pastor while I was in the midst of one of the regular Presbyterian public battles over sexuality, in which people were saying mean things about one another and threatening to leave the church. "Why don't your churches seem to argue about these matters as we do?" I asked. My Methodist friend said the difference was that his church gathered nationally every four years, so the anger had a chance to dissipate. My Catholic colleague said he thought the difference was that in his church there is an ancient tradition of ignoring headquarters.

Protestant-Catholic issues regularly present themselves in pastoral life. Since restrictions and warnings about what used to be called mixed marriages have largely disappeared, one often encounters couples who have decided to honor both ecclesiastical traditions. They may attend Catholic mass one week and a Presbyterian service the next. Something like ecumenical baptism also happens fairly regularly, though probably without official sanction: a Protestant minister will participate in the sacrament in a Roman Catholic church. My own family contains

grandchildren baptized in a Presbyterian church who participate in both a Catholic parish and a Presbyterian congregation. Are they Catholics or Presbyterians? I think the answer is yes.

That's why I like Cardinal Walter Kasper's comment that the goal of ecumenical conversation is not conversion to one church but deeper conversion to Christ, and that it is through that conversion that "we move closer to one another."