

Going Catholic: Six journeys to Rome

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

When I ran into a friend from divinity school recently, we asked each other the normal catch-up questions. Then, in the same casual tone, she said, “So are you going to become Catholic?”

It’s not that odd a question these days in theological circles. Last year a string of theologians left their Protestant denominations for the church of Rome. The list includes three Lutherans—Reinhard Hütter and Bruce Marshall, theologians at Methodist seminaries (Duke and Southern Methodist), and Mickey Mattox, a Luther scholar at Marquette; two Anglicans—Rusty Reno of Creighton and Douglas Farrow of McGill University; and a Mennonite—Gerald Schlabach of St. Thomas University.

All six all have strong connections to mainline institutions, and several were involved in official ecumenical conversation at high levels. They are also relatively young, poised to influence students and congregations for several decades. They more or less fit the description “postliberal” in that they accept such mainline practices as historical criticism and women’s ordination while wanting the church to exhibit more robust dogmatic commitments. All of them embrace what Mattox describes as an “evangelical, catholic and orthodox” vision of the church. They could not see a way to be all those things within mainline denominations.

Rusty Reno, who studied with George Lindbeck at Yale, is best known for his book *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Brazos). He argued that mainline churches like the U.S. Episcopal Church are in disarray because of their inattention to church teaching and scripture and because they accept modernity’s relegation of religion to the private realm of feeling. But in making this argument in 2002, Reno maintained that orthodox believers should not leave their home churches. The proper scriptural response to living in ruins, he said, is to follow the example of Nehemiah, who dedicated himself to living in a devastated city. To flee institutions in search of something supposedly better elsewhere would be to simply replicate the modern tendency to favor a posture of ironic distance over one of dogged commitment.

In a February 2005 article in *First Things*, aptly titled “Out of the Ruins,” Reno announced that he had changed his mind. He had left the denomination that he had long seen as a “smugly self-satisfied member of the liberal Protestant club.” What had changed? Reno writes that his defense of staying in the Episcopal Church had become more a theory to him than a full-blooded commitment. And he had come to agree with John Henry Newman, the archetype for any Anglican converting to Rome, that the Anglican *via media*, its prizing of the middle path between extremes, is a mistake. After all, in the fourth century it was the backers of the *homoiousion* term in the Nicene Creed who were the *via media* party, with the claim that Christ became God. The backers of *homoousion*, with their claim that Christ is eternally God, were the extremists—though eventually the church determined them to be right.

More important, Reno wrote, his feelings had changed. “I may have wanted to return to the ruins of the Church with Nehemiah’s devotion, but in reality I was thinking bitter thoughts as I sat in my pew. The most innocuous diversions from the Prayer Book made me angry. The sermons of my quite faithful rector were subjected to an uncharitable scrutiny. . . . The good people of my parish lost their individuality and were absorbed into my mental picture of ‘Episcopalians,’ people to whom I would be heroically but lovelessly loyal.”

It’s unclear how Reno made this move without indulging the modernist temptations—listening to one’s feelings, being impatient with institutions, believing things are better elsewhere—that he describes so well in *In the Ruins*. He claims that having taught at a liberal Jesuit school, Creighton, he is “not naive about how insouciant about orthodoxy priests can be.” In an allusion to recent Catholic sexual-abuse scandals he says simply, “I do read newspapers.” But he does not fully explain how the Roman Catholic Church is any less “in the ruins” than the church he has left behind.

Mickey Mattox, trained at Duke, served as a consultant to the Lutheran World Federation in dialogues with the Orthodox and the Anglicans. He credits the work of Jaroslav Pelikan and Richard John Neuhaus (Lutherans who converted to Orthodoxy and Catholicism, respectively), among others, for making him both “evangelical and catholic.” In a letter to friends and family upon his conversion, Mattox, previously a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, wrote that “the pull” of Catholicism was stronger than “the push” away from Lutheranism. Yet he worries that “the Lutheran center no longer holds, as insistent voices from the left and right

dilute our catholic liturgical, catechetical and theological traditions to much the same effect.” As for the pull, he wrote: “We as a family want to venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary, and to unite our prayers with and to the holy martyrs and saints. We want the holy icons, the rosaries, the religious orders, yes the relics too . . . and to practice and experience the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic meal while retaining the bond of love and fellowship in communion with the bishop of Rome.”

Mattox also has an argument particular to the Lutheran-Catholic conversation. He thinks the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) should have worked. Once both Catholics and Lutherans concluded that they have no substantial disagreements on the doctrine of justification—the doctrine on which Lutherans have long said the church stands or falls—then there is no reason why they should not reunite under the bishop of Rome. Mattox thinks the problem lies with the ELCA: “There is an institutional intransigence, I believe, on our Lutheran side, and a cultural captivity to hyper-Protestant ways of understanding the church that stymies even the best efforts to overcome the visible breach of the sixteenth century.”

Bruce Marshall held a similar vision of evangelical and catholic Lutheranism that he caught while studying with Lindbeck at Yale, a vision in which the Reformation is viewed as an attempt to restore genuine catholicity to the church. He has written widely on the Trinity, on Aquinas and Luther, and on the church’s relationship with Israel. He was also involved in Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue.

Marshall says he long ago came to the conclusion that “there is no doctrinal reason why a Christian of the Augsburg Confession cannot be a Roman Catholic.” So there was no doctrinal change of mind needed for his reception into the Catholic Church. He admits that this evangelical and catholic vision of the Lutheran church is “a minority position”—indeed, with Mattox, Marshall and Hütter converting, it is even more so. As with Mattox, the Catholic “extras” were not a barrier to conversion, but a bonus: “I would rather—far rather—live with the possibility of excess that accompanies Catholic understanding of Mary and the Church’s teaching authority than with the complete absence of the former—and, it now generally seems, of the latter—in Protestantism.”

He insists there was no “push” factor for him: “If disenchantment with my denomination had been the decisive issue, I would have stayed where I was.” Indeed, he says, “I could not see that I had any right to leave the community in which I was baptized, in which I learned to believe the catholic faith from the heart,

and in which I had my theological vocation.”

After a pause he adds, “except that right which Christ alone can give—and did.” He clarifies that “entry into the Roman Catholic Church was Christ’s way of drawing me closer to himself, and mercifully granting me the fulfillment of my baptismal vocation.” He adds that his wife’s decision to foreswear the Anglican ordination she had been seeking was critical (in all of these cases family matters are crucial, idiosyncratic, and difficult to talk about on the record).

Reinhard Hütter is even more reticent to speak about himself. He was educated at Erlangen in his native Germany before teaching theological ethics at the Lutheran Theological School in Chicago and then systematic theology at Duke. The church has long been central to Hütter’s theological vision, and he has called himself a member of the “Catholic church of the Augsburg Confession.” In writing and teaching he has used what Luther called the seven marks of the church—preaching, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, ordination, catechesis and discipleship—to help discern order amid the chaos of divided church life. Hütter calls these the “constitutive practices” of the church that allow us to glimpse the Spirit’s presence and work.

Hütter has written extensively about the work of Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas on the one hand, and on the Roman Catholic moral and dogmatic tradition on the other—especially on papal encyclicals. It seems that the appeal of the latter finally won the day. In a forthcoming essay on “The Christian Life” for the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, Hütter focuses on the classic disagreement between Protestants and Catholics over the nature of the law and the freedom of the will. Are humans free to do the good, as Erasmus of Rotterdam insisted in his famous argument with Luther (and as liberal Protestants today maintain), or is it necessary for God to override our sinful nature and enable us to do the good that we do (as per more classic Lutheranism)?

In Hütter’s view, the alternatives were wrongly stated by Luther and Erasmus, and the dispute was actually solved beforehand by Thomas Aquinas, who manages to capture the strength of both positions while avoiding their weaknesses. For Aquinas, God’s transcendence is such that God’s action is never in competition with human action—humans can act with complete freedom, yet God’s sovereignty is not compromised. Hütter says that in Catholic theology the Holy Spirit “affects the human being tangibly, first and foremost by way of the sacraments—in ways that . . .

. constitute a journey toward the goal of perfect union in charity with the blessed Trinity.”

It was as a Lutheran that Hütter developed his theology of the church and his appreciation of Aquinas. Was a conversion necessary? Hütter has always been interested in the inseparability of ideas and practices, so perhaps it is not surprising that his deep appreciation for Catholic theology and practice became a way into the Catholic Church itself.

None of the figures mentioned so far have directly addressed the churches’ various tumults over homosexuality in recent years. Douglas Farrow has. He was a strong opponent of the decision by the Anglican Church of Canada to bless same-sex unions. He criticized the Anglican Church’s recent Windsor Report and its effort to navigate a middle ground on the homosexuality question among Anglicans, insisting that a definitive decision on homosexuality “may be the one process that really matters.” Farrow also opposed Canada’s move to permit same-sex marriage on a national level. Farrow testified before a Canadian parliamentary committee, arguing that a vote for the proposal to allow gay marriage was “in fact a vote for tyranny” and, ratcheting up the religious rhetoric, that the proposal “has ten horns on its head.”

But Farrow is not simply a conservative malcontent. He has written that the description *conservative evangelical* is an oxymoron—for the gospel upsets conventional notions of morality, it does not conserve them. He has chastised conservative Christians for merely playing chaplain to the conservative subculture. He is also a renowned theologian, who did his doctoral work at King’s College in London and taught at Regent University in Vancouver before coming to McGill. His book *Ascension and Ecclesia* (T&T Clark) has been hailed as an important treatise on Jesus’ ascension. Ellen Charry of Princeton called it “nothing less than a theological breakthrough.”

Farrow’s rationale for his claims about homosexuality are more interesting than mere culture-war rehash. He asks why the government, in permitting gay marriage, felt the need to promise religious groups that they would remain free to “refuse to perform marriages that are not in accordance with their religious beliefs.” Just by raising the issue, Farrow suggested, the state was indicating that it could, if it wished, require ministers to perform rites against their will. “What has happened in Canada that suddenly we are forced to contemplate such a thing?”

Theologically, Farrow takes issue with the Anglican proposal to “affirm the integrity and sanctity of committed adult same-sex relationships,” for the wording suggests that persons can be “already pleasing to God, requiring no redemption in Christ.” Such marginalization of Christ’s redemptive work in favor of approval of what people innately “are” would give up “what cannot be conceded without denying the gospel itself.” Finally, Farrow wrote in *First Things* about the oddity of the Anglican primates criticizing conservatives for poaching on the dioceses of liberal bishops in forming the Anglican Mission in America—a conservative network of parishes that have defected from the EC-USA to submit to mostly African primates. For is not Anglican existence in a place like Montreal (where Farrow teaches) a relic of a previous poaching effort into Roman Catholic land? “If Episcopal disunity and competition is wrong between Anglicans, it is wrong full stop.” Farrow concluded that essay of January 2005 with a hint of his pending departure: “Perhaps the crew of the good ship Anglican needs to put in at the nearest Roman harbor.”

Unlike the other converts, Gerald Schlabach does not come from a magisterial Protestant tradition of state churches—though some other Anabaptists, like Yoder, have argued that the Mennonites also pursue a catholic (small “c”) vision of the church. Also unlike the others, he studied at a Catholic institution (Notre Dame). He has written widely in church history and theology, especially on Augustine. In a statement about his reception into the Catholic Church posted on his personal Web site, Schlabach insists he is a “Mennonite Catholic”—before, he had been a “Catholic Mennonite.” He refers to his experience with Bridgefolk, a Catholic-Mennonite dialogue. He affirms the gifts of the Mennonite tradition of enduring persecution and speaking out for nonviolence when the rest of the church is too cozy with imperial power. He says, “God always intends such witness to help transform the whole (catholic) body, not to cement an eternal split.”

Like Mattox, Schlabach worries that Protestant churches have become ends in themselves rather than reform movements dedicated to the church universal. Schlabach sees the Catholic Church as the best hope for a reunion of “liberal” and “conservative,” “protestant” and “catholic” visions of the church: “Imagine a church . . . that could not sing without feeding the poor, nor feed the poor without nourishment from the Eucharist, nor pass the peace without living peaceably in the world, nor be peacemakers without depending on prayer, nor pray without joining in robust song.”

What do these conversions mean? Perhaps nothing beyond the significance of these six personal journeys. Yet for each of these stories there are many similar ones involving graduate students and lesser-known theologians.

Carl Braaten, one of the key figures in the “evangelical catholic” movement and founder of the journals *Dialog* and *Pro Ecclesia*, recently wrote an open letter to the ELCA’s presiding bishop in which he cited some of these conversions and lamented a “brain drain” in the church. He contended that the ELCA is driving out its best and brightest theologians—not because it is too Lutheran, but because it has become just another “liberal Protestant denomination.” By *liberal* Braaten means the theological liberalism that Karl Barth spoke of as a “heresy”—the view that Christian language for God represents universal human feeling writ large on the cosmos rather than God’s address to humanity in a Word that disrupts preexisting categories. Braaten concluded that all that is left of the Lutheran heritage in the ELCA is the “aroma of an empty bottle.”

Another engaged observer of these conversions is Ephraim Radner, an Episcopal priest in Colorado (and another student of Lindbeck’s) who has been just as critical of the mainline church as Braaten or Reno. He more explicitly takes up the arguments of liberals within the mainline church who suggest that conservative histrionics over the inclusion of homosexuals are no different from the resistance to racial or gender inclusiveness or to revision to the Book of Common Prayer (indeed, conservatives on the issue of homosexuality are in some regrettable company in recent history). The issue of homosexuality is different, Radner insists. He says that the Episcopal Church’s “revisionary teachings on sexual behavior is unique in our church’s development,” and that appeals to “justice” and “love” over the particular and defined words and actions of scripture suggest that a general principle has become more important than the lordship of Christ. He also laments liberals’ “chilling” indifference to the protests of more conservative Anglicans in the Third World.

But Radner has also developed an argument for why it is important to stay in what he sees as a deeply flawed church. “God has allowed us to come to faith and to practice our faith within divided Christian communities so that, forced to follow Jesus where we have been placed, we might learn repentance.” Radner offers a figural scriptural argument: though Israel was divided because of human sin and divine punishment, “No Jew . . . is ever asked by God to ‘choose’ between Israel and Judah.” Jewish writers of scripture did not even consider such a move—rather they

stayed where they were and tried to help the people be more faithful to the law of the Lord.

Radner sharpens this argument with a christological coup de grace: in the face of infidelity, Jesus himself stays put and dies for his enemies. He does not flee for greener pastures. “It is facile and ultimately misleading for orthodox Christians to identify, face, and respond to their churches’ errors by saying ‘repudiate and separate’ . . . for the simple reason that this is not the shape of Israel’s history—which must ultimately be our own—because it is not the shape of Jesus’ own life. There is no other standard.”

A significant figure hovering over this discussion is Hütter’s Duke colleague Stanley Hauerwas, who over the years has encouraged his students to engage Catholic theology and the teachings of the Catholic magisterium. “When John Paul II confessed the sin of the Reformation on the part of Catholicism, I thought, ‘That’s really significant—who would do that in Protestantism?’” He suggests that perhaps the Reformation *worked*—Catholics now hear more scripture in mass and in preaching than do many Protestants. And with its teaching office, monastic orders and other practices, Catholics have gifts that Protestants lack: “Catholicism has maintained the integrity of being the church of the poor in a way that we Protestants don’t have a clue about.”

So why not join the Catholics? His answer is partly personal. While raising his son, Hauerwas found that the Methodists were good at shaping young people in faith. He is also prefers loyalty to one’s church of origin: “I feel like you need to stay with the people that harmed you.” At the theological level, Hauerwas cites the remark by Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican’s chief ecumenical officer, that “the ecumenical aim is not a simple return of the other into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church nor the conversion of individuals, even if this must obviously be mutually acknowledged when based on conscience. In the ecumenical movement the question is conversion to Christ. In him we move closer to one another.” Hauerwas hopes that his work contributes to a catholic unity that all Christians should seek. He is sympathetic with friends and students who become Catholic, but at the same time he wants to say to them, “Don’t do it. We need you!”

These converts have all been captivated by a catholic vision of the church—a vision they have come to believe is best realized in the Catholic Church. Braaten worries that “the very persons who ought to be troubled by this phenomenon will say to themselves (perhaps not out loud), ‘good riddance, we won’t be bothered by those

dissenting voices anymore. We wish more of their ilk will leave.” A more widespread response might be that genuine catholicity is best promoted by the approach that Hauerwas describes, in which one refuses to despair over the church of one’s baptism, believing that the Spirit can always renew the church. Still others might argue that a more influential and long-term movement in the church catholic is the trend of people leaving the Catholic Church because it will not ordain women or allow priests to marry. Nevertheless, for those in mainline churches these converts raise in a pointed way the question of what it means to be evangelical, catholic and orthodox.