

Roman Roundtrip

Review by Christopher A. Castaldo

Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic

Francis J. Beckwith

Brazos Press, 2009

144 pp., \$14.99

The immediate outburst of comments piled beneath Francis Beckwith's blog post was heated and profuse. They came after Beckwith explained why he had returned to the Catholic Church of his youth and therefore felt it was prudent to resign from his position as president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS).

Beckwith is professor of philosophy and church-state studies at Baylor University. He has authored several books, most of which deal with issues of apologetics, bioethics, jurisprudence, and philosophy. But *Return to Rome* is different, as Beckwith states in his introduction:

What I hope to offer here is an account of a personal journey that focuses on my own internal conversation, or struggle, between the Protestant theology I embraced during most of my adult life and what I've come to think of as my Catholic constitution, which I have to believe had always been there....It is not meant to be an apologetic for Catholicism or an autobiography in the strict sense.

It is my hope that this book may effectively, with grace and charity, communicate to my fellow Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, an understanding of the reasons and internal deliberations that culminated in my departure from and eventual return to the Catholic Church (15-16).

The first five chapters of *Return to Rome* are full of warm and personable accounts of Beckwith's Catholic upbringing. Stories of Grandma Guido and Uncle Fiore will make you laugh, even if you're not Italian. He leads readers through his religious pilgrimage from Post Vatican II parish life, to a Catholic charismatic Bible study, movement toward Protestantism in 1979, a Ph.D. in Philosophy at Fordham, and eventually to Baylor.

The subtitle "*Confessions*" of an Evangelical Catholic is more than a rhetorical flourish. Like Augustine, Beckwith's faith in Jesus was enlivened as an adult. The nature of this faith was fresh, personal, and reasonable. From early on, Beckwith's mentors taught him that faith and reason were in harmony (14). These lessons laid the groundwork for his vocation as a Christian scholar and for his "Evangelical Catholic" faith.

Although Beckwith says in his introduction that the book is "not meant to be an apologetic for Catholicism," he leans in this direction in the final two chapters:

Although it had become clear to me that the Church Fathers were far more Catholic than they were Protestant, I needed to be convinced that their views on justification were consistent with

scripture. I also had to be convinced that the “Catholic practices” that were impediments for me—the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the teaching authority of the Church (including apostolic succession and the primacy of the Pope), and Penance—were legitimate Christian beliefs and practices with long orthodox histories. It did not take long to be persuaded (96).

This notion that the Church Fathers appear more Catholic than Protestant was crucial to Beckwith’s return to Rome. It is one of four factors he cites. The other three are his “Catholic constitution” (15), the greater “explanatory power” of Catholic dogma (97), and a desire for “a deeper spiritual life” (129).

Usually when Catholics attempt to refute Protestant doctrine they start with Scripture Alone and then move onto Justification by Faith Alone. But Beckwith does it the other way around, addressing justification in chapter six, and Scripture in seven.

Central to Beckwith’s argument against justification is his critique of “methodological Protestantism” (96)—imposing forensic categories so broadly that they function as an interpretive lens. He suggests that this approach is so pervasive that it exercises tyrannical control over the Protestant reading of Scripture. Beckwith makes his case as well as any Catholic apologist, but not much differently.

Beckwith’s argument in chapter seven is more significant because Protestant commitment to Scripture Alone marks a fundamental difference from Catholics. He presents his case as a response to the press release issued by the ETS Executive Committee following his resignation. The statement asserted that “Confessional Catholicism... sets forth a more expansive view of verbal, infallible revelation,” and therefore doesn’t conform to the ETS doctrinal statement. Beckwith disagrees, and in nine pages tries to convince readers that the Executive Committee should grant Catholics membership in the Society. The burden of his case rests on whether the minimalist doctrinal statement of the ETS (a mere two sentences) can accommodate the Catholic canon and Roman Magisterium. It’s a tough sell.

Return to Rome culminates in Beckwith returning to the congenial tone of previous chapters. He concludes with a poignant quote from John Henry Cardinal Newman which summarizes Beckwith’s religious journey. It describes a boat that has weathered a rough ocean storm before reaching its port. For Beckwith, the port happens to be the same one from which his voyage began: Rome.

If I may borrow Newman’s nautical metaphor, some readers will find Beckwith’s journey interesting, a few exhilarating, and others will perhaps get nauseous. Regardless, everyone can benefit from it. As with books from previous converts to Rome, from the 19th-century Newman to Tom Howard a generation ago, *Return to Rome* encourages all to reflect more deeply on how to give a thoughtful answer for the hope within us.

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