

Relinquishing the Principle of Private Judgment in Matters of Divine Truth: A Protestant Theologian's Journey into the Catholic Church*

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“I BELIEVE and profess all that the Holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.” On December 28, 2004, the Feast of the Holy Innocents, after the profession of the Nicene Creed, my wife and I spoke these words to the Catholic priest and the faithful gathered at what would momentarily afterwards be our first Eucharist. We were about to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church and receive the sacrament of confirmation. I vividly remember the strong sense of joy, awe, and conviction with which I spoke these words: joy, because after a long quest I had reached the goal; awe, because I sensed that embracing the faith of the Church was like embarking on a borderless ocean of truth with unfathomable depths; conviction, because I made an act of assent about which I was certain after much theological searching, probing, and reflecting. And it was precisely this long theological journey that made me keenly aware on this Feast of the Holy Innocents in 2004 of the two essential features that are comprised in the speech act of saying: “I believe and profess all that the Holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God.”

The first essential feature is an act of intentional assent to the Church's teaching and simultaneously a surrender to the Church's judgment in matters of divine truth; and the second feature, enclosed in the first, is an act of equally intentional renunciation. By assenting to the divine truth

* Originally delivered in Raleigh, North Carolina, at the Ignited By Truth Catholic Conference, February 26, 2011.

as believed, taught, and proclaimed by the Catholic Church, I renounced myself as the supreme and final court of deciding matters of divine truth.

In what follows I will call this act of deciding, this individual arbitration and adjudication of matters of divine truth, the *principle of private judgment*.¹ But there is no renunciation without a prior affirmation. As the thunder-clap follows upon the flash of lightning, renouncing the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth follows upon the act of surrendering to the judgment of the Church. It follows upon accepting all that the Church proposes and teaches to be revealed by God, explicitly and implicitly. And it follows, last but not least, upon accepting the magisterium of the Catholic Church to be the infallible, divinely created and ordained instrument of communicating, expounding, defining, and defending the divine truth.

It took me another almost seven years as a Catholic-theologian-in-the-making to come to understand that this intentional assent and surrender are properties of the fullness of the one “divine faith” which is a gift of grace.² Believing the one, holy, and catholic Church to be God’s infallible instrument of conveying divine truth, “the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15; RSV), and surrendering to her judgment in matters of divine truth are intrinsic and indispensable features of the fullness of the one divine faith, that is, the Catholic faith.

However, I arrived at this crucial theological insight quite some time after I had reached the end of my quest for the fullness of the Catholic faith. What stood at the beginning of this quest was the slow but sure realization that the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth,

¹ *Nota bene*: It is not only legitimate, but unavoidable, to use private judgment in *penultimate* matters that involve the use of the virtue of prudence in choosing particular means in order to achieve specific ends. In *ultimate* matters of divinely revealed truth, to exercise private judgment in principle is nothing but the intentional strategy of avoiding the need to submit to the authority of the divine truth in its fullness and to the authority of the divinely instituted infallible instrument of proclaiming, defining, and defending this truth.

² Vatican I, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, “*Dei Filius*,” chapter 3, “On faith”: “And so faith in itself, even though it may not work through charity, is a gift of God, and its operation is a work belonging to the order of salvation, in that a person yields true obedience to God himself when he accepts and collaborates with his grace which he could have rejected. Wherefore, by divine and catholic faith all those things are to be believed which are contained in the word of God as found in scripture and tradition, and which are proposed by the church as matters to be believed as divinely revealed, whether by her solemn judgment or in her ordinary and universal magisterium” (Norman P. Tanner, S.J., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. II [London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990], 807).

and hence in matters of the faith, is a burden and a bane inescapably embedded in all versions of Protestantism. And what sent me eventually on the road to the Catholic Church was my increasing realization that as a Protestant theologian I could not escape from abiding by the principle of private judgment. Because I am narrating the journey of a theologian into the Catholic Church, it does not come as a surprise that my story has a theological plot: the more I understood the principle of private judgment as the hidden center of my existence as a Protestant theologian, the more strongly was I drawn to the faith of the Catholic Church.

Many other factors, for sure, were contributing to my finding my way into the full communion of the Catholic Church, but none of them were sufficient reasons on their own. I could speak about growing up in Germany as part of a sizable Lutheran minority in a largely Catholic area graced by a beautiful countryside that is still soaked with the signs of Catholic piety. I could speak about my youth in a valley framed by the most gorgeous Baroque churches, with the Benedictines, who long ago brought the faith to the area, on one side and, on the other, the Cistercians who cultivated the wilderness. I could speak about an important journey to Rome after having graduated from high school; about an even more important visit to the ecumenical community of Taizé as a college student, and about two memorable visits to a famous Benedictine monastery as a university student. I could speak about regular encounters with Catholic theologians during my years of teaching Lutheran ethics in Chicago; of my encounter with the work of Thomas Aquinas; and of visiting the Easter vigils of a most remarkable Catholic parish in Hyde Park, Chicago, three minutes walking distance from our apartment.

All of this contributed, but in the end was not sufficient and decisive. For me, as a theologian, the crisis that sent me onto my theological quest had to come from the very heart of theology itself. Three theological areas turned out to come together and form the critical mass of the catalyst: first, moral theology; second, justification, church, and Eucharist; and third, the question of an incontrovertibly authoritative and, indeed, infallible magisterium. In each one of these areas I came to understand the principle of private judgment to be a reality as inescapable as it was detrimental for me as a Protestant theologian, a principle that made it impossible to entrust myself fully to the guidance of the light of divine faith.

I. Moral Theology

My first teaching position found me at a Lutheran seminary in one of the largest urban centers of the United States. My primary task was to teach Christian ethics in a Lutheran key to future Lutheran ministers. After

only a short while of teaching, I realized that I was in trouble. I felt as if I was on a small boat without rudder, paddle, sail, or compass, tossed about on a rough sea by strong winds and high waves. I had expected rudder, paddle, sail, and compass to be provided by the four normative points of reference on which a proper teaching of Christian ethics had to rest: Scripture, God's law—natural and revealed—conscience, and ecclesial teaching authority. I quickly discovered that most, if not all, of these four normative points of reference had been eroded more or less for my students by the time they reached my class. The required ethics course that I was to teach was scheduled for the third and final year of the Master of Divinity program required for Lutheran ordination, and by the time the students reached this course, they were profoundly shaped by the ways they had been taught biblical exegesis and Lutheran church history and theology. After the students had been thoroughly trained to deconstruct and reconstruct the meaning of biblical texts according to the latest trends of historical-critical exegesis, there was not much left that could serve as one of the normative pillars for a Lutheran ethics that traditionally was grounded in the witness of Scripture. Scripture itself had become the victim of a mode of hypercritical historical exegesis that resulted in an understanding supposedly guided by the objectivity of historical science, but *de facto* governed by the principle of private judgment. Having been engaged in their respective historical, social, and political contexts, that is, having become products of and responses to these contexts, biblical texts could only in the widest sense, if at all, bear upon contemporary moral matters. It was left to the students to adjudicate among the multiple, variant, and often contradicting interpretations they encountered in their courses on the Old and the New Testaments and whatever significance they might have for the Christian life.

What then about conscience as a normative point of reference? Conscience exists in Lutheran faith and theology, but not as an internal guide in matters of good and evil. Lutheranism regards conscience as part of a human nature that is totally corrupt after the fall; Lutheran theologians, therefore, usually take conscience to be inherently troubled, to be constantly accusing the person, and hence to be in continual need of assurance and peace. For this reason, the more traditional Lutheran students did not seek guidance from their conscience, and the students who regarded themselves as progressive and “with it” unsurprisingly followed the secular culture at large and—after having embraced the Enlightenment notion of the inherent goodness of human nature—simply identified conscience with the principle of private judgment.

What then about God's law, natural and revealed? According to traditional Lutheran theology, intellect and will are both profoundly affected by the fall. And natural law, which relies upon reason to understand the natural order and telos—or goal—of human life, can therefore not function as a reliable guide.

What about the divine, revealed law? According to traditional Lutheran teaching the primary and proper function of God's revealed law is to convict humanity of its sinfulness and to drive it to the Gospel promise of forgiveness and justification by faith alone. Unsurprisingly, most of my students understood Christian freedom predominantly as a freedom *from* God's law, a spiritual freedom that, again unsurprisingly, was guided by the principle of private judgment. The technical term for this particular Lutheran denigration of God's law is "antinomianism," and "antinomianism" did reign sovereignly among most of my students.

In sum, the dominant default position I found solidly in place in the minds of most of my students by the time they took my ethics course was one of "private judgment" or arbitration that was ultimately guided by individual sentiments and desires, self-constructed identities, and the utilitarian principle of the greater good for the greater number. The more traditional students embraced this or that aspect of Martin Luther's own teaching as a normative guide for their lives. But the particular selection and combination of aspects of Luther's teaching was at best the result of their exercise of the principle of private judgment.

Scripture, ecclesial teaching authority, God's law—natural and revealed—and conscience (according to my best understanding at that time, the four pillars on which a proper teaching of Christian ethics had to rest) found hardly any traction with most of my students. They had experienced the dissolution of Scripture's authority by the acids of hypercritical exegesis; they had witnessed the happy embrace of the secularizing spirit of the times by the leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA); they had imbibed the teaching that natural law had to be rejected on Lutheran dogmatic grounds and that on the same grounds conscience was either treacherous or a barely camouflaged celebration of moral subjectivity.

In this situation I found myself confronted with an exceedingly ironic alternative. The one alternative was to embrace the principle of private judgment as tragic but unavoidable. Was I not myself constantly forced to exercise it in my teaching of ethics and then impose it upon the students by way of my personal teaching authority? The other alternative was to encourage the students to cultivate their own private judgment in matters of faith and morals so that through my action as a "midwife" they

would develop their own, authentic, considered, and hence what some would call “theologically mature” arbitrations of faith and morals. I regarded the second alternative to be nothing but a subtle capitulation to the cultural forces of moral relativism. Hence, I chose the first alternative and decided to swim upstream on my own by reasserting the four pillars—Scripture, ecclesial tradition, God’s law (natural and revealed), and conscience—but it was a matter of my own private judgment to do so. And what I offered to the students, of course, was my own personal construal of an ethics in a Lutheran key. The goal of the ethics I taught according to my own best lights, as informed by the four pillars, was to battle the enemy whose name was “antinomianism.” For especially in the area of what we now call the “ethics of life,” this Lutheran antinomianism was beginning to take on rather dramatic forms.

In the early 1990s, the ecclesiastical leadership of my Lutheran body, the ELCA, had begun to soften, and eventually it abandoned, the once rather strict Lutheran opposition to abortion. Abortion became for the pregnant woman increasingly a matter of private judgment (of course, of a “responsibly informed” private judgment); while she was encouraged to listen to God’s Word, seek advice, and search her conscience, in the end her choice, the result of a sheer act of will, was the final and decisive authority, and for that, a legitimate moral authority. What happened now in regard to abortion—namely, exchanging properly formed conscience for the principle of private judgment, and foregoing objective natural and revealed norms—had already happened decades earlier in regard to contraception and to divorce and remarriage. The same was eventually to happen regarding matters of sexual relationships between consenting adults, whether of the opposite or the same sex. Neither divine truth as witnessed in Scripture, nor right reason, nor natural law, nor the tradition that has informed Christian thinking about these matters for almost two millennia, guided the ELCA in these matters. The guiding norm was the principle of private judgment exercised individually under the culturally dominant misnomer of “conscience,” extended managerially by way of particular strategies and initiatives of the church headquarters, and collectively by way of the instrument of assembly voting. I found myself already at that time profoundly troubled and deeply disconcerted by a development that was fully to unfold as logically as regrettably only in recent years.

It was into this desolate and at points desperate situation that in August 1993, at the end of my third year of teaching Christian ethics in a Lutheran key, Blessed Pope John Paul II promulgated his encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, *The Splendor of Truth*. I still vividly remember my first reading of it. I was struck as by lightning. Here the Church spoke in her

authoritative voice, interpreting the Scriptures in a way that was as powerful as it was beautiful, affirming the reality of conscience and simultaneously instructing it in view of God's law, natural and revealed. And in the very core of the encyclical, I encountered a rich account of the ontology and teleology of moral action that was as illuminating as it was profound. I suddenly saw all four pillars of the Christian ethics I had envisioned not only affirmed but powerfully at play! I found myself in vehement agreement with all that *Veritatis Splendor* taught. At the same time I was greatly confused: for all this wonderful teaching was obviously Roman Catholic and not Lutheran—but I was a Lutheran ethicist! Was my vehement agreement leading me into the traps of legalism and works-righteousness, that is, into what Lutherans would see as exchanging the freedom of the Gospel for ecclesially imposed laws and as exchanging salvation by faith alone for meriting salvation by way of religious works? I was unable to discover any of these traps in *Veritatis Splendor*—but how could this be?

I began—for the first time in my life—seriously to study Catholic moral theology, and I especially threw myself into the study of Thomas Aquinas's ethics, for his voice and vision seemed to me to inform what was most centrally at stake in *Veritatis Splendor*. When, two years later, the encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*, *The Gospel of Life*, came along, it only affirmed the initial and overwhelming impression I had when I read *Veritatis Splendor* for the first time: here the Church was teaching authoritatively and truthfully, and in such a way that it became possible to teach Christian ethics in accord with Scripture, the ecclesial tradition, God's law (natural and revealed) and the voice of conscience—and if need be, against the spirit of the age, and the winds of the times, and most importantly, in a way that made private judgment not the final arbiter of truth in matters of faith and morals. Embracing this teaching meant freedom from the seemingly interminable necessity of individual theological wrestling over the truths and norms of the Christian life. What seemed to be called for now rather were fidelity and prudence, the faithful application of these truths and norms to one's own life of discipleship and, for the moral theologian, to the specific task of teaching ethics. Instead of constantly changing the rules of the game according to one's own best liking or latest whims, it had become a matter of finally playing the game on a clearly circumscribed playing field with clear rules. And the fact that an authoritative magisterial encyclical letter opened my eyes to these truths, taught me for the first time that there indeed is a referee on the playing field of moral theology and that his presence is indeed indispensable for moral theology to remain accountable to the truth of the faith!

To the degree *Veritatis Splendor* became a decisive point of reference for my thinking and writing, I became estranged from the project of a Christian ethics in a Lutheran key. And—needless to say—my estrangement did not go unnoticed. Less than well-meaning colleagues, especially in Germany, began to characterize me as “crypto-catholic” and “Rome-friendly,” synonyms for “unreliable” and “deviant.” But this did not matter too much to me, since other parts of my research and writing had carried me increasingly from ethics to dogmatics and fundamental theology. I had begun to become preoccupied with the question of what theology itself was and how “to do theology” accountable and in fidelity to the Church. By asking this question, I had to pursue the question of the nature of the Church and of the Church’s doctrinal tradition and teaching authority. Unsurprisingly, but at that time unforeseen by me, it was here that the Catholic question caught up with me most forcefully.

II. Justification, Church, and Eucharist

Six years after the promulgation of *Veritatis Splendor*, in the year 1999, the President of the Council for Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church and the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. The vast majority of German Lutheran theologians hotly debated and contested earlier drafts and—in open defiance of their own ecclesial authorities—rejected the final draft. Again I found myself in a position of profound estrangement, especially from my German Lutheran colleagues in theology. Unlike most of them, I warmly welcomed this declaration; for it officially removed the one central theological and doctrinal obstacle that kept me from even beginning to contemplate full communion with the Catholic Church. Now I heard it officially from both sides of the Reformation divide: in the core of the understanding of justification by faith through grace, there is substantial agreement between the current teaching of the Catholic Church and the current teaching of the Lutheran bodies that are part of the Lutheran World Federation. (In recent years, the World Methodist Council also adopted and affirmed this declaration.) For most of the Lutheran theologians who supported the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, this agreement meant that irrespective of all remaining differences one could and should move to immediate Eucharistic communion that would celebrate and acknowledge a state of reconciled difference. In a nutshell: because we agree in the one point that truly matters, we are free to differ in everything else; we simply cease to regard these other differences as church-dividing. Again at odds with most of my German Lutheran peers—this time the small group of

supporters of the *Joint Declaration*—I drew quite a different conclusion from the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*: I was not only entitled but now indeed mandated to explore and consider the fullness of the teachings of the Catholic Church. While others mainly inferred that now, for sure, there was no need to consider the Catholic faith more closely, because the Catholic Church seemed to have come around to the Lutheran position on the one issue that according to the Lutheran point of view really matters, I inferred the opposite: if there ever was a mandate upon the Lutheran theologian to consider most carefully and attentively the Catholic doctrine, it was now, after the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* had been signed, and the one obstacle had been removed that might have stood in the way of such a consideration.

This conviction became deeper and deeper in the years after 1999 and formed the silent background of most of my theological work. The foreground, however, was not that silent; rather, I found myself increasingly troubled, if not annoyed, in the context of the life of faith most central to me: the kinds of treatment that the remaining elements suffer after the completion of the celebration of what Lutherans usually call the Lord's Supper.

During the years of my childhood and youth in a liturgically rather conservative German Lutheran body, hosts, wine, and kneelers had been in regular use; now in my adopted U.S. setting, not only were the kneelers gone in most places, but in many places grape-juice had replaced the wine, and in all places a loaf of bread had replaced the communion hosts. These matters were irritating, but not detrimental. What I came to regard as increasingly disturbing and eventually detrimental to the authenticity of the faith in Christ's real presence, however, was a most troubling lack of respect, let alone reverence, after communion for the remaining elements. It was a common practice to throw out the remaining bread as food for the birds and to pour the wine into the ground outside the church building. There was no consumption, let alone reservation, in any shape or form. I do not even want to mention what the carpets around the communion rails looked like when only too often the bread turned out to be too dry and crumbled or when the distribution had been insufficiently careful. All that was left of Luther's own intense personal reverence for Christ's real presence in the elements was the aroma of an empty bottle. And where the sacramental piety was gone, the practice seemed to go awry, too.

Being greatly disturbed about this practice, I began to investigate more closely what various Protestant bodies, primarily Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, and Reformed, taught about Christ's presence in the blessed bread and wine. For I rather naively thought that in this way a greater

clarity might be gained about how to treat the elements with reverence, not only during but also after communion. The findings were thoroughly sobering. Anglicans allow for at least three ways to conceive of Christ's presence in the elements, and these three views entail considerably different attitudes about the practice of treating the remaining elements. Lutherans and Reformed have disagreed about these matters fiercely since the Reformation; and only after the Second World War did they reach an ecumenical agreement in Germany, the so-called *Leuenberg Concord*, that was, in a nutshell, simply the agreement not to disagree anymore on the issue and to abstain from all too-precise teachings about it, but to commune together and acknowledge each other's differing theological construals of the event.

The various construals, of course, unavoidably become a matter of one's theological predilection, or taste; in short, a matter of private judgment. And, of course, the question as to how the remaining elements were to be treated after communion do equally become a matter of one's theological predilection, that is, a matter of private judgment. And even inside the older Lutheran tradition there did not seem to be unanimity about so central a question. The dominant doctrinal notion seemed to be that Christ's real presence in, with, and under the elements ceases to obtain with the end of communion, a notion that had no clear warrants from Scripture or the theological tradition. Treating the elements that remained after communion in the way I have described seemed to be driven largely by the rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation. As a justification for the post-liturgical vacuuming of the remaining elements from the carpet around the altar rail, I was once told by a Lutheran pastor: "If He can get Himself in, He surely can get Himself out." This is, in nuce, the Lutheran doctrine of "consubstantiation," and the practice of vacuuming seems to be quite consistent with it. I should emphasize explicitly, though, that by no means all Lutheran pastors followed this practice; some rather were eager to treat the remaining elements in reverent ways. In short, there simply was no authoritative doctrinal teaching and disciplinary ruling on it that was binding for all theologians and pastors. Luther's own position was invoked by some, if not many, but it was expressed in texts of his that were not regarded as authoritative by all Lutheran communions. In short, the matter was left to the individual private judgment of each pastor, or the collective private judgment of a congregational council, or of some synod, the authority of which was ambiguous at best. Because the Lutheran ecclesial teaching of Christ's real presence lacked clarity and definition, the practice of treating the elements remaining after communion was left to the arbitration of vari-

ous groups of individuals, an inescapable mode of exercising private judgment in a matter at the core of the faith.

Where to turn in such a situation? Thanks to God's good providence, I was not tortured for too long by this question. For on April 17, 2003, Blessed Pope John Paul II promulgated what was to be his last encyclical letter: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. And again I encountered a teaching as consistent as it was convincing that answered all of my questions and troubles definitively and so freed me from the need to submit this most central mystery of the faith, Christ's Eucharistic presence, to the lights of my own or my pastor's private judgment. Moreover, I encountered more in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* than I had bargained for—an account of the Eucharistic sacrifice that most satisfyingly addressed all lingering misconceptions, concerns, and reservations Lutherans had entertained since the Reformation. What had seemed to be intractable problems on Protestant dogmatic, liturgical, and practical terms, suddenly received surpassingly beautiful solutions in an authoritative teaching of the Catholic Church, an answer that opened a path to the very heart of the mystery of Christ and His Church. There was a striking fittingness between the doctrinal teaching of the encyclical letter on the Eucharist and the Church and the normative practical guidelines given in great detail and care in *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, *The Sacrament of Redemption*, an important instruction issued on March 25, 2004 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.³

III. Magisterium

Things were obviously coming to a head. In my own teaching and writing as a Lutheran theologian I increasingly realized the burden hidden deep in the identity of the Lutheran theologian: a tangible vacuum of magisterial authority and guidance. I came to understand this vacuum as caused by a systemic lack of clarity about the question as to whether a proper magisterium—an authoritative teaching office—exists at all in the

³ The instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* expresses explicit concern about the phenomenon closely connected with private judgment in matters of divine truth: “[7.] Not infrequently, abuses are rooted in a false understanding of liberty. Yet God has not granted us in Christ an illusory liberty by which we may do what we wish, but a liberty by which we may do that which is fitting and right. This is true not only of precepts coming directly from God, but also of laws promulgated by the Church, with appropriate regard for the nature of each norm. For this reason, all should conform to the ordinances set forth by legitimate ecclesiastical authority” (www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html), accessed on May 6, 2011.

various Lutheran, let alone other Protestant, bodies; and if such a teaching office exists, whom it encompasses, how far it extends, and with what kind of authority it is equipped. The individual theologian was to fill this vacuum of magisterial authority with his or her own best theological judgments. But the particular selections of normative sources on which the individual theologian's most considered theological judgments rested, were unavoidably the result of his or her own private judgment: sundry passages from Scripture (judged to be most in accordance with Luther's teaching and forming the truly normative canon in the wider canon of Scripture), combined with the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines of the first ecumenical councils (Luther happened to affirm these doctrines as ultimately biblical and to emphasize at the same time that the councils could and did err in matters of doctrine and morals), and finally a selection of what were regarded as the normative writings of the Reformation period. There was no unanimity as to how these sources related to one another, nor was there an authoritative office to clarify definitively how they were to be ordered and ranked; and there was no authoritative, let alone infallible, instrument that was in a position to adjudicate between variant theological and quasi-magisterial construals. I slowly realized that, in order to ease this quandary somewhat, many if not most Lutheran theologians tended to take what Luther regarded as the most central theological tenets (that were supposedly directly received from Scripture) as an infallibly normative point of reference. The ironic result of this pervasive tendency was the fully functional but not at all acknowledged infallibility that was granted to Luther himself and his capability to open up the true meaning of the Scriptures. The tacit assumption was that by faithfully following the central tenets of his theology, under no circumstances could one wander from the truth of the faith and fall into error.

Once I became fully aware of this, the functional infallibility granted to the central tenets of Luther's theological teaching turned into a serious theological problem. For whence should such a gift of infallibility come? From Scripture, from the Church, or by way of a special divine gift of prophetic inspiration? The latter, the special gift of a prophetic inspiration, was the only possible option, but upon closer inspection an utterly unsustainable one. It was not claimed consistently by Luther, nor was it a universally shared conviction, let alone an emerging and eventually accepted tradition in Lutheranism. But if, bereft of such an alleged divine gift, Luther was just one theologian among many; and even if we were to grant him to have been a unique genius of religious intuition and imagination, gifted with the most exceptional rhetorical powers and zealous for the truth as he understood it, he was indeed as fallible a theo-

gian as I was. Hence he had no superior claim upon my allegiance to his teaching. My allegiance or non-allegiance to his teaching, rather, was again a matter of my private judgment. For what other criterion integral to the faith and superior to the principle of private judgment could lay a claim upon my allegiance and fidelity? The Protestant canon of Scripture as interpreted in light of Luther's own fallible theological tenets? Hardly so. A contingent consensus of Lutherans gathering in one place at one time and agreeing upon a particular expression of the faith based on a reading of Scripture in light of said tenets? Hardly so. A Lutheran selection of the ecumenical councils—whose doctrinal decisions, according to Luther and Lutheran teaching, are not infallible—and a Lutheran selection of the teachings from the Church fathers? Hardly so. Individual Lutheran theologians of great standing? Hardly so. An accumulative combination of all the above? Hardly so.

I had finally reached the end of a road that turned out to be a cul-de-sac. Short of some subtle mode of self-deception or a foregoing of the quest for truth in this crucial matter, there was no way forward in the direction taken by the Reformation theologians. I was faced by a simple alternative, as plain as it was painful. Either I had to bite the bullet and posit—based on my private judgment—the tacit functional infallibility of Luther as the authoritative magisterium in identifying the normative canon in the canon of Scripture and in the most central matters of faith and morals, or I had to accept the reality of a fallible, collective magisterium made up of sundry Lutheran church leaders, synods, and theologians from whose fallible teachings I would accept what I, according to my own fallible lights, would regard as right. At the end of either alternative, what stared back at me was the ugly face of the seemingly inescapable principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth.

In light of these equally unacceptable alternatives internal to Lutheranism I became increasingly aware that I was in a theological and spiritual position impossible to sustain over time. Contemplating the theological contours of the quandary I faced, it dawned on me slowly but surely that I was faced with a much deeper and more fundamental “either-or” than the one internal to Lutheranism: One could embrace the principle of private judgment as the tragic, but unavoidable, last resort and acknowledge once and for all that Christ had not given to his followers an infallible instrument by means of which they were to be protected from error in all the central truths of faith and morals. This alternative further entailed that the truth of the faith in its integral fullness was only eschatologically available. What is available now is some sort of promise together with small fragments of a pledge that takes shape in various and

often contradictory forms. But that again would entail that Christ, who called Himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life, was Himself only an eschatological promise and by no means present among His disciples through that divine Paraclete who would lead His followers into all Truth. But such a reduction of the most central tenets of the faith to a merely eschatological promise would contradict Christ's own promise. Traveling further down this road of an increasing evacuating of the faith's content would eventually mean opening oneself to an ever so subtle skepticism regarding the truth of the faith itself and hence would make oneself at first vulnerable and eventually subject to unbelief.

Was there an alternative, an "or" to this stark "either," and if so what was it? Well, obviously the relinquishment of the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth! But how was this to be done? Had I not been guided to this very impasse and hence to this insight by my own private judgments? How could one relinquish private judgment on the basis of one's private judgment? Could one pull oneself by one's own hair from sinking ever deeper into the quicksand?

It was not all too long after I had become a Catholic that I came across a text by now Blessed John Henry Newman, in which he describes the conundrum I faced. To the objection that converts must use their own private judgment in the act of conversion, Newman responds that "they use it in order ultimately to supersede it; as a man out of doors uses a lamp in a dark night, and puts it out when he gets home. What would be thought of his bringing it into his drawing room? . . . if he came in with a great-coat on his back, a hat on his head, an umbrella under his arm, and a large stable-lantern in his hand?"⁴

Newman assumes that after a long search in the darkness of the night relying on the light one has, one might find indeed one's way back home. But before entering the drawing room, one puts out one's own light. The convert uses private judgment right up to the act of assent, but the act of assent itself is neither motivated nor informed by private judgment. And so it happened to me.

In the summer of the year 2004 I taught as a guest professor in a German university in a traditionally Protestant area. There was no Catholic theological faculty in this university, and the Catholics in town were a tiny minority. The theological faculty on which I taught for this semester was thoroughly and decidedly Protestant. But the oldest part of the university—its heart, so to speak—was the remnant of a Dominican convent, dissolved during the Reformation, shortly after which the

⁴ Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 335.

university was founded as an intentionally Lutheran bulwark of higher learning. On the Solemnity of the Ascension of our Lord, a state holiday in Germany, I planned to attend the Lutheran worship service in the main medieval church downtown. When I arrived, just on time, to my great surprise I came upon closed church doors and a note informing me that the worship service was taking place somewhere in the woods. It was, after all, a beautiful spring day and gathering for worship somewhere outdoors was a customary practice, especially on this holiday, among Protestants. I did not have a car and in addition had no familiarity with the geography of the surrounding areas. After a brief moment of being lost about what to do, it occurred to me that the Catholics must have mass on this feast day and I happened to know that a Catholic parish was less than ten minutes walking distance away. Upon my arrival there I learned that mass would start in half an hour. So I put myself into the very back bench and waited in the beautiful silence of the sanctuary. Slowly the sanctuary filled with the faithful, young and old, rich and poor, and with a surprising number of children. And eventually the sanctuary was packed; standing room only. And then I forgot everything, including myself. For from the very beginning of the liturgy on I was overwhelmed with the most powerful sense of having simply arrived home, sitting now in the bright light of what was, in the English of Newman's nineteenth century, the drawing room of my home. Here, obviously, I was no longer in any need of my own lights that had assisted me before in finding my way home. Mother Church, here she was ever so gently embracing me in a liturgy that was virtually identical with what I had grown up with more than thirty years ago in Bavarian Lutheranism; with a homily that was illuminating Christ's ascension in a simple but profound way; and with a most reverent and at the same time joyful celebration of the Eucharist. Here was the Catholic Church in all its humility and glory, in all its poverty and richness, in all its simplicity and beauty, a heavenly treasure in earthen vessels. I wept from the beginning to the end of mass—tears of joy and gratitude. I had come upon the one pearl and suddenly I understood what Augustine might have felt when he exclaimed in his *Confessions*: "Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!"⁵ I had been so close to Mother Church all these years without realizing it and without heeding the gentle but persistent beckoning of her teaching. Now I had arrived in the place that disclosed fully the teaching of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. And it was here, in the gentle embrace of the liturgy of

⁵ *Confessions*, Book 10, 26. (Translation from St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, introduction, translation and notes by Maria Boulding, O.S.B. [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997], 262.)

the mass that I was able, as peacefully as joyfully, to relinquish the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth and let myself be guided into the fullness of divine faith by Mother Church. When I left this Ascension Day mass I had become a Catholic without fully realizing it yet. While I had not yet received explicit answers to all the questions lingering in my still largely Lutheran mind, I had encountered Mother Church in the core of her life as described so beautifully in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*; in this celebration of the mass I had been able to relinquish the principle of private judgment in an existential act of assent, which was as fundamental as it was comprehensive, an act of assent simply to receive the whole as it was explicitly and implicitly present in the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy, as proposed to me by the Catholic Church. This assent was identical with realizing that I had found my way back home and arrived in the drawing room. My own lights had become superfluous; I could leave the principle of private judgment outside the door.

It took me the remainder of my time in this German university town to digest this dramatic, life-changing experience. I was not able to speak to anyone about it, because I was still dazed and dazzled by the weight of the encounter, and in need of God's guidance as to the next step forward. It might hardly come as a surprise that from this Ascension Day on I sought God's guidance primarily in prayer in front of the tabernacle in this particular Catholic church. I was loath to return again to the principle of private judgment and simply follow my own best lights. And so I asked God for the grace of an incontrovertible sign that would signal to me God's approval to move forward; and after my return to the United States, several weeks into the fall semester at Duke University, during one memorable night, I received the grace of such an incontrovertible sign. From this moment on I was in a state of great inner clarity and peace, and things began to unfold almost by themselves. And on December 28, the same year, on the Feast of Holy Innocents, with a strong sense of joy, awe, and conviction I was able to say: "I believe and profess all that the Holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God."

My wife, not working in an academic institution and therefore not burdened with the particular challenges of the academic theologian, was less, if at all, infected by the principle of private judgment. In fact, being gifted with a very strong spiritual instinct, she had been ready, a number of years before I was, to enter into the full communion of the Catholic Church, but had patiently waited for me to be granted the theologian's way of relinquishing the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth. After this had finally happened in a place far away, we were able to move forward again together. My life has not exactly become

easier since then (and no Catholic would expect this), but there never has been more peace and joy in my heart and soul.

As a Catholic theologian I am freed from carrying the Protestant burden of private judgment in matters of faith and morals; I am also freed from the correlated necessity to act as a quasi-magisterium; rather, encouraged and guided by Mother Church, I am constantly discovering and exploring truths old and new in the inexhaustible treasure chest of the deposit of the faith. It is a daunting responsibility to be a Catholic theologian, but this responsibility becomes an ever lighter yoke the more the Catholic theologian exercises his responsibility in fidelity and docility to the magisterium of Mother Church. In the same degree also the joy increases over the extraordinary privilege to assist in teaching and defending the divine truth. Again Augustine's words capture this joy best: "Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!"

Is there sadness? Yes. Caused by well meaning and committed Protestant colleagues who just cannot see the path I have traveled let alone the profound problem of private judgment in matters of divine truth. They think I have abandoned them. There is no way for them to realize that by letting myself be embraced by Mother Church I have come much closer to them than I otherwise ever could have. But this sadness is nothing in comparison to the pain caused by encountering lukewarm Catholics, so indifferent about the treasure they have received that they willingly exchange it for a poor dish of pottage, for the mere exercise of private judgment in matters of divine truth. The pain only increases by encountering the numerous Catholic theologians who conceal their unremitting commitment to the principle of private judgment in matters of divine truth behind the label and attitude of a supposedly faithful dissent from the Church's teaching.

But all these pains I gladly accept, for they weigh nothing in comparison to the divine treasure I received in earthen vessels, the fullness of the divine faith together with the gift of an infallible instrument that protects it from error. What more can a theologian ask for? "I believe and profess all that the Holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be revealed by God." Thanks be to God!