

Journeys to the Catholic Church 2

A Twentieth Century Awakening - How I Became a Convert

By Frances Virginia Frisbie and M. S. J.
International Catholic Truth Society No.ctsa003 (1912)

"Confessions of a Convert"

The late Msgr. Robert Hugh Benson was a son of Archbishop Benson of Canterbury, the ecclesiastical head of the Church of England. He was born in 1871, and educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. He served in the Anglican ministry for nine years and entered the Catholic Church in 1903. In the preface to his book "Confessions of a Convert," Msgr. Benson wrote as follows:

Cardinal Newman compares, somewhere, the sensations of a convert from Anglicanism to those of a man in a fairy story, who, after wandering all night in a city of enchantment, turns after sunrise to look back upon it, and finds to his astonishment that the buildings are no longer there; they have gone up like wraiths of mists under the light of the risen day. So the present writer has found. He no longer, as in the first months of his conversion, is capable of comparing the two systems of belief together, since that which he has left appears to him no longer a coherent system at all. There are, of course, associations, memories and emotions still left in his mind — some of them very sacred and dear to his heart: he still is happy in numbering among his friends many persons who still find among those associations and memories a system which they believe to be the religion instituted by Jesus Christ; yet he himself can no longer see in them anything more than hints and fragments, and aspirations detached from their center and reconstructed into a purely human edifice without foundation or solidity. Yet he is conscious of no bitterness at all — at the worst he experiences sometimes a touch of impatience merely at the thought of having been delayed so long by shadows from the possession of divine substance. He cannot, however, with justice, compare a dream with a reality. He has abandoned, therefore, the attempt — which lack of leisure in any case would make practically impossible — to place side by side with his drowsy memories of Anglicanism the story of his vivid adventures under the sunlight of Eternal Truth.

A Twentieth Century Awakening

By Frances Virginia Frisbie

It is hard for those who for a lifetime have had an intimate knowledge of the great truths of the Catholic Church to realize what vast numbers of people in this so-called enlightened country lie in utter ignorance of these very truths. Non-Catholics see the Church as a powerful organization that builds great edifices and calls crowds of people to them on Sunday morning; further than this many well-disposed men and women never see. Probably they have some misconceptions, but, strange as it may seem with so many Catholics about them, they have not the slightest knowledge of the

fundamental teachings of our Faith. One of these sincerely ignorant people probably lives on your street, dear Reader; you, as a good Catholic, wish to be an apostle of Christ in leading your neighbor to a knowledge of the truth. But you do not know how to reach him; the gulf between you seems almost impassable.

Perhaps a young woman of ordinary twentieth century attainments and enlightenment, in telling the story of her awakening to a knowledge of the truth, may help you to a sympathetic understanding of your neighbor. No new arguments can be advanced, but your point of view may be broadened by an insight into how the old arguments impressed one new hearer. It is with the prayer that it may help the reader in his home-missionary work that I, a convert, attempt to analyze and reveal my attitude previous to conversion and the steps that led me to a knowledge of the truth.

My father is a Presbyterian minister. From childhood I had without question thought of Catholics as belonging to the same class as the heathen of Africa. It may be hard for the majority of my readers to believe that all my associates were perfectly sincere and utterly unconscious of any injustice in their judgment. Their heritage from the sixteenth century is a firm belief that the Church is the stronghold of hypocrisy and deception. During my college days I was interested in the study of history. My professors were not bigots and wished to present facts instead of prejudices; they often called attention to the great good the Church had done the world. Nevertheless, when I received a college degree, I, with my class-mates, believed the world had long since outgrown the Catholic Church.

After graduation from college I taught several years in a state normal school. There I met more Catholics than I had met previously. However, for at least three years I felt that our Catholic students should be tolerated but seldom trusted. I imagined that when a Catholic girl wished to violate some rule of the school she went to the priest, before or after the deed was done, and received a kind of license to do as she wished — a not uncommon notion of absolution.

In my fourth year in the Normal School, I took up the study of church history. Interest in this subject led me to attend a lecture on the origin of the forms of the Church of England given by the rector of the local Episcopal Church. He made the statement that "The Book of Common Prayer" was, with a few changes, translated from the "Roman Missal." God surely led me to investigate this statement. Expecting to be obliged to review Latin in order to translate it I asked one of the Catholic girls to lend me her prayer-book. Fortunately, "My Prayer-Book," edited by Father Lasance, fell into my hands. My surprise in finding such a practical aid to devotion in anything Catholic, was great. I wondered at the fact that all sources, Protestant and pagan as well as Catholic, had been drawn upon in presenting the great religious truths.

One day I expressed my opinion of this little book to a dear friend and asked her to read it. She looked at me and said, "I do not care to see it." This refusal, to the sorrow of my friend when I afterwards told her of its results, was what caused me to think seriously on our unquestioning prejudice. "Is this the way we do?" I asked myself: "Do we, when our attention is called to the good in a religion other than our own, deliberately shut our eyes to that good?" For weeks, especially in the dead of night, these words ran through my mind like a refrain — "I do not care to see it." I came to see that for our own enlightenment we ought to search for the good wherever it may be found; I came, also to wish for the opportunity to know from a reliable source the Catholic view of history and the fundamental Catholic teachings.

Just when these desires were strongest I met a fervent Catholic woman, who suggested my meeting the Superior of the Sisters of Mercy in a nearby hospital. I went to the Hospital with fear and trembling; but was reassured when, on meeting her, I immediately realized that I was in the presence of a holy woman. At my request, she gave me a copy of "The Faith of Our Fathers." I began its perusal with no thought of becoming a Catholic, but with a desire to understand and acknowledge the good in the Church. The conflict that went on in mind and soul while I was reading this book and the many others that followed is indescribable. The more I read the greater grew the conviction that in this much-abused religion were depths unknown to other Christian denominations. I feared before man the consequences of continuing my study; I feared before God the consequences of discontinuing it. The kind Sisters sacrificed for me hours of their precious time — I envied their wonderful faith but could not accept as reasons what seemed to them so clear. Their work lay not in proving but in explaining and, above all, in living the truth. However, God shows the one who is sincere the facts that seem conclusive to that particular individual — so He did with me.

A very few of the many considerations that were helpful to me I shall mention. You will surely understand that I do not mean to make any authoritative statement with respect to the doctrines of the Church: the longer we contemplate them the more clearly we see that only the greatest theologians can express them accurately. You will also understand that when I use a modern term in explaining my thought, it will be of no intent of giving it a technical meaning. The term "evolution," for example, is not used to stand for the Darwinian theory of the origin of the species, but for the general belief that, in many phases of our life, there is development from one state to another.

One of the facts that first impressed me is that, contrary to the common notion, many Catholic doctrines are in keeping with the best modern thought. The great thinkers of our day hail as new what the Church has taught from the beginning. The doctrine concerning Purgatory is one of the many illustrations of this fact. As we have before noticed, it is accepted by modern thinkers that, naturally, there is development from one state to another; that, in the natural order as it now exists, there are not leaps and bounds, but periods of growth. Does not this seem consistent with the old, old teaching of the Catholic Church in respect to Purgatory? To put it in modern language, a soul deserving of punishment (unless Divine Mercy, in answer to prayer, accepts as satisfactory the sacrifice and good works of other souls), must evolve into the state where he may merit and enjoy Heaven. Far more consistent it seems than the belief that, when an ordinary man, with good intentions but with common failings, dies he goes with the saints direct to Heaven.

Another consideration that leads to faith is the fact that the Catholic Church alone dares to carry its teachings to their logical conclusions. Take, for instance, the doctrine of the omnipotence of God. All orthodox Protestants claim that they believe with us that God is omnipotent, that He can do all things. But when you tell them that God changes bread and wine into His own body and blood, they exclaim, "Oh, that can't be!" We may sum up their argument in some such way as, "God can do anything; but He cannot change bread and wine into His body and blood." What a contradiction! Either let a person say frankly, "God has not supreme power," or let him with all true Catholics be willing to admit that whatever God wills is possible.

When we investigate the teachings of the influential Protestant churches, we find that, almost without exception, their teachings that have done good to humanity have their source in the great body of Catholic revealed truth. This statement, of course, does not apply to many of their negative teachings, for what practical good do these negative teachings do the world? Even if we did not

revere the Virgin Mary, could we help any one to a better life by telling him that he should not invoke her? But all the great positive truths that Protestants claim as their own — the doctrines of the justice and the mercy of God, of the efficacy of prayer, of the Divine revelation and redemption through Christ, of the immortality of the soul, of the necessity of faith, hope, and Christian charity — all these with many others have formed so practical a part of Catholic teaching that no fairminded person can look on that body of teaching with contempt. With human limitations as great as they are, it is impossible for any person or group of persons to recognize all truth and to see each part of truth in its proper relation to every other part; we need an infallible guide to aid us. It seemed to me, as I studied the question, that the Catholic Church, with God as its guide, had revealed and arranged all the truth necessary for us; that when the non-Catholic sects sprang up, each one took only that part that its adherents, with their human limitations, saw; and that thus, the balance of the perfect whole was destroyed. We Catholics are the fortunate possessors of the perfect whole.

One serious objection that we must meet is that the Church is the enemy of progress. The proofs that this accusation is false are too numerous and too well presented in great Catholic works for me to try to state them here. However, one who studies history must recognize that what has often been taken for a spirit of hostility to progress is in reality one of the great benefits the Church has given to the world — throughout the ages it has been to the world a great conservative force. Sometimes the fact that it has acted slowly in order to act safely has led hot-headed enthusiasts to accuse it of being inimical to progressive movements.

We need not look outside of our own age for an illustration of this conservative power of the Church. What would the world come to if there were not a great force preserving the good that is the accumulation of ages? Where would those who stand for individual rights (socialists and anarchists) lead the world if there were not some force that can recognize and preserve as well as the sacredness of the individual the sacredness also of the home, of property, of authority, and of the spiritual life of man? In so far as the Church opposes the modern individualistic movements, it stands as the champion of the human race against the evils with which these movements are fraught; but it is not the enemy of any good at which they may aim. We must be willing to allow God to take His time in working things out in the world. When the end of this present struggle shall be seen, the individual will be possessed of far greater freedom than these other movements can give him; our Church will have aided in bringing about the greatest and most lasting good for each individual human soul.

But perhaps what inspires more love for the Church than anything else is that this our Holy Mother meets the natural and instinctive needs of her children as does no self-appointed Mother. In the sacraments she meets these needs. Consider, for instance, the sacrament of penance. Is it not true that under great stress, at least, relief can come only through an unburdening of the heart to some trusted one? The greatest seers have recognized this longing; the simplest souls have felt it. Our Mother alone, in contrast to those who are pampering their children, shows her great love by commanding that we do what she knows will be to us (even to us who do not wish to do it) the greatest relief and spiritual gain.

The sacrament of supreme love in the Holy Eucharist meets one of the most universal human needs — the need of a visible, tangible, Divine Being to love and to be loved. God knows how we, who are very much limited by our senses, long for a God not only to think of, but to look at, to feel close to our hearts. We get the personal touch that so many non-Catholics despair of getting; some of

them say there is a God, but not One who cares for the individual person. Of course without the grace of faith they cannot believe that it is God whom they see before them on the altar. But perhaps they can believe if it were God it would satisfy a great longing of the longing heart; then, to go a step farther, they may admit that, if God can do what is for the good of His children, He does it, and that God Himself is on the altar — a voluntary victim of His love.

Besides so much evidence that appeals to the reason (of which I have tried to mention only a little that was especially impressive to me), there was in my experience a force without which I could never have found my way to the Church — the force of the influence of Catholics who lived upright lives of Christian charity. The very so-called Catholics who had come under my early observation had almost seemed to justify my opinion of the whole body. But later many of those whose religion was a matter not only of words but of deeds became my friends. I have already mentioned my friendship with the Sisters. Their lives were to me a constant marvel; I knew that it was no earthly influence that led so many truly human women to make such great sacrifices and to exhibit such true love.

From a humorous standpoint, my first meeting with a priest is more worthy of description than the first meeting with the Sisters. You cannot imagine with what fear and trembling I approached him. It was after I had read enough to partially understand the forms of service and the fundamental doctrines that my guiding Sister suggested my meeting a priest in a nearby parish. When it dawned upon me that a priest was indispensable to a Catholic Church my doubts doubled. "The theory is all right," I thought, "but how can I talk to a priest?" Curiosity, however, overcame cowardice, and one Sunday after attending my first Mass I found myself waiting in the rectory to meet the pastor. Not until he had appeared and I had analyzed my previous sub-conscious state, did I realize that I had expected to confront a being, not with horns, perhaps, but certainly with evident signs of intoxication. My childish fancy was soon set aside, however, by the cultured gentleman who greeted me. Since that morning I have become acquainted with many men who have responded to this highest calling of God; and, thank God, I have come to a faith in our priesthood as well as in our Church.

The sisters and the priests, great as their influence is, are not the only ones to whom the world looks for an example of Christian living. God will surely reward those faithful ones whom I knew as friends and in whose homes I visited, for their great share in bringing one soul to a realization of the meaning of the highest Christian life.

So, dear Reader, may you receive your heavenly reward, not only because you have been able to give logical arguments in behalf of your Faith, but because you have stood as a witness to the world that Our Holy Mother teaches us to live in truth and charity! May God help us all, through the uprightness of our daily lives, to lead others to true peace and joy.

How I Became a Convert

By M. S. J.

How did I become a convert? It was like this.

Some years ago, during Easter Week, I, a young girl, a Southerner and an Episcopalian, went up to the Convent of Mercy to see a Sister whom I knew. It was late in the afternoon and an elderly priest who had been to see one of the Sisters who was ill, was just ready to leave. I was presented to him,

and we stood there talking for some little time. I had told him I was a Protestant, and when he started to go, he asked my name again, and, taking me by the hand, he said: "Mary, you are a young girl to be in New York alone; you will meet many difficulties, trouble may come, you may not have any one to advise you; now if that day ever comes, you come and tell me about it, and I'll tell you what to do." He said good-bye and left me to go my way. I never went back, I never saw that kind priest again until one Sunday I went to hear his Eminence, Cardinal Farley, preach his first sermon after his elevation to the Cardinalate, and in the pulpit saw my old friend in his red robes of state. Through all the long years I never forgot his gentle eyes, his kind words. Thus was the seed planted.

I was what New York calls "a business girl." Every day found me at a desk, the evenings at home with a book, at the theatre or out with friends. I was alone, my family nine hundred miles away. There is no solitude like that of a great city. The uncaring, shifting crowds, the cold emptiness of the great churches, the hushed silence of the libraries and museums fall like the pall of death upon a friendly young heart, fresh from home and all that sweet word means. But I had been strictly reared, and home and religious training held me fast. As a rule, Sunday found me at church either in the morning or afternoon, for, being a Protestant, church going was not obligatory, but I never felt right the rest of the week unless I went to some one of the many Episcopal churches which dot New York. I had been reared in what is termed the "low church," but the beautiful ecclesiastical music and the ritual of the "high church" appealed, and the doctrine of the Real Presence was a vital truth to me. The ritual of the high church which I attended is almost exactly like that of the Catholic church, only it is in English, but always I felt there was something lacking. I could not tell what it was, but I felt that something essential was not there. I could never have confessed my sins to one of those priests. Whenever I thought of it a shadow seemed to fall between, so intense was this feeling that something was lacking. But years of training held me in the Episcopal church, though I often said to myself the Catholic really is the True Church, but, like most Protestants, to me at that time, one church was as good as another, and having been reared an Episcopalian, I remained one. However, I left that particular edifice and went down to what is known as a "broad church," but somehow that form of worship left me still lonely and unsatisfied, and as Protestantism gave me much liberty of action, I left the "broad church" and returned once more to the "low church" of my childhood. The rector at this church is a delightfully genial man, who is at the door of his church every Sunday after the service, greeting his parishioners with a pleasant word and smile, and after stopping me one Thanksgiving Day for a little talk, we grew to be pleasant acquaintances, and for the first time in many years I became a registered member of a parish in New York, and began to take an interest in the work of the church and to see something of the social side of church life. Still I felt that sense of something lacking. There was always the clergyman in the pulpit with "I think" this or "I think that," always "I," and I would go home and with great liberality of thought often say to myself, "well, I don't agree with him at all, I think it should be interpreted this way."

The priests expound dogmas and the clergy preach and preach on brotherly love, but often the only thought in the hearers' minds is, going to church makes a pleasant break in the day, and how can I put in this long Sunday afternoon.

One Sunday afternoon in January, 1912, a rainy, cold day, I found myself at home alone, save for a book, a modern sin-infested story. For lack of other reading matter and because I wanted to be up to date, I read that book. That horrible story, that wasted, desecrated Sunday I can never forget. I felt as though I wanted to wash my mind and hang it in the sun to get it fresh and clean again. The very

next evening, upon the invitation of a friend, I went with her to a Catholic Mission held in old St. Stephen's, for, I thought, it at least would kill time to go over, and I was just tired of everything.

Upon the very threshold of the church I met the priest, who, with a book, bridged for me the chasm dividing Protestantism from Catholicism, and on that book I walked across from the shadow into the light. On him that night fell the task of answering the questions from the Question Box, and I was intensely interested. As he answered them rapidly one after another, the pages of church history opened up before my eyes, the voice of infallible authority, sounding down the ages, fell upon my ears, and in a flash I knew what I had missed in all the years of Protestantism. It was that voice of Infallible Authority, never once "I," but always "the Church teaches." I walked out with the rest of the congregation, filled with a thousand doubts where I had never given a thought before, but in my mind was firmly fixed the resolution to which I have adhered and ever will: never again will I waste a Sunday as I did yesterday; I will study up the history of the Church on lonely Sundays.

At the door I saw the same priest. He stood alone and I went over and told him I was an Episcopalian, that I was interested in some of the glimpses he had given me of church history and asked him to tell me two good histories of the Reformation, so that I could read both sides. Gravely and courteously he gave me the names of a Protestant and of a Catholic historian, and I went forth with the firm intention of coming again to the mission. The weather was cold and wet, but every evening of that week saw me in my seat. At the close of every exercise I plied that patient priest with questions, doubts, fears and all that ignorance of a subject carries with it, and every night he gave me books and pamphlets bearing on the history and doctrines of the Catholic faith. I had a singularly unprejudiced mind, but in my talks with Protestant friends whom I told of the mission, of my researches and of the wonderful field of new reading into which I had wandered, I encountered prejudices of which I had never dreamed and ignorance which I could not have imagined to exist in the twentieth century. But always something led me on, and finally one evening I went into a Catholic church at Benediction and fell upon my knees. Repeating the familiar prayers of my childhood, I made up my mind that I had been traveling in what was the wrong road for me, and begged God to strengthen my endurance so that I might stand and not fall before the criticism which I in a dim way realized I would have to meet. I went to see the priest who had given me my first books, told him of my intention and asked him to instruct me. He was a missionary priest and had to be away most of the time, but before he left he gave me some carefully selected books with the words, "Now, don't pay any attention to anything I have told you, but don't pay any attention to anything any one else tells you. You've got a mind, go home and use it." And I did. It took me seven weeks to make up my mind to take the final step. Night after night I burned the midnight oil, toiling over books of Catholic and non-Catholic doctrine, and the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, torn with the beliefs, hopes and fears each of us gather in the journey through life. The kind missionary gave me help in his short stops in New York as he traveled from one mission to another, and all the intervening time I filled with prayer and study. In the Protestant churches there is much which is beautiful, good and true; in the Catholic Church I found all this and much, much more, and depths of wisdom and truth which I had never penetrated. The same priest whose guiding hand had held the light gave me conditional baptism and heard my first confession on Easter Eve, the day upon which, in ancient times, all converts were received into the Church. On Easter Sunday I made my First Communion, and as I knelt at the altar rail, between my folded hands I held a little book, the Manual of Prayer.

And so I say I read myself into the Church. Some dead and gone ancestor touched me on the shoulder, as it were, and gently turned me back, back to the Faith of my Fathers, and in that Faith I have found rest.
