

## OBJECTIONS, OBSTACLES, ACCEPTANCE

This interview about my reception into the Catholic Church originally appeared in the January 2005 issue of *Catholic World Report*. The interviewer prefaced it with the statement that since I had been an influence among American Evangelical Protestants, “For some, then, it came as a jolt when, on Easter Sunday 2004, Budziszewski was received into the Catholic Church.” I suppose it did, but as I hope the interview makes clear, I remain friendly to Evangelicals and continue to work with them in ecumenical contexts.

**Question:** Could you tell us something about your background—your education, particularly?

**Budziszewski:** I was born in Milwaukee, where I lived until age 13. My adolescence was spent on the east coast of central Florida, near the Space Center. In 1970 I began studies at the University of Chicago, choosing it partly because of its biopsychology program (which in fact I never entered) and partly because of its reputation as a hive of left-wing activity. Intellectually I was obsessed with mind-body problems; politically I was far to the left. After one year of college I married my high school sweetheart; after another year we moved back to Florida. In those days I viewed places like the University of Chicago as aquaria for the children of privilege. It seemed to me that a good socialist should get out of there, learn a trade, and join the proletariat, so I learned welding. I worked a variety of jobs as a welder, ending up at the Tampa shipyards.

What I discovered during that period was that I belonged in college after all. Needless to say, there was no such thing as a "proletarian" university, but I thought I could stomach a public university, so I earned my BA at the University of South Florida, there in Tampa. After that I obtained an MA at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. Somewhere along the line I must have lost my prejudice against aquaria for the children of privilege, because I did my doctoral work at Yale University. Since finishing my PhD in 1981, I've been teaching at the University of Texas.

**Question:** So when you were at the University of Chicago, you were not studying in your current field of political theory?

**Budziszewski:** No, not then. My radicalism drew me into a political science major, but I didn't even know there was such a thing as "political theory;" that discovery didn't come until much later. It seemed to my young self that revolutionaries need to know about a lot of different things—political science, sociology, economics—and the

political science major was more generous about such electives than those other majors were.

**Question:** And what about your religious background?

**Budziszewski:** My birth family was Baptist; in fact my maternal grandfather was one of the first Polish Baptist ministers in the United States. He pastored a Polish-speaking congregation.

I was a convinced Protestant. At the age of 10, I "walked the aisle," presented myself for Baptism, and vowed to follow Christ. Probably the best description of my spiritual condition during adolescence is "pious, but not holy."

In college, I abandoned my faith utterly: first faith in Christ, then belief in God, then belief in a real right and wrong. It wasn't until after I had finished my education and had been teaching for a year or two that God drew me back to my abandoned Christian faith.

When I came back, though, I came back not as a Baptist but as an Anglican. I still wanted one foot in the Reformation, but I wanted another foot in Catholic tradition.

**Question:** Was your interest in the Catholic tradition part of the process that led you back to Christianity? Or, if we could put it another way, was your return to your Christian roots part of the overall journey that eventually led you to the Catholic Church?

**Budziszewski:** Although the seeds took another 20 years to sprout, Catholic friends and thinkers had influenced me even during my wilderness years of atheism.

I ought to explain that during those wilderness years, I was a practical atheist. I was never a theoretical atheist; I wasn't quite fool enough to think that I could prove that there isn't a God. What I thought was that there wasn't any God who could make a difference.

Similarly, I was a practical nihilist. I wasn't quite fool enough to think that I could prove that there isn't a real difference between good and evil. What I thought was that the difference couldn't make a difference. You see, I denied free will. I reasoned that if the mind is enchained, then we can't have any confidence that any of our reasoning about good and evil has validity. For practical purposes, they would have to be viewed as human constructs.

Of course, the hole in that line of thought is large enough to drive a truck through. If I couldn't have any confidence in my reasoning about good and evil, why should I have any confidence in my reasoning about having no basis for confidence? Why should nihilism make any more sense than morality? I papered that problem over with clever talk about taking an ironic view of reality.

But I was going to tell you the Catholic influences that worked on me during my wilderness years. I read St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and especially Dante Alighieri. When I read Dante's imaginative description of the center of Hell—the Lake of Cocytus, where the damned are imprisoned in ice, unable to move a muscle to the right or to the left—I thought that he was describing me. I couldn't move either. I'd thrown out all possible motives for movement.

Naturally I taught my students Thomas Aquinas, but I found it difficult to do so. The problem was that his arguments presented such a strong appearance of truth. For the very beauty of this appearance, I had to exercise strong discipline not to weep. One of my students in those days asked permission to put a personal Question. "I've been listening carefully," he said, "and I figure that you're either an atheist or a Roman Catholic. Which one is it?"

You can see why, when I finally returned to Christian faith, I wanted that one foot in Catholic tradition.

Yet return also meant recovery of lost elements of Protestant belief, and I couldn't see my way to Catholicism proper.

I had the common Protestant idea that Catholicism teaches "works-righteousness"—that we earn our way into heaven, apart from the merits of Christ—that if we just earn enough "virtue points," we're in. It took a long time to get over such misunderstandings.

**Question:** Thus far we've been talking about the intellectual origins of your return to the faith....

**Budziszewski:** When you speak of "intellectual origins," you'd better put scare quotes around the phrase. For several years after returning to the faith, it disturbed me that I wasn't able to give a coherent intellectual account of why I had done so. That came much later.

What actually led me back was a growing intuition that my condition was objectively evil. I didn't believe in objective evil, so that seemed to make no sense. But the

intuition became so strong that I could no longer ignore it. It wasn't a "feeling." I was forced to regard it as a perception of truth.

At this point I suppose intellect does come in, because I was familiar with Augustine's argument about evil. Evil is deficiency in good; there is no such thing as an evil "substance," an evil-in-itself. So if my condition really was evil, there had to be some good of which my condition was the ruination. And if there really were both good and evil, then I had been so wrong, for so long, so profoundly, that it seemed that almost anything might be true—even the faith that I had abandoned.

So I began studying all those Christian things I had forgotten. There was no distinct moment in time at which I could have said, "I believe, but a moment ago I didn't." One day, though, I realized that without having noticed it, I had been believing for some time.

But if the Christian revelation about Jesus Christ is true, then it makes no sense to do anything else except to follow him. So we took up the life of faith again, both of us. My wife never had lost her faith as totally as I had; you might say that her faith had gone into remission. She had compartmentalized Christian belief, allowing her life to be guided by other beliefs that were incompatible with it. But although her path back to faith was somewhat different from mine, she too was ready to return.

**Question:** And upon your return you were an Anglican; what prompted you to move on from that point?

**Budziszewski:** The first push was the discovery that Anglicanism was dying and all but dead. When my wife and I resumed Christian worship, we assumed that the reason the congregation recited the Nicene Creed together was that they all believed it. After years of self-imposed exile, this was indescribably wonderful. The "cloud of witnesses" of which St. Paul speaks was almost palpable; we felt that you could reach out and touch those millions of Christians from bygone generations.

Then came the day when the college chaplain, who happened to be giving the homily that day, announced to the congregation that he "was no longer able" to believe in the Resurrection. I wanted to ask, "What happened to your vows?" and "How dare you continue to call yourself a priest?" But I merely asked, "I see you every week, reciting the Nicene Creed like the rest of us. If you don't believe it, how can you?"

He responded, "I do it as an act of solidarity with the community." In other words, it meant nothing at all. I came to realize that this was true for a great many Episcopal priests. The principle of doctrinal education in our parish was "anything goes"—that is,

anything but historic Christian doctrine. If you stood up for Holy Scripture and Apostolic Tradition you would quickly find yourself on the outs.

The Question we faced was whether it would be more pleasing to God to get out of the Episcopal communion altogether, or stay behind as a "faithful remnant."

**Question:** Was that the point of your departure from Anglicanism, then?

**Budziszewski:** No, not yet. Instead we transferred our membership to another Episcopal parish where it seemed that historic Christian doctrine was still taught. We remained in that parish for years, and still bear a deep love for the people we knew there.

But the ongoing collapse of the Episcopal enterprise forced us to ask deeper Questions about the nature of the Church. Our ecclesiology was very nearly Catholic, long before we actually joined the Catholic Church. This fact made our picture of ourselves as part of a "faithful remnant" inside the Anglican communion harder and harder to believe in. After all, if what the Catholic Church teaches about her nature and authority is true, then how can you justify not becoming part of her?

Although we continued to disagree with a number of Catholic dogmas, we suffered a growing suspicion that where we disagreed, it was we who were wrong, not the Church.

Not all converts come into the fold in the same way. For some people on the way into the Catholic Church, the ecclesiastical objection is the last one to be overcome. First they become convinced about doctrine A, doctrine B, and doctrine C, and then at last they become convinced that the Church has authority to teach about these matters. For me it was the other way around. First I became convinced that the Church has authority to teach. That didn't mean that my various difficulties about doctrine A, doctrine B, and doctrine C disappeared, but it converted my "objections" into "obstacles."

After several years of wrestling, becoming convinced on one point after another, I finally found myself able to say with respect to the remaining issues, "I am ready to obey." That turned out to be crucial. As Augustine said, we believe in order to know. There are some things you have to understand before you can accept them—but there are others you have to accept before you can understand them.

**Question:** How long did that whole process take?

**Budziszewski:** Much too long. About eight years, ending in 2003. We made God wait.

The last three of those years were really difficult. My wife and I had not yet reached that point of obedience. We were still in "faithful remnant" mode. In a sort of a compromise -- which, in retrospect, seems rather unsatisfactory -- we decided that if the Episcopal church ever came to incorporate the prevalent abominations into its canons, that would be our signal to get out.

The signal we were waiting for came unmistakably during the summer of 2003. It was bad enough that the Episcopal general convention ordained as bishop a man who had abandoned his wife and children in order to live in sin with another man. That might have been viewed as an aberration. Much worse was the fact that the general convention authorized drawing up rites for the blessing of same-sex unions. That converted the aberration into a rule.

But the signal turned out to have been unnecessary, because we had already crossed our Rubicon. That summer, we visited an Episcopal church in another town. No sooner had we entered than we encountered a "tract table" offering visitors free pro-abortion bumper stickers bearing the Episcopal shield.

That was the last straw. We knew that we could never consider ourselves members of the Episcopal Church again.

**Question:** What did you do, then, when you realized you could no longer be Anglicans? What were the practical steps that you took toward Catholicism?

**Budziszewski:** We met with a priest, telling him that we wanted to begin preparation to enter the Catholic Church, but that we were still troubled by certain obstacles which we hoped he could assist us in overcoming.

For me, the last such obstacle concerned the title of co-mediatrix often given to Mary. By using such a title, was the Church contradicting her own teaching that Christ is the one mediator between God and men?

He was very helpful. A convert himself -- Methodist, then Anglican, then Catholic -- he understood the difficulty immediately and encouraged me to read Chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium*. As he expected, it resolved my difficulties. After all, there are many ways in which many people may be mediators. If you intercede for someone in prayer, you are a sort of mediator. If you explain the Gospel to someone, you are a sort of mediator. If a priest offers the sacrament of Reconciliation, he is a sort of

mediator. Mary has an even more exalted role in this economy of grace. Yet all these things are possible because of what was uniquely done for us by Jesus; they don't lessen or compromise it

So that obstacle was just—gone!

**Question:** Was that the only major obstacle that you had to clear?

**Budziszewski:** Although the doctrine of justification had at one time presented an even greater obstacle, by this time that obstacle had already broken up. The Church's approval of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, in 1999, had been especially helpful to me. We came to recognize that the Church's actual teaching about justification is quite different from what we had always taken it to be. It was not what we had believed as Protestants, but it contained nothing to which we were unable to submit, and it made sense.

**Question:** With that problem resolved, did the rest of the process go smoothly?

**Budziszewski:** We went through RCIA in the ordinary way. It was good to go through it with all kinds and conditions of people. One of the thrilling things about the Catholic Church is that it is so obviously drawn from all classes, all nations, all cultures. At Protestant services one tends to see only people like oneself. At Mass on Sunday morning, we saw every sort of people: professional, working-class, Hispanic, black, Asian, speaking all sorts of languages—not because of a quota system or a multicultural ideology, but because this is the Body of Christ.

**Question:** Were there any individuals—friends or colleagues—who were particularly important in the process?

**Budziszewski:** Yes, certain Catholics we know have been deeply important to us. Two such people were our sponsors, close friends of very long standing. For years they had been saying to us, "Your whole understanding of things is Catholic. You think like Catholics. You sound like Catholics. You have a Catholic sensibility. Why aren't you Catholics?"

We know now that many other Catholics were praying for us. And of course certain conversations with Catholic friends and colleagues had helped us along the way.

**Question:** Can you think of any particular example?

**Budziszewski:** Some years ago, during a long conversation with a Catholic friend who knew of my attraction to the Church, I indulged in a bit of bellyaching. "I can't call this an objection to Catholic doctrine," I said, "but you can't deny the flat tonelessness of the language coming from some of the liturgical reforms. Besides, the Church puts up with forms of popular piety that are utterly inconsistent with its own teachings." My example was an urban Catholic church I knew that displayed the motto "MARY, SAVE US" in enormous letters. I said, "You know, I know, and the Church knows that Mary doesn't save us. Mary points to her Son. Jesus saves us. So why is this tolerated?"

My friend leaned back and answered, "All of this is true. These are real problems. The Church knows about them. But in 200 years they'll all be taken care of."

It was a preposterous reply, and on another evening, in another mood, I might have considered it glib. That evening, though, it struck me that my friend was viewing things from the perspective of the Church. As a Protestant, I realized that I had a much shorter timeline and that much of what I considered wisdom might actually be impatience. The mystery of the endurance of the Church through the centuries sank in a little deeper.

**Question:** In light of your concerns about the liturgy, and your background in the Episcopal Church, did you have any interest in the Anglican Use?

**Budziszewski:** Never. We knew about Anglican Use [and respect it]. But we said if we were going to be Catholics, we wanted to [clean house]. We had "made God wait" long enough, and had no remaining nostalgia for Anglican ritual.

By the way, "concerns about the liturgy" is a little strong. I was too ignorant to be "concerned." I was merely annoyed. Besides, submitting to flattened language is an exercise in humility. Who am I to say, "The Church must live up to my aesthetic standards?" We are supposed to become saints, not aesthetes. We don't need to waste time complaining about plaster statues, plastic Rosaries, or words that don't come up to our poetic standards.

"Flattened" is also a relative term. The Catholic liturgy retains deep beauty. It is a deep grace to be given the opportunity to say before receiving the Eucharist, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and shall be healed."\*

**Question:** Were there any doors that you found either opened or closed— socially or professionally—after your conversion?

**Budziszewski:** That's a difficult Question, because much of this is still sorting itself out. We did wonder what would happen after our conversion. Would our Protestant friends think that we weren't Christians any longer? But although there have been a few isolated problems, most of the Protestants we've worked with have said to us, "We know you are following Christ. If you're still glad to work with us, we're still glad to work with you."

We were Catholic-friendly Protestants, and of course we intend to be Protestant-friendly Catholics. The teaching of the Church strongly encourages us in that intention.

**Question:** Has anything surprised you about being Catholic? Have there been any difficult adjustments?

**Budziszewski:** There have been many adjustments, but they seem more like an adventure than a difficulty. One thing we've found is that it takes much longer to learn Catholic culture than Catholic doctrine. There are so many things that we had misunderstood!

For example, when we first began to visit Catholic parishes, we had the reaction most Protestants do: They seemed cold. You go in, and no one but the greeter says anything to you. You sit down, and at the end of the service everyone leaves. We concluded from this that parish community doesn't exist. What we've discovered is that this isn't true. Parish community exists, but it doesn't manifest itself at the door as it does in Protestant congregations. It manifests itself in the multitude of ongoing ministries. That is where you meet people and form friendships.

One Sunday after Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, our Austin home parish, we found our perspective turning upside-down when a new acquaintance warmly said to us, "I've noticed you coming for several months, and I've wanted to talk with you so much, but I was afraid of speaking for fear of scaring you away." I'm absolutely convinced that she was sincere. She plainly wanted us to become part of the community, but we wouldn't have known it. What might have seemed like chilliness was really an expression of her warmth. It was rather touching, rather amusing, and a little bit bizarre, like finding yourself in a tribe where you express your gratitude for the meal by belching loudly.

**Question:** It's also a different style of welcome, isn't it? You can come into a parish church and sit in the back anonymously, and you're free to do that; no one will bother you.

**Budziszewski:** That's right. The idea is, "Take your time. We're not going to greet you so aggressively that you become alarmed and run away." You have to appreciate the consideration in that.

While getting used to these fascinating aspects of Catholic culture, we've also been "translating" them for our Protestant friends. Let me tell you about one of our most interesting experiences as translators.

The modern university, you know, is an aggressively agnostic place—operationally atheist, if not theoretically atheist. People of faith often feel isolated on the university campus. This is especially true of graduate students. So for several years my wife and I have hosted a weekly meeting in our home for Christian graduate and professional students in various disciplines. We supply the dinner; they supply the discussion.

Most of these young people are conservative Evangelicals. When they found that Sandra and I were becoming Catholic, they were stunned, simply floored. They couldn't believe that we were no longer Christians, but they couldn't believe that Catholicism was Christian, either.

Discussion at these dinners is wide open, so they knew that they were free to raise their concerns. For weeks, the only topic they wanted to discuss was their objections to Catholicism. It was a great introduction to Catholic apologetics. We view it as part of our catechesis. To answer all those Questions, we had to learn a lot, really fast.

It was also fun. We saw barriers dissolving and prejudices breaking up. Another interesting result was that the Catholic members of the group, who had always felt outnumbered, found their voice—and grew, unexpectedly, closer to the others.

**Question:** Have you encountered any altered expectations about your professional work? You recently published an article in *First Things* about the death penalty, for instance. Are there people who think that now, since you're a Catholic, you should think in a certain way about specific issues?

**Budziszewski:** I wondered if that might be the case. But the view that I take on capital punishment is compatible with Catholic teaching, you know. It's not disobedient for a Catholic to believe that capital punishment still has a place even today.

**Question:** Certainly it's not disobedient. But it's also not popular.

**Budziszewski:** Right; it's not popular. The general tendency in Catholic discussion runs the other way. Frankly I think that one side of the debate has seized upon certain papal teachings and exaggerated them to its own advantage.

I had expected that some people would say, "See here, no sooner do you convert than you become a dissident!" That hasn't taken place. People may think I'm seriously wrong—I've received a certain amount of email telling me how mean I am—but they rarely claim that I'm heterodox or disobedient.

Writing the article did involve some struggle for me. The main difficulty doesn't lie in submitting to the magisterium—that I can do—but in trying to understand what submission means in this case.

The Holy Father [at that time John Paul II] is obviously deeply uncomfortable with capital punishment. This is not an infallible teaching, and as a scholar, I am supposed to present the best arguments I can. Yet even with respect to teachings that fall short of infallibility—and with respect to discomfort that falls short of explicit teaching—I should try to think with his mind, and I am glad to do so. But what does it mean to think with his mind, when, with respect to some applications of capital punishment, we would probably disagree? I've been trying to work that out. I hope I'm succeeding.

**Question:** Are there other notable discoveries that you have made since becoming a Catholic?

**Budziszewski:** Your request to interview me illustrates something else that my wife and I have discovered since becoming Catholics.

We had always thought that the telling of conversion stories was an Evangelical Protestant custom. Evangelicals love such stories so much that when two Evangelicals meet, the very next Question after "Tell me your name," and "Tell me where you live and work," is often "Tell me your story."

We have been surprised, and affectionately amused, to discover that Catholics love conversion stories, too. But what Catholics especially love is the stories of Protestants who convert to Catholicism!

Lifelong Catholics sometimes tell us, "It's so good for us to talk to people like you, because people think we're crazy to be Catholic. We're so encouraged whenever we find someone who isn't Catholic discovering that Catholic faith makes sense."

**Question:** Your story can also be encouraging in another way, since it gives us a window into the thinking of people who are not Catholics, but might be interested in the faith. Your story may give us some insight as to how we can encourage others to enter the Church.

**Budziszewski:** That reminds me of another discovery we've made about Catholicism. Catholics are said to be uninterested in evangelism. Of course they are interested in evangelism. But they approach it in different ways.

A Catholic young woman whom my wife and I know well always had a strong negative reaction to the term "evangelism." We were surprised to learn that she has a very strong positive reaction to the term, "evangelization." When she thinks of "evangelism," she thinks of Protestants throwing Jack Chick tracts into the windows of passing cars. But when she thinks of "evangelization"—the term that we've found is more commonly used in Catholic circles—then she thinks of sharing the Gospel!

Differences in vocabulary and language needlessly inhibit understanding between Catholics and Protestants. It has been awfully good to discover that some of these barriers are smaller than we had expected them to be.

**Question:** It's a bit more than simply a linguistic difference, isn't it? There's a cultural difference behind that use of different terms. Catholics are more inclined to take what one might call a Hippocratic approach to evangelization; the principle is: "First, do no harm."

**Budziszewski:** Yes, but "First, do no harm" might seem to Protestants to be a euphemism for doing nothing. What we've found is that although Catholics "do something" about evangelization, what they do is different.

For instance, a Catholic is more likely to think: "If only I can get my friend into church, then he may be willing to talk about the Gospel, because the liturgy itself is such a teacher." Whereas an Evangelical is more likely to think: "If only I can talk with my friend about the Gospel, then he may be willing to come to church."

**Question:** And neither approach is right. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that each approach is both right and wrong.

**Budziszewski:** Each is partly right. There's something to be said for each approach. They need each other.

I believe the Catholic Church to be the true Church, but I don't think that I attenuate my Catholic faith by saying that we can learn some things from Protestants. We ought to be in dialogue.

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\*In the new translation to the missal adopted in 2011, this response has become more accurate, more beautiful, and more reminiscent of the incident in Scripture to which it alludes: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed."

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