

Richard L. Akins

Challenged to **GROW**

**A Catholic Parent's Journey
Through an Evangelical World**



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Chapter 1

Overcoming Christian Disunity

I was in my late thirties, a life-long Catholic, married, and a father of three. Suddenly, to maintain family cohesion I lived part-time within a decidedly anti-Catholic “Evangelical”¹ faith community, attending their services at least every other week.

As a teen, I joined an inter-denominational youth group run by Evangelicals. During my high school years those sessions tapped into and ignited my passion for Christ. Later, as an adult, I listened to Evangelical radio broadcasts while commuting to work for at least two decades. My very best friend, who died all too young, was an Evangelical. I never considered that any of these Evangelicals risked eternal damnation simply because they didn’t share my Catholic beliefs.

And— lucky day!— as I scoured the well-worn pages of my Catholic Catechism, I found that the Church agreed. The official teaching of my Catholic faith is that baptized Christians of other denominations are saved by

1. I will use the term “Evangelical” because this is the title used most often by those I have attended services with. However, the term “Evangelical” describes people who may hold a wide range of beliefs. To be more precise, then, those I have lived with and experienced as often the most aggressively divisive may also use the additional titles “Reformed,” “Calvinistic” and “Bible-Believing.” I will also use these terms where appropriate in this work.

Christ. In fact, the Church teaches that God might lead even those who are not Christian to recognize something of the Truth. Regardless of their expressed beliefs, we all share the same creator God and this creator God can be creative enough to call all kinds of people and even save them, if he so chooses.

Only months after we began attending the Evangelical church, my son—then eight years old—changed from not wanting to go to the new church to not wanting to go back to our Catholic parish (in which he had just received his first Communion) because the music in the new church was more exciting. Occasionally, the children in his age group at the new church performed child-oriented skits. My son was entertained. To a child, isn't that all-important? Shouldn't I strive to keep him and my two daughters interested in going to church?

But a large and startled part of me protested, "That is *not* all-important. Not by a long shot."

No, the important issue is to come to Christ. To lead a Christian life, in the way Christ and those who lived with him taught, so we can create a better life here for ourselves, our families, and our world; but more critically to find ourselves one day in a much better and eternal life with Christ.

Isn't that what "religion" and faith is for? Didn't I long ago commit—vow, in fact—that in the raising of my children and in my married life, I would follow and teach faith in Christ as the Catholic Church confesses?

Hitting Close to Home

The relatively small Evangelical church we initially attended part-time soon gave way to a “mega” church. My “Sure, we’ll go to Protestant services occasionally” turned into attending this megachurch three or even four times a month. However, as time passed and my youngest daughter missed the entire year of Catholic education leading to her first Communion, I faced a growing daily struggle.

Was I doing the right thing? When I was confirmed, I committed myself to the Church and the Holy Spirit. I promised to bring my children up Catholic. I promised during our wedding, celebrating the sacrament of matrimony, to live out a Catholic life. Now I felt a threat to the unity and future of our family. How could my most intimate relationships survive if we could not share the most intimate matters of faith?

Were my intentions of seeing other Christians as fellow Christ-followers false? Was my view of Christian unity and fellowship a reality, or was it just a nice sentiment to make myself feel better as long as other Christian expressions of the faith remained outside myself and my family?

An Ecumenical Upbringing

Over the past eighteen years, I have gone from listening to, reading, and appreciating Evangelical leaders on the radio, Internet and bookshelves, to scrutinizing what they teach, why they teach what they teach, and the outcomes of those theologies. Facing new challenges raised by my Evangelical brethren, I looked equally hard

at my Catholic faith. I and my children were now questioned by good and sincere Christians who denied we Catholics were even Christian. In fact, many held that we are instead enemies of God. How should I address these issues?

Could I lead my Evangelical brethren to a deeper appreciation and acceptance of the “Christian” nature of the Catholic faith? Could I transfer to my fellow Catholics some of the ideas and practices of the Evangelical churches I find beneficial for our 2000-year-old expression of the faith?

I decided long ago that I didn’t have all the answers. Perhaps— just perhaps— my church didn’t have all the answers. To this day the Catholic Church holds councils and synods to address the needs and questions of a changing world. I never felt I and my fellow Catholics alone could be saved. The Catholic Church itself teaches all validly baptized Christians are part of the catholic (“universal”) family of God, part of my church. Perhaps an *exclusive* perspective on salvation would damage my ability to love non-Catholics and attract non-believers to the faith.

At the same time, having been brought up in a positive and devoted Catholic family, I love the Catholic faith. I was troubled that Evangelicals believe all truth is found in the Bible yet at the same time disown the Catholic Church, which from its earliest centuries gathered, verified, transmitted, studied and taught from those same biblical texts.

I needed justification, at least for my own peace of mind, for my being Catholic. For my children, I needed

clear reasons for holding with the Catholic faith, and in a larger sense, for explaining why that faith should be acceptable—at the very least—to the non-Catholic Christians we live among. To be open to “fundamentalist” Evangelical teachings, I also had to expose my children to, and reconcile them with, the “fundamental” Christian faith—Catholicism. Where appropriate, I needed to demonstrate why the Catholic faith is vital for my growth as a Christian and theirs.

In a unique way I have been challenged to grow. I have been led upon a thirteen-year path toward reconciliation. Reconciliation with what God requires, what my personal vows demand, what the future holds for my children and my direction within my church(es). This path is the theme of this book. In short, the theme of discovering the “fundamental” future of my eternal soul.

A Practical Hope

As a Catholic interfacing with a second Christian faith community, I had little appreciation for the questions and challenges I would experience. I quickly realized my Evangelical brethren likewise could not comprehend the questions a Catholic like myself would ask. As I uncovered these challenges and the responses to them, I realized followers of all denominations need to appreciate the various expressions of our Christian faith. Not by choice but through a decade’s worth of sometimes difficult life-experiences, I find myself in a unique position to present the truths of Catholicism to those who hold aggressively anti-Catholic beliefs. With due respect for both perspec-

tives, perhaps we can take the first small steps toward unity within our Lord's family.

This is a vital task. As Jesus prays in John 17:20-21, it is by the outward unity of Christians that the world will come to believe that the Father has indeed sent his Son.

The following thoughts gelled as the primary aims of this book:

For Catholics:

- We belong to the “fundamental” Christian faith that Christ brought to the world.
- Our faith is deeply biblical.
- Our faith is additionally effective because it is sacramental.
- Ecumenical outreach to our Christian brothers and sisters is not optional.

For Other Christians:

- The main tenets of our faith are catholic (universal).
- The Bible we read is catholic. There is no single “exclusive” interpretation of scripture.
- The original Reformers did not seek to deny the sacraments of the Church.
- Christ calls on us to also reach out to our Catholic brothers and sisters