

Dr. Eduardo J. Echeverria – Seeking the Answers to Life’s Basic Questions

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Dr. Eduardo J. Echeverria

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“You made us for Yourself, and our hearts find no peace until they rest in You.” In this statement, the philosopher-theologian St. Augustine of Hippo (a.d. 354–430) claimed that nothing less than God can completely satisfy the restless quest of man for peace — for the truth, for the good, for happiness. In other words, God is our ultimate fulfillment.

This is also the sentiment of the opening question and answer of the Baltimore Catechism:

“Why did God make you?”

“God made me to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him for ever in the next.”

I did not, however, always know the answer to that question.

Early Years

In 1950, I was born in Merida, the capital city of Yucatan, Mexico, the second of five children. When I was almost two years old, we left our Mexican roots and immigrated to the eastern part of the United States. For a short time, we lived in Manhattan but then moved up north to the Bronx.

My Catholic parents were firm believers in the importance of Catholic education. So I spent my formative years at Our Lady of Lourdes grammar school and Immaculate Conception School, and then on to Mount St. Michael Academy, an all-boys high school run by Marist Brothers. I graduated in 1969.

I had been baptized, confirmed, and catechized a Catholic, yet I do not remember ever thinking seriously about personally turning toward God and away from sin by making a heartfelt commitment to Christ. I was like many teenagers: The Church’s proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ just did not seem relevant to my life. I never made a conscious choice to be an atheist; rather, I just assumed that the Church had nothing to say to me.

Aside from the usual things, I lived my late teens in the “adversary culture” of the late 1960s: the Woodstock generation, the protests against U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and the counterculture’s spiritual and moral critiques of the emptiness and inauthenticity of the established society. Many of my boyhood friends were swept away by the drugs and music, the philosophy of “free love,” absolute freedom, and self-expression. Thankfully, several close friends and I recognized that drugs, sex (and more sex), and rock ‘n’ roll were not the answer to life’s meaning and purpose, and we resisted the dynamics of this culture.

In my resistance, I began to ask myself: “Does God exist? If He does, why did He make me?” Not remembering where to turn for answers, I began searching for direction in my life through the works of authors popular at the time, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Herman Hesse. It was the summer of 1970.

L'Abri Fellowship

That summer, I made my first trip to Europe. In Amsterdam, a girl at a youth hostel told me about L'Abri Fellowship, a community in Switzerland where young people came from diverse cultures and religious backgrounds searching for answers to questions about God, man, and the meaning of life. I don't remember her telling me that L'Abri was an Evangelical Christian community, only that staying there was free for the first ten days.

For a guy on a tight budget, therefore, L'Abri sounded like the place to be. Within a few days, I was off for Huemoz, Switzerland, a little village about seven miles up into the Swiss Alps near the city of Montreux, two hours from Geneva.

The first person I met at L'Abri was Os Guinness, whom I later came to know as a first-rate thinker and a deeply committed Christian. While he was deciding where I would stay, he gave me a copy of Francis Schaeffer's classic book, *The God Who Is There*. Schaeffer, along with his wife, Edith, had founded L'Abri Fellowship in 1955.

You can imagine my surprise — more exactly, my bewilderment — when I learned that they had established L'Abri for the purpose of evangelizing people for Jesus Christ by demonstrating the character and reality of God by the way the community lived, taught, and prayed. The singularly unique purpose of this community was to present the gospel of Jesus Christ as the answer to all life's basic questions, so that nothing less than God, they claimed, could completely satisfy my restless quest for truth, for the good, for happiness.

After ten days at L'Abri, I responded by fleeing — not just the place, but more specifically, God. I rationalized leaving by telling others and myself that Christian faith required a demanding change of life that wasn't really for me. Thus I left, hitchhiking with a friend to Rome.

But God would not let me get away that easily. Exhausted from hitchhiking and running out of money, I found myself a couple of weeks later unable to get into Spain without a visa. One night in a French town bordering Spain, I met two American guys. I began telling them about L'Abri and realized that I was persuading them to accompany me back. The L'Abri community, with genuine, Christian charity, welcomed me back with open arms.

From that moment on, I never looked back. I spent the rest of the summer there, and in time, I returned to Jesus. In faith through God's grace I accepted the fundamental truth that the ultimate fulfillment of life to which God calls us is in Jesus Christ — the love of the Father manifested in the gift of the Son and communicated by the Holy Spirit.

I now knew that God put me into this world to know, to love, and to serve Him. I discovered that this truth was not merely a matter of faith but — in contrast to those who said that there are no rational grounds for such believing — a reasonable assent of the mind. A Christian commitment involves accepting intellectually that certain things are true; that faith and reason are not antagonists but allies; that there are sound arguments for the reasonableness of the Christian faith. However, this was just the beginning of my journey home.

In the summer of 1970, I came wholeheartedly to acknowledge, assent to, and believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. I responded in faith, repentance, and obedience to what I would later come to realize I had received at my infant baptism some twenty years earlier. At that time, however, I did not see any essential connection between the Sacrament of Baptism, spiritual rebirth, and salvation. In fact, Francis Schaeffer insisted that I be baptized again when I made my public confession of faith before the L'Abri community.

Being a neophyte, I trusted Schaeffer's judgment. He taught that Baptism as an external rite actually effects nothing and plays no role in determining our spiritual state before God in Christ. Years later, when I was more theologically mature, I realized that Schaeffer, a Presbyterian Calvinist, like the Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox,

the Anglican, and the Lutheran, understood the rite of Baptism to have some covenantal meaning. Still, he did not believe what I later came to accept as the truth of Catholic teaching: that the act of Baptism itself actually effected the grace of regeneration, washing away the stain of Adam's original sin that we, as children of Adam, have inherited.

Shortly after returning to the United States, I moved to Chicago with a good Christian friend I had met at L'Abri. My Christian experience at L'Abri had given direction to my life in more than one sense. It was there that I discerned my calling to the academic life, particularly to studying philosophy and theology. With two years of college work to finish, however, where was I to go?

Further Studies

Through this concatenation of Christian friends, I enrolled at Trinity Christian College in suburban Chicago in the fall of 1971. Once at Trinity, I was introduced to the neo-Calvinist Amsterdam school of philosophy and theology and began to study the great theological writings of Herman Dooyeweerd, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and G. C. Berkouwer. I graduated from Trinity in June 1973, having spent my last semester abroad in the Netherlands participating in a Trinity program at the University of Leiden.

My plan was to do graduate studies at the Free University of Amsterdam, the bastion of the Amsterdam school of philosophy and theology. It was the summer of 1973, and I was now a committed Christian in the Reformed tradition of Dutch neo-Calvinism.

At this point in my journey home, I understood the one Christian faith to have many interpretations and expressions — Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Evangelical, and others — but I had come to accept the Reformed tradition as the most authentic interpretation of the Christian faith. Central in this tradition were the writings of the Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) and Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), theologian, politician, and founder of the Free University of Amsterdam.

This tradition's unique understanding of the biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption built upon the intellectual formation I had received at L'Abri. The world, including man and his works, is an actual manifestation and exercise of God's goodness and gift of creation. At the same time, there are also fallenness, evil, destructive powers, idols, and, yes, sin, as violation of the will and purpose of God.

The whole of creation is fallen. Thanks be to God, however, His work of redemption was cosmic in scope, restoring life in its fullness and delivering the whole creation, including man and all his works — not the least of which is the life of the mind — from sin.

Furthermore, God has called us in Christ to be His coworkers by cooperating in His mission for renewal, for realizing His Kingdom, for making the world holy. In the phrase of Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Neo-Calvinism is a world-formative Christianity, a tradition of holy worldliness."

After eight years of being steeped in the Amsterdam school of philosophy and theology, I received my Ph. D. in September 1981. Still, I was restless. The liturgical life of the church in the Reformed tradition was deeply unsatisfying.

My studies of the history of the Catholic Church led me to discover that the Church had an ancient liturgy that was rooted in her sacramental life, a life that was wholly biblical and evangelical, that is, flowing directly from the gospel of Jesus Christ. I became convinced that the Reformed tradition wrongly rejected the Catholic Church's teaching about the sacraments, the liturgy — especially the sacrifice of the Mass — and her piety as it was chiefly expressed in the Council of Trent. This was a first but nonetheless decisive break for me with some aspects of the Reformed tradition.

Over the next eight years, I examined and found wanting other aspects of classical Reformed Protestant

teaching, particularly the doctrines of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. Through the writings of great men of faith such as Thomas Aquinas, Blessed John Henry Newman, and Blessed Pope John Paul II, I moved away from the Reformed tradition and became an Anglo-Catholic.

Everything Converging on Rome

By fall 1991, I had held teaching posts in South Africa, the United States, and Canada, and by the next spring, everything in my mind and heart was converging on Rome. I was ready to heed Christ's call to embrace His Body, the Catholic Church, as the one true fold: I wanted her antiquity; her unity; her orthodoxy; her Magisterium, or teaching authority, manifested in all teachings about faith and morals, that Christ had founded in Peter and his apostolic successors; her episcopal hierarchy; and her mission to teach all nations and to preach the gospel to every creature so that all may attain salvation, faith, Baptism, and the fulfillment of the commandments.

All this I now accepted as wholly evangelical. As I put it to my last Anglican pastor, everything that drew me to the Anglo-Catholic tradition was Catholic in origin, and the Holy Spirit was now guiding me to accept the fullness of truth in the Catholic Church. To quote the title of Scott and Kimberly Hahn's popular book, I was headed to "Rome sweet home."

The Apostle Paul had written to Timothy that "the Church of the living God" was "the pillar and ground of the Truth" (1 Tm 3:15). For twenty-two years of Christian searching, I had been trying to discover the truth about this Church revealed by God in His written Word. It was only later that I discovered a prayer of the Church that, using different words, accurately expressed my longing to come to a fuller knowledge of God in Christ. I record now in this chronicle the prayer for others who are searching for the truth about Christ's Church:

Lord God, since by the adoption of grace, You have made us children of light: do not let false doctrine darken our minds, but grant that Your light may shine within us and we may always live in the brightness of truth.

I knew that the Christian life could only be grounded in authentic Christian doctrine, that is, in truth. St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Blessed John Newman, and Blessed John Paul II had taught me this, and early on in my Christian experience, Francis Schaeffer had done so as well. Thus, I could not accept, any more than Newman, the doctrine he called religious liberalism, namely, "that truth and falsehood in religion are but matter of opinion; that one doctrine is as good as another; that the Governor of the world does not intend that we should gain the truth; that there is no truth; that it is enough if we sincerely hold what we profess."

These claims, as Newman saw, were incompatible with any recognition of the Christian faith as true.

In this light, I understood my conversion to be both a personal commitment and a free assent to the whole truth that God has revealed about His Church. Significantly, this conversion was my response in faith and obedience to Christ's high-priestly prayer to the Father: "That they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

The interpersonal communion of Persons that characterizes the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of the Church's unity. So I now knew in truth that if I were to enter more deeply into the life of God, I must enter into fuller communion with the Church of Christ.

The ecclesiology of Vatican II is that the "Church [of Jesus Christ], constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that succession" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). The Catholic Church in a unique way is the fully and rightly ordered expression of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Vatican II also taught that all Christians, all those who are "in Christ," are truly, genuinely, but imperfectly, in communion with the Catholic Church. "[I]n some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them

also He gives His gifts and graces, and is thereby operative among them with His sanctifying power” (*Lumen Gentium*, 15).

This very important teaching helped me to make sense of the “many elements of sanctification and of truth” that I found throughout my Christian experience — from L’Abri to the Reformed and Anglo-Catholic traditions of Protestant Christianity. Indeed, I now knew them to be gifts and graces that the Spirit of Christ used as instruments to bring me home.

At the same time, the teaching of Vatican II, recently reiterated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “does not treat these [elements of sanctification and of truth] as autonomous and free-floating,” as Dominican Father Aidan Nichols puts it. “[R]ather do they derive from the fullness of gracious truth Christ has given His holy Catholic Church, and coming from that source, carry a built-in gravitational pull back — or on! — towards the Church’s unity.”

I Found My Way Home

The inner dynamism of these gifts and graces toward Catholic unity, that essential mark of the Church as Christ willed her to be, is what brought me home. In this sense, my conversion essentially involved bringing to fulfillment in my own life a unity already given by God as His gift in founding His Church. In the spring of 1992, I became a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Massapequa Park, on Long Island in New York.

For about three years after my return to the Catholic Church, I continued to teach at Molly College, a Catholic liberal arts college in Long Island founded by the Dominican Sisters of Amityville. I longed to be more directly involved in serving Christ and His Church, however. I could not imagine what He had in store for me. By January 1996, I was teaching philosophy at Conception Seminary College in Conception, Missouri. I rejoiced in God’s blessing for this new opportunity to trust and serve Him.

The singularly most important thing about teaching at Conception Seminary College was being of service to Christ and His Church by helping the seminarians to discern, in the process of priestly formation, whether Christ was calling them to the sacramental priesthood. A priest is above all a faithful servant of Christ and a steward of the mystery of salvation, the new life of grace communicated by the Church in her sacramental life — the love of the Father manifested in the gift of the Son and communicated by the Holy Spirit, which is present fully and unsurpassably in Christ’s redemptive sacrifice on the cross (see 1 Jn 4:9–10). My own contribution in this process of discernment was chiefly in the realm of philosophical formation, a critical and creative engagement with the history and problems of philosophy in the light of Divine Revelation.

So I found my way home by means of the gifts and graces of the Spirit of Christ. I have used the image of journeying home as the guiding theme in this chronicle of my return to the Catholic Church to describe my life’s walk with God. Yet the journey home has still not ended for me and all those who are, as the New Testament puts it, “in Christ,” that is, in communion with the Body of Christ that is the Church.

We are the journeying People of God, the Pilgrim Church, and the Church promises to bring us to our home in heaven (see Phil 3:20; Heb 11:10; 13:14). This eschatological hope also embraces the fallen creation, now redeemed in Christ and headed toward the fullness of the kingdom, which is the new heaven and the new earth (Rev 21:1–8) realized in glory at the end of time.

We have not yet reached our final destination, however. Meanwhile our present life is not a mere waiting room. As Christ’s faithful people, we are called to announce and extend the kingdom here on earth. In the words of *Lumen Gentium*:

The Church, consequently, equipped with the gifts of her Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility, and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God. She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While she

grows, the Church strains toward the consummation of the kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

Thus, we are still on the road yearning to know the love of Christ, sharing in His glory, which surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God, “with the joy native to the life of the Trinitarian Persons,” as Father Nichols puts it, in our heavenly home (see Eph 3:19).

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