

Dear Lloyd and Michelle,

Spring 2001

Hello again, at long last. I hope this note finds you and your family well and in good spirits. Here's wishing you the best of all God's blessings in the new year. (Please see our enclosed Christmas letter for our goings-on in 2000.)

Let me begin by offering my apologies for the slowness of my response to your letter and the tape from the Presbyterian pastor in Tacoma. I didn't intend to take so long to let you know how I appreciated hearing from you. Your package arrived in April of last year, shortly before Gary and I moved from our apartment into our first house together, and as I'm sure you know, projects and problems crowd in on your time, and – before you know it, it's Christmas, and then it's February, and then... So, I'm glad to have the time to sit at the computer and compose a few thoughts to share. (I've actually been working on this off and on for a couple of months now; I'm hoping to finally finish it and get it off to you in time to wish you all a happy Easter.)

Now, to the issue at hand: When I first received your letter and listened to the tape attacking the Pope and the Catholic Church, I mulled over all sort of ways to respond to it. Cards on the table: Gary and I both were confirmed in the Catholic Church in the spring of 1999, and we have been so blessed by the experience of His powerful presence in the Church that Pastor Rayburn's arguments against Catholicism are pretty much like water off a duck's back. I thought at first that I might try to marshall some big theological guns in response – e.g., sending you some material by Dr. Scott Hahn (who I think you must have heard of) or Karl Keating's *Catholic Answers* pamphlets that address the issue of the papacy (and “sola Scriptura”) directly and thoroughly. Michelle, I'm sure you remember me as one who loved to bat theological questions back and forth, and I thought of all sort of clever replies that I could write down and craft into a mini-*Summa Theologica* (that's Thomas Aquinas' great work) for you, with arguments and prooftexts so tight as to be totally unanswerable. But, that idea began to be a burden – it'd be a lot of work, for one thing, and I have to admit that other (smarter) people have done it much better than I. (I did decide finally to send a few things along that I found helpful in my studies.) After more thought and prayer, and after re-reading your letter again, I thought it might be best to simply share the story of my spiritual walk with you.

When I first started investigating traditional Christianity in the summer of 1996, I was very much in “search mode” as to what God meant by the word *church*. For the previous 4 years (since I returned from California in 1992), I had been with Summit Fellowships, D. and J. M.'s house church network that “spun off” from New Song. I believed (and still believe) very deeply in D.'s teaching that the Church is not primarily programs, denominations, or anything else besides people. In the summer of 1996, however, I had what one might call a “falling out” with someone in my small group, and it was handled so poorly by the leadership that I ended up leaving Summit by November of that year. Without naming names or going into gory details, the issues and questions that were brought to a head by the situation were these:

- ❖ If the Church is people, what people are those? Just the ones that are in my face every week/every day? Where do my family or friends fit in if they're not “saved” (according to however my group interprets the Bible to define that) or going to my church? Do I have any responsibility/recourse to Christians outside my little conclave? Does the idea of “a faithful remnant in every denomination”/an “invisible Church” really make any difference in terms of a real experience of Christian unity? What does it mean to be “one body in Christ”?
- ❖ What's the nature of Christian leadership? What does God's appointed authority functioning in the Church look like?

- ❖ As an evangelical Protestant, I was taught to regard art for its own sake (apart from overt evangelistic purposes) with suspicion, even though I've always been involved with music. I love art and music deeply because of how it speaks to the depth of my soul – beyond my intellect, even beyond my emotions. I know what it's like to have a spiritual experience with a work of art, especially with music; this is what my time with charismatic Christian groups taught me, in contrast to my Baptist upbringing. How is visual art (paintings, statuary) any different? Why was the traditional Church able to support and create fantastic works of art that stand as monuments to God in Western culture (Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel and Pieta, early Christmas carols), while the best evangelicals can manage is a good pop singer or two, Thomas Kincaid, and a mediocre movie every now and then?

At the same time that I was asking these big questions, I had been hanging out with some friends from Atlanta who were newly converted Catholics. I had met a fellow by the name of Rod Bennett (the person who compiled the early Church fathers quotes enclosed) the previous year at JPUSA's Cornerstone Festival, where he was involved in a series of lectures within the festival called "The Imaginarium". These lectures focused on Christianity, pop culture, and the imagination, with subjects ranging from the works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald to *Star Wars*, *Godzilla*, the old Universal Studios monster movies, and *The X-Files*. Rod had been publishing a magazine called WONDER: The Children's Magazine for Grown-Ups that had features on all these types of things, approaching them with wide-eyed reverence, being free to enjoy them while at the same time doing tough-minded analysis of them from a Christian standpoint. In his writing and in his lectures at Cornerstone, Rod emphasized that science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories are the main way in which our culture talks to itself about what happens when the supernatural breaks into space and time (from either above or below), which is, of course, a very spiritual sort of discussion. Rod's talent in his lectures was in making the connections clear for us regarding "the story behind the story", e.g. between Tolkien's Middle Earth or Lewis' Narnia or Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* and the traditional Christian worldview. Needless to say, I ate this stuff up, as did many hundreds of other people who stumbled into the tent at various times to hear the speakers, to watch movies, or just to hang out with other people who liked all this "weird" stuff.

Rod's thoroughly Christian, though not conventional, approach to art and pop culture was a great refreshment to me, and actually confirmed some opinions that I had held for a long time, but didn't share too often with Summit members for fear of being condemned or misunderstood. As I listened to other lecturers hold forth on the lives and works of Chesterton and Lewis, I learned that through their respective Catholic and Anglican backgrounds, they had internalized a pattern of symbols, rituals, and sacraments that formed their imaginations in such a way as to spill over into the alternative worlds they created. There's something about the way the "magic" (i.e., the miraculous) works in Middle Earth that makes it "ring true" to the human spirit – there are principles involved that are based on the way humans are and who God is from a Christian point of view. For example, true and lasting power only comes to him who is worthy – one who will humbly use it for the good of others. Those who grab for power may capture it briefly, but it won't last – their selfishness will catch up with them. Those who aspire to good must struggle against evil – must prove themselves worthy, and/or trust and obey the instructions and maps of the wise ones gone before. Tolkien's works and other fantastic stories are a sort of dramatic exploration of these principles. They make use of powerful symbols, such as rings, old sages, robes, keys, food, washings, crossings, and battles. This pattern of symbolic actions is what goes on in liturgical worship – all of these things are employed in the re-enactment of the great drama of the story of our faith, of how Jesus breaks into space and time and takes us up into the presence of God, and how He gives us strength and power to continue His work of love on the planet. I

began to get a glimpse of how it might be possible for God to actually *be there* in sacraments such as the Lord's Supper and Baptism – not just in my head because I believe it, but really break into space and time, revealing Himself in some sort of objective way. I began to think about how art and music, not just worship music but my own music, might possibly be able to be a vehicle for a sacramental reality of some sort in Jesus' hand.

At the same time I was listening to these lectures at Cornerstone and getting all jazzed about these ideas (this is Fourth of July weekend of 1996, now), I was smack in the middle of an awful-feeling-in-the-pit-of-your-stomach conflict with my house church group (a bad roommate situation), and I worried about how I was going to deal with the situation when I got home. At one point during the festival, I explained my situation to Rod looking for some moral support, and unfortunately, he took the opportunity to get on a soapbox about traditional Church authority structures. I was very sensitive about all of those issues, and I was not going to go there. But, I found that I was comforted to some degree by the ideas I was soaking in, and hope began to rise in my heart that life might possibly get better if I could incorporate them somehow.

On the last day of the festival, Sunday, Rod and his wife Dot took me to Mass with them in the small town of Macomb, IL. I don't mind saying that I was in a very vulnerable state of mind that morning. At the same time that my mind was being stretched with these new ideas about liturgy and art, the stress and confusion of the situation at home was serving to dig me up, so to speak, from my emotional attachment to Summit. As I sat (stood, knelt) there in church with them, I felt a real deep longing and need for Jesus to meet me, and as I looked up toward the altar and the tabernacle (the large container used to keep the consecrated bread/Host), I began to allow myself to think that maybe, just maybe, Jesus' presence could really be there - in a special, mysterious, beyond-understanding sort of way. The thought was a comfort to me, I don't quite know in what sense. I just felt like I was - getting warm by the fire.

Then, I had my first "trap door" experience in terms of encountering Catholic teaching. After Mass, we were driving to a nearby Pizza Hut for lunch, and Rod, the never-daunted Catholic evangelist/apologist, asked me, "Well, Kath – what did you think of that? What was it like for you?" I was about ready to burst into tears, but at the same time, I was mad at Rod for not having really listened to my point of view in earlier theological discussions we'd had that weekend (see 2 paragraphs ago). I told him, "Rod, I'm not ready yet to have that conversation with you – I need some more time to process this." Rod was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "Well... um... if I could, I just wanted to apologize for my kinda steamrolling over you earlier when we were talking about stuff. Can we have that conversation?" Surprised, I said, "Sure", and so then the three of us had a really great conversation in which Rod told me that he valued my opinion and thought I was an intelligent person, and a good addition to the discussions at the Imaginarium, and that he respected me, which he had never said to me before and which I very much needed to hear in the midst of what I was going through. My life was teetering on the brink of change (in what direction, I had yet to find out), and I really just needed his and Dot's support as friends right then. So, from there, we were both able to open up a little more and get back to the experience of Mass and other things, and at one point, I shared with them something that I had learned at Summit in regard to importance of community and the Lord's Supper.

In I Corinthians 11, there is a familiar passage which is used in many churches as a preface for communion – "But I received from the Lord Jesus that which I also delivered to you, that on the night He was betrayed, Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is My body'..." (vv. 23-32). However, the important thing to remember is the context of this passage. Starting at v. 11, Paul is actually berating the Corinthians for screwing up the Lord's Supper – basically saying, "Whatever you guys do when you get together, it's not church."

There are divisions among you; one leaves hungry, another gets drunk – in fact, you make it worse” (vv. 11-22). Then, he offers the instructions in vv. 23-32 as a correction – “This is how you do it.” Then in v. 33, again he picks up the theme of the community – “So, when you get together, wait for one another...” (vv. 33-34). So, in focusing on the connection, the phrase *discerning the body of Christ* (v. 29) becomes the most significant. The point is, whatever you may believe about the bread and the wine, the phrase *the body of Christ* refers as at least as much to the people in the room as to the bread and wine. We are, in fact, “transubstantiated” into the actual body of Christ through the Lord’s Supper.

As I was explaining this to Rod and Dot, at this point Dot piped up and said, “Well, that’s Catholic theology.” I stopped short. I was stunned. “What?” “Yes – both Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believe that the transformation occurs both in the elements and in the people gathered.” This was quite unexpected news. I had thought that my commitment to the body of Christ as people first separated me from all traditional forms of Christianity – only to discover that this concept is integral to the celebration of its most important sacrament.

I began to consider some of the answers that Rod was giving me in regard to the ever-burning question of *what is church?* All I knew at that point was that I had to admit that I was unhappy at Summit. For the previous 4 years, Summit had been a good place for me to recover from the beating that my spiritual life took when I was working in the Christian retail industry – I was a classic burnout case. In Summit, I had felt free to be myself – I didn’t have to lead great worship music to be holy or accepted, but people valued other contributions I made just as an ordinary member of the group. As I began to heal from my exhaustion and come back to the true calling and visions that God had given me for my life, I began to be drawn again toward the art/music world, really wanting to work more in the mainstream with non-Christians and be a witness in that field, rather than just within the confines of the church or the Christian subculture. I felt a bit uncomfortable about sharing this with Summiters, though, because of an unspoken but very strong “secular music is evil” attitude. I began to write articles for the Summit newsletter trying to combat this idea just from a music history standpoint, and by the reactions I got, I realized that I was making other people uncomfortable. So, I began to just keep my mouth shut about such things. I continued to help lead worship at large group gatherings and so forth, but in terms of ministry outside the Summit conclave, there didn’t seem to be much interest or support.

When I first joined the group in 1992, Summit’s structure was pretty healthy in that there was a board of elders that oversaw D.’s work, and many of the elders were leaders of small groups. These groups would meet in homes during the week and then come together for a regular large group meeting on Sunday afternoons in a church building we rented. Some folks felt they were getting “meetinged out” after a while, and when D. heard of this, he began to tell people that if they had to choose between large group and small group, they should go to their small group. As attendance by Summit leaders and other regulars at the large group gathering dwindled, a sea change occurred in which these larger meetings began to attract non-Christians as well as “lone wolf”/“I’m-a-prophet-of-God-but-nobody-listens-to-me”-type Christians. I’ll tell you what, these meetings began to get real weird real fast because of the lack of leadership and guidance. The most frustrating question was: If the church is people, but non-Christians keep coming in the door, at what point can you call the meeting *church?* Sure, Jesus said, “where two or three are gathered together, there am I”, but how do you know what should be said or how to minister to people? What kind of guideline do you use to determine what people’s needs are, or what you should do to focus everyone’s thoughts on the Lord? “Follow the Spirit’s leading”, some would say. Well, we tried, believe me. And it seemed like everyone present had a different idea of what the Spirit’s leading was, and we’d debate about it endlessly. At the same time, in the small home groups, it was a constant struggle to reach any common goal or maintain any sort of momentum

in terms of outside service projects because each group was so intensely inwardly focused. We would get together once a week, have our potluck dinner, and then sit around and talk about the question of what we should talk about for 3 hours. Can you see how I began to wonder, “Is this really what Jesus meant for the true church to be?”

Meanwhile, back in the summer of 1996: When I got home from Cornerstone after my heady experiences with Lewis, Tolkien, and Mass, it was like the devil himself was waiting for me when I stepped off the plane. My roommate relationship went from bad to worse, and the emotional abuse I took for the next 3 weeks sent me to a place inside myself that I hadn’t been in a long time. I set up a counseling appointment with J. M. to try to figure out what was going on, and she said to me, “I wondered how long it was going to take you to come to me.” That’s a weird thing to say, I thought – but it fed my ego in a backhanded way, as if I was expected to be strong and self-sufficient. The conversation wandered; she did give me some hints as to how to manage the situation, but the upshot was that there was nothing really to be concerned about – it was nothing that I shouldn’t be able to handle on my own, with just a little more faith and prayer. The grand Summit vision of a Christian community based simply on everyone loving each other still seemed attainable. But, how was I to apply the abstract command to “love” in this situation – without a picture, without guidelines, without a clue? And, what about my hurts, my needs?

My roommate threw me out at the end of July. I was actually grateful. I called J. to tell her what had happened, and *she encouraged me to try to stay*, saying that my roommate needed my help and support. I was appalled. I told her no, and I moved out that weekend. Starting with that phone conversation and over the next few months, I began to realize (to my horror) that J. really wasn’t interested in being there for me – really didn’t want to know what my problem was or what I thought, but only wanted me and my roommate to “kiss and make up” as soon as possible, so as not to discourage others. When I found out that J. and other elders’ wives knew of the depth and intensity of the spiritual and emotional struggles that my roommate was going through before I moved in (J. was in fact counseling my roommate), but no one ever warned me clearly about what I was getting into, I felt betrayed. I had been emotionally beat up by this woman, but they were protecting her.

I continued to go to my Summit small group; my roommate was switched to a different small group under J.’s watchful eye. I understood from my small group leader that the elders’ board would take it up, and J. began to ask if she and my (former) roommate could meet with me so we could ask each other’s forgiveness. (Each other’s forgiveness? What had I done?) I talked to my mother about the situation (who is a licensed mental health professional), and I took her advice and went to see an independent therapist on my own, who encouraged me not to allow myself to be manipulated into setting up a meeting until I felt ready. Believe me, I knew that I had some spiritual work of my own to do – I had to forgive my roommate for what she had done. The Holy Spirit had made that much clear to me. I had begun to entertain the thought of leaving Summit, and I knew that if/when I left, I didn’t want to leave angry. I wanted to be able to move on with a clean slate – otherwise, people would assume that I had left the church on account of this bad situation and not because I was moving toward something else.

By the time September rolled around, I felt ready. When I arrived at the meeting, I had thought that at least a few of the elders would be there to help us with an objective view. It turned out that J. had planned for the meeting to be just the three of us, with no elders involved. (It ended up being five, including two elders’ wives - one who came to support me and one who came with my former roommate). Again, I felt abandoned by those in leadership – it seemed like the men felt this was just a squabble among women and didn’t require their attention. The meeting was at the M.’s house, and before we got started, D. walked in and gave a little speech, which boiled down

to “play nice, girls”. Then he walked out. I thought, Oh, God. There is no protection whatsoever for me here. What will happen now?

It was like a group therapy session gone horribly wrong. I was able to offer forgiveness to my roommate when (with some coaching and coaxing on J.’s part) she asked for it, and I was glad to give her as much as I could at that point – God had really given me a desire to release her from any sense of owing me anything, even though I had been deeply hurt. However, the tables turned when J. began to put words in my mouth, basically telling me to ask my roommate for forgiveness *for making her angry enough to throw me out*. (Ever read those Dear Abby quizzes that indicate whether you’re in an abusive relationship? The question about someone who blames others for setting them off? Notice any similarities here?) So, I was made to apologize for my fear, which caused me to avoid her and not be friendly, which enraged her and caused her to abuse me, which made me afraid...

I’m sorry. I know I said that I wanted to avoid gory details, but I think this helps provide some background in terms of what I was going through – make no mistake, what God was putting me through at that time. As it happens, this whole experience ended up being another “trap door” – this time into an understanding of the Catholic view of spiritual authority.

Summit had been founded on the concept that the Church consists of the Bible and people, and nothing else. That is, all that the Church is – all of its ministries, including the exercise of spiritual authority – can only flow from person to person through direct relationships. There is nothing that can legitimately be called a proper church “structure”; there is no such thing as clergy, since we are all “a kingdom of priests” by virtue of our baptism in Christ. D.’s desire was to create a plural leadership paradigm in which decisions would be made not by a few leaders or elders, not even by majority vote, but by consensus. Theoretically, the Holy Spirit would lead everyone to the same conclusion (or at least give dissenters the grace to submit to the majority), and the group could move ahead. Unfortunately, this is not a Biblical or Christian view of spiritual leadership. God gives us leaders as gifts (Eph. 4:11-16); the Bible describes leadership as a spiritual gift that some have and others don’t (I Cor. 12:17-19; see also the lists of qualifications in I Timothy). In theory, we were “being led by the Spirit”; in reality, we had chaos. If everyone leads, no one leads – and we’re back in the days of the Judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

In terms of how all this affected me, I realized that if direct personal relationships between Christians were supposed to be the only conduits of God’s grace, those friendships end up carrying a huge burden, with every word having to be spiritually charged with “ministry” and every action having to be perfectly holy – indeed, perfectly sacramental. Can mere human relationships bear all that Christ meant the Church to be? We were all trying to be spiritual people, no doubt, but at times our personalities and frailties would obscure what Jesus was trying to do. What then? Does that mean our access to God’s grace is hopelessly cut off whenever someone’s ego or sin gets in the way?

More background, for a second: In 1995, I had taken a class in church history at Western (Baptist) Seminary, just for fun. In reviewing the controversies that rocked the early church, my professor mentioned the persecutions and the difficulties posed by those who went apostate to save their lives, but then wanted back in the church once the danger was past. For example, what was a person to do if the elder/priest/bishop who baptized him had gone apostate? Did that mean the baptism was void and had to be done over? The elders/bishops studied the apostles’ teaching and came up with an answer: The power of God in the sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, etc.) works by virtue of the sacrament itself, not by that of the person administering it;

similarly, the source of spiritual authority in a leader is not the strength of their personality or character, but rather their office, i.e. their representative role, the fact that they stand in the place of Jesus in governing the Church.

In the midst of my crisis, God brought this concept to my mind, and I began to see how elegantly and completely this idea harmonized everything I'd learned about spiritual leadership up to that point. When spiritual authority is exercised in connection to an office (e.g., think of how a policeman's office represents the state's authority, how the office of a parent represents all moral authority to a child) and that authority or discipline isn't forced to flow solely through a personal relationship, the person can step out of the way, and Jesus can be clearly seen in whatever action is being taken. I realized that this was what I needed – this was what was missing in the situation. This is what had kept the Church of Jesus Christ from becoming a massive personality cult for thousands of years. Of course, one always hopes that Christian leaders are of good character, but if they're not, God promises us that He will always be there for us, even if the people around us screw up.

In this light, the traditional idea of the communion of saints began to make way more sense. I realized that D. was right about the church being people, but the Church actually is all of us – those passed before us into heaven, everyone on the planet bearing His name, and all those yet to be born who will one day accept His gift of grace. G.K. Chesterton (an influence on C.S. Lewis) once said, "Tradition is the democracy of the dead." In other words, sure, everyone gets a vote, but you've got to contend with the huge voting bloc of those that have come before us, and consider the impact on generations to come. I began to realize that if the saints in heaven are one with Christ and therefore care about what goes on the whole Body the way that He does, I could rely on their friendship and support as I wended my way toward a place where I could be part of a group calling itself "church" again.

I don't know if you heard about this, but as it happened, Summit imploded in a big way in March of 1997, a mere four months after I left. The issues I've mentioned in regards to spiritual authority, leadership, and outreach were among the reasons why. The entire elders' board resigned by June of that year, and membership dropped by half. D. and a few other house church leaders who stayed were of the opinion that those who left were simply weaker in faith than those who stayed – we just couldn't stand to be the "New Testament church, the true church". Be that as it may, I was just glad to be getting on with my life. As I visited Catholic churches and found small discussion groups for inquirers like myself, I was relieved to find other Christians who weren't all weirded out about art, people I could just talk to and be friends with, and I began to discover the depth of spiritual resources available to me as a baptized Christian – my heritage, my "roots", if you will.

OK, I think I'll start wrapping up. There's more to the story, but this is probably enough (too much?) for now. Thanks for your patience in wading through with me up to this point. There's just a few more things that I thought of while listening to the tape that I'd like to put forward for your consideration...

If you would have preferred a point-by-point refutation of the arguments that Pastor Rayburn presented, I could have done that – except that it wouldn't have gotten at the real issue, which is: How do we know what we claim to know about God, His son Jesus, the Bible, and the Church? Who do you trust to interpret the Scriptures? Who do you trust to translate the Scriptures? (When I was at New Song, I once overheard a couple of the elders arguing over the NASB and NIV translations of Romans 7 – whether the Greek word *sarx* was best translated *the flesh* or *human nature* for the modern reader, and all the theological implications of that.) Unless you

know classical Greek and Aramaic, you can't read the Scriptures in the original languages, and even if you could, what do you do when your best translation doesn't yield a clear meaning? Do you take the Baptist interpretation you grew up with, your current Presbyterian pastor's interpretation, the interpretation of the fundamentalist preacher on the radio, or that of the Vineyard fellowship down the street, or - ? And, an even bigger question – what does it mean to be “saved”? How do you know that you're saved – that you've come from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light, that you've been adopted into God's family? All Christian groups (and the cults, too) have definitions of that idea that differ to some degree – indeed, those differences are often the ones that caused them to break fellowship with one another in the first place. Pastor Rayburn said, “There is no other basis of Christian unity except that of true faith” – so what does “true faith” consist of? Who makes the decisions about what's part of the “true faith” and what's not? You? Me? How does that promote unity?

I submit that the early Church, those great men and women who came before us that we both know we are spiritually descended from, want to give us an answer to the question of “What is the true faith?” It is found in the Apostle's Creed, the oldest creed that church historians know of and the foundation of all orthodox Christian theology:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary,
Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
On the third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven,
And is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic Church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.

And, yes, it says right there that to be a Christian involves believing in the “holy catholic Church”. You will not be surprised to learn that the Catholic Church believes herself to be that catholic Church. No doubt you've heard Protestant pastors hold forth on how the word “catholic” in the Creed merely means “universal”. If you said that to a Catholic, he would simply nod his head, “Yes, universal – the Catholic Church is the universal Church.” I guess my problems with the Protestant understanding of a universal but “invisible church”, a spiritual bond of some sort between all “true believers”, include the following:

- ❖ Jesus said His followers were to be “a city on a hill that cannot be hid”. That says to me that the Church must be some sort of visible institution in society.
- ❖ In looking at church history since 1500, and also in my experience, it's been so common to hear of Christians fighting over conflicting Biblical interpretations and breaking fellowship with one another that it's hard to believe that any real unity could exist without being able to experience it intellectually or emotionally. If our unity in Christ

does exist (and it does because Jesus prayed for it), then why can't we experience it? Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another." It strikes me that the opposite is also true – if Christians don't have a way of practicing their love for one another as an integrated whole, how will anyone know who they are? How will they recognize one another? Pastor Rayburn on the tape said, "The remnant can be detected only by faith" – what is that, a warm, fuzzy feeling? How can we do that if we don't even have a common definition of what it means to be faithful? (But yes, you're right - somehow, through the Holy Spirit, we do often experience a sense of bonding with other Christians when we meet, no matter what denomination they are. There is a way to understand this that I'll talk more about below.)

- ❖ Correct me if I'm wrong, but Pastor Rayburn seemed to be saying, "Whatever Jesus meant in His prayer (for unity in John 17), He couldn't have meant" the Catholic idea of Christian unity, i.e., an actual, visible, single institution, with a central government and an established teaching authority. He seemed to say that we simply don't know yet what Jesus meant by "unity". Forgive me, but - what a copout! There are people dying and going to hell because of the division of the Church. There are people who hate our Lord Jesus because of how deeply some Christians hate each other. This is a serious issue, and it deserves more attention and effort in finding an answer than simply shrugging the question off to be answered in a more convenient way at a more convenient time.

I realize that these are huge, scary questions, and that life and death, heaven and hell hang in the balance of how they are answered. Believe me, one of the reasons why this response has taken me so long is that I don't want to approach such matters lightly. And, the process of actually "crossing the Tiber" into the Catholic Church, as one former evangelical put it, can be an excruciating experience – complete with loss of friends, disowning of family, and loss of livelihood. Some people have had it a lot worse than Gary and I, including my friend Rod, whose Baptist family ripped him up one side and down the other when he converted and still don't understand what happened to him. It's part of the cross Jesus gave him to bear, sad to say. So, this is most definitely a "count the cost" sort of thing and not a "Jesus will give you a brand new car!" sort of thing.

One thing I know for sure, though, is that you guys are saved – that I'll definitely see you in Heaven (but hopefully before then!), and there we'll have all the time and energy in the world to talk about the greatness and wisdom of God. The reason I'm so sure of this, based on my understanding of the ancient Church's teaching, is twofold. First, you both have received a Christian baptism. This very important sacrament is a conduit of real saving grace in your lives. This, in fact, is the basis of our unity in Christ and with Christ. This is how we know that our spiritual life has begun and we've been incorporated into the Body of Christ. Peter says, "Baptism now saves you" (I Peter 3:21). It wasn't until I was in the process of coming into the Catholic Church that I realized the significance of my baptism – how foundational it is in terms of the transformation that occurs by God's power and grace. I'm not sure if you know this, but the Catholic Church doesn't re-baptize people who've already received a Christian baptism (i.e. in water and in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). They regard it with respect, whatever kind of Christian did it and in whatever circumstance, and so when Gary and I came in, all we needed was to be confirmed. In fact, the new Catechism teaches that in essence, everyone who's baptized Christian is baptized Catholic, i.e. initiated into the universal Catholic Church in some way. Although it doesn't mean that you've got a free ticket to Heaven and you can sin all the way there (you've got to persevere and walk in the Spirit, as Paul says), the grace of your baptism, that appeal to God for a clean conscience and His gift of that to you, is always doing a powerful work in your soul because of His great power and love for you.

Secondly, at the rate you're going and with the questions you're grappling with, I don't think that the Holy Spirit is going to let you get away from Him. I believe that the Holy Spirit within you and the prayers of the saints that surround you (including me) will enable you to persevere in faith to the end, no matter where you go to church or how frustrated you may get with other Christians. What I would encourage you to do, though, is to be faithfully obedient to the truths that have been revealed to you. "If today you hear the voice of God, harden not your heart." That's what He's always saying to us, it seems.

*Whew. OK, I'll shut up now. Again, forgive me for the length of this letter – even though I've only been writing it for a few months, I've thought about it all year, since the day I opened the package you sent me. And I knew that God was at work in your hearts, and in my heart, and He just wanted me to let you know that. I do hope that we can continue this conversation, if you're interested (if you take a whole year to get back to me, that's OK – I'll understand ;^). My email address is lundquist3198@comcast.net. Maybe we can keep in better touch that way.

Until then, God bless you, and may His peace and joy fill your hearts this Easter.

Love in Christ,

Kathie