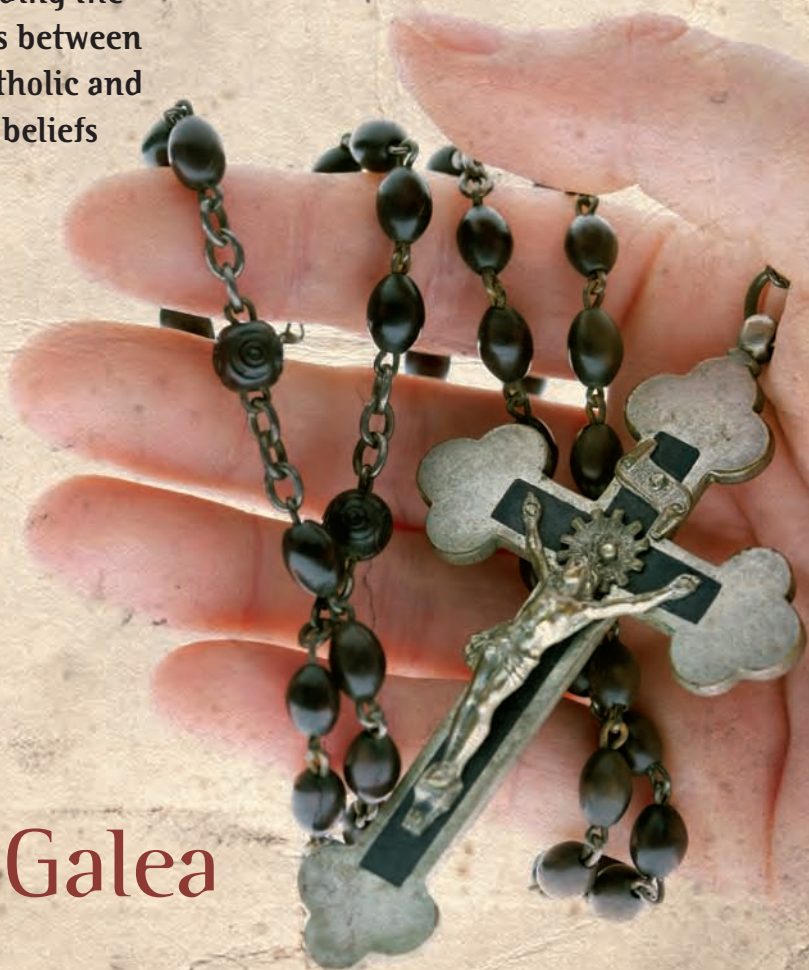


Nothing in my hand I bring

Understanding the differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant beliefs



Ray Galea

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For my dear wife, Sandy, and my three patient children,
James, Amy, Madeleine.



A big thanks to Tony Payne, without whom this
book could not have been written; to my parents,
Tom and Rita, whose love is never-ending;
and to St Alban's Multicultural Bible Ministry,
whose support enabled me to write this book.

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to thy cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

Rock of Ages

~ AM Toplady (1740-1778)

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Chapter 1

⊕ Growing up Catholic

SCHOOL WAS OVER for the day, and we were waiting for our buses outside the front gates of St Aidan's Primary School. I asked my friend, Charlie Gauci, "Which direction does your bus go to take you home?"

"My bus goes down this road and then turns right at the church that is not a Catholic church", he said.

I think that was the very first time it dawned on me that there were such things as churches that were not Catholic churches. I was eight years old. Little did I know then that thirty years later I would end up the minister of that church at the end of the road that was not a Catholic church.

I grew up in a devout Maltese Australian Roman Catholic home, which meant we went to mass three times a week—Sunday, Friday night and Tuesday Novena. To be Maltese was to be Catholic. No matter how tired my parents were at the end of the week on the farm, no matter which cousins we

visited on Sunday—and there were many—we always attended mass. (It’s a discipline I have since learnt to appreciate.)

Throughout my youth, my mother taught me that God was personal—not so much through formal lessons, but through everything she said and did. God-talk was always on her lips, and it left a lasting and profound impression on me. That was probably one reason I never doubted the existence of God.

Strangely, I have no memory of praying personal or conversational prayers as a family. Nevertheless, my mother diligently led us in saying the Rosary each night with no resistance from my father, who would sometimes be found with his head slumped back on the lounge chair gasping for air, fast asleep after a hard day’s work, while we giggled through “Hail Mary, full of grace ...”

My memories growing up as a Roman Catholic were mostly positive. Our parish priest, Father Morreau, was so deeply loved by everyone in the community—even the Anglicans—that they named the local reserve after him. As his altar boy for eight years, I remember him patiently answering my questions: “If the Pope died while visiting Australia, would they bury him in Australia or ship his body back to Rome?” And: “Could a boy become a pope?”

I clearly had high ambitions.

I was a Catholic child and then teenager during the time of Vatican II, the Church Council that brought in some major reforms. For example, unlike my brother I have no memory of the Mass being said in Latin, as it had been for over a thousand years before. More of the Bible began to be read in the Mass, and there was a strong push to have the homily or sermon connect with the Bible readings. There were

attempts to make the Mass understandable and an expression of fellowship—as seen by the introduction of the ‘sign or kiss of peace’ which we gave to each other (which was not to everyone’s liking). Ecumenism, or unity with other denominations, had become a much talked about topic, although my parents never exhibited any prejudice toward non-Catholics. My father judged a man on his character not his creed.

However, the change that struck me most forcefully at that time was in the public face of God. The stern God of judgement and wrath became more of a God of love and peace. It was almost matched by a change in the nuns who ran my primary school. The school went from being run by the Sisters of St Joseph, with their heavy, forbidding, brown habits, to the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, who wore a light white veil.

In the lead-up to my first holy communion, I remember being told of the fires of purgatory which, while not quite eternal, came close to images of hell itself. But as time went on, the God who was hard to please was replaced by the God who was quick to forgive. The change was typified (some years later) by a series of TV ads the Catholic Church ran, which asked the question through a catchy song: “When you get to heaven, what do you think He’ll say?” The answer was “G’day!”—where once we might have been threatened with “Get out!” After Vatican II, salvation appeared to be open for all, and not just Catholics.

I clearly remember learning the doctrine of the Trinity in second class from a wonderfully kind American nun who also assured me that Australia would never win the America’s

Cup. She had the Trinity right at least. Every prayer we prayed was ushered in by the self-blessing of the sign of the cross and the familiar words, “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”. The Trinity, which was revealed in the Bible and clarified in the fourth-century Nicene creed, confessed that Jesus was “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made”. I’ve since realized that I could have been a Catholic in the fourth century.

How I pray even now has been influenced by some of the prayers found within the first section of the Mass, called ‘the liturgy of the Word’. One of my favourites is the ‘Gloria in Excelsis’ from the fourth century:

You alone are the Holy One,
You alone are the Lord,
You alone are the Most High,
Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

It doesn’t get any better than that!

As I look back on my Catholic upbringing, there are lots of fond memories. I am indebted to the foundation I received, and for deep convictions on a number of ethical matters, such as the protection of the unborn.

I understand that not all Catholics share the same fond memories. Some endured the occasional vicious nun, who cracked the ruler over the knuckle for writing left-handed; or worse, a molesting brother or priest who destroyed the lives of the vulnerable. As time would reveal, Roman Catholicism would not be the only church to bear this shame.

But I have no story to tell like this. My parents were devout in their faith, my parish priest was sincere, and the nuns who taught me were mostly kind. It was truly a loving Catholic home and a caring Catholic community.

Even so, as I grew older, it began to dawn on me that being Catholic was more about belonging than believing. For a good number of Roman Catholics, going to mass, which still remains a day of obligation, did not seem to be an obligation at all. They just didn't go. In fact, some seemed quite comfortable to write 'Roman Catholic' on the census and yet openly profess that they did not even believe in God.

Growing up Catholic, I assumed that the majority of Australians belonged to this community I belonged to. As a Maltese Catholic, I had a truckload of relatives who shared the same faith. I attended a Catholic primary and secondary school, where pretty much everyone was Catholic. In fact, it wasn't until about fifteen years ago that I realized with a shock that only about a quarter of the population identified themselves as Catholic, and the vast majority of those were not at all devout.

The result was that I saw myself belonging to what I thought was the majority, and this gave me a sense of security and confidence. It also seemed to me that Catholic Church buildings seemed larger and much better attended.

Up until my late teens, I saw no real distinction between Protestants, the Orthodox and the Jehovah's Witnesses. In my understanding, if you were not Catholic you were part of a cult and most probably a Jehovah's Witness (who, interestingly, have a high success rate among Catholics). I did love the way my mum, who never took a backward step,

could out-talk and out-argue any member of the Kingdom Hall who knocked on our door.

Looking back, one of the oddest things about my Catholic upbringing was my attitude to Jesus. I may have prayed the ‘Gloria in Excelsis’ with its exalted view of Jesus as the supreme and only Lord, but I had no personal sense of Jesus’ complete authority over *my* life, or his centrality for the Christian life.

Perhaps it had something to do with my culture’s constant reference to Jesus as “the infant” (*il Bambin*), and the many statues depicting the infant Son of God in Mary’s arms. I certainly revered Jesus as a model of faithful and sacrificial obedience, and as a teacher second to none, but I would hardly say that he was the focus of my spirituality. In fact, like many Catholics, I was suspicious of people who made too much of Jesus, or spoke of friendship with Jesus in personal terms. They were ‘Jesus freaks’ and ‘Bible bashers’ as far as I was concerned, and were to be avoided at all times. I was much more comfortable with Mary being spoken of in such personal terms.

Like many young people, my late teens were a time when any relationship with God was going to be on my terms. I somehow managed to get God to agree with pretty much everything I did. He was most compliant, or so I thought.

While studying Social Work at Sydney University, I got to know Anne, who came from a home that did not believe in God. To my surprise, she started becoming one of those ‘Jesus freaks’. It began with her reading a Bible in her bedroom, and then deciding to surrender her life to Jesus. It did not take me long to realize that she had something I did

not have. The living Jesus, and not just God, was very real in her life.

One day Anne challenged me. “Ray,” she said, “Jesus is either Lord of everything, or he is a liar or a lunatic. Who do you think he is? You need to make a decision.” She could have said more but she didn’t need to. I realized the implications straight away. I could see that if Jesus was not my Lord, then I was in trouble. But since I was not prepared to change my lifestyle for anyone, I did what a lot of people do in those circumstances—I put the idea on the back burner and tried not to think about it.

That worked, at least for a while. A year later, in November 1980, I was living in the beach-side suburb of Bondi in a house full of travelling New Zealanders. Early one morning, I was walking near the sewerage outlet at Dover Heights when it came again to my mind that if Christianity was true and Jesus really was the Lord and the Son of God, then I was in big trouble, because I was ignoring the most important Person in the universe. I also realized that despite my Catholic upbringing and all the teaching and instruction I’d received, I had never seriously examined the claims of Christ for myself.

Fortunately, something else from my Roman Catholic youth came to mind at that point. I remembered the Bible being read at mass and Jesus saying, “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find ...” I understood this to be a promise that I would not be disappointed if I genuinely searched for Jesus. So I made a pact with God based on this promise. I vowed to read the Bible, and it was up to him to persuade me if it was true, and I presumptuously asked if he could do it in three weeks. I just didn’t see myself embarking

on a lifelong search for enlightenment. Patience was never one of my virtues.

I began my search with the Bible for two reasons. Studying history at university taught me that if you want to get to the bottom of something, you go to the primary documents. You don't simply read what other people said later about it—you try to get back to what was actually said and done. You examine the sources that are closest to the time. And those sources were obviously the books of the New Testament. Secondly, I reasoned that whatever differences there were among Christian denominations, one thing they all agreed on was that the Bible was the word of God.

So I read the Gospels. I read them for the first time as an adult, and I had but one question as I read: “Is Jesus the eternal Son of God?” If he was, then I was prepared to surrender my life to him. If he wasn't, I could walk away knowing that I had genuinely looked at the evidence.

Reading the Gospels like this, really for the first time, was a profound experience. I knew a lot of the stories. Familiar snippets and quotations and incidents kept rising up to greet me. But what was completely new and unfamiliar to me was the portrait of Jesus that emerged as I read. I have to say that I simply fell in love with the Jesus that I met in the Gospels. There was a ring of truth about him, and about what he said and did. This was Jesus, the Son of God, in all his glory, and I couldn't deny it.

Several weeks later, I was in the Hotel Bondi with two of my friends, Peter and Vince, both Catholics. They knew I had been reading the Bible, and they were both a bit concerned that I might become one of those ‘Bible-bashing Christians’.

They tried to dissuade me by listing out all the changes I would have to make if I were to become a Christian. Since we all sinned in the same areas, they knew very well the kinds of things I did, and what changes I would have to make if I decided to follow Jesus.

After twenty minutes of walking through all the changes I would have to make, the choice was pretty stark. I realized that I could keep living on my terms, doing all these things that I currently did for the next sixty years, and be cut off from God forever. Or I could surrender to Jesus as the Lord, make a completely fresh start, and enjoy forgiveness now and acceptance on the Last Day. The penny had dropped, and there and then I told Vince and Peter, “Guys, you have just persuaded me. I am a Christian.” This was the decisive change in my life, but it would not be the only change.

The first decision as a Christian was to confess that Jesus was my Lord. The second decision was to start living with him as my Lord—to stop doing those things that grieved him, and to start doing things that honoured and pleased him. At the time, my friends understandably thought it was a phase that would pass, but I had the taste of truth in my mouth. That truth was a person, the Lord Jesus.

If Jesus was to be my Lord and Saviour, I needed to think through which church to go to. I did not want to assume that just because I was born a Catholic, this was by definition the right choice. I knew I could just as easily have been born a Baptist or a Mormon. So I spent the next six months reading and talking to priests and ministers to find out the differences between Catholics and Protestants. How did each of their teachings compare with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles?

To my surprise and hurt, I gradually, reluctantly and painfully discovered that every ‘distinctive’ teaching of Roman Catholicism seemed to undermine the person and work of the Lord Jesus. A time came when I realized that the differences were not superficial, and that I could not with a clear conscience remain a Roman Catholic. I felt I could no longer remain within the Catholic Church and be true to the Lord Jesus.

Making that decision public before my friends was one thing; telling my parents, whom I deeply loved, was another. My mum didn’t mind me going to a Protestant church as well as going to mass. But to reject Catholicism must have felt to her like a personal rejection of her faith, her parenting and her community. It was a rejection of everything she held dear. And above all, it was a rejection of what she saw as the path to salvation.

My memory is that she cried every day for nearly two years because of my decision. No sin I turned away from was harder than seeing this impact on my mother. I was left clutching the words of Jesus: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37).



IT’S COMMON THESE DAYS to disparage searching for the truth. “What is ‘truth’ anyway?” people say. “It’s all just a matter of opinion.” It’s funny, though, how passionate we get about the truth when we are misquoted or misunderstood. Or when someone lies to us and rips us off—whether it’s a shop assistant or the government.

The truth really does matter. And the truth about Jesus matters most of all. Ask and it will be given to you, said Jesus. Seek and you will find. When I went searching for the truth, and found it in the person of Jesus himself, it eventually led me to the realization that the differences between Catholics and Protestants were large and significant. It led me to the unavoidable decision to leave the church I had loved growing up in.

As I write these words, the feelings well up inside me again—the pain of having hurt family members, the sense of having betrayed my culture and community, the accusations of arrogance (“What makes you think you know more than the Pope?!”).

But in the end, once you are convinced that something is true, integrity demands that you stand by those convictions. I remember as a teenager being inspired by two films about men who stuck to their convictions in the face of enormous pressure. One was *Serpico*, with Al Pacino playing an honest cop who would not compromise his integrity in the midst of a corrupt New York police force. The other, somewhat ironically, was *A Man for All Seasons*—the story of how Thomas More stood up to King Henry VIII when the King rejected the Roman Catholic Church to obtain a divorce.

Both men were men of conviction. They saw that the truth mattered, and that integrity mattered, and they were prepared to pay the price for their convictions.

Whatever your own views as you come to this book, my prayer is that you will seek the truth about Jesus, and that when you find it—as God promises that you will if you honestly seek—you will grasp it and hold it tight. For as hard

as the search can be, and as painful as the consequences may sometimes be, when you find the truth, as Jesus said, it sets you free.