

# THE NEW CATHOLICS

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Contemporary Converts  
Tell Their Stories

Edited by DAN O'NEILL

*With a Foreword by Walker Percy*

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CELIA WOLF-DEVINE

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*From New Age Christianity  
to the Catholic Church*

**I**n the mid-1970s I was living in Boston, teaching part time, and trying vainly to finish my dissertation in philosophy; each time I sat down to work on it I became totally blocked and panicked. Emotionally I was drained by conflicts with my family, and my periodic relationships with whatever man was most insistent in his pursuit of me at the time added to my turmoil. Spiritually I felt I was being worn down, herded in some inexorable way into a narrowing path—dying. I was grasping desperately for ways out; I learned transcendental meditation and began using the *I Ching* for guidance. Through it all, two old-timey country songs began to run through my mind, one about Jonah and the other about the prodigal son. “I believe I’ll go back home, acknowledge I done wrong.”

I met a woman at a party who told me about a wonderful man she’d been to who did psychic readings and gave spiritual guidance. Not wanting to get involved in any black magic, I asked if he was a Christian, and she replied that he was, or at least he read the Bible and had a crucifix and pictures of Christ. Encouraged by the *I Ching*, which gave me “turning point leading to abundance,” I made an appointment and set out alone on the several-hundred-mile trip to Rochester, New York.

The night before the reading I went to one of the regular meetings

of his students. The lecturer spoke about the importance of forgiveness for spiritual and physical health, and following this we had a healing meditation in which we concentrated healing energy on several members in turn. At one point during the meditation, I suddenly saw a woman's face dissolve as though seen through undulating water, and be replaced with the face of a bearded man. As we went out afterward for food, I felt an electric feeling, as though dormant mental powers had been awakened.

The psychic did readings in the basement of his unassuming suburban home. While I sat in a chair, I could see him dimly as he paced up and down behind a black curtain, smoking cigarettes. He told me a great deal about myself—my inability to trust my own judgment, my lack of emotional self-control, my negative thought patterns, my overemphasis on sex, my talent at speaking and writing, and my need for self-expression. He also reminded me of a sexually traumatic childhood experience that I had repressed, and pointed out that 1964-65 had been the year in which I had taken a wrong turn in my life spiritually. He said the face I'd seen the night before was the woman's "spirit guide" and that I had considerable psychic ability, including the ability to do magnetic healings and astral projection. Should I wish to develop my psychic gifts, he recommended contacting spiritualist churches and Eckankar, a new age religious group which emphasizes the practice of soul travel (bilocation).

Before I left, he taught me a meditation technique that involved visualizing various colors of light. He also gave me some "affirmations," which I was to repeat frequently during the day in order to develop more positive patterns of thinking. It is a basic principle of occult philosophy that thought creates reality, and that what we speak becomes reality. Thus, he said, if I could train myself in positive thinking, more positive things would happen in my life.

One affirmation, for example, was: "The infinite love of God ever enfolds me, bringing order, harmony, and peace into my mind, body, and affairs. Only good now manifests in my mind, body, and affairs."

So it was that I returned to Boston full of new hope, resolved to pursue spiritual growth and to avoid sexual entanglements. This would involve ending one relationship (which was winding down anyway) and resisting the temptation to slip into what promised to be a sexually intense, but otherwise meaningless, relationship with the man who repaired my car. As I drove, I repeated some of the affirmations: "All power is now given me in mind, body, and affairs. The power of God is now working through me to free me from every

negative influence. Noth mine to control my tho success, and to bless othe I am strong in God and i

The path I followed ir several things. First of al had learned the Lord's Pi gone to a Christian sumi at Saint Andrew's Episco tant, I had called on Jesu twelve, and He had com brought me peace and c always believed that Chr

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The idea of returning at this point. I had stu searing condemnations grace, and perceived th per-class institution. T for daily spiritual disci just sitting through a Church did not occur Catholics, except for a regarded as from the unconsciously adopted

<sup>1</sup>The affirmations the psy

negative influence. Nothing can hold me in bondage. All power is mine to control my thoughts, to vitalize my body, to experience success, and to bless others. I am strong in the Christ consciousness. I am strong in God and in the power."<sup>1</sup>

The path I followed in my spiritual searching was influenced by several things. First of all I was a Christian; I belonged to Christ. I had learned the Lord's Prayer from my grandmother when I was six, gone to a Christian summer camp, and sung in the children's choir at Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church in Wellesley. But more important, I had called on Jesus when I was in great anguish at the age of twelve, and He had come. I had experienced His presence, and He brought me peace and comfort. I could never doubt Him and have always believed that Christianity was true.

On the other hand, I did not attend church or follow all of Christ's teachings. How much this was due to the failings of the Episcopal Church, and how much it was the result of my own willfulness, only God knows. In spite of a brief return to my faith my senior year in college, when I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, I had not been willing to really let Christ in. In fact I was resisting Him so hard that I fainted one day while kneeling after Communion; I wanted to take the bit in my teeth and go my own way. About a year later, I drifted into my first sexual relationship—with a married man. These things occurred during 1964-65, the period the psychic had described as a turning point.

At the same time, I found it increasingly hard to see any difference in content between programs offered by the local Episcopal youth groups, which I continued to attend, and the prevailing secular culture. I ceased going to them and gradually went less and less to church. The year before my return to Christ was the first time I had failed to go to church on Christmas.

The idea of returning to the Episcopal Church did not occur to me at this point. I had studied Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, with their searing condemnations of complacent bourgeois religion and cheap grace, and perceived the Episcopal Church as a stuffy, formal, upper-class institution. The quest for God, it seemed to me, must call for daily spiritual disciplines, for passion and seriousness and not just sitting through a church service on Sundays. The Catholic Church did not occur to me either. I had never really known any Catholics, except for a few people in my high school class who were regarded as from the wrong side of the tracks. In addition, I had unconsciously adopted the anti-Catholic prejudices prevalent in the

<sup>1</sup>The affirmations the psychic used are from a group called the Unity Church.

circles I had moved in and thought of Catholics as generally ignorant types who believed whatever the pope told them to, and who were so benighted and irresponsible as to oppose birth control.

Eastern religions didn't appeal to me; their emphasis on nothingness and emptiness made me feel cold and cheerless. Although I had done astral projection once on my own, I decided against pursuing the study of soul travel through Eckankar upon being told by one of them that someone named Paul Twitchell would begin appearing in my dreams to give me guidance! I found this too ludicrous to consider seriously (although I do wonder what would have happened if he had a more imposing-sounding name). Finally I discovered in an occult bookstore an advertisement for a group called the Holy Order of MANS, which offered both daily Communion and training in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and concentration.

I was favorably impressed. I heard one of their "master teachers" speak and liked the spiritual authoritativeness he projected; it appealed to my desire to attain spiritual power to fight for the good (I had always admired Joan of Arc, and rather fancied myself mounting my white horse and driving the forces of evil into the sea). I also found their local "priest" and community members to be full of life and enthusiasm, and to have a genuine personal devotion to Jesus. In my first meeting with the community leader, Rev. Jacob, he listened to me for a while and then said, "You know what Christianity is all about, I don't need to tell you. You just need to decide, do you want to change?" After some inner struggle, I said yes. He prayed with me and received the guidance that my name was now to be Rose. On the way out, I knelt to pray in their chapel and felt the Lord ask me, "Are you serious this time?" Again after some struggle, I said yes. I settled down and joined their community, sharing an apartment with another member just two blocks away from the chapel.

In spite of my (perhaps unusual) openness to things like psychics, spiritual beings, and inner guidance, a part of me continued to regard all this with great suspicion. But as William James had pointed out, if God is personal it would be most ungracious to demand that He come and prove Himself to me; at least I should go out to meet Him halfway. Many people throughout history had come to know and experience God through prayer, meditation, Bible reading, and group worship. If I opened myself to God in these ways, I would discover to what extent the spiritual realm was real. The possibility of encountering negative spiritual beings did not really occur to me; I thought that as long as I was seeking God and did not participate in any obviously occult practices, such as seances, I

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would be in no danger. nothing by trying. But confirm my belief in the

The Holy Order of only to vowed order men as a result of a private 1 The astrological age of A sented Father Paul's visi extremely eclectic, and C ing variety of ideas take trology, the Kabbalah, th phy underlying Tarot (alt future). During the peric was after Father Paul's de an excessive syncretism a the order from trying to very hard to tell which merely skin deep, and dep ests, and temperament of come away with a very dif.

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<sup>2</sup>They baptized in the name of th recall if they used water), and bap even those who had already been ba

would be in no danger. If nothing happened, then I would have lost nothing by trying. But my experience with the order continued to confirm my belief in the reality of the spiritual.

The Holy Order of MANS (an acronym for something known only to vowed order members) was founded in 1968 in San Francisco as a result of a private revelation to a man they called Father Paul. The astrological age of Aquarius began in 1968, and the order represented Father Paul's vision of Christianity for the new age. He was extremely eclectic, and Christian doctrines were mixed with a dizzying variety of ideas taken, for example, from Eastern religions, astrology, the Kabbalah, the new age movement, and even the philosophy underlying Tarot (although they did not use cards to foretell the future). During the period that I was a community member (which was after Father Paul's death and before a new director was chosen) an excessive syncretism and a general anti-intellectualism prevented the order from trying to develop a consistent theology. Thus it was very hard to tell which elements were essential and which were merely skin deep, and depending on the religious background, interests, and temperament of the priest one was talking with, one might come away with a very different idea of their doctrines.

In many ways the Order resembled the Catholic Church, and there was a little Mary shrine in the chapel. However, they also offered a series of spiritual initiations. Of these only the first (baptism)<sup>2</sup> was available on request; the others (illumination, self-realization, and God realization) were given only when the priest judged the person was ready.

The structure of the order involved several levels. There were people who just came to services or the public classes, and then there were those who, like me, became community members. Members tithed 10 percent of their income and were required to do at least three hours a week of voluntary service to the broader community (I saw a child through the Big Sister program). They were permitted to attend special classes at which material not mentioned in the public classes was presented—for example, color healing or Tarot. There was also a members' brunch and business meeting on Saturday once a month. Inside this circle was a smaller circle, that of vowed members of the order, and inside that there were the priests. There were further levels within the order, culminating with the six or seven

<sup>2</sup>They baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (although I don't recall if they used water), and baptism was required of all community members, even those who had already been baptized.

"master teachers." Men and women were represented at all levels. Major decisions were made by a group called the "esoteric council."<sup>3</sup>

The community surrounding the order was a wonderfully warm one—my first experience of really being accepted and affirmed as part of a community. It was a small group (sixteen when I joined and seventy when I left two and a half years later) so we knew each other quite well. The community leader always prayed for unity in Christ and his prayer was answered. We were encouraged not to be cliquey, but to try to learn from one another, even those with whom we felt little natural affinity. While single members tended to live near the chapel and socialize more with one another, many of the married couples invited us to enjoy their homes and children with them on weekends.

One of the things I found most gratifying was that I felt my talents were appreciated and used. On Sundays I would wear long peasant-style skirts and dresses and prepare and serve coffee and tea, making newcomers welcome. I was sometimes asked to lead evening prayer and organized some music for the Christmas pageant. I got together a group to perform Renaissance dances at a Halloween medieval and Renaissance party, which a group of us organized to raise money to help a member who was a single mother pay her son's tuition at school. I even got cast in the lead for a hilarious skit we performed at a regional meeting of Order communities.

Probably one of my happiest moments was the Christmas party we put on for a nursing home I had worked in. I had been the one who pressed for doing it and coordinated it. One member worked at the Italian Home for Children and arranged a group of children to come and sing carols for the patients. We had the children make presents for the elderly people and went to the nursing home to help them make stockings for the children. We made corsages for the women and donated gifts left over from our Christmas bazaar. Since two of us had worked there, we knew the patients well enough to select gifts appropriate for each person. Our community comedian in residence came and played the piano, and others also sang or went around talking to patients. People caroled upstairs for those who could not come down, and someone dressed up as Santa Claus and visited rooms. I was overjoyed to see their bleak lives temporarily illuminated by warmth, humor, and love.

<sup>3</sup>The order has gone through major changes since that time (1975-78). It has moved more in an orthodox Christian direction, but there is disagreement within the order over how much of the original revelations to Father Paul they should keep. At last report, they have temporarily discontinued giving the higher initiations.

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Another thing for which I will always be indebted to the order was the way in which they taught us to experience spiritual realities, not just to talk about them. How many times had I heard the phrase "lift up your hearts to the Lord" in the Episcopal Church, yet no one had taught me what this means or how to do it. In the community we were taught techniques of prayer and meditation; we tried to pray regularly throughout the day and to maintain a constant sense of God's presence. We also learned to be open to the Lord's guidance, exercising caution, and not trusting just any inner voice. The first time I heard an actual inner voice, it startled me dreadfully.

I continued to receive guidance from time to time—guidance that was always appropriate. For example, as I was praying something from T. S. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," which ended "Oh, Lord, I am not worthy, but speak the word only," I heard "Take up your bed and walk" coming from within, yet with a sort of energy that I knew was not just myself. Once I felt strongly tempted to go my own way again, but made myself go in the chapel and prayed, "All things come from God, all obedience is due to God, I am God's," at which point I thought I heard angels. (They sounded more like a powerful and majestic roaring than our stereotype of angels.) Rev. Jacob saw me immediately after this and said that I looked radiant. The skepticism about the reality of the spiritual that I had absorbed through my academic training in philosophy began to give way to an unshakable belief in its reality.

I also developed a devotion to Mary during my time in the community that made it easier later for me to come into the Catholic Church. Shortly after I joined the community, the man with whom I had been about to have an affair came to supper. Afterward he leaned a little toward me and began putting out a sexual energy that almost pulled me under. I prayed to Mary for help and immediately felt uplifted and freed. This happened three times and then he left. I continued to go to Mary in prayer, seeking her help in becoming more gentle and pure of heart. Another community woman and I even went to a workshop on feminine spirituality organized by some new age groups and did a presentation on Mary.

In spite of all these good things, I began to have serious problems with the order. For one thing, their emphasis on experience as opposed to rational thought ("get out of your concepts," they would say) was very hard on me, since I am by nature an intellectual. They made me feel that this was a fault and a barrier to experiencing God. I had abandoned my thesis and had been doing nurse's aide work and temporary office work, and was becoming frustrated by the fact that my mind was not being utilized.

I was beginning to have doubts about Father Paul also. I had read a book he had written about his communications with spirits (which only order members were supposed to see) and had a strong feeling that at least some of these were decidedly evil and were playing up to his spiritual pride. I had been told that he had claimed to be a reincarnation of Saint Paul. At first I'd been willing to consider the idea, at least, but recently I had read some of his poetry, which was so dreadful that it strained my credulity to the breaking point. Father Paul had set up the entire structure of the order, including all the initiations, the words of the Communion service, and even the minutest details of the way the sanctuary was constructed. If he were in touch with evil spirits, then who knows what forces might be at work on us.

I had long had trouble with the idea that what we speak and think creates the reality we experience, since it followed logically from this that if my life was not going well it must be my fault. Either I was thinking negatively or, worse yet, rebelling against God in some way. I began to feel that I was hopelessly separated from Him. I prayed that He would show me the truth and bring me to Him, even if He had to kill me to do it. I began to feel increasingly assaulted by negative things. I went to a Catholic psychic who said she saw me held within the Sacred Heart of Jesus, but surrounded by dark spiritual forces.

Around this time, I awoke one night, sensing something overwhelmingly evil in my room between me and the red light on my prayer shrine, and the next day I felt in prayer that the Lord had delivered me. I had received the initiation of "illumination," after which I had been shivering all over for hours and felt all kinds of energy flowing through me for days. This was supposed to "seal the light of Christ" in me. Given my distrust of Father Paul, I began to wonder whether this initiation might be connected somehow with my frightening experience.

Unable to sort all these things out and unwilling to break totally with the community that had become like a family to me, I decided to go to California with the intention of staying if things worked out. The order had two communities in the Bay Area, so I could count on a community to be part of; perhaps things would be different there. Besides, my best friend from college also lived near there. As soon as I gave notice on my job, following what I thought was the Lord's guidance, a drive-away car for the Bay Area became available, and I set out at once.

I arrived at my friend Edie's house and asked if I could store my things there and pitch my tent temporarily on her lawn. Seeing that

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I was in a state of near collapse, she encouraged me to stay as long as I wanted. I soon discovered that she had become a Catholic. Edie and I had often discussed theology together in college. She had gone to Union Theological Seminary, lost her faith there, and been a Marxist for many years. I knew from a letter that she'd become a Christian again and was involved with evangelicals. This I could accept, but the Catholic Church? Personal conversion was one thing, but an authoritarian, hierarchical institution was another. How could such an intelligent woman do that?

But she seemed to welcome questions and was able to provide intelligent answers. I also noticed that she had lost the judgmental tendencies she often had and was more gentle and charitable. She did not pressure me about the Order, but gave me books to clarify my beliefs—the writings of C. S. Lewis and John Stott's *Basic Christianity*. I began to realize that it was essential to have some intellectual structure to anchor one's faith—that Christianity was not merely a matter of personal devotion to Jesus.

It began to dawn on me that being a Christian and a philosopher were not inconsistent. One day I introduced myself to a Melkite rite priest, Owen Carroll, as "Rose" in Christian circles and "Celia" in philosophical circles, and he pointed out that these need not be mutually exclusive. Strange as it may seem, I had come to see it that way. A professor of mine at Smith had, it was rumored, been kicked out of the philosophy department and into religious studies because of his interest in teaching about philosophers like Kierkegaard. And my graduate training in analytic philosophy had done nothing to make me see religious beliefs as intellectually respectable.

For a while I continued to attend services at the order. But when one of my new Catholic friends began to question me about the words of their consecration and the validity of their orders, I became very uncomfortable. I felt loyal to the order and rather protective of it, and I knew Father Paul's claim that the authority of order priests derived from their membership in the "Order of Melchizedek" would be received with raised eyebrows at the very least.

A battle of world views was going on in my mind; one day the world seemed created and sustained by God, the next day it all seemed empty and meaningless. It was at this time that I had my most clearly identifiable experience with a demon. When I said, "Stand in the light of Christ," it turned its face away as though the light hurt it and vanished. Shortly after that I had an experience of being caught up and held by God for what seemed an endless time, while light and energy poured through me. Unlike the energy I had experienced during my initiation in the order, which left me feeling

shaky and overwrought (as though a powerful electric current had passed through me), this time I felt whole and alive. It seemed to harmonize with my nature rather than to assault it.

My final break with the order occurred when, after a sermon embodying a seriously erroneous Christology, I felt the Lord say, "This is not how I want you to understand me. Do not take Communion." Before I'd left Boston, Rev. Jacob had encouraged me to explore other groups as well as the order; I decided that it was time for me to do this. I soon realized that the Lord wanted me to avoid all dabbling in esoteric things. One day I was at the Graduate Theological Union library and saw a book, bound in white leather with gold writing, called *Golden Moments with the Ascended Masters*. I felt an irresistible urge to take it down, but as I reached up for it, something sharp sticking out of the binding pricked my finger and made it bleed. I laughed and said, "Okay, Lord, I get the message," and left it on the shelf.

To this day, I am unable to say with any certainty to what extent (if any) the order sacraments and initiations were responsible for my experiences with negative spiritual forces. I do believe, however, that their teachings and initiations had a tendency to attract people seeking spiritual power and to encourage that desire in us. And that desire for spiritual power, in itself, is one of the main ways in which people become open to the operation of negative spirits.

The Catholic Church still seemed forbidding and somehow foreign to me. Besides, I was rather galled by some triumphalist Catholics I'd met recently who talked superciliously about the "One True Church." But I was not comfortable with the evangelicals either, because I felt the lack of a sacramental structure. On Edie's recommendation, I decided to try a High Church Anglican group (Anglican Church of North America), which had broken away from the Episcopal Church because they wanted to retain the Book of Common Prayer and did not believe in ordaining women.

I went to a noon Mass and was very moved by the beautiful prayers I had grown up with. The priest was a slight, frail, white-haired man (very English in manner) who said the Mass in a simple and humble way. He had a quiet authority about him, a confidence in the validity of the sacrament quite independent of any "spiritual power" of his own. I felt a real closeness to the Lord after Communion that day and decided this was where He wanted me to be. For the next year and a half I attended their student chapel at the University of California and sang in their Gregorian chant choir.

I began to read Catholic philosophers such as Gilson, Maritain, and Pieper and was delighted by them. I had become disillusioned

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with the analytic philosophy I'd been taught in graduate school; it seemed to lack any foundation and to be almost wholly destructive. I saw in retrospect that this disillusionment had been one of the factors that had made the experiential emphasis of the order so appealing; the head had failed me, so I would follow the heart. But in philosophers of the Aristotelean-Thomistic tradition I discovered for the first time a positive, systematic, and coherent view of human beings and their place in nature. The perennial debates in philosophy took on a deeper meaning for me. I met intellectual and devout Catholics, most of them converts, with whom I could discuss theology and philosophy.

I had found part-time work teaching ethics at the University of San Francisco, and as I read Catholic moralists I was struck by the incisiveness and consistency of their reasoning. When I squarely faced the abortion issue for the first time, I realized that my previous position (that it was a horrible thing, but sometimes necessary) was totally untenable. If the fetus is a human life (and I could see no way to deny that), then nothing short of threatened death to the mother could justify taking that life. I was not ready to accept the Church's teaching on contraception yet, but was troubled because I believed homosexual practices to be wrong and saw that most of the philosophical arguments against homosexuality were also arguments against contraception.

I also experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit during this time. I'd gone to a few meetings of a Catholic charismatic prayer group, and one of the Anglican priests was charismatic. So one day, as I sat alone praying in front of the sacrament at the Anglican church, I asked the Lord for the gift of tongues to praise Him. I felt a powerful welling up of praise and was soon praying in tongues and feeling such deep adoration and joy that I wanted to go on forever. I found that continuing to pray in tongues cleared away doubt, confusion, and fear and deepened both my faith and my understanding of that faith.

So why did I become a Catholic? Certainly I felt guided by the Holy Spirit. But more than that, my conversion represented the logical culmination of the development I had been going through, and I saw no reason to stop with Anglicanism.

The sacramental structure and the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church were important to me. After my experiences with the dark side, I wanted the protection of the Church. I saw the sacraments as opportunities to experience Christ, and as essential helps in Christian growth. The validity of Anglican orders was open to question, whereas that of Roman Catholic and Orthodox orders were not. I wanted to be sure I had the real thing.

I thought that the mainline Episcopal Church had surrendered to secular trendiness. But the Anglican Church of North America (ACNA) was a small, geographically localized splinter group. As far as I could see, the only things keeping the ACNA from the Roman communion were the issues of papal authority, a few of the Marian doctrines, and the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

I had no trouble with papal authority. I recognized the need for an authority to rule on disputed points of doctrine if the Church was to be saved from the schisms that have repeatedly afflicted Protestantism. Besides, I found the new Pope, John Paul II, a charismatic and appealing figure. The Marian doctrines seemed reasonable enough also. If Mary was to bear God Incarnate in her womb, it seemed appropriate that she should be without sin (could a sinful person bear to be that close to the Glory of God without going up in smoke?), and since death came into the world through sin, she should not have to pass through death in the same way we do.

That left birth control. It seemed unfair to have to abstain from sex just at the time when the desire for it is the strongest, but I also realized that pleasure is not a reliable guide to what is right. I heard a man and a woman from Couple to Couple League speak about the theory underlying Natural Family Planning and the ways in which using it had deepened their relationship, which helped me a lot.

I began taking instruction with Father Anthony Mastroeni at the University of San Francisco. It went smoothly, since I had already resolved most of my doubts about Catholic doctrines. The only thing still troubling me was contraception. I had read some attempts by Catholic philosophers to defend *Humanae Vitae*; although I did not find them wholly compelling, they at least convinced me that rational arguments could be offered in support of the Church's teaching. I also saw that the Church's position on this issue was closely connected with other teachings I accepted. Thus it did not seem unreasonable to accept *Humanae Vitae* on faith for the time being, while continuing to seek a better understanding. I discovered, to my surprise, that the emotional resistance to the Church that I had felt for so long had melted away, and I was at peace. I was received on June 24, 1980.

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I have to wond Mother of God w with such authen mentally and inge chant, "Yahweh, Y Hindu chanting, were to sing for ar it a riddle fit for th would be the resul