

Prominent evangelical theologian returns to Catholic Church

WASHINGTON - The return of a prominent evangelical philosopher and theologian to the Catholic Church, his childhood home, has provoked a storm of controversy in the evangelical community.

Francis J. Beckwith is a tenured associate professor of church-state studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, the largest Baptist university in the world. He resigned as president of the Evangelical Theological Society May 5, after entering into full communion with the Catholic Church a week earlier.

He said in interviews that a combination of factors - including the 1999 Catholic-Lutheran "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" and a closer study of the writings of the early Christian theologians known as the Fathers of the Church - had led him gradually to embrace Catholicism.

Beckwith is a specialist in Christian philosophy, philosophy of religion, social ethics and church-state issues. He has written extensively on issues of religion and public policy. He is especially known for his defense of the pro-life position on abortion and of the constitutionality of teaching, in public schools, the theory of intelligent design as an alternative to evolutionary theory.

His latest book, "Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice," is slated for release in August.

Born into a Catholic family in 1960, Beckwith attended Catholic elementary and high schools in Las Vegas and earned his master's and doctoral degrees in philosophy at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York. He also earned a master's degree in apologetics at the Christian evangelical Simon Greenleaf School of Law in California (now part of Trinity International University) and a master's in juridical studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

On "Right Reason," a Web log, or blog, of conservative philosophers he regularly contributes to, Beckwith announced May 5 that he had formally returned to the

Catholic Church the previous week.

He received the sacrament of reconciliation April 28 and was publicly accepted back into the church at Mass the following day at St. Joseph Church in Bellmead, a Waco suburb. "My wife, standing beside me, was accepted as a catechumen," he said.

"My work in philosophy, ethics and theology has always been Catholic-friendly, but I would have never predicted that I would return to the church, for there seemed to me too many theological and ecclesiastical issues that appeared insurmountable," he wrote.

He added, however, that in recent months "I began reading the early church fathers as well as some of the more sophisticated works on justification by Catholic authors. I became convinced that the early church is more Catholic than Protestant and that the Catholic view of justification, correctly understood, is biblically and historically defensible."

Justification, the central doctrinal issue behind the Reformation, refers to the divine action by which human beings are saved: The faith that saves is a free gift from God that is never earned by human beings.

The 1999 joint declaration on justification that Beckwith referred to said Catholics and Lutherans together can "confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while calling us to good works."

In the declaration Catholic and Lutheran authorities agreed that "the mutual condemnations of former times do not apply" to the understanding of justification in their respective churches today.

In some evangelical circles, however, the Catholic Church continues to be accused of teaching that human beings can merit salvation through their good works.

Efforts by Catholic News Service to reach Beckwith by phone in mid-May were unsuccessful, but in an interview with Christianity Today, Beckwith said he was "shocked" by some of the reactions to his return to Catholicism and realizes "I underestimated the deep divisions that were still there, at least among lay

evangelicals and Catholics, more so than the academics who interact with each other more often.”

He said that in embracing Catholicism “I still consider myself an evangelical, but no longer a Protestant.”

He said that “Protestants often misunderstand” what the church is trying to convey in its teachings on the need to be virtuous. “The Catholic Church frames the Christian life as one in which you must exercise virtue – not because virtue saves you, but because that’s the way God’s grace is manifested,” he said.

In his blog statement about his resignation as president of the theological society, he said, “Even though I also believe that the Reformed view (of justification) is biblically and historically defensible, I think the Catholic view has more explanatory power” historically and scripturally.

Beckwith said he had begun a correspondence with the executive committee of the Evangelical Theological Society about now to terminate his leadership in the society without creating public controversy when events overtook the discussion: James White, a blogger on a fundamentalist evangelical apologetics blog, lambasted him May 3 for becoming a Catholic and called for his resignation.

The “Right Reason blog and several others were then flooded with commentary; some Beckwith described as “pockets of uncharity.” He thanked those, including critics, who treated him and his wife with respect.

On May 7, two days after he resigned as president, Beckwith announced he was resigning as a member.