INTRODUCTION

The Only Rebellion Left

Anything but Catholic.


But why in the world would anyone become Catholic today? Isn’t Catholicism a backward, intolerant, bigoted religion? Isn’t it run by pedophile priests and full of scandals? Doesn’t it degrade women and LGBT people and obsess about sex? Isn’t it plagued by pointless rules that stifle real faith?

I was not raised Catholic. Some of my friends must have been Catholic growing up, but I never knew it. I grew up in a Presbyterian church, which provided a warm community and great formation. Yet like many young people, the life of faith never took root in me. This was almost certainly my fault, not the church’s.

As a teenager, I probably would have identified as “spiritual but not religious.” But then in college at Florida State, while studying mechanical engineering, I fell in with a Methodist group on campus, which dramatically affected my faith. I found a deep, vibrant community that
welcomed me in. They weren’t afraid of hard questions, and they exposed me to the fascinating world of the Bible. I started praying on my own and began devouring books about God and faith and philosophy.

But then, as a twenty-year-old senior with a budding faith, and on the cusp of graduating, getting married, and starting a new engineering job, I did something few people could fathom, something that didn’t fit with all those other sensible decisions: I became Catholic.

To say friends and family were surprised would be a vast understatement. Most were profoundly confused, and remain so. Though I’ve discussed it often, trying to explain what led me into the Church, it’s still hard for people to understand how a young man with an apparently well-functioning brain would not only look favorably on an institution such as the Catholic Church but also actually choose to join it.

It’s been eight years since I chose to become Catholic. Interestingly, I’ve noted how different the reaction I usually get compares to the reactions that converts to other religions often receive. Admit you’re exploring Buddhism and you’re greeted with wonder and encouragement. Reveal that you’ve become Jewish or Muslim and you’re treated with hushed reverence. Say you’re dedicated to meditation or the power of positive thinking and the “Good for you” comments will stream out as if you lost sixty pounds. Heck, share that you’ve just been baptized at a local nondenominational church and people will congratulate you on such a wonderful milestone.
But admit you’re becoming Catholic? Crickets and confusion.

Choosing to be Catholic is provocative. It’s countercultural. It’s literally the opposite direction our culture is going. The Pew Research Center completed a massive, national religious study, surveying more than thirty thousand Americans, which found that exactly half (50 percent) of millennials who were raised Catholic no longer call themselves Catholic today. That’s massive attrition. Half of young Catholics have already left the Church (with more likely following in the future). That explains why “former Catholic” continues to be one of America’s largest religious groups.

The study also found that roughly 80 percent of people who left the Catholic Church have left before age twenty-three. These aren’t lifelong Catholics who stay on the fence for decades before drifting away. They’re young people, people in high school or college, or young adults—people the same age I was when I chose to become Catholic.

Perhaps most telling, the Pew study revealed something called the “loss-gain ratio.” This is the ratio of people who leave a particular religious tradition divided by the people who join (excluding births and deaths). Ideally, you want your loss-gain ratio to be less than one, meaning your religion is losing fewer people than you’re gaining. Unfortunately, in the latest survey, no Christian group had a loss-gain ratio less than one. In other words, every Christian tradition is losing more people than it’s gaining. But do you know which religious group owned the worst loss-gain ratio of all? Catholicism.
The Catholic Church’s loss-gain ratio was a staggering 6.45. That means for every one person walking in the front door of the Catholic Church, more than six leave through the back door. That’s a worse ratio than Baptists, Evangelicals, Methodists, Mormons, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus—even worse than atheists and agnostics!

The Catholic Church is hemorrhaging people, especially young people. So why be Catholic? Surely anything else would be better, maybe some other form of Christianity, or even a mystical Eastern faith, or perhaps some do-it-yourself spirituality.

But why Catholic? I wrote this book to answer that question.

I’m not part of the 50 percent of millennials who left the Church. I’m not one of the 6.45 who continually stream out the back door. I’m the one who joined. I’m the one who deliberately chose Catholicism, who carefully studied and wrestled with its claims, who prayed, read, thought, and discussed and came out the other end a Catholic.

I’ll admit it’s a weird decision. It goes against the grain. It’s radical. It is, in a word, rebellious.

But that’s precisely what makes it worth considering (and, dare I say, exciting). It’s easy to swim downstream, to accept the status quo. What’s hard is to be a rebel, to look with fresh eyes on something most people reject and say, “What if they’re mistaken? What if ‘anything but Catholic’ should perhaps be ‘what else but Catholic’?”

These same questions struck G. K. Chesterton. He was one of the most popular and prolific English journalists of
the early twentieth century, writing more than a hundred books and more than five thousand essays, and lecturing all over the globe. But in 1922, he stunned the world by announcing his conversion to the Catholic Church. Friends and family were just as confused as mine were almost a century later. They thought this normally straight mind had gone horribly off the rails, asking him accusingly, “Why would you become Catholic?”

Chesterton replied, as was his wont, with an essay. He titled it, plainly, “Why I Am a Catholic,” and he began it by saying, “The difficulty of explaining why I am a Catholic is that there are ten thousand reasons all amounting to one reason: that Catholicism is true.”

That’s a great answer, and it’s mine too. It’s the main reason to accept any belief, philosophy, or worldview. Whether we’re talking about Christianity, evolution, democracy, or atheism, what matters most is that fundamental question: Is it true? Sure, a particular view may make us feel better. Perhaps it puts us in good company or is rooted in our family’s heritage. But ultimately, the best reason to accept any belief is because it’s true. Like Socrates, we should assess the evidence and follow it wherever it leads, even to conclusions that are unpopular or uncomfortable. That’s what truth demands.

Of course, there are other good reasons to believe something. If a belief is true, it’s almost always good and beautiful too. There’s a harmony among these three qualities, what philosophers call the transcendentals. For example, look at science. Even atheist scientists such as Stephen
Hawking and Richard Dawkins speak about the elegance and majesty of the universe. The remarkable order we see in nature strikes us not only because it’s true, because it matches our equations, but also because it’s surprisingly beautiful. Similarly, when we see a truly good act, such as a father sacrificing his life to save his son, we recognize the truth of it, that what the father did, for example, was truly the right thing, not just one subjectively good course among many.

Truth, goodness, and beauty are like three notes of a chord, and when they’re played together we know we are hearing something coherent and fulfilling. Or to switch metaphors, they’re like the three codes to a lock. When you turn the dial back and forth, hitting all three codes, the lock clicks, it opens, and you’re welcomed in.

That’s precisely what I found in Catholicism. I discovered that in the Catholic faith these transcendentals do converge, that the Catholic Church is worth considering not because it’s popular, progressive, or comfortable but because it’s true, good, and beautiful. In Catholicism, the locks click and the world opens up.

But this isn’t just a conversion memoir—there are lots of those by much better writers. This book is only partly an explanation of why I decided to become Catholic. Primarily, it’s my appeal to you, why you should consider Catholicism yourself.

As with all appeals, this one requires an open mind. Even just exploring the Catholic Church is an act of rebellion. But again, that makes it exciting.
Today’s world is a simmering pot of rebels. Every night on the news we see fed-up citizens rebelling against dictators. Protesters fill our streets, decrying injustice. Hipsters refuse to conform to the plans of past generations. People are hungry for something radical and revolutionary.

Catholicism offers that. In fact, it’s the only true rebellion left. It’s not rebellious to get drunk, criticize institutions, pursue sex and money, or come out as an atheist. Everyone’s doing that. Those are all mainstream. They’re easy and expected. They may sometimes require a slight bit of courage, but really, everyone is following those paths, swimming along with the current.

What’s truly radical is to consider a Church that billions of people have embraced throughout history but millions of people today dismiss as bigoted and outdated.

Maybe the critics are right. Maybe the Catholic Church is wrong, evil, and ugly, and the few who choose it are deluded.

But perhaps the opposite is true. Maybe in a strange and confused world, the Catholic Church looks so backward because everyone else is facing the wrong direction.

Catholicism used to be respectable. Today it’s not. Choosing to be Catholic is emphatically a countercultural move.

So I invite you, through this book, to carefully consider it, if only in the spirit of rebellion. Venture into this world few people genuinely explore. Refuse to join the herd. Be willing to swim upstream.
Because when you do, you’ll discover that perhaps the Catholic Church really is true, good, and beautiful; that it really is in harmony with our deepest desires; and that it’s the rest of the world that’s singing off key.
PART I

Catholicism Is True
Because God Exists

Like many new college students, I was hungry for truth. My freshman year exposed me to countless new ideas, from politics to science, economics, and religion. It was an almost overwhelming cacophony, and I hardly knew where to start. But I did know one thing: I wanted the truth. I didn’t just want to believe whatever my parents or professors fed me, nor was I fine just accepting whatever made me feel good. I wanted the truth.

The best reason to accept any belief system is because it’s true. So that’s a good place to start in this exploration—determining whether the claims of Catholicism are true. But to arrive there we need to walk through several steps. We can’t just presume God exists or that Christianity is true and then quickly show how Catholicism is the right expression. That wouldn’t be fair. There are several stages before that, so let’s start at the very beginning. Let’s start with the question of God.

One or two hundred years ago, in most communities throughout the world, the vast majority of people would have taken for granted a belief in God or a higher being.
Nearly all people were religious in one way or another. But that’s not true today. Over the last decade, the Western world has experienced a surge of skepticism. This has been fueled in large part by the so-called new atheists, a polemical group of scientists and philosophers who, emboldened by the Enlightenment-era skeptics who came before them, paint religion as violent, irrational, and even dangerous. These fiery doubters include bestselling authors Richard Dawkins (The God Delusion), Sam Harris (Letter to a Christian Nation), and the late Christopher Hitchens (God Is Not Great). Their characteristically dismissive and snarky rhetoric has gained traction, especially among young people.

But polemics are one thing; truth, another. Oftentimes, rhetoric is just a facade covering up shallow arguments. So we should push forward past the zingers and slogans and focus on the single question that really matters in this first stage: Does God exist? Catholics and other theists say yes. Atheists say no. Both of them can’t be right. So how do we determine the answer? Let’s examine the evidence.

**EVIDENCE FOR GOD**

Someone once asked the great atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgment day and God asked him, “Why didn’t you believe in me?” Russell replied, “I would say, ‘Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!’”

I run a website where millions of Catholics and atheists engage in dialogue, and I must say that’s the most common
refrain I hear: “Show me the evidence!” And I’m totally fine with that demand. It means the person is unwilling to accept beliefs without solid proof or support, and that’s commendable. But I usually ask for some clarification: What do you mean when you say you want evidence? In the realm of science, evidence refers to observable phenomena, in the natural world, that confirm or challenge a hypothesis. This sort of evidence is inevitably something you can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. In other words, it’s empirical. And to be sure, this sort of evidence, in the context of science, is the right kind and has led to remarkable discoveries.

However, it’s easy to forget that sensory evidence isn’t the only type of evidence in our world. This is a crucially important fact. Sensory evidence is irrelevant, for example, when we consider questions of morality, meaning, or existence. You can’t hear morality; you can’t see meaning; and there’s no way to touch existence. Likewise, sensory evidence is not the best type of evidence when considering God. God is, by definition and whether you believe he exists or not, immaterial and transcendent. That means he is not composed of physical matter, nor does he exist somewhere in our cosmos, perhaps beyond our galaxy; he exists beyond all space and time. And since that’s the case, we would not expect to find direct, physical evidence of his existence in our world.

It’s not just that we haven’t yet found such evidence, though it may exist. It’s that such evidence is impossible, even in principle. Does that mean it’s impossible to show God exists? Not necessarily. It simply means that science
isn’t the right tool, nor is scientific evidence the right sort of evidence, to settle the God question. Just as a metal detector isn’t the right instrument to settle moral questions, we need other tools to probe the existence of God.

One such tool is philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with some of life’s biggest issues, from beauty to morality, existence, and free will. It allows us to explore realities that can’t be detected through our senses and is therefore a much more useful tool in the quest for God.

So let’s return to our original question. Is there any evidence for God? Many people certainly think so, but it’s a different type of evidence than we may be used to. Instead of physical, sensory evidence, these thinkers point to arguments and logical deductions to prove their case. They’ve identified no less than twenty arguments for God, arguments that range from the clear and simple to the super complex. Some of the arguments appeal to emotion or history; others depend on reason and experience.

We can approach the God question from many angles, and there’s no one best way. But when I began seriously studying God, I did find some of the arguments stronger than others. In fact, three arguments stuck out to me, and I thought the evidence supporting them was overwhelming.

Before we dive into a few of these twenty arguments, though, I should add one more note. If terms such as arguments or evidence rub you the wrong way, it may be helpful to instead consider these as clues. Think of them as clues that converge and point to a common conclusion, much as road signs collectively guide you to a specific destination.
(Road signs don’t prove the destination exists but show clear the way.) That’s exactly what these arguments and evidence are: signposts to God. So let’s look at each of them.

Clue 1: The Universe
We might as well start with the largest and most spectacular evidence that God exists, namely, the universe itself. The universe encompasses all energy, matter, space, and time. Despite its unfathomable size, it’s easy to take the universe for granted. After all, we live in it and are surrounded by it every day. But in our most reflective moments, when faced with its staggering size and scope, we’re led to wonder, Where did all this come from? Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?

From ancient times, people have posited some god or gods as the answer. This isn’t just a Christian or Jewish idea. Early Greek thinkers such as Aristotle devised proofs for God based on the universe’s existence. These proofs have been refined over the centuries to become simpler and clearer. Let’s take a look at one popular formulation, known as the Kalam argument. Its name comes from the medieval Islamic theologian who first formulated it. The Kalam argument is deceptively simple and runs like this:

Premise 1: Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
Premise 2: The universe began to exist.
Conclusion: The universe has a cause.
The first premise is common sense and almost nobody denies it. It means that nothing just springs into existence randomly and without cause. For if that were the case, then our world would be a wild spree of things popping into existence like magic—only it would be worse than magic, since with magic you at least have a magician who pulls rabbits out of hats! But in a world that violated this first premise, you’d get rabbits popping in and out of being without even magicians or hats. Very few sane people believe the world works this way, and so pretty much all of us agree with this first premise.

The next premise is more controversial, or at least it used to be. For centuries, most scientists believed that the universe was eternal—it had always existed in the past. This conveniently avoided a universal beginning, which would imply a creation moment. But over the last hundred years, new discoveries from the big bang to quantum cosmology have produced a stunning reversal on this point. The scientific consensus today is that the universe had a beginning, and it occurred roughly 13.7 billion years ago. How sure are we about this? In the words of cosmologist Alexander Vilenkin, speaking at a colloquium for Stephen Hawking’s seventieth birthday, “All the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning.” It’s extremely rare for a scientist to speak with this measure of conclusiveness. It’s not just that some of the evidence points to a beginning, or even the majority of evidence, but that all of the evidence points this way. Vilenkin elaborated, “It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes
to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.” (There are also strong philosophical reasons to think the universe must have had a beginning, but we won’t get into those here.)

So the first two premises are generally accepted by common people and scientists alike. But if that’s the case, the conclusion logically follows. If everything that begins to exist has a cause, and the universe began to exist, then it must have had a cause. This is required by logic.

But that leads us to natural follow-up questions: What is that cause? What’s it like? What could have been responsible for causing the whole universe? Well, for starters, it couldn’t have been anything within the universe, or even the universe itself, since things can’t cause themselves to exist. (Just as your arm couldn’t cause you to come into existence; before you existed, there was no arm!) This means the cause must be something beyond the universe, beyond all matter, energy, space, and time. In other words, it must be transcendent (beyond the universe), immaterial (beyond matter and space), and eternal (beyond time), and to create something so massively complex as the universe, it must have been tremendously powerful and intelligent.

A transcendent, immaterial, eternal, supremely powerful, intelligent cause of the universe—what does that sound like to you? There are only a few possibilities. Perhaps the cause was something abstract, such as the laws of physics, numbers, or mathematical functions. But those won’t work
since, to use a bit of technical language, they’re causally inert. They either describe reality or represent abstract concepts, but they don’t cause things to happen. For instance, the law of gravity describes the forces between objects, such as a ball falling to the earth, but the law itself doesn’t cause the ball to fall. It only describes what happens. It’s not the law but the earth’s force that is actually responsible for the falling ball. Likewise, the number seven is a helpful mathematical concept, but it doesn’t cause anything to happen and certainly can’t bring something into existence.

There’s only one plausible option then, only one solution that accounts for all the scientific and philosophical evidence and makes sense of the universe’s existence. That would be God.

Now admittedly, this proof for God is abstract. It doesn’t generate the warm, personal faith you might derive from prayer or other religious experiences. And it doesn’t prove the fullness of God, especially attributes that we could only know if God revealed them to us, such as that God is love or is a Trinity of persons. It doesn’t show that Catholicism, Judaism, or Mormonism is true.

But it does present a substantial slice of God, a slice far too thick for any atheist to accept. It proves the truth of theism and thus helps us move to the next stage in our exploration.