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Sharon L. Priestley

"Happy to Worship in a Romish Church": Boswell and Roman Catholicism

James Boswell was fascinated by the Church of Rome during most of his adult life, but this fact often goes unnoticed by readers of Boswell's journals, which constitute a valuable record of the Scotsman's search for religious truths through his involvement in Christian churches. His published journals demonstrate Boswell's attraction to Roman Catholicism and the intense spiritual fulfillment and satisfaction he gained in the ceremony of the Mass and worship in Roman Catholic churches. While some work has been done on Boswell's sustained and profound interest in his own spirituality, not enough attention has been given to his relationship to Catholicism.[1]

Born in Edinburgh in 1740, Boswell was the son of intriguingly different parents. His father, Lord Auchinleck, was a stern and cold individual who rarely treated his offspring with compassion or kindness. Boswell describes his mother as a woman of "almost unexampled piety and goodness." In his "Sketch of the Early Life of James Boswell," Boswell praises his mother for her piety and devotion but specifically blames her for teaching him Calvinism. Boswell's reaction to this system of beliefs emerges forcefully when he writes:

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[1]See Mary Margaret Stewart's "The Search for Felicity: A Study of the Religious Thought of James Boswell in the Light of the Religious Developments of Eighteenth Century England and Scotland." Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 1959, and "Boswell's Denominational Dilemma," *PMLA*, 76 (1961), 503-511.

> My catechism contained the gloomiest doctrines of that system. The eternity of punishment was the first great idea I ever formed. How it made me shudder! I thought but rarely about the bliss of heaven because I had no idea of it.[2]

Boswell deplores that fact that he was indoctrinated with "frightful Presbyterian" notions.[3] His early experiences with Calvinism gave him a lasting interest in damnation, hell, and the fear of death, and it may be that the harshness of Calvinist doctrines frightened him so much in his early life that he turned to other religious groups which he hoped would bring much-needed comfort.

One such organization was the Church of Rome; in 1760, he fled to London and became a Roman Catholic. Boswell's conversion to Roman Catholicism is described by Frederick Pottle in his Introduction to the *London Journal*[4] and in his biography (Pottle, pp. 40-54; 569-74). By the age of nineteen, Boswell had become involved in the Edinburgh theatre and had fallen in love with an actress named Mrs. Cowper, a devout Roman Catholic. It appears that when Boswell became interested in her religion, Mrs. Cowper arranged to have him meet a priest in Edinburgh, who undoubtedly gave the young man books about the Church of Rome. After studying those materials and arguing with his father about the issue, Boswell became convinced that he should convert to Catholicism.

In March 1760, Boswell did just that and officially became a Roman Catholic, but how he came to make such a decision "will probably never be known, for it was one of the few episodes of his life that he was close-mouthed about" (*London Journal*, p. 5). Pottle's words are clear about what happened:

> No one should have any doubt that he was formally received into the Roman Catholic Church. Boswell uses words very precisely, and would never have spoken of being 'united to the grand and only true church' if he had not been admitted to communion (Pottle, p. 574).

Pottle notes that aligning oneself with the Church of Rome had serious consequences, as Boswell knew, in that Catholics could not become barristers, serve in the military, hold public office, nor inherit property. Boswell's staunchly Presbyterian father learned about what he perceived to be his son's shocking behavior and engaged a friend to lure Boswell away from Catholi-

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[2]Frederick A. Pottle, *James Boswell: The Earlier Years, 1740-1769* (New York, 1985), p. 2. Henceforth Pottle.

[3]James Boswell, *Boswell in Holland, 1763-1764*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1952), p.246. Henceforth *Holland*.

[4]James Boswell, *London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. Fredrick A. Pottle (London, 1975), pp. 5-7. Henceforth *London Journal*.

cism. By June 1760, Boswell was "clamouring for a commission in the Guards, sure proof that he had renounced Romanism (*London Journal*, p. 7). Pottle also states that Boswell's "formal adherence to the Church of Rome could not have lasted more than a month. Yet he was well informed as to the issues involved, and the experience left an indelible stamp on his mind" (Pottle, p. 52). Nevertheless, Boswell was continually involved with Catholicism long after he relinquished his official allegiance to the Church of Rome. As we shall see, Boswell was ordinarily calmly devout and happy whenever he worshipped in a Catholic church; undoubtedly, he found something unique and significant in what this church offered.

Since the *London Journal* and all the subsequent journals were written after Boswell's short-lived conversion to Catholicism, the writing in them is from the perspective of a former convert who renounced the Catholic faith partially from family pressure but also perhaps because this church did not seem to present complete solutions to his religious dilemmas. On the other hand, Boswell never fully discarded Catholicism.

Foreign embassy chapels, which were under the jurisdiction of official representatives of countries with Catholic monarchs, were the only places where Boswell could publicly and legally worship in the Catholic manner in London. How much the Roman Catholic service appealed to his senses can be seen in the following description of Mass in the Sardinian Minister's Chapel in Lincoln's Inn Fields:

> I was happy enough to be conducted by a person in the Ambassador's livery to a seat just before the organ and fronting the altar. The solemnity of high mass, the music, the wax lights, and the odour of the frankincense made a delightful impression upon me.[5]

For a man who luxuriated in sensual experience, such occasions provided gratifying ritual and grandeur and contributed to his feeling of spiritual security.

Another favorite Catholic venue in London was the Bavarian Chapel, the church where Boswell first heard the Romish service "with a wonderful enthusiasm";[6] he says he was therefore motivated to visit it at least once each time he was subsequently in London.

The journal entry for 1 April 1781 shows Boswell's intentions: "As I wish to be at mass every Sunday, I went first to the Bavarian Chapel, and in the

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[5]James Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence, 1769-1774*, ed. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1960), p. 134. 19 April 1772. Henceforth *Defence*.

[6]James Boswell, *Boswell, the Ominous Years*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1963), p. 114. 2 April 1775. Henceforth *Ominous*.

crowd below was devout."[7] These are not the words of a man who is generally interested only in carousing and drinking; on the contrary, they indicate his serious intention to involve himself regularly in the ritual of the Mass. It should be noted that the date of this entry is 1781—twenty-one years after Boswell formally renounced Catholicism. In April 1786, he returned to the Bavarian Chapel and, in his words, "revived my first London Ideas."[8] He was a devoted worshiper while participating with other members of the congregation in the Mass and also a contemplative individual who could experience rewarding moments of worship by himself.

Another foreign ambassador's chapel which was one of Boswell's favorite places of worship was London's Portuguese Chapel. He was here often and when he notes, for example, "Chapel a moment,"[9] he is probably not exaggerating, considering how convenient it was to go there—the Portuguese Chapel was "only a step from Paoli's house (*Applause*, p. 136. 11 May 1783). While in the capital city, Boswell often stayed at the home of his Catholic friend Pasquale Paoli, the exiled leader of the island nation of Corsica. Boswell visited this chapel not only for formal services; one journal entry tells us that he "knelt before the altar, and was secretly pious, public prayers being over" (*Ominous*, p. 137. 9 April 1775). Personal satisfaction was the motivation for his presence in that setting, as his journals continually demonstrate.

For example, one entry reads simply, "Went to the Portuguese Chapel and adored for a little."[10] This brief notation represents many which illustrate Boswell's attendance at the Chapel for the fulfilling act of devotional worship and provides an unexpected opportunity of viewing Boswell as a solitary and contemplative worshipper. The Portuguese Chapel gave him the valuable spiritual sustenance he continually desired, and the Easter season of 1781 shows Boswell often at this church for worship. He frequently uses the terms "adored" and "devout" when he recounts his visits and describes veneration at a profound level, showing a genuine interest in meaningful worship. When he writes, "I adored with reverence and hope the awful crucifixion for the salvation of mankind" (*Extremes*, p. 146. 13 Sept. 1777), he is demonstrating his serious, reverential attitude towards God. In his worshipful seeking of Him,

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[7]James Boswell, *Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck, 1778-1782*, ed. Joseph W. Reed and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1977), p. 304. 1 April 1781. Henceforth *Laird*.

[8]James Boswell, *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785-1789*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1986), p. 60. 23 April 1786.

[9]James Boswell, *Boswell: The Applause of the Jury, 1782-1785*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1981), p.136. 11 May 1783. Henceforth *Applause*.

[10]James Boswell, *Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778*, ed. Charles McC. Weis and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1971), p. 316. 26 April 1778. Henceforth *Extremes*.

Boswell manifested a spiritual intensity and depth which were powerful indeed.

Boswell's Grand Tour (1764-1766) provided many opportunities for participation in rituals in European Catholic churches which were often more glorious and sumptuous than the smaller embassy chapels in London. His impulse towards worship was easily satisfied in countries whose leaders were Catholic. One journal entry reveals Boswell's focus of interest: "We were now in a Roman Catholic town. It was *fête-Dieu*, so that there was to be a procession. I went into the church, adored my God and resolved to be a worthy man. All seemed noble and well."[11] These words show a personal relationship with God.

This tone is reiterated in Boswell's next journal entry describing his arrival in Rietberg, which he calls a Popish town:

> I was struck at the sight of an image of the Pope, with a crucifix in one hand and an olive-branch in the other. I was filled with pleasing reverence. I kneeled, and with warm devotion adored my God and was grateful to the Saviour of the World (*Germany*, p. 9. 22 June 1764).

Again, Boswell's use of words and phrases such as "reverence," "warm devotion," and "adored my God," shows an active sense of worship. The phrase "grateful to the Saviour of the World" is not one Boswell normally employs, but it appears that, at this time, he accepts Christ as his Redeemer and Saviour and finds solace in this affirmation.

Two days later, Boswell attends a Catholic Mass in the town of Minden, and declares that he "was devout, and had not one Scots Sunday idea. My religion now is chiefly devotion. Pomp of worship aids me in this" (*Germany*, p. 10. 24 June 1764). Boswell's love of such brilliant displays is inevitably linked with worship, and his spirits rise in the midst of grand, solemn ceremonies in Rome, as we see in the journal entry for 8 April 1765:

> Yesterday morning went to St. Peter's. Immense crowd; fine day. Superb high mass. Cardinal Alexander Albani; most grave and pious. Quite sure there must be some truth beyond skies.... Pope knelt and prayed. Whole crowd on knees. Universal silence; perfect devotion. Was quite in frame; thought it *one* way of adoring the Father of the universe, and was certain no hell for ever. Then up. Stood just by Pope's chair when he gave blessing. Grand.[12]

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[11]James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1953), p. 8. 21 June 1764. Henceforth *Germany*.

[12]James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Italy, Corsica and France, 1765-1766*, ed. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1955), pp. 68-9. 8 April 1765. Henceforth *Italy*.

In this entry, Boswell is not fearful of eternal punishment, and, in the midst of such fulfilling rites he sees little cause for doubt.

Another example which shows Boswell's enjoyment of Catholic observances comes on 14 May 1765:

> Yesterday morning at ten went with Abbé, &c. to Monte Cavallo. Waited. In antechamber, off sword, &c. Then in, and kneelings, and kiss of slipper rich with gold. 'Signor Baron Boswell.' I, master of ceremonies. First Sir W., then I, then Clarke, then Rich. POPE: 'How long have you been away [from England]?' To all: 'Very young.'" [We talked of] Naples, Genoa, grande fête, &c. CLARKE: 'I have obtained letters, made preparations.' Abbé, of me: 'The father is his friend.' I: "Genoese father.' (*Italy*, pp. 86-7).

And the conversation continues. Boswell loves ceremonies of all types, including formally meeting men of importance, especially if they are Catholic. Being introduced to the individual who held the highest rank in the hierarchy of the Catholic organization—the Pope himself—was an extraordinarily uplifting experience for Boswell. His interest in religious men and spiritual matters is evident.

A few days later, Boswell returns to Rome and the extent to which being in this renowned place affected him is manifested in a letter to Jean-Jacques Rousseau of 3 October 1765, describing Boswell's devotional activities:

> I returned to Rome for Holy Week. I grew calm. The solemn services of the Roman Catholic Church made a serious impression on me. I began to be a little melancholy and I recalled with religious regret how I had once been, like you, in the bosom of the faithful.... On Easter I was in St. Peter's, and in that superb temple I saw noble and mystical adorations offered to the Supreme Being. I was penetrated with devotion.
>
> I was sure that the revelation given by Jesus was true; and when I saw the Christian High Priest with venerable magnificence elevate before the Eternal Justice a Sacrifice of the sins of the whole world, I fell to my knees among the throng of my fellow men who remained fixed in respectful silence; I struck my breast, and with all the ardour of which my soul was capable, I prostrated myself at the feet of my Father 'who is in Heaven,' convinced that, by varied ways of which we know nothing clearly, he would one day lead all his creatures to happiness. Let cold beings sneer; I was never more nobly happy than on that day (*Italy*, p. 6).

Boswell's words demonstrate contentment with this spiritual position as he expresses his belief that he will experience happiness in the world to come. His certainty is perceived at the same time he is participating in the services and rites of the Catholic church and this is not merely coincidental; rather, it shows Boswell's dependence upon Catholic ceremony as an aid to his spiritual well-being.

A reminder of how much Boswell enjoys Romish rites and also how different the Roman Catholic ceremony was from the Presbyterian service is apparent in an entry for 18 November 1764. Boswell is in Karlsruhe, is presented to the Catholic Prince Christoph, and attends Mass with him: "There were seven masses at a time. The music was excellent. I was very devout, and fully relished the contrast between *Affleck Kirk* and the Romish worship" (*Germany*, p. 180). The pattern is the same: pomp promotes devotion and this gives Boswell intense satisfaction.

Although Boswell obtained spiritual comfort from Catholic worship, he was uneasy about Catholic theology and this led him to seek opinions about Catholicism from numerous people. On his Grand Tour, Boswell met men who had taken holy orders in the Church of Rome and who attempted to live in a way they felt was God-centered. Theirs was a lifestyle Boswell admits he had once considered embracing but one which he never came close to following. He was, however, continually curious about what the sequestered life entailed and enjoyed talking to members of the Catholic religious orders about three topics in particular: life in holy orders, why people accept and reject Catholicism, and specific Catholic tenets.

An important discussion about Catholic beliefs took place when Boswell visited Mannheim. After viewing their elegant church, he goes to the Jesuits' College to see a French priest, Père Monier. The two discuss Catholicism, and the priest asks if he is Catholic. Boswell writes:

> I told Père Monier that I was of no sect. That I took my faith from Jesus, that I endeavoured to adore God with fervency; that I found my devotion excited by grand worship, and that I was happy to worship in a Romish church. I said my notions of God made me not fear him as cruel. The Père said, 'I am really sorry that you are not a Catholic.' He was so agreeable I almost regretted that I could not make him happy by thinking as he did. But I took him by the hand, and said, 'Sir, I shall have the pleasure of meeting you in heaven' (*Germany*, p. 165. 7 Nov. 1764).

Some telling points about Boswell's attitude towards Catholic doctrine emerge here. Monier's assessment that Boswell is enlightened was flattering to Boswell, who liked to think of himself as having achieved a deeper level of spiritual understanding than that of the average person. Boswell, interested in the law, is also impressed by the priest's arguments about salvation and states that a Protestant who feels that his religion is the only means of salvation could not easily contradict the Catholic stance as put forward by Monier. Undoubtedly, Boswell is himself trying to create arguments against Catholicism which could be substantiated, but he does not believe he can do it.

Boswell wished to discuss Catholicism with another person who had "inside" information—John Turberville Needham, a Roman Catholic priest and scientist. As a member of the Royal Society, Needham was a particularly desirable person with whom to converse because he had religious training tempered with knowledge and information about the real world. Boswell said that

Needham's "acquaintance I much wished for" (*Italy*, p.30. 12 Jan. 1765) and that his wish was granted. During their discussions, Boswell found Needham to be a learned man with whom he could easily communicate. Their conversation of 14 January 1765 covered some Catholic issues, as Boswell describes:

> This morning I waited on Mr. Needham, who read me a defence of the Trinity which was most ingenious and really silenced me. I said, 'Sir, this defence is very good; but pray what did you do before you thought of it?' He replied that he submitted to it as a mystery. He said the Catholic religion was proved as a general system, like the Newtonian philosophy, and, although we may be perplexed with partial difficulties, they are not to shake our general belief (*Italy*, pp. 35-36).

Two days later, a doctrine central to Catholicism was discussed—transubstantiation. According to Boswell, Needham "explained his philosophical opinion of transubstantiation, by which I was convinced that it was not absurd" (*Italy*, p. 37. 16 Jan. 1765). Does this mean that after this Boswell accepted completely this Catholic doctrine? Not at all. Here, he does not say that he is convinced that transubstantiation is true—he merely states that the doctrine is not absurd. Boswell's comments reveal his long-term inability to decide what he should believe. His discussions with Needham continue on 19 January 1765:

> After dinner I sat some time with Needham, who told me he was in orders as a Catholic priest and had always lived with conscientious strictness. He said he had many severe struggles to preserve his chastity, but had done so, and was now quite serene and happy. He had also been distressed with a lowness of spirits which impedes devotion (*Italy*, p. 39).

On another day, Boswell writes that he was consoled with "learned and solid conversation" (*Italy*, p. 41. 21 Jan. 1765) with Needham. In parting, the Jesuit advised Boswell to "continue to lay up knowledge" (*Italy*, p. 43. 22 Jan. 1765)—collecting opinions and information about Catholicism, a task the Scotsman took seriously. Boswell was an excellent listener and this priest had sound and reasonable advice to give, yet Boswell still could never really decide whether or not Catholicism truly answered his questions precisely.

Continually intrigued about what Catholics believed, Boswell demonstrated great persistence in pursuit of this quest for knowledge from them. The second category of people with whom Boswell discusses Catholicism is non-Catholics, including Archibald MacLaine, William Forbes, Rousseau, and Samuel Johnson.

A revealing discussion occurred in 1764, when Boswell was studying law in Utrecht and went to The Hague for a short time. There he met his friend Archibald MacLaine, co-pastor of the English Presbyterian Church. On one occasion, Boswell visited MacLaine and "put him in sweats by defending transubstantiation. He was a little splenetic" (*Holland*, p. 260. 2 June 1764). This is all Boswell says of the conversation with MacLaine, but although the de-

scription is brief, it shows how clever Boswell can be in purposefully disconcerting his companions, rather like Dr. Johnson. He knew that MacLaine did not believe in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation; it is noteworthy that Boswell may have been unsure himself as to what he gave credence, but he was precise in realizing what MacLaine did not believe. In order to sort out his own questions concerning this doctrine, Boswell needed to get his friend to address the issue and consequently felt justified in confronting the minister in this way. Although Boswell does not report MacLaine's verbal response, it is apparent that he made his conversational partner rather uncomfortable. Boswell's general style is to provoke people into defending their positions on the religious dogmas he thinks should be debated.

As late as 1790, Boswell was still discussing transubstantiation, again with a non-Catholic. In a letter dated 18 May 1790, Boswell's old friend and advisor Sir William Forbes wrote to Boswell reminding him that he had promised to send a copy of a letter written by their mutual friend, the Bishop of Killaloe. The epistle concerned the "true meaning and import of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper."[13] Forbes also describes a treatise containing:

> An argument against Transubstantiation, that is, as far as I know, perfectly new; and at the same time, in my humble opinion, absolutely unanswerable. As I think you used sometimes to tell me, you had been occasionally distressed with doubts and difficulties on that Subject.

Forbes then recommends that Boswell seriously consider this piece of writing. Boswell is never able to offer a definitive answer to the question of whether or not one should believe in transubstantiation. This equivocation about a central Catholic doctrine was a major issue for anyone wishing to embrace or reject Catholicism.

Boswell insisted on posing queries about Catholic doctrine with respected non-Catholics in order to compare his unsettled thoughts with their opinions. As a dominant figure in the eighteenth-century world of social and political philosophy, the novel, autobiography, and moral theology, Rousseau was an appropriate man Boswell could consult. Since Rousseau was never shy in offering his forthright opinions, Boswell hoped he had encountered the right man to offer some definitive conclusions about Catholicism.

During one of several meetings, Boswell sets the conversation afire by mentioning that he had once been a Roman Catholic. Rousseau responds by saying that he too had been a Catholic but had returned to Geneva and was readmitted to Calvinism, the denomination of his upbringing. So Boswell, with his nearly perfect ability to read individuals (but not necessarily himself),

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[13]Sir William Forbes, Letter to Boswell, 18 May 1790. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

hits upon exactly the right approach to Rousseau. The fact that the two men shared strikingly similar experiences must have helped establish rapport. In his discussions with the famous philosopher, Boswell continues the pattern upon which he relies so often: getting someone he holds in special regard to discuss in detail an important topic. Rousseau advises the young man to decide for himself what he should believe. Although Boswell respects the philosopher's opinion, he continues to interrogate people on this issue.

In fact, Boswell stubbornly pressed on in the hope that other non-Catholics would reveal their private thoughts about Catholicism, most of all Samuel Johnson. The Scotsman had little difficulty in getting his hero to offer some insights concerning the Popish religion. When Boswell met Johnson for the first time in May 1763, Boswell was searching for a Christian denomination which would suit him. Johnson, content to be a member of the Church of England, was eager to delineate his ideas on many aspects of religion in general and about individual denominations in particular, including the Church of Rome. Boswell was quick to bring Catholicism into his conversations with Johnson, even at an early stage in their friendship. For example, a month after being introduced to Johnson, Boswell told Johnson he "believed the Christian religion; though I might not be clear in many particulars" and Boswell is pleased to report that Johnson "thought all Christians, whether Papists or Protestants, agreed in the essential articles, and that their differences were trivial, or were rather political than religious" (*London Journal*, p. 283. 25 June 1763).

The fact that Boswell wanted Johnson to expound on Catholicism is readily apparent. Always the hunter of Johnsonian words of wisdom, Boswell initiates a fairly long conversation which is recorded in October 1769. On this occasion, Boswell and Johnson were dining together at the Mitre Tavern in London, where there was a "pretty large circle this evening. Dr. Johnson was in very good humour, lively, and ready to talk upon all subjects." And, as usual, Boswell was equally keen to raise questions:

Boswell: 'So, Sir, you are no great enemy to the Popish religion.'

Johnson: 'No more, Sir, than to the Presbyterian religion.'

Boswell: 'You are joking.'

Johnson: 'No, Sir, upon honour I think so. Nay, Sir, of the two, I prefer the Popish.'

Boswell: 'How so, Sir?'

Johnson: 'Why, Sir, the Presbyterians have no church, no apostolical ordination.'

Boswell: 'And do you think that absolutely essential, Sir?'

Johnson: 'Why, Sir, as it was an apostolical institution, I think it is dangerous to be without it.'[14]

The two men then discuss briefly the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Thirty-nine Articles, and predestination. Boswell is pleased by Johnson's comments about the Church of Scotland because Johnson, unlike Boswell's father, is critical of the Presbyterians. Boswell proceeds to focus on Catholicism and asks his companion some extremely telling questions. Their dialogue shows just how precise Boswell wanted Johnson to be and how tolerant Johnson could be of doctrines he did not accept personally. Boswell summarizes the conversation:

> I thus ventured to mention all the common objections against the Roman Catholick Church, that I might hear so great a man upon them. What he said here is accurately recorded. But it is not improbable that if one had taken the other side, he might have reasoned differently.[15]

This statement may explain why, even after what seem like lengthy and exhaustive discussions, Boswell feels obliged again to ask about specific aspects of Catholic doctrine. He continually hopes for the final word but is all too aware of Johnson's ability to play the conversational chameleon and change his stance almost instantly, if the situation warrants.

That Johnson was not always tolerant of the Catholic point of view and could easily lash out against the people he often defended can be seen in Boswell's journal entry for 10 October 1779. Here, Johnson and Boswell had a "long quiet conversation" but Johnson was "this evening violent against the Roman Catholics" and "He was even against the invocation of saints. In short, he was in the humour of opposition" (*Laird*, p. 143). It is particularly significant that Johnson refers to "us," indicating that Johnson and Boswell were not Catholics; in addition, Boswell is aware of Johnson's sympathy towards the doctrine of invoking the saints and prayers for the dead and that Johnson was in fact quite Catholic-like in this regard.[16]

By June 1784, Johnson was an aged man, and Boswell knew that the number of opportunities for recording Johnsonian remarks was diminishing. Boswell must have been especially attentive when, six months before he died,

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[14]James Boswell, *Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766-1769*, ed. Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1957), p. 351. 26 Oct. 1769.

[15]James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D. With a Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. G. B. Hill; rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934-64), II, 105. Henceforth *Life*.

[16]Samuel Johnson, *Diaries, Prayers, and Annals*, ed. E. L. McAdam, with Donald and Mary Hyde, 16 vols. (New Haven and London, 1958-1990), I, 50.

Johnson showed an inclination to accept some central Catholic principles. On 10 June 1784, while in Oxford, Johnson and Boswell were talking with friends, including Mrs. Ann Kennicott, who

> spoke of her brother, who had given up good preferments in the Church of England on his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. Johnson, who felt conscientiousness as warmly as man could do, said with fervency, "GOD bless him" (*Applause*, p. 232. 10 June 1784).

These are forceful words coming from an Anglican who did not fully support Catholicism.

Yet he was able to go even further in his open-mindedness; Boswell quotes Johnson as saying:

> If you join the Papists externally, they will not interrogate you strictly as to your belief in their tenets. No reasoning Papist believes every article of their faith. There is one side on which a good man might be persuaded to embrace it. A good man, of a timorous disposition, in great doubt of his acceptance with GOD, and pretty credulous, might be glad to be of a church where there are so many helps to get to Heaven. I would be a Papist if I could. I have fear enough; but an obstinate rationality prevents me. I shall never be a Papist, unless on the near approach of death, of which I have a very great terrour (*Life*, p. 4, 289).

Boswell, who also feared dying, reports that Johnson then "argued in defence of some of the peculiar tenets of the Church of Rome" (*Life*, pp. 4, 284). To what degree Boswell was influenced by Johnson's comments is impossible to say, but he noticed Johnson's phrase that the Catholics offer "so many helps to Heaven." Quite simply, Boswell was extremely interested in gaining entry into Paradise.

Worshipping as a Catholic was a manifestation of his beliefs, but on one striking occasion Boswell found himself in a completely different situation in which he perceived he might have to act upon his ideology. This time, however, his action threatened to produce a detrimental rather than satisfying result, and the experience was also significant because it reveals just how important the question of the validity of Catholicism was.

At one point in 1774, an agitated Boswell expected that he would be forced to reveal publicly and dramatically exactly how he felt about Catholicism. He had been elected as a delegate on behalf of his friend, Colonel Archibald Campbell, to vote in Edinburgh's Parliamentary election. Boswell overlooked the fact that "the Formula" might be administered to him. This parliamentary act, which took effect in 1700, required that the "taker" prove he was not a Roman Catholic by declaring publicly that he denied certain tenets seen to be peculiar to Catholicism. Boswell describes his feelings:

> My difficulty in taking the Formula was that I could not well swear I *abhor* all the tenets there mentioned, such as *purgatory*, the *invocation of angels and saints*, and believe them *contrary to* and *inconsistent with* the written word of GOD; for indeed, I do not see that they are. At least I do not recollect the passages against them (*Ominous*, p. 26, 19 Oct. 1774).

Boswell refers to the day on which he is to take the Formula as the "important day of risk." He continues the entry by writing that some paltry images [perhaps some small statues, pictures, or a rosary] upon his chimney-piece revived ideas of saints. He then turns to the section of Tillotson's *Sermons* in which the author "endeavours to confute some doctrines of the Church of Rome contained in the Formula. But he did not satisfy me" (p. 31). Boswell's plight appears desperate as he summarizes his situation:

> Sometimes I thought that I might swear the Formula against the doctrines there mentioned, meaning as they are practised in the Church of Rome, they being greatly abused. But alas! The Formula seems to hold an abhorrence of the doctrines themselves as the test of not being a papist. I thought I would plead that no man is by law obliged to take the Formula unless he *is suspected* of being a papist, which I am not. But then I considered what an appearance my refusal of it would have in the House of Commons; and besides, that the fact of my having once embraced the Romish faith might be brought out" (pp. 31-32).

Fortunately, he is never called upon to take the oath and reveal the action that had previously escaped detection, so his earlier membership in the Catholic congregation does not become public knowledge. His simile succinctly describes his reaction after his deliverance: "I was like a man relieved from hanging over a precipice by a slight rope" (p. 32). The incident shows that Boswell is sympathetic to at least some Roman Catholic beliefs, but he never notes in his journal if he had planned to accept or reject the Formula. We are left wondering. Fortunately for Boswell, he was never forced into deciding and never had to show his hand in a game which had strict rules and grave ramifications.

A compelling piece of evidence which demonstrates Boswell's sympathy for the Church of Rome may be found in his Codicil, which bears the date 30 May 1785, two days later than that of his will. In this document, Boswell requests "the prayers of all my pious friends for my departed soul considering how reasonable it is to suppose that it may be detained some time in a middle state" (*Applause*, p. 304). The Catholic nature of this section of the legal document predominates. It appears that Boswell, who in this life was uncertain about what happened after death, wished to do all he could to guarantee his success in the next world.

On a doctrinal level, the Catholic Church offered Boswell some powerful claims for being an exceptionally valid manifestation of spiritual truths. Apostolic ordination by Jesus Christ Himself, Masses and prayers for the dead,

and the phenomenon of transubstantiation fascinated Boswell, but it is apparent that he could never quite accept these doctrines. This explains his compulsion to discuss these and other issues with Catholics and non-Catholics.

Boswell was clearly drawn to Roman Catholicism, even after surrendering his membership in that denomination. Further evidence could be cited; for example, in a letter to Johnston, Boswell happily describes his seeing the "Holy House itself where the blessed Virgin Mary lived which house was transported hither from Nazareth by Angels."[17] He goes on to say, "who knoweth the ways of God: or who can say what may be the interpositions of his supreme power. I am a Sceptic. But a devout one." How very characteristic of Boswell, who will not be categorized easily, to call himself a devout skeptic. Nonetheless, he was fascinated to see this house, reiterating the fact that he sought experiences associated with Catholicism. In addition, as discussed previously, Boswell asks his family and friends for their prayers after his death; likewise he has at least four other prayers—all strikingly Catholic—which might also be described in detail to support the view that Boswell was an individual who experienced great rapport with Catholicism.

This discussion has shown how Boswell was, in his own words, "happy to worship in a Romish Church" (*Germany*, p. 165. 7 Nov. 1764). Participation in the formal Mass and worshipping informally during solitary visits to Catholic churches were outward signs of belief, and Boswell gained spiritual satisfaction by being physically present in these places of worship. On these occasions, he is calm, devout, and gratified to participate in a Catholic mode of worship.

As his writings show, Boswell's thoughts were often directed upwards and away from the ordinary and sometimes depressing daily life. With the threat of melancholy almost always waiting to overcome him, Boswell yearned for and thrived upon peak experiences, including those which had a fundamentally religious basis. Catholic ritual relies partially on the appeal to the senses to help bring one's spiritual nature into focus, and attempting to see his own spirituality clearly and unequivocally was an activity in which Boswell was constantly engaged. Did Boswell ever stop wondering about the validity of Catholicism? Probably not, for he never outgrew his need to inspect and dissect doctrines in his elusive dream of achieving a reasonable understanding of his own beliefs.

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[17] *The Correspondence of James Boswell and John Johnston of Grange*, ed. R. S. Walker (New York, 1966), p. 157.