

"THE DEPTHS OF THE CHURCH ARE NOT DISTURBED"



An interview with **ADRIAN VERMEULE, J.D.**, a Harvard law professor who made a dramatic conversion to the Catholic faith

■ BY **CHRISTINA DEARDURFF**

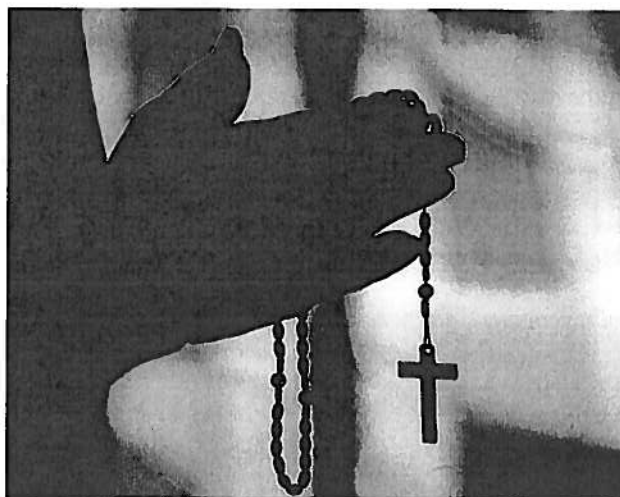
In the midst of a widespread attitude of indifference, if not scorn, toward religion in general and toward the Catholic faith in particular, in a time of ideological battles among Catholics, and scandals and schism marring the Church of the early 21st century, a steady stream of courageous souls continues to convert from other confessions — or no confession — to the Catholic faith.

Recent converts include *Wall Street Journal* opinion columnist and native of Iran Sohrab Amari, who announced his conversion on Twitter after the murder by ISIS of French priest Fr. Jacques Hamel; and the first Muslim winner of the Miss USA beauty pageant, in 2010, Lebanese-American Rima Fakih.

Below, Adrian Vermeule, the Ralph S. Tyler Professor of Constitutional Law at Harvard Law School, answers a few questions about his own recent conversion experience. A graduate of Harvard College ('90) and Harvard Law School ('93), he served as a law clerk for the late Justice Antonin Scalia in 1994-95, is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and has authored or co-authored eight books, including *Law's Abnegation: From Law's Empire to the Administrative State*, due out soon from Harvard University Press. Married with two children, he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In announcing Professor Vermeule's conversion, Robert George, Catholic law professor at Princeton University, commented, "How the Church, weakened and wounded as she is at this historical moment (with the worst of her wounds being self-inflicted), continues to attract such extraordinary men and women, is, to me, well...a miracle."

FTV: Could you cite those who influenced your interest in and decision to con-



"... BEHIND AND ABOVE ALL THOSE WHO HELPED ME ALONG THE WAY, THERE STOOD A GREAT LADY..."

vert to Catholicism? What was your religious background previously?

Professor Vermeule: I was baptized and raised as an Episcopalian/Anglican; my first school was run by Anglican nuns, and I later attended an historically Episcopalian boarding school. I fell away from the Episcopal Church in college, and when I returned in later life, it was a different place. There are many "small-o" orthodox Christians remaining within it, including dear friends, but they have lost control of the institution to heterodox forces.

As for influences, there were many, especially Cardinal Newman; Father Brian Dunkle, SJ; Father Kevin Grove, CSC, who generously arranged my reception at Notre Dame; a set of lay and clerical scholars and friends from Notre Dame, Harvard and other universities; friends at St. Paul Parish at Harvard; and a larger cloud of witnesses throughout the Church. But behind and above all those who helped me along the way, there stood a great Lady.

Did you experience any kind of mystical or possibly supernatural signs or occurrences relating to your conversion?

Let me refer back to the end of the previous answer and leave it at that.

What is the logic of your Catholic position against the present zeitgeist? How could you choose the Catholic faith in our time — a time of turmoil in the Church and evident sin among Catholics, even among the clergy?

The intellectual logic is unoriginal and Newman-derived. Raised a Protestant, despite all my thrashing and twisting I eventually couldn't help but believe that the apostolic succession, through Peter as the designated leader and *primus inter pares*, is in some logical or theological sense prior to everything else — including even Scripture,

"... THE DEPTHS OF THE CHURCH ARE NOT DISTURBED BY THE STORMS THAT PASS TO AND FRO ON THE SURFACE."



...if, the Church in the US has faced scandals in recent years. Journalists pose questions to Washington Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and Justin Gregory, then president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, during a press conference at the Vatican April 24, 2002 to discuss a two-day summit between American and Vatican Church leaders on the problem of clergy sexual abuse (CNS photo from Reuters)

...those formation was guided and completed by the apostles and their successors, themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit. A corollary is the very great evil of schism and private judgment, brought home to me when the Episcopal Church essentially decided to go its own way based on novel views, even in the face of faithful admonition by the broader Anglican Communion. Ultimately I think with Newman — and with the Notre Dame historian Brad Gregory, whose brilliant book *The Unintended Reformation* crystallizes the idea — that there is no stable middle ground between Catholicism and atheist materialism. One must always be travelling, or slipping unintentionally, in one direction or the other.

As for a “time of turmoil” in the Church, I’m not convinced that’s true. Or, to put it differently, it’s always true in greater or lesser degree, but the depths of the Church are not disturbed by the storms that pass to and fro on the surface. Perhaps I speak now with the naiveté and enthusiasm of the convert, but the Church seems to me an institution whose foundations are as strong as iron. The turmoil will pass away; episodes, scandals and debates will come and go; but the line and witness of Peter’s successors will never fail.

Which saints do you admire and learn from? Augustine? Thomas More? John Henry Newman?

Athanasius, Aquinas (especially for his political and legal theory: parochial of me, I know, but each sentence cuts like a razor), Joan



“THERE IS HOPE FOR RENEWAL, BECAUSE OF FATHER JACQUES HAMEL AND OTHERS LIKE HIM”

of Arc, Newman, and the profound psychologist, Josemaria Escriva. But most of all, nearest to my heart, a young and fiercely courageous Jewish refugee girl who teaches inexhaustible lessons, Miriam bat Joachim.

Do you think the West can still be called “Christian,” or did that end a long time ago? Is there hope for a religious renewal in the West? How?

There is hope for renewal, because of Father Jacques Hamel and others like him. God acts through the weak and the marginal —

the humble, aged parish priest who goes to his death filled with faith and courage, naming the darkness and pushing it away. Out of this, God has fashioned a light to illuminate France and the whole West.

On what legal fronts do you find the most hope for influencing the culture away from the “culture of death” of materialism and nihilism we seem to be gradually embracing?


I put little stock or hope or faith in law. It is a tool that may be put to good uses or bad. In the long run it will be no better than the polity and culture in which it is embedded. If that culture sours and curdles, so will the law; indeed that process is well underway and its tempo is accelerating. Our hope lies elsewhere.

(Dr. Vermeule would like to thank Fr. Dominic Legge, OP, for theological advice in connection with this interview) O

SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

PLAN A PILGRIMAGE BEFORE THE CLOSING OF THE JUBILEE OF MERCY!

www.guadalupe Shrine.org
5250 Justin Road -

 Toll-free: (877) 799-4059
La Crosse, Wisconsin