

literally indispensable; and to society as a whole which depends on the marriage-based family for the rearing of responsible and upright citizens. If her pro-life advocacy angered many liberal intellectuals, her outspoken defense of marriage and traditional norms of sexual morality made them apologetic.

Betsey's marriage to Gene was one of the great love stories of our time. They were two very different personalities, perfectly united. He was the head of the family; she was in charge of everything. Their affection for each other created a kind of force field into which friends were drawn in love for both of them. Although unable to have children of their own, they lavished parental care and concern on their students and younger colleagues, who in turn worshipped them. Betsey leaves us many fine works of historical scholarship and social criticism—works admired by honest scholars across the political spectrum. Even more importantly, her life provides an unsurpassed example of intellectual integrity and moral courage. Her fervent witness to the sanctity of human life and the dignity of marriage and the family will continue to inspire. May the living God who drew her to Himself comfort her bereaved husband and grant her a full share in His divine life.

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### **A Conversion Story**

— *Historian and Chestertonian, the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese described her 1995 conversion to Roman Catholicism in First Things (April 2000). Somewhat remarkably, she received five sacraments in one day—baptism, penance, marriage, communion, and confirmation.*

When, in December 1995, I was received into the Catholic Church, my non-believing colleagues tactfully refrained from comment, primarily, I suspect, because they literally did not know what to say. More likely than not, many of them assumed that, having lived through some difficult years, I was turning to faith for some form of irrational consolation. Consequently, from their perspective, to acknowledge my conversion would, implicitly, have been to acknowledge my vulnerability. Others, who were less sympathetic, doubtless assumed that my turn to Rome reflected what they viewed as my reactionary politics, notably with respect to abortion. From their perspective, I had exiled myself from acceptable conversation of any kind.

Believers, in sharp contrast, welcome conversion stories as heartening evidence of God's grace and the workings of the Holy Spirit. The conversion of a secular intellectual in particular seems to snatch a soul from the very jaws of Feminism, Communism, Nihilism, Atheism, or some other fashionable Secular Ideology. Given the broad gap between belief and non-belief that both sides perceive, it is not surprising that both hostile and

sympathetic observers expect conversion stories to be dramatic. Like St. Paul on the road to Damascus, the convert is generally expected to have experienced a moment of blinding illumination followed by a radical change of life. This expectation testifies to a widespread sense that the tenets of faith and those of the world, of Jerusalem and of Athens, are in conflict. While emphatically not disputing the significance of the deep differences between the views and attitudes of believers and those of non-believers, I did not myself experience conversion as a radical rupture with my past. This is not to say that I did not experience the journey to belief as what my students call “life-changing”: in essential ways, I did. Nonetheless, in other ways I did not. In many respects, my conversion fit neatly—almost seamlessly—into the continuum of my life, and, from this perspective, it was a natural stage in the journey rather than a new departure.

The story of modernity has arguably been one of the marginalization and discrediting of belief, or, perhaps more accurately, its relegation to the realm of radical subjectivity. Modernity, in other words, has systematically divorced faith from moral and intellectual authority. Until well into the twentieth-century, however, the mounting assaults on faith did not entirely erase the living legacy of Christianity from Western culture. If nothing else, the moral teachings of the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount continued to receive a measure of respect-in exhortation if not uniformly in observance. My early years conformed precisely to this pattern, especially with respect to the Decalogue, which my parents took with utmost seriousness. In retrospect, it seems to me that my father especially never doubted the truth of Dostoevsky’s troubling question: “If God is dead, is not everything permitted?” Yet neither he nor my mother was a believer, and neither taught us to believe. Like many other honorable and upright modernists, they apparently grounded their strong sense of morality in the integrity of the individual.

Over the years, however, my concerns about morality deepened, and my reflections invariably pointed to the apparently irrefutable conclusion that morality was, by its very nature, authoritarian. Morality, in other words, drew the dividing line between good and bad. During the years of my reflection, however, the secular world was rapidly promoting the belief that moral conviction, like any other idea, expressed the standpoint of the person who enunciated it. And it was becoming a widely shared belief that there were as many moralities as there were people and that it was inappropriate to impose one’s own morality on another whose situation one could not fully understand. Although as predisposed as any to respect the claims of difference, whether of sex, class, or culture, I increasingly found this moral relativism troubling. It seemed difficult to imagine a world in which

## *News and Comments*

each followed his or her personal moral compass, if only because the morality of some was bound, sooner or later, to clash with the morality of others. And without some semblance of a common standard, those clashes were more than likely to end in one or another form of violence.

My more wrenching concerns, however, lay elsewhere. Thinking and writing about abortion had led me to an ever greater appreciation for the claims of life, which were so often buried beneath impassioned defenses of a woman's right to self-determination, especially her right to sexual freedom. When I began to think seriously about the issue, my commitment to women's rights to develop their talents predisposed me to support the legality of abortion, at least up to a certain point. Even then, I found it impossible not to take seriously the life of the fetus that was being so casually cast aside. The emerging discussions of assisted suicide only intensified my discomfort, as I found myself worrying about one human being deciding whether another's life is worth living. "How do we know?" I kept asking myself. "How ever can we know?" I had not attended a Mass since my youth, during visits to France, and then only rarely. I had no clear idea of what to expect, although I knew enough to know that I could not receive communion. Yet an almost visceral instinct told me that this first direct encounter with the faith I was planning to embrace was something I could not foresee and must undertake alone. By now, most of my specific memories of that morning have merged with the countless times I have attended Mass at the Cathedral since. All that stands out is my response to that first hour, as a Catholic-to-be, of confronting the figure of the crucified Christ that dominates the Cathedral. There, directly in front of me, was the Lord I had pledged myself to serve—a Lord whom as yet I barely knew and who nonetheless seemed to hold me fast.

In deciding to enter the Church, I had decided that I believed in Christ Jesus and accepted him as my Lord and Savior, but even as my love for and commitment to the Church deepened, I remained unsure of precisely what my faith meant or from whence it derived. Fr. Richard Lopez, a remarkable priest who remains my confessor and spiritual advisor, reassured me that faith and faithfulness were, above all, matters of the will rather than the emotions, which, he insisted, remain inherently suspect. His words conformed to what I had learned from my own reading in Catholic theology and eased my occasional misgivings about the elusiveness of my own feelings. On the day of my reception, which included the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage, and communion, a transformative joy consecrated a decision that now seemed to derive as much from the heart as the mind. That joy, although varying in manifestation and intensity, has persisted since. But my understanding of its meaning has not ceased to

change and grow. Today I see more clearly than I could at the time that much of my initial hesitation and diffidence derived from my unconscious persistence in materialist habits of thought. Like any good rationalist, I kept looking for unambiguous explanations for my turn to faith, and, although the possible candidates abounded, none clearly stood out as the reason. It took two or three years for me to begin to understand that the decisive action had not been mine but God's. In principle, we all know that faith is a gift or grace, not a personal accomplishment. But if my case is as common as I suspect it is, we find that knowledge is surprisingly difficult to believe and make fully ours. Thus, with the best of intentions, we try to earn that which lies beyond the reach of even our most heroic efforts and which exceeds any merit we can conceive. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese taught at Emory University. Her last book, co-edited with Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, was *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (Routledge).

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Elizabeth Fox-Genovese  
1941–2007.