

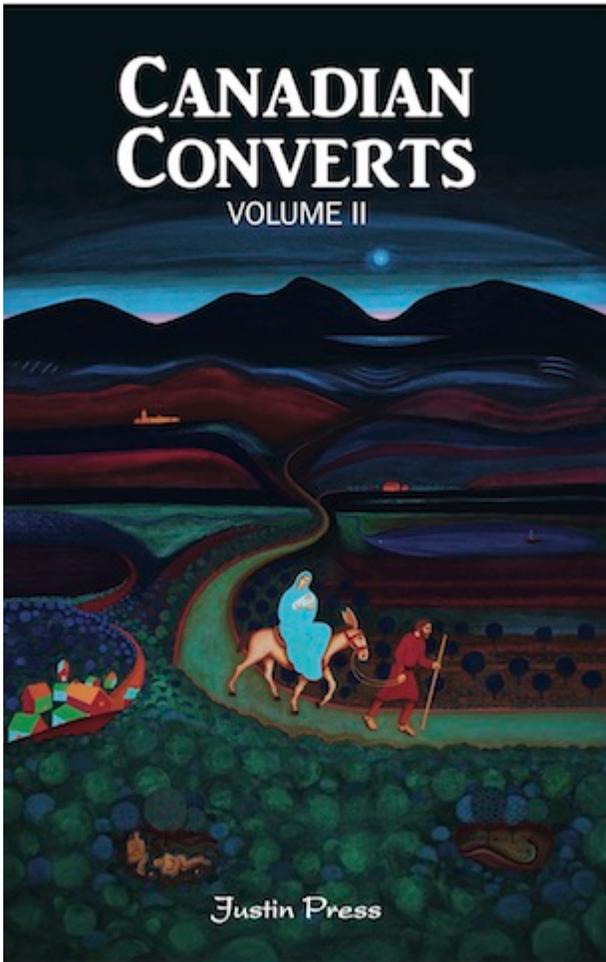
Catholic college president bares atheist past in new *Canadian Converts* book

Jason West, president of Edmonton's Newman Theological College, would rather talk about abstract theories, such as Transubstantiation and the Trinity, than his own personal life.

"I don't like being vulnerable at all," said West, who was for many years an atheist, before rising to the top of the ranks of the Catholic theological college.

West left his comfort zone to pen his personal conversion story in the second volume of *Canadian Converts: The Path to Rome*.

"People are letting you look inside themselves to a great extent in these stories," said John Gay, CEO of Justin Press, the Ottawa-based publishing house that also produced the first volume of *Canadian Converts*. Released in 2009, Volume 1 featured 12 conversion stories, including that of Conrad Black – the former newspaper publisher and author who spent time in jail after being convicted of fraud in 2007. He wrote his conversion essay from prison.



The second volume of *Canadian Converts* was released on Nov. 9 by Justin Press.

Released on Nov. 9, the second volume of *Canadian Converts* includes essays from a Zoroastrianism priest, a poet from British Columbia, and a Chinese-Canadian doctor.

"It's an interesting group to be a part of in terms of the different people and their backgrounds," said West. "It's interesting to see how God works in these different ways."

"It's not in a straight line. At least in my own experience, it's not a deliberate choice," West said of his journey to the Catholic Church. "It's really you're chosen and pulled into it, and in some cases, almost against your will."

West's 30-page essay includes details about his life including days of binge drinking and dabbling in pornography as a young infantry soldier in the military reserves.

"It's easier to forget about some of that past," said West. "But then there's also people who go through those things too these days. So it may be helpful to

see that you're not limited by your past bad choices. They have consequences, but you can rise above them with some effort."

West grew up in Winnipeg and then Northern Ontario, the son of parents who had been raised in the United Church of Canada but had stopped actively attending church shortly after their marriage. He excelled in academics and athletics, and at 16 joined the reserves in Sudbury.

"I was looking for something to commit my life to in different ways – from athletics to the military, in studies – and not finding any of them satisfactory," said West.

In his first year at Laurentian University in Sudbury, he writes in his essay, he registered at the Jesuit College on a whim, welcoming the opportunity to test his "atheist presuppositions." But it wasn't until his postgraduate years at the University of Waterloo in his 20s when he experienced his conversion.

At Waterloo, West met his future wife, Christine, who had been raised a Catholic and was rediscovering her own faith through her studies in philosophy.

"Even when my arguments were persistent and bordering on rude, Christine's faith did not waver, and this made a profound impression that began to incarnate the intellectual journey I had undertaken," writes West.

A friend, Canadian philosopher Louis Groarke, was the first to invite him to Mass, explaining the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

"I was struck by the reverence of the faithful receiving Communion, which made a profound impression upon me," said West. "So much so that the next week I looked up the closest parish to my apartment and walked over to Blessed Sacrament Parish (Kitchener) for Mass."

Ultimately, it was his reading of historical Catholic theologians that led to his decision to fully enter the Catholic Church.

"If Augustine had taught me that God must exist, Aquinas taught me who that God must be," said West.

It was this insight that led him to the altar at the Easter Vigil in 1996, to receive the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.

West is one of a number of the 15 diverse writers featured in the book who mention being influenced by the works of St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, and John Henry Newman, the Anglican-turned-Catholic priest who penned *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (A defence of one's own life).

But the journeys were not all intellectual, said Msgr. Kevin Beach of Ottawa's St. Patrick's Basilica, in his introduction to the book.

“In its richest expression, our faith encompasses the whole person – body, mind and soul. This is why it attracts the simple and the sagacious, the powerful and the pauper,” said Beach.

Many of the writers, like Ryan Topping, an author and academic dean at Newman, came from other denominations of Christianity into full communion with the Catholic Church.

“They don’t slam the door after them,” said Gay. “Many of the converts pay tribute to the good things of their previous religious communities.

“But there’s a price to pay,” he added, noting that often, close relationships with friends and even family members are broken because of the decision to convert.

Topping, a former member of the Mennonite Church, also recently released his own book, *The Gift of the Church: How the Catholic Church Transformed the History and Soul of the West*.

Both books were to be featured at a public book launch on Nov. 28, at 4 p.m. in the gathering place of Newman Theological College. *Canadian Converts* can be purchased at Newman’s bookstore or through the publisher’s website, <https://justinpress.ca>.