



## September 2015 CHNewsletter

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# THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



## From Narnia to Middle Earth

by Michael Goodwin

*“It’s — it’s a magic wardrobe. There’s a wood inside it, and it’s snowing, and there’s a Faun and a witch and it’s called Narnia; come and see.”*  
— Lucy, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis

### The Wardrobe to Narnia

Since my childhood, I always loved C.S. Lewis’ stories about the adventures in Narnia. It was stories like the ones about Narnia that helped me realize that this was the way we usually come to understand the real and true things of life. As I began to wonder about who God is, I got introduced to characters such as Aslan, Mr. Tumnus, and Lucy. Through stories told creatively and beautifully, I came to not just know but also love the goodness and truth concerning God.

During my first eighteen years, I grew up in a family that taught me to love Jesus and His Word. I found Jesus to be like Aslan in the Narnia stories: someone who always surprised and captivated me. I was never bored hearing about Jesus. He not only saved me from my sins through His death and resurrection, but also desired to lead me, encourage me, and commune with me. My family also encouraged me to grow in Christian community at our Bible church in eastern Long Island. This became Narnia for me. I fondly remember the

great love and service the community shared with each other and anyone who had need. Songs were lifted to God in praise of His Son Jesus. The pastors through the years taught the Bible with great compassion and grace. There were dinners shared, friendships formed with other young Christians, and trips for service and spiritual growth on a yearly basis.

My childhood was not all love, joy, peace, and happiness, though. I struggled to seek deep friendships and was often ridiculed for my Christian beliefs at the public schools I attended. It turns out that being a born-again Christian was not the way to become cool and popular. High school was especially difficult. I had trouble figuring out how to be a Christian and still relate to my classmates at a public school. Coupled with my inclination to be socially shy, I would usually be the one who would sit by myself during lunch. The Evangelical mindset was that people were either saved or not saved. So, how can you be friends with those who are not believers? How can you “be in the world and not of the world”?

The stories of Narnia provided a tale of people from our world becoming more alive in another world. This story matched *Continued on page 2* ➤

Journeys Home

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

my experience growing up as an Evangelical Protestant. It spoke to a longing to want to escape from the difficulties of this world and have an adventure or take a holiday in another.

### First Encounters with the Catholic Faith

*Narnia was a children's story. It had clearly defined and often symbolic characters that represented key themes from Scripture. Jesus was represented by Aslan while the devil was portrayed as the White Witch who had cast a spell on Narnia, making it "always winter, but never Christmas." Just like the main child characters that visit Narnia, there is a time to grow into an adult and have other adventures. As St. Paul says in his first letter to the Church at Corinth: "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known" (13:11-12).*

My first encounters with the Catholic Church did not occur until I was beginning high school. That might sound as if I had a sheltered life. But, if you were to ask many Protestant Christians they would likely express a similar experience. Sadly, the Catholic and Protestant worlds often do not have regular points of contact.

I primarily became acquainted with the Catholic Church through the ways in which it was portrayed in the media and from the few friends I knew who were Catholic. Many times when I would drive by a Catholic church, I would wonder to myself: *What is going on in there?* In general, though, the Catholic Church was something totally other.

### A Dim View of Hobbits

*Everyone outside the Shire seemed to have a low view of Hobbits. They are oddly mannered and even more oddly shaped. They have weird customs and names. They are considered, by the rest of Middle Earth, as small and insignificant. In a similar way, some in the Evangelical world have a dim view of Catholics.*

Overall, my perception of the Catholic Church was not a favorable one. The Bible church I attended up through adolescence provided occasional caution about the Catholic Church. The offenses raised were directed toward both what it was thought Catholics believed and how they lived the faith. Here are a few examples of things I heard growing up that formed my perception of the Catholic Church:

"Catholics believe that the Pope is sinless."

"Catholics teach their people to confess to a priest *instead* of Jesus."

"Some Catholics worship and pray to Mary."

"The Catholic Church has added works to the message of Jesus' gospel of salvation."

"The Catholic Church teaches useless tradition that distracts from the simple message of the gospel."

"Catholics follow a man-made religion."

Based on the depiction of Catholic Faith and practice, you would think our church community considered Catholics our enemies. Actually, the common understanding was that many Catholics were Christian, despite being Catholic. It was accepted that some people who were Catholic were "born again Catholics." The assumption was that, in spite of all the false and wrong things the Catholic Church taught, some Catholics were miraculously saved by Jesus "from" the Catholic corruptions of the Faith and "into" a relationship with Jesus.

### On the Border of Middle Earth

As I began college, my awareness of the Catholic Church began to grow. I had grown weary of the public school setting and desired to attend a school that would nurture and strengthen my Christian faith. I attended a historically-Baptist college in southwestern Ohio that placed a strong emphasis on Christian development and community. We had chapel every weekday with time spent singing and being taught the Scriptures. Friendships were developed and campus leadership encouraged students to pursue ministry and service opportunities in nearby local churches.

It was also at this time I first encountered Tolkein's epic work, *The Lord of the Rings*. The movies were announced right before I started college in 2001. I sought out the books and perceived that the imagery spoke to something deeper about the Christian Faith than the stories of Narnia. There were vivid and strange characters, epic quests, battles, and sublime beauty. The question naturally began to arise: what informed Tolkein's writing of *The Lord of the Rings*? I would not discover the answer to this question for another seven years when I finally discovered the deep Catholic faith of J.R.R. Tolkein.

Another major impact that college had on me was that it instilled a growing awareness of the Evangelical Christian world. It was here that I first became aware of "Protestantism" as an historical movement and began to notice that Protestant Christians, while sharing some common beliefs, also had some major differences in their beliefs and practice. For most of my life, I assumed that what I was taught at my small Bible church on eastern Long Island was what Christians were taught all around the world. But, after four years at a college with students coming from hundreds of different Protestant denominations, I quickly learned that this was not the case — and it bothered me.

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# Conversion in the New Millennium

Dr. Kenneth J. Howell

When we look out at our culture in North America and in Western Europe in 2015, we may well ask ourselves what our priorities should be as Catholic Christians. In the midst of a growing secularism, it is easy to become dismayed and discouraged. In the last eight to ten years, we have also witnessed a revival of a virulent paganism that is taking hold on the minds of many of our fellow Americans. In a few instances the Christian Faith is openly mocked and derided. In a few more, there are signs of active repression. In most cases, it is ignored in the media. Many millennials apparently feel that religion in general and Christianity in particular are no longer relevant to their daily lives.



What should a conscientious Christian do in these days? Or perhaps more pointedly, what can a Christian do to remain faithful to Christ and His Church in these days? As we try to read the signs of the times and the needs of our days, the lines between the Church and the world seem to be drawn more distinctly than ever. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said some years ago that he envisioned a smaller but more faithful and committed Church in the future. I believe when the differences between the Church and the secular world become more obvious, we can be thankful because it provides clarity in people making choices about what is most important.

On the individual and family level, Christians of all stripes are called to do exactly what the generations of believers before us have always done. We are called to live lives of holiness and love, or in Paul's words, "Perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor 7:1). Pope Francis wisely said early in his petrine ministry that joy may be one of the most powerful magnets for drawing people to the Church. By living joy-filled lives we can be the salt and light of Christ in the world. We need to be convinced that the world out there needs Christ and His Church more than ever because in fact it really does. In a world where the "battle lines" are clearly drawn, the need for conversion becomes even clearer. But how can we foster conversions for those who do not yet know God's grace?

## Making Holiness Real

Surprisingly, seeing others converted begins not with them but with us. And it begins not with preparations for how to engage in evangelizing efforts but with the pursuit of holiness. Throughout the Bible are stories of the pursuit of holiness that serve as an example for us. This pursuit is at the heart of the story of Jacob and the man/angel at Peniel in Genesis 32:22-32. A simple story, it contains profound truths about what it means for a human being to seek holiness. The prayers of the liturgy say that the Father in heaven is the source of all holiness and the great saints remind us constantly that holiness is a

gift from heaven. But like Jacob the Patriarch, we must wrestle with God in the quiet of the night. The text tells us that "Jacob was left alone." In the end, it always comes down to being alone with God. Yet, throughout the night, Jacob struggles with a being whom we cannot tell is God or a man. In fact, the biblical author appears to want to leave it vague when Jacob's wrestling partner says to him, "You have striven with God and with men

and have prevailed." In what way had Jacob prevailed? Perhaps the answer lies in the change of name from Jacob to Israel for the root of the word Israel could be from the word "to strive" in Hebrew. In the stories of the patriarchs, the change of name always signals the mission that God has for the patriarch. The unidentified man (or heavenly Being) asks Jacob his name because he wants to prepare Jacob for a change in his name and mission. We too have a change of name; the name we bear is Christian, the name given to us at our baptism. We belong to and represent Christ. Holiness means accepting that name and the mission attached to it.

But then Jacob asks his wrestling partner his name because he had a natural desire to identify him with certainty. And the response? "Why do you ask my name?" says the being. In other words, if he told Jacob his name, Jacob would know who he was. And that is impossible because this being is beyond human knowledge and human ability to define. Yes, in some mysterious way, this being is God Himself. Jacob senses that and that is why he says to him, "I won't let you go until you bless me." Jacob is all of us. We too must yearn for God and His blessings. Wanting God's blessing is the cry of the Christian heart. In what way does God's blessing come to us? The story hints at an answer. This is a story about Jacob's transformation from a supplanter to a servant, from a spiritual pauper to a mighty patriarch. Jacob is no longer his own man; he is God's man.

The key to the story lies in the names given and Jacob gives this place a new name, Peniel, or the face of God. This is our part in the pursuit of holiness, seeking the face of God. The Psalmists give voice to this yearning,

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“As we try to read the signs of the times and the needs of our days, the lines between the Church and the world seem to draw more distinctly than ever.”



“My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord” (Ps 84:2) and “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps 42:2). Like Jacob we must see God face to face; we need to have a deep experience of God’s presence in our lives. Only His presence and grace can transform us into what He wants us to be but our part is to be ready to “wrestle” with God like Jacob did. Time spent in adoration of God before the Blessed Sacrament is never a waste of time. Holiness is the indispensable root of all joy and the most effective means to help move others toward the Church.

### A United Witness

Our individual efforts toward holiness are essential but they are not enough. Conversion of others requires a holy Church. And one of the most powerful realities that can draw converts is unity. When Christians are divided by conflicting doctrines or misplaced priorities, when the unity of the Church is threatened, the witness of the Church suffers (cf. Jn 17:21). And the unity of the Church has been threatened many times in the past, but fortunately we have some wisdom from the past to turn to. St. Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200 – September 14, 258) faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles to unity which is why he composed *The Unity of the Catholic Church*. This treatise was written when there were schisms and heresies threatening the Church, when renegade priests asserted their power without the bishop’s authority, and when the bishops themselves could not agree with one another on proper pastoral policies.

Cyprian addresses this confused situation by reminding us of three essential truths. There can be no unity without a unifying bishop, a pastoral figure who functions as the center for the whole Church. Cyprian says that such a figure has been given by Christ in the person of Peter and the bishops who are his successors. The Chair of Peter is the magnet of unity. But that implies that all the bishops need to seek unity among themselves in their shepherding mission. Unity can hardly have any attraction when the pastors of the Church are not unified. Finally,

unity will be maintained and grow when both clergy and laity persevere in the commands of Christ, or as we would put it today, to remain in the faith and morals articulated by the Church. Dissent from the official dogmatic teachings of the Church is a betrayal of unity. What the world needs to see is a unified Church: unified in doctrine, practice, and love.

In a recent speech, Pope Francis reminded us that being a disciple of Jesus Christ necessarily means being a missionary, “Evangelization does not consist in proselytizing, for proselytizing is a caricature of evangelization, but rather evangelizing entails attracting by our witness those who are far off, it means humbly drawing near to those who feel distant from God in the Church, drawing near to those who feel judged and condemned outright by those who consider themselves to be perfect and pure” (Pope Francis, Mass in Bicentenario Park, Quito, July 7, 2015). In our world today, conversion is our greatest need, and a Church united in holiness will be the most powerful magnet to draw others to Christ and His Church. ■

## STAY CONNECTED BY EMAIL!



We have a number of email lists that may be helpful and spiritually edifying to you: Conversion Story Email Club, The Journey Home Program, Deep in Scripture Radio, Deep in History Videos, and more. Visit [CHNetwork.org/email](http://CHNetwork.org/email) to customize your email preferences and stay connected with your favorite CHNetwork content.

## FEATURED RESOURCES



### The Eucharist Converted Me CD

— By *Kenneth Howell*

Dr. Kenneth Howell tells his remarkable faith journey to the Catholic Church in this inspiring talk. Learn how the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist drew him towards the Catholic Faith.



### Something Greater is Here — By *Kenneth Howell*

As a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor, certain nagging questions wouldn’t let Dr. Kenneth Howell alone. Was what he believed really true? Did he really understand what it means to be a Christian? Could there be a deeper spirituality out there that he had not yet encountered? This inspiring book details Dr. Howell’s pursuit of truth, goodness, and love that gradually led him on a surprising journey and towards an unexpected destination.

**\$35**

Receive *The Eucharist Converted Me CD* for a \$35 donation.

**\$50**

Receive *Something Greater is Here* for a \$50 donation.

**\$75**

Receive *The Eucharist Converted Me CD* and *Something Greater is Here* for a \$75 donation.

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## A Spiritually Invigorating Retreat!

By Marcus Grodi

Let me first begin by saying that, as far as I know, everyone who attended the recent Primary Retreat in Biddeford, Maine, had a wonderful time!

Ever since the CHNetwork began back in 1993, we have recognized the value of providing “get-away” retreats for our Primary members (former and current non-Catholic clergy, missionaries, academics, youth ministers, etc., and their spouses). We had our first retreat that year at Franciscan University of Steubenville and since then have had nearly a dozen. These “get-aways” are specifically for Primary Members who need time away from their present responsibilities to discern where God is calling them next. Certainly we recognize that retreats are good for all of us (!), but this invitation-only environment allows for Primaries on the journey to meet with each other along with who have made the journey before them — while protecting their anonymity.

This past May, twenty-five CHNetwork Primary members gathered for three days at the Marie Joseph Spiritual Center located at Biddeford Pool along the coast of southern Maine. It's difficult to put into words the beauty and peacefulness of this setting! The center, which in the 1920s was a seaside hotel, was perfect for our gathering and the Sisters who shared their hospitality were gifts of God.

The schedule for the three days included daily Mass and Evening Prayer, three communal meals, seven group discussion sessions, and lots of free time for fellowship, walking the beach, or exploring the villages of southern Maine.

Because we protect the privacy of those on the journey, we aren't listing those who attended, or providing a “group photo.” I will say, however, that those attending who are still on the journey included a Salvation Army couple, both captains; an Assemblies of God pastor; the wife of a navy chaplain; and a Pentecostal couple who are missionaries. The converts included two former clergy who are presently unemployed, and four former clergy who are now Catholic priests.

Here is just a sampling of some of their reflections:

*“I had no idea what this retreat would entail, so no preconceived notions... thus being open to the Holy Spirit. I loved how the Spirit did move me!”*

*“The format and agenda moved us all deeper into our walks with the Lord. I enjoyed it and learned SO MUCH! Keep doing retreats, next time my husband will attend!”*

*“This retreat was a wonderful mix of sessions/conversations and fellowship. Definitely a place I would come back to.”*

*“I loved and appreciated the format of the retreat... continue on! What a great impact you have had on my life.”*



Member's Section

Member's Section

*"Format was great...how rich the testimonies were!  
I feel this retreat produced a beautiful tapestry — all  
the stories interwoven for the glory of God. Thank  
you!"*

This retreat, especially, reaffirmed how helpful these gatherings are both for men and women on the journey as well as converts and reverts. So, we are escalating our plans to hopefully include the following future Primary retreats:

- **Fall 2015** The Gilmory Retreat Center, Pittsburgh, PA
- **Spring 2016** A retreat center in Orange County, CA
- **Fall 2016** Marie Joseph Spiritual Center, Biddeford, ME
- **Spring 2017** A retreat center in the Midwest (possibly in the St. Louis diocese)
- **Fall 2017** Marie Joseph Spiritual Center, Biddeford, ME

Again, I realize many of you who aren't Primary Members of the CHNetwork might love to attend one of these retreats, but these are specifically designed to address the needs of Primaries, and providing them with privacy is crucial.

However, we recognize the value of providing opportunities for all members of the CHNetwork to gather. We also have heard the beacon call of many of you to once again sponsor the Deep In History Conferences. So, although the full-weekend conferences are beyond the scope of our staff, we are in the process of organizing one-day Regional "Deep In History" Gatherings, which we hope to sponsor in parishes around the country. Please let us know whether you have a parish large enough to hold such a gathering. More news of these will follow.

For all of you, though, who support our work, these Primary Retreats are a spiritually invigorating outflow of your generosity. You make these possible, and I'm sure I can speak for everyone who has ever attended one of these retreats: thank you! You have blessed our lives!

Sincerely in Christ, Marcus Grodi ■

## EVANGELIZATION CHALLENGE

Don't forget our network challenge from the last newsletter! Help us to get more Catholic converts on the books so that we are equipped to connect each new inquirer with companions for the journey home! If you know of friends, family, colleagues, or even public personalities that are converts to the Catholic Church, tell them about the CHNetwork!



## RECENT CONVERT?

Have you been recently received into the Catholic Church? If so, please get in touch with the CHNetwork office so we can update our records.

**Former non-Catholic clergy/academics** — please contact Jim Anderson at [jim@chnetwork.org](mailto:jim@chnetwork.org)

**Former non-Catholic Laity** — please contact Mary Clare Pieczynski at [maryp@chnetwork.org](mailto:maryp@chnetwork.org)

## EWTN'S THE JOURNEY HOME on television and radio, hosted by Marcus Grodi, president of CHNetwork



### TELEVISION

Mondays at 8 PM ET — Encores: Tuesdays 1 AM ET, Fridays 1 PM ET  
*The Best of the Journey Home*: Monday-Thursday 1 PM ET

### RADIO

Mondays at 8 PM ET — Encores: Saturdays 7 AM ET, Sundays 1 AM ET and 5 PM ET  
*The Best of the Journey Home*: Monday-Thursday 12 AM ET

### September 7

Fr. Fred Werth\*  
Former Presbyterian  
Re-air from 7/25/2011

### September 14

Ulf & Birgitta Ekman\*  
Former Charismatic/Non-denominational

### September 21

No *Journey Home* programming on account of Pope Francis' visit to the USA

### September 28

Deacon Jeffrey Lewis\*  
Former Episcopalian

\*Schedule is subject to change.





# Prayer List



## Clergy

- For Alan, a Baptist minister, that, through the help of his new Catholic friends, our Lord Jesus may draw him home to the Catholic Church.
- For a youth minister in Illinois, that the Holy Spirit would make her husband more open to her journey to the ancient, apostolic Church of Rome.
- For an Episcopal priest in the south, that the grace of God would guide him back to full-communion with the successor of St. Peter.
- For Tom, a nondenominational minister, that his love of Jesus would bring him back to the Catholic Church of his youth.
- For a Nazarene minister in the state of Washington, that he and his whole family may soon receive our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist.
- For a former Church of Christ seminarian in Texas, that the Holy Spirit would help him past the stumbling blocks he perceives between him and the Church.
- For a Unitarian-Universalist minister, that our Lord Jesus Christ, whom she encountered attending Mass, would call her home to the fullness of the Faith in the Catholic Church.

## Laity

- For a woman on the journey who is struggling with her parents not understanding her interest in the Catholic Faith.
- For Raphael who is searching for answers to his questions about the Catholic Faith.
- For Julie who is reading conversion stories and is drawing closer to the Catholic Church.
- For Susan who is planning to return to the Church, that her faith be enriched and deepened by receiving Jesus in the Eucharist.
- For a Messianic Christian who feels strongly called to become Catholic, that he find good Catholic friends to encourage him.
- For someone who is struggling with belief in the Trinity.
- For a man from a nondenominational background who is close to returning to the Church, that he will be given the grace to make a good confession.
- For Kay who is watching *The Journey Home* and is searching for answers to her questions, that the Holy Spirit guide and enrich her journey.
- For a man in Europe who is struggling with his journey but is more open to the Catholic Faith now than previously.

- For Amanda who is discouraged in her faith journey.
- For the wife of an Anglican priest, that she come to embrace the fullness of the Catholic sacraments.
- For a man who is suffering from loneliness and discouragement and is no longer attending Mass, that he find good Catholic friends and support for his journey.
- For James who is planning to go through RCIA and be received into the Church this year, that the Holy Spirit guide his path.
- For Tara to have wisdom and discernment in her path ahead to full communion with the Church.
- For a woman who is cautiously proceeding with her faith journey on account of her previous faith background.
- For Heidi, that she find healing and peace.
- For a convert who is having serious financial difficulties and is facing homelessness.

In every issue we include timely prayer concerns from the membership. All members are encouraged to pray at least one hour each month before the Blessed Sacrament for the needs, both general and specific, of the CHNetwork and its members and supporters.

Please submit all prayer requests and answers to CHNetwork Prayer List, PO Box 8290, Zanesville, OH 43702 or email prayer requests to [prayers@chnetwork.org](mailto:prayers@chnetwork.org).

We use only first names to preserve privacy.

### Please also pray for the Coming Home Network International's staff and Board of Directors.

- **President/Founder**, Marcus Grodi (*former Presbyterian pastor*)
- **Senior Advisor: History & Theology**, Jim Anderson (*former Lutheran*)
- **Director of Studio/Media**, Scott Scholten (*former Presbyterian*)
- **Office Manager**, Ann Moore
- **IT/Facilities Coordinator**, Bill Bateson (*former Mormon*)
- **Publications and Laity Coordinator**, Mary Clare Pieczynski
- **Manager of Outreach**, JonMarc Grodi
- **Financial Assistant**, Wendy Hart (*former United Methodist*)

- **Board of Directors:**
- Marcus Grodi (President)
- Msgr. Frank Lane (Chaplain)
- Dr. Robert Geiger (Vice President)
- Dr. Marian Schuda (Director)
- Donald Brey (Director)



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► “Journeys Home” continued from page 2

My first inkling of something amiss was on the teaching regarding water baptism. In my small Bible church growing up, water baptism was not practiced and was dismissed because it was viewed as an outward action that diminishes God’s inward work of grace that occurs in the heart. It was thought that this action caused people to begin to rely on their own action for salvation, instead of the total grace of God’s work in our salvation. Basically, the belief was held that the practice of water baptism brought in a subtle suggestion that “we did something” to attain our salvation. We had to “do a work for it,” and this struck at the heart of God’s free gift of salvation.

For twenty-five years this sounded very reasonable; a collection of verses were shared from the Bible to support this belief. Baptism was seen as an old holdover from oppressive Catholic teaching that demanded works from people to attain God’s favor and salvation. This was all built off the assumption that water baptism was just an outward symbol and work of man. I was willing to accept that there were some slight variations in how this belief was expressed, but I was certain that since this was dealing with teaching directly related to our salvation that there was little room for much variation. But, then I arrived at college and learned how thoroughly wrong I was.

### A Helm’s Deep of Troubled Waters

*As the story of Hobbits, the Ring, and Middle Earth progresses into The Two Towers, we witness the episode of the attack on Helm’s Deep. As Sauron’s armies of darkness march across Middle Earth, the men of the region of Rohan seek refuge in a bunker-like fortification. Surrounded by massive walls, the people of Rohan seem secure. But, a flaw is discovered and exploited by the enemy. This great barrier wall has one weakness: a small entryway that allows water to pass into the enclosure so people may survive.*

As it turns out, the belief espoused by my Christian faith community back in New York was not the consensus of Evangelicals after all. In fact, I soon discovered that my community’s beliefs were an extreme teaching without historical precedent throughout all of Christian history. This awareness of abnormality aroused a deepening curiosity that had been idling in my heart since adolescence. At my historically-Baptist college, there were a handful of beliefs held by the students which each of them brought from their own home churches. Some students held that water baptism was, as the school taught, a symbol of God cleansing us from sin when we profess belief in Jesus. The conviction was that it was a way for Christians to outwardly testify about their interior acceptance and faith in Jesus Christ. So, in a sense, it was not a work required for salvation, but a work that testified in response to God’s work. Baptism was often com-

pared to a wedding ring in marriage: something that outwardly testifies to an inward commitment — not essential, but helpful.

Not essential, but helpful? This was quite a difference from what my home church essentially taught; that water baptism was both not essential, and possibly harmful to our faith. Baptists gave the rationale that Jesus commanded His disciples to go into all the world and baptize, and we are called to follow His instruction. My home church instructed that Jesus laid aside outward forms of worship with the old covenant. This was a conflict. Two Christian groups were saying that Jesus had two different intentions. Both groups, though, did share a common conviction: that water baptism was a responsive act of man and not something that God does on the soul at the supernatural level.

If it were merely these two positions on this teaching, then the path ahead still seemed manageable. But, these were not the only two positions. I soon discovered that in Evangelical Protestantism there were potentially four or five “views” about Baptism. Convictions were numerous both in what water baptism was and how it should be practiced. Infant, or adult, or both? Pouring, sprinkling, or full immersion? This did not even bring into consideration what Catholics taught about Baptism. There was an enormous elephant in the room that was (consciously or unconsciously) being ignored.

### Saint Augustine was Gandalf in My Life

*Gandalf is often believed to represent the prophets that arise throughout all of Scripture. He is the voice of faith and reason throughout the Middle Earth saga. He calls characters out of complacency, casts light in darkness, removes evil influences, and is pretty much the main catalyst for many of the events that transpire in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings.*

The first time I heard the name Augustine was during my third year of college. One pastor who came to speak at our chapel recommended reading Augustine’s *Confessions*. So I did. It did not take any extensive research to discover that Augustine was a Catholic bishop in northern Africa during the fourth century. As I read more and more of his writings, I became a little concerned.

It seemed that Augustine and his contemporaries believed something very different about the Church than most Protestants today. The early Christians believed in Scripture and the Sacred Tradition handed on from the Apostles to their successors, the bishops. They believed that what distinguished the Church was its unity of teaching, and what distinguished the heretics and false teachers was their division from the successors of the Apostles. The early Christians practiced confession to priests, prayed for the dead, and believed that God works through the sacraments to apply His salvation and grace into our lives. They recited written prayers. They spoke of Christ’s purification of Christians through something called purgatory. They testified that Mary was free from original sin, called her

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

“the New Eve,” and wrote prayers, which called on Mary to intercede for them in prayer. As I read more and more of these writings, I became unsettled and wondered if all the things about which these early Christians wrote were still going on in their totality in any church today. This became yet another elephant in the room: the continuing authority and apostolicity of the Catholic Church.

“I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had ever happened.” — Frodo Baggins, speaking to Gandalf in the mines of Moriah.

Finishing college, I laid aside the concerns I had about the lack of congruence I began to see between the Church throughout history and the Protestant church today. I had attempted to ask my church community back home about the teachings I had found in the early Church, but the reply I got was a pamphlet of verses along with their interpretation of these verses. They did not offer any historical support for their interpretations of Scripture. I tried to explain that there were many groups, both Christian and non-Christian, that can use passages of Scripture to support a belief they had, but the lines of communication coming from my home church quickly went dead.

I began studies at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary to prepare for Army Chaplain ministry. While there, I made it a purpose to take classes specifically focused on the early Church. At this point, I was becoming more and more hungry for the truth, but at the same time I did not want the Catholic Church to be the Church started by Jesus. I was still saying to myself, “Let it not be so.”

### Samwise Gamgee: A Fateful Meeting at Army Chaplain School

*Just as there was a Gandalf in my journey of conversion found in the fourth century Catholic bishop, Saint Augustine, so also there was a Samwise that had a pivotal role on my decision to enter the Catholic Church. Samwise was told by Gandalf to accompany Frodo on his journey to Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring.*

In May of 2005, after four years of school and serving at a Baptist church on internship, I was ready to complete the last phase of my Chaplain ministry training with the Army. I was to spend eight weeks of my summer at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. About halfway into the summer, I was invited by some friends in my platoon to a dinner at a house off base. A Catholic seminarian who was also attending the chaplain school was invited to the same dinner.

### The Dinner Conversation that Changed My Life

In a group of Christians from many different Evangelical denominations, the Catholic seminarian caught my attention.

During that evening’s discussions, the Catholic had a lot of insightful things to share about Scripture and the history of Christianity. The major turning point in my life came a few days later when this Catholic seminarian invited me to attend the Catholic Mass on the base where we were training. After experiencing the first Catholic Mass in my memory, I immediately began to realize there was something different about the Catholic Church. At Mass, I noticed that the Bible I had known my entire life came alive in ways that were only hinted at in Protestant worship services.

I began to earnestly read both the writings of the early Church and also stories of other Protestants who converted to Catholicism, many whom had now been Catholic for close to twenty years. I was encouraged to read the Bible, think critically, and use reason.

One of the striking things I was told was to not just go back and read writings from the early Church, but to also go back and read the first Protestant leaders, including Luther and Calvin. My Catholic friend gave me a challenge regarding the teaching that Catholics have about the Eucharist. “Michael,” he said, “go back and read what both Luther and Calvin taught regarding the Eucharist and ask yourself: ‘Do any of the Protestant churches you have been a part of in your life still teach the same way Calvin and Luther taught concerning the Eucharist?’” I took him up on his challenge and I came back to him and admitted that I had never encountered any Protestant Evangelical church that was still teaching what was taught by the first Protestants. It was then that I finally realized what I needed to do: I needed to seek communion with the Church that our

... I immediately began to realize there was something different about the Catholic Church. At Mass, I noticed that the Bible I had known my entire life came alive in ways that were only hinted at in Protestant worship services.

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

Lord Jesus started and still sustains to this day: the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

### “There and back again”

*For both Bilbo and Frodo, the journey began in the Shire; in a comfortable home in the ground. They traveled to distant lands and experienced things they would never have dreamed of. They left the known and ventured into the unknown. It took courage and it took faith. They both returned to the Shire, but neither one of them was ever the same.*

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” — Bilbo Baggins, *The Lord of the Rings*

I returned back from chaplain training knowing I needed to become Catholic for the sake of the truth. The Catholic seminary suggested I talk to some local priests back in Grand Rapids about the process of becoming Catholic for adults known as RCIA. I knew that taking this step was going to have enormous implications for the rest of my life. The relationship I had with my parents would become strained and I would lose some of the friends I had made at the Baptist church I had been serving at in Grand Rapids. Everything I had been preparing for over the past four years to serve as an Army Chaplain would come to an end. I am not exaggerating when I say this was the most difficult experience in my life. I went through and read thousands of pages from early Christian writers and spent days reading about the teachings of the Catholic Church. I wanted to be sure, because, at the end of the day, the truth mattered more than anything else.

### On Eagle’s Wings to the Father’s Arms

*At the end of The Lord of the Rings, when things are at their darkest point, Frodo and Samwise are in grave danger. The One Ring has been destroyed by being cast into the fires of Mount Doom. But, as they flee, the volcano erupts and lava is pursuing them down the mountain. When it appears they are about to meet their end, from the sky come the eagles, which draw them up out of danger.*

Jesus has surpassed my expectations. The Catholic Church — Christ’s beloved bride — has been a joy, a refuge, and more than home. Is the Church perfect? No. It’s full of sinners like you and me, just as Middle Earth is full of a variety of noble and ignoble characters. The Lord said to His people: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). This has been most true since becoming a Catholic Christian.

I have been Catholic for five years now and could spend many more pages sharing the amazing experiences I have had. Please

keep me in prayer as I am currently in Catholic seminary preparing to hopefully become a priest of Jesus Christ. Some may wonder if becoming Catholic is really worth all the struggle and loss I had to go through. I think Augustine may best convey why I believe it is worth it:

There are many other things which most properly can keep me in the Catholic Church’s bosom. The unanimity of peoples and nations keeps me here. Her authority, inaugurated in miracles, nourished by hope, augmented by love, and confirmed by her age, keeps me here. The succession of priests, from the very see of the apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after his resurrection, gave the charge of feeding his sheep [John 21:15–17], up to the present episcopate, keeps me here. And last, the very name Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone, in the face of so many heretics, so much so that, although all heretics want to be called “Catholic,” when a stranger inquires where the Catholic Church meets, none of the heretics would dare to point out his own basilica or house. (St. Augustine, *Against the Letter of Mani Called “The Foundation,”* 4:5 A.D. 397)

I hope my journey might inspire you to seek to passionately, fully, and earnestly experience the Catholic Church. Consider what she teaches, see how people live out their faith, and consider whether the fullness of Christ’s Gospel continues to resound from her throughout the world! ■



MICHAEL GOODWIN grew up on the east end of Long Island in a home of devout Christian parents. From a young age, he was taught by his parents to love and follow Jesus while being encouraged to deepen his faith by worshipping and serving at the local, Evangelical, Bible church near his hometown. Michael attended Cedarville University in Ohio where he earned his BA in Education. He then went on to join the Army Chaplaincy program and became a 1st Lieutenant in the Army Reserves while completing a four year seminary program at an Evangelical school in Grand Rapids, MI. He entered the Catholic Church in Grand Rapids at the Easter Vigil on April 24, 2011. He is presently preparing for the vocation of priesthood to serve in the diocese where his Catholic journey began. If you would like to read more or contact Michael, you are welcome to visit his blog at [easterpeople.me](http://easterpeople.me).

**BLOG**

Please visit [www.chnetwork.org/blog](http://www.chnetwork.org/blog) to comment on and discuss this story!

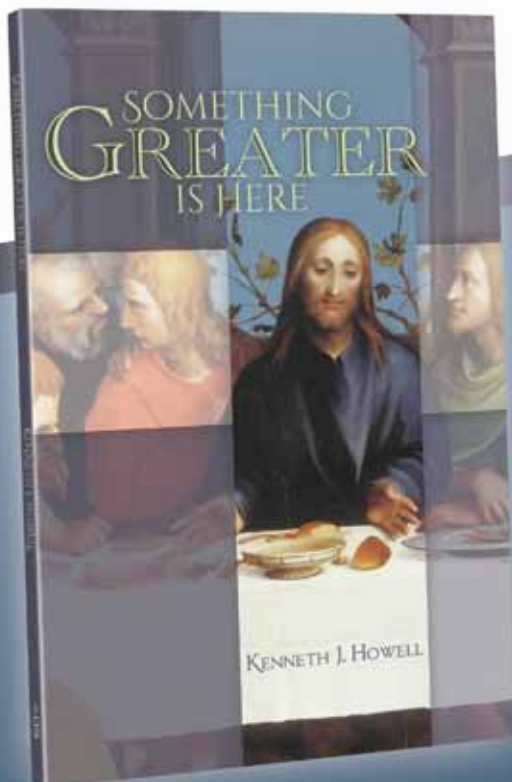


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# SOMETHING GREATER IS HERE

As a Presbyterian minister and seminary professor, certain nagging questions wouldn't let Dr. Kenneth Howell alone. Was what he believed really true? Did he really understand what it means to be a Christian? Could there be a deeper spirituality out there that he had not yet encountered? In *Something Greater is Here*, Dr. Howell details his inspiring pursuit of truth, goodness, and love that gradually led him on a surprising journey and towards an unexpected destination.