



## February 2017 CHNewsletter

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# THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



## How the Search for Truth Led Me from Atheism to Catholicism

By Jennifer Fulwiler

Jennifer Fulwiler is a former atheist who was born and raised with the natural materialist worldview that says, “If you can see it and touch it then it is real.” Influenced by her atheist father, who told her, “Seek truth and do not believe assumptions,” from early childhood she sought answers to her many questions that eventually brought her to an unexpected destination.

One thing I could never get on the same page with my fellow atheists about was the idea of meaning. The other atheists I knew seemed to feel like life was full of purpose despite the fact that we’re all nothing more than chemical reactions. I could never get there. In fact, I thought that whole line of thinking was unscientific, and more than a little intellectually dishonest. If everything that we call heroism and glory, and all the significance of all great human achievements, can be reduced to some neurons firing in the human brain, then it’s all destined to be extinguished at death. And considering that the entire span of *homo sapiens*’ existence on earth wouldn’t even amount to a blip on the radar screen of a 5-billion-year-old universe, it seemed silly to pretend like the 60-odd-year life of some random organism on one of trillions of planets was something special. (I was a blast at parties.)

By simply living my life, I felt like I was living a lie. I acknowledged the truth that life was meaningless, and yet I kept acting as if my own life had meaning, as if all the hope and love and joy I’d experienced was something real, something more than a mirage

produced by the chemicals in my brain. Suicide had crossed my mind — not because I was depressed in the common sense of the word, simply because it seemed like it was nothing more than speeding up the inevitable. A life multiplied by zero yields the same result, no matter when you do it.

Not knowing what else to do, I followed the well-worn path of people who are trying to run from something that haunts them: I worked too much. I drank too much. I was emotionally fragile. Many of my relationships with other people were toxic. I wrapped myself in a cocoon of distractions, trying to pretend like I didn’t know what I knew.

### A Guy Named Joe

A year after I graduated from college, I met a guy at work named Joe. I was so impressed with him but I didn’t think I had much of a chance. He’d grown up poor, raised by a single mother, and had gone on to get degrees from Yale, Columbia, and Stanford. People who knew him said he was one of the smartest people they’d ever met. So when we began dating, I was thrilled. Our life together turned out to be even better than I could have

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Journeys Home

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

imagined: We traveled the world on whims, ate at the finest restaurants, flew first class, and threw epic parties on the roof of his loft downtown. On top of that, both of our careers were taking off, so our future held only more money and more success.

We were a perfect couple. The only thing we didn't see the same way was the issue of religion. A few months after we started dating, it came out that Joe not only believed in God, but considered himself a Christian. I did not understand how someone who was perfectly capable of rational thought could believe in fairy tale stories like those of Christianity. Did he believe in Santa Claus too?

It didn't cause any problems between us, though, since we had the same basic moral code: he didn't practice this bizarre faith of his in any noticeable way, and, mainly, I did not want to think about it. At all. Whenever the subject of God came up, something deep within me recoiled. Not that I had any problem demolishing silly theist ideas — it had been something of a hobby back in college — but the subject took me too close to that thing I was trying to forget. I had constructed my entire life around not thinking about it, so I never articulated what it was. It had been so buried by the parties and the socializing and the breathless running from place to place that it was no longer a specific concept, just some dark, cold amorphous knowledge I needed to avoid.

Joe and I married in a theater in 2003, reciting vows we wrote ourselves, with me wearing a dark purple dress. The plan was that marriage would be just a stepping stone along the path we were already on. But then I discovered I was pregnant, and everything changed.

### Motherhood Turns My Life Upside Down

Motherhood caught me completely off guard. I'd grown up as an only child in a culture where nobody I knew had more than two kids living at home. I never had a friend whose mom had a baby during the time of our friendship. And considering that I'd never wanted kids and had some minor medical issues that made me think I probably couldn't have them anyway, I was utterly unprepared for motherhood. The physical, mental, and emotional

changes I went through after the birth of my son were a hard blow, like a punch to the head that comes out of the blue, and it left me reeling.

This cataclysmic event unearthed all those old thoughts about meaninglessness, and this time there was no re-burying them. Now that I had a child, it felt like my life had more meaning than ever. The dark-haired, blue-eyed baby felt so valuable; my own life was flooded with hope and joy at his presence. But with none of the usual distractions in place, the facts of the matter now descended upon me: There was nothing transcendent about my son's life, my life, or any of the love I felt for him. He was destined for the same fate as the rest of us, to have his entire existence erased upon his inevitable death.

For weeks, I hardly got out of bed. Some combination of severe sleep deprivation and more severe depression left me almost catatonic. But then one morning, as I looked at the baby in the pre-dawn light that filtered in through the window, I felt something new within me. It was something that was not despair, some unfamiliar yet welcome feeling. I peeled back the layers to find that it was doubt: Doubt of my purely materialist worldview, doubt of the truth I had believed since childhood that there is nothing transcendent about the human life.

I considered that in almost every single time and place throughout human history, people have believed in some kind of spiritual realm. Almost every human society we know of has shared the belief that there is more to life than meets the eye, that what transpires here in the material world somehow reverberates into the eternal. Previously I had assumed that the vast majority of the billions of people who had ever lived were all simply ignorant; now I wondered if maybe I was the one who was missing something.

### My First Christian Book

A few months later, I stumbled across a Christian book. I'd never been in the Religion section of a bookstore, let alone read anything about Christianity. I'd only picked up this book because the author claimed to be a former atheist, and I was curious to see what level

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## FEATURED RESOURCES

### Deep in Scripture CD



Marcus Grodi is joined by Jennifer Fulwiler in this classic *Deep in Scripture* program in which they discuss her atheistic background and her new-found love for the Scriptures.

\$35

Receive a *Deep in Scripture* CD for a donation of \$35.



### Something Other Than God — By Jennifer Fulwiler

Jennifer Fulwiler's compelling memoir recounts her asking the unflinching questions about life and death, good and evil, that ultimately led her to Christianity, the religion she had reviled since she was an awkward, skeptical child growing up in the Bible Belt.

*Something Other Than God* is a poignant, profound, and often funny tale of one woman who set out to find the meaning of life and discovered that true happiness sometimes requires losing it all.

\$50

Receive *Something Other Than God* for a donation of \$50.

\$75

Receive a *Deep in Scripture* CD and *Something Other Than God* for a \$75 donation.

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# Why Did the Reformation Happen?

## PART 1: AN EXPLOSION OF IDEAS

By Kenneth Hensley



In last month's article, we asked the question, "What was the Reformation?"

We argued with Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc that at its heart the Reformation was not so much a dispute

over one or two or more particular doctrines of the Church but over the very question of how doctrinal disputes within the Church would be settled. It was a dispute over the issue of *where authority is to be found in the Church*. This is what tore at the heart of Christianity in the early 16th century.

Indeed, I believe one of the most useful ways to think about the violent fracturing that took place at that time and the separation of Christians into "Catholic" and "Protestant," is to think of it as a bitter divorce between those who continued to embrace the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church and those who rejected that authority to take their stand on the authority of Scripture alone: *sola Scriptura*. This is the essence of what took place at the time of the Reformation.

But why did it happen? And why did it happen when it happened? How is it that so many at that particular point in history came to react against, and ultimately reject, the authority of the Church? What were the causes of the Reformation? This is the question I want to ask this month, and over the next few.

A reader might be thinking, "Isn't it simple, didn't Martin Luther cause the Reformation? After all, he opposed the teaching of the Catholic Church and on Oct 31, 1517 nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Cathedral Church in Wittenberg and one thing led to another and in the end the Church was shattered!" Well no, it's not quite that simple.



An image I have in my mind when I think about Luther's role in the Reformation is that Martin Luther "caused" the Reformation like a man who lights a match in a house filled with gas "causes" a fire. Yes, Luther struck the match. Yes, Luther was the spark. But an atmosphere

was already present in which such a spark could ignite a fire that would burn its way throughout Christendom. The house of late-Medieval Catholicism was primed for such a conflagration.

The truth is, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, there were a number of historical, cultural, and spiritual forces at work driving the world in the direction of what was to occur.

In fact, by the time we've finished surveying these forces, you may agree that it would have taken a miracle for the Reformation not to have happened when it happened.

Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers weren't the "cause" of the Reformation. They were themselves created by the historical, cultural, and spiritual forces we will delve into during the next few months. They were caught up in these forces. They rode these forces like a man rides a horse.

So what are we talking about?

**1. TO BEGIN, THERE WAS THE EXPLOSIVE GROWTH IN LITERACY THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE DECADES LEADING UP TO THE REFORMATION; THE TREMENDOUS INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF THOSE WHO COULD READ.** Think of the revolution that has been brought about by the invention of computers and the internet. These technological advances have in many ways changed our world. A hundred years ago if ISIS was marauding through Syria and Iraq, we might not even have known it. Now the entire world watches in real time and graphic detail.

Our kids are used to these inventions and think nothing of them. I, on the other hand, can still remember when my pastor first told me he had something called a "modem." It was the early 80's. I was still cranking out my papers at Fuller Theological Seminary on an electric typewriter. Personal computers were just beginning to magically appear on the desks of those on the cutting edge of societal evolution. "Guess what?" he said. "I have this thing called a modem. It allows me to plug a phone line into the back of my computer, dial up a number, and go into libraries around the world and do research." I was amazed. I thought we'd entered the Twilight Zone.

In the same way, it's hard for most of us to even imagine the revolution the invention of the printing press brought about in the mid-15th century.



We spend our days digging out from under a mountain of books and magazines and written materials of all kinds. We have twelve step programs to deliver us from the bondage of electronic media. But it wasn't like this in the Middle Ages. Before the invention of the printing

press, written materials were scarce and expensive. And because of this, literacy was scarce. The ability of individual Christians to possess books of theology, to read them and interact critically with what they read, was rare.

In his biography of John Calvin, Oxford professor Alister McGrath describes the situation:

In the early Middle Ages, the charmed circle of the literate was virtually exclusively clerical. Written material took the form of manuscripts which had to be painstakingly copied out by hand, and were generally confined to the libraries of monasteries on account of their scarcity ... With the advent of printing and the development of new papermaking industries, it became possible for an educated layperson to obtain and understand works which hitherto had been the exclusive preserve of the clergy. (*A Life of John Calvin*, p. 4)

Imagine it! For the first time in history, written materials became available and at prices ordinary people could afford. With this there was a dramatic increase in the number of people who

could read, and a growing confidence that they could think through issues for themselves, develop their own ideas about what the Bible and the Church Fathers were teaching.

**2. NOT SURPRISINGLY, DURING THOSE SAME DECADES LEADING UP TO THE REFORMATION, THERE WAS AN EXPLOSION OF NEW THEOLOGICAL IDEAS.** As literacy spread and the availability of written materials increased, the need for schools and universities increased as well.

Again, quoting McGrath:

The rapid expansion of the university sector throughout Western Europe ... led to an increased number of theology faculties, with a corresponding increase in the number of theological treatises produced. Then as now, theologians had to do something to justify their existence. These works frequently explored new ideas. But what was the status of these ideas? The ... failure to draw a clear distinction between theological opinions and church teaching, between private opinion and communal doctrine, caused considerable confusion.

[And now, listen to this confession coming from a world-renowned Protestant scholar.]

It is quite possible that Martin Luther may have confused one theological opinion with the official teaching of the church and initiated his program of reform on the basis of this misunderstanding. (Ibid, p. 11)



The point here is not to explore Luther's education and the bad theology he may have soaked up, but to highlight a crucial reality: As the 16th century dawned — as Martin Luther sat at his desk at the University of Wittenberg, preparing his lectures on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans and the young university

student John Calvin sat in the cafes of the Latin Quarter of Paris discussing philosophy and theology, a revolution was taking place throughout Catholic Europe.

In the decades following the invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century, Europe was witnessing an unbelievable ex-

plosion of books and articles, tracts and treatises, exploring every aspect of Catholic teaching. New ideas were everywhere!

At the same time, colleges and universities were popping up all over the place. And as everyone knows, to paraphrase something the great educator Mortimer Adler once said, "The halls of academia are like the halls of a madhouse at midnight."

As I think about the situation, even if there had been no other forces at play that might have contributed to a rising spirit of independence and the increasing desire of some to break with the authority of the Church and go their own way, theologically speaking, what we've looked at here alone could have done the job.

Do the numbers: (a) A technological revolution brought about by Guttenberg; (b) a resulting flood of written materials presenting all manner of new ideas; (c) an explosive growth in literacy among the laity; and finally (d) a rise of new universities and theological faculties keenly interested in examining these new ideas, debating them, and in some cases presenting them as true. It doesn't seem all that surprising that what happened, happened.

The reality, however, is that these weren't the only historical, cultural, or spiritual forces at play at the time. There were even more, which combined with what we've looked at here, were literally driving the Christian world in the direction of what was to occur.

To be continued... ■

## MARCUS GRODI'S SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

**February 18, 2017**

Catholic Men for Christ Conference

St. Louis, MO

[catholicmenforchrist.org](http://catholicmenforchrist.org) | 314-792-7185

**March 3, 2017**

Diocese of Oklahoma City

St. Gregory's University | Shawnee, OK

## WHAT IS THE CHNETWORK?

The Coming Home Network International was established to help non-Catholic Christians, clergy and laity, discover the beauty and truth of the Catholic Church.

Through the one-on-one outreach of our pastoral staff and volunteers, our monthly CHNewsletter, regional retreats, social media, and through the online community forums and groups at our website [CHNetwork.org](http://CHNetwork.org), we strive to ensure that each person touched by grace has fellowship and resources for their journey of continual conversion to Jesus Christ.



**CHNetwork**

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740-450-1175



[info@chnetwork.org](mailto:info@chnetwork.org)



The Coming Home  
Network International



[www.chnetwork.org](http://www.chnetwork.org)

### The Journey Home through the Cross

By Marcus Grodi

"The Journey Home through the Cross"  
By Marcus Grodi..... A

"From the Hermitage:  
*Spiritual Disciplines During Lent*"  
By Br. Rex Anthony Norris ..... B

Recently, on the Memorial of St. John of the Cross, the Office of Readings offered the following selection from St. John's *Spiritual Canticle*, and it reminded me of why we believe it is so important to help our separated non-Catholic Christian brothers and sisters discover the beauty and truth of our Catholic Faith. Certainly their faith in Jesus Christ is a gift of God's grace, as they have responded to His gift of mercy and love. And certainly we recognize that by their Baptism they are new creations in Christ, temples of the Holy Spirit, members of the Mystical Body of Christ — one might insist that they are imperfect members, but which of us aren't? We all need to continue growing in our faith, in holiness and humility, and especially in submission to one another out of love of Christ (cf. Ephesians 5). And for these reasons the Coming Home Network is committed to reaching out to our separated brethren with the fullness of the Catholic Faith. Certainly, through devoted reflection on sacred Scripture, Christians around the world can be drawn to a deeper walk with Christ. But often, well-meaning Christians avoid the hard aspects of the Gospel.

Allow me if you will to offer some (certainly novice) reflections on the following reading from St. John of the Cross, in relation to our work:

Though holy doctors have uncovered many mysteries and wonders, and devout souls have understood them in this earthly condition of ours, yet the greater part still remains to be unfolded by them, and even to be understood by them.

Not only "holy doctors" but Christians of all traditions have "uncovered many mysteries and wonders" from serious study of sacred Scripture. Yet it is so easy to miss "the greater part" because we can brush aside the hard verses that call us to sacrifice and accept suffering as a necessary aspect of our growing in grace and faith. Well-meaning Christians too often can shape their understanding and practice of the gospel to fit within their "earthly condition." But to know the fullness and depth and demands of the Christian Faith, Christ gave us His Church as the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

We must then dig deeply in Christ. He is like a rich mine with many pockets containing treasures: however deep we dig we will never find their end or their limit. Indeed, in every pocket new seams of fresh riches are discovered on all sides.

All I can say, from personal experience, is that Christians need trustworthy guides when we desire to "dig deeply in Christ." It is far too easy to be distracted by the constant whispering of "the world, the flesh, and the devil," leading

far too many to dig, not deeper in Christ, but off course into alternative gospels, confusion, compromise, complacency, and, for some, into despair.

For this reason the apostle Paul said of Christ: "In him are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God." The soul cannot enter into these treasures, nor attain them, unless it first crosses into and enters the thicket of suffering, enduring interior and exterior labors, and unless it first receives from God very many blessings in the intellect and in the senses, and has undergone long spiritual training.

Herein lies the key that so many Christians want to avoid, and for which St. John of the Cross is so famously revered: the necessity for our soul to accept and endure with joy suffering and spiritual training.

All these are lesser things, disposing the soul for the lofty sanctuary of the knowledge of the mysteries of Christ: this is the highest wisdom attainable in this life.

And what are these "lesser things"? All the things of our daily lives that constitute suffering: anything in life, no matter how small, that goes differently than how we wish our lives to be, this is the suffering Christ has given us to endure, to accept as the way He wants to shape us into His faithful sons and daughters.

Would that men might come at last to see that it is quite impossible to reach the thicket of the

Member's Section

Member's Section



In years past I had given up coffee altogether. But once the initial headache was gone, I never gave much thought to coffee until Easter Sunday when I would begin to drink coffee once again. In other words, giving up coffee was not much of a discipline for me; it rarely led to my thinking much about anything "spiritual." But last year, drinking black coffee during Lent did, in fact, give me much to think and pray about.

You see, I find black coffee to be bitter. I don't care for the taste of it at all. And the physical experience of bitterness that comes with each and every sip of black coffee is a reminder to me of the spiritual bitterness of sin in my life and in the world. With each sip I am reminded that all is not right in my inner world nor in the outer world. Each sip is a call to prayer for God's mercy within me and around me.

The bitter taste of black coffee and the annoyance of having a pebble in my shoe are minor and transitory experiences. Someone might even call such disciplines silly. So what? They help dispose me to the grace of God that flows from prayer for others and for oneself.

The result of these Lenten disciplines also reminds me that the annoyances and bitterness that are part and parcel in this broken world do not have the final word. Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh and splendor of the Father who rose from the dead on this first Easter, is the final Word.

In closing, my prayer for you, dear reader, is that all of your Lenten disciplines, whatever they may be, will help prepare you to be embraced by Easter joy. ■

## TAX LETTER

If you need a record of your 2016 contributions for tax purposes, please contact **Wendy Hart**:  
wendy@chnetwork.org | 740-450-1175 ext 100

## CHNETWORK RETREATS

Would you like fellowship and connection with other converts or those on the journey to the Catholic Church? The CHNetwork is offering a number of retreats in 2017. See the back page for more details or go to **CHNetwork.org/retreats**.

## EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Do you know of an employment opportunity in your local parish or diocese that would be well suited to a faithful Catholic convert who loves the Faith? When non-Catholic clergy convert they leave behind their careers and ministry. This can often be a difficult transition for them and after conversion they often are looking for ways to serve Christ and His Church. To help meet this need, we have a job board on our online forum, [forum.chnetwork.org](http://forum.chnetwork.org), where we post job listings that might help a former Protestant minister find meaningful and gainful employment in the Catholic Church. If you know of an opening that you would like us to post, please e-mail the job description to [jim@chnetwork.org](mailto:jim@chnetwork.org).

## SUPPORT CHNETWORK

For your convenience, CHNetwork is able to automatically deduct monthly donations directly from your credit card, checking, or savings account. If you would like to set up an automatic monthly donation, please go to **chnetwork.org/donate/** or complete this form and mail to:

**CHNetwork**  
Attention: Ann Moore  
PO Box 8290  
Zanesville, OH 43702

Please contact Ann at 740-450-1175 or [ann@chnetwork.org](mailto:ann@chnetwork.org) if you have any questions or concerns.

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# Prayer List



## Clergy

- For Andrew, an Anglican priest, that the Holy Spirit would guide his RCIA experience.
- For a non-denominational minister in Africa, that by discovering the CHNetwork he would be led home to the Catholic Church.
- For Jim, an Episcopal priest, that he may be able to see clearly the path the Lord is setting before him.
- For an Assemblies of God youth minister in Washington state, that his studies of early Church history would lead him home to the Catholic Church.
- For Angela, a lay minister in Illinois, that she may soon obtain employment after losing her job by becoming Catholic.
- For a former Anglican priest in Connecticut, that he may receive the grace to respond to the attraction he feels toward the Church.
- For Neil, a former Baptist minister, that God would grant him the grace to pass through the doors of the Catholic Church into full-communion.
- For Chris, a non-denominational lay minister, that he would find a parish that is accepting and willing to help him home.
- For a Wesleyan minister in Africa, that God might give him a hunger to learn the truth of the Catholic Faith.

■ For John, a minister in Minnesota, that his curiosity in the Catholic Church would bring abundant fruit in his life.

■ For a Presbyterian seminarian in New Jersey, that our Lord Jesus would guide his vocational discernment.

■ For Ben, a non-denominational minister, that he may find a new calling so that he may support his family as a Catholic Christian.

## Lay

■ For an Anglican in Virginia who is doing well in RCIA but is concerned about telling her longtime friends of her impending conversion.

■ For a woman from a Baptist faith background who is concerned about Marian devotions, that she be able to more fully understand Mary's love for Jesus' disciples.

■ For Kay who feels drawn to the Catholic Faith, that her husband come to understand and share her desire to be Catholic.

■ For Josh who feels Catholic in his heart but on account of difficult things in his life wasn't able to begin RCIA.

■ For Derek as he goes through RCIA and for his wife who doesn't share his interest in the Catholic Church, that they be able to continue to grow spiritually with mutual respect for each other's faith.

■ For a man who comes from a non-denominational background and is struggling to understand Catholic doctrine.

■ For Marc, that he will find a vibrant parish community in which to convert and raise his family.

■ For Sabrina, as she and her family move toward the Easter sacraments, that their sacrifices to live a good, Christian walk be rewarded.

■ For Susan who is struggling with various issues about the Catholic Church and is hurt by the treatment she has received by some Catholics.

■ For an Evangelical in California who has had many struggles with his faith journey and is wondering if he really needs to become Catholic.

■ For a woman who comes from a New Age background and who has been encountering numerous difficulties that might put a halt on her journey.

■ For Dana who is drawn to the Catholic Church but feels for now she needs to support her husband in the Lutheran church.

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 or general descriptions to preserve privacy.

## EWTN'S THE JOURNEY HOME on television & 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*: Wednesday 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

**February 6**  
 Scott Weeman\*  
 Revert

**February 13**  
 John Lillyman\*  
 Former Anglican and Presbyterian

**February 20**  
 Fred Shafer\*  
 Revert

**February 27**  
 Billy Kangas\*  
 Former Lutheran

To access the full archive of past Journey Home programs go to [chnetwork.org/journey-home](http://chnetwork.org/journey-home).

\*Schedule is subject to change.



## ...Journeys Home Continued...

► “Journeys Home” continued from page 2

of fraud he was. After flipping through the first few pages, I was surprised to find that I believed that he had been an atheist. I read a few more pages, and found his writing to be clear and basically reasonable. Obviously he’d come to the wrong conclusions, but I could respect the fact that he at least attempted to reason his way into his current belief system, rather than basing it on some emotional experience. I found that I couldn’t put the book down, and ended up buying it (loudly noting to the cashier that it was a gift for a friend).

A quick internet search showed that the book was widely scorned by atheists, and some of their counter-points to the author’s arguments were good. But it was simply not true to say that there was nothing compelling about it. For example, the book pointed out that thousands of Jewish people abandoned the sacred practices that had sustained them through centuries, through all types of persecution, in the years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. Almost all of Jesus’ original followers went to their death rather than recant their statements that they’d seen Him rise from the dead. Christianity spread like wildfire in the early centuries, despite the fact that becoming a Christian often meant persecution or even death.

I had never seen Jesus as anything other than a silly fairy tale figure whom people called upon to give a divine thumbs-up to self-serving beliefs, but now I was intrigued by the man as a historical figure. Something happened in first-century Palestine, something so big that it still sends shockwaves down to the present day. And it all centered around the figure of Jesus Christ. As Joe once pointed out when I asked him why he considered himself a Christian, Christianity is the only one of all the major world religions to be founded by a guy who claimed to be God. That’s an easy claim to disprove if it’s not true.

One afternoon, shortly after I finished the book, I was caught off guard by a thought: *What if it’s true?*

What if there were a God? What if He chose to enter history as a human being? It was the most shattering thought that had ever crossed my mind. Never once in my life, not even as a child, had I considered that a personal God might exist, or that there could be even a shred of truth to any of Christianity’s supernatural claims. I quickly came to my senses and admonished myself to stop this silliness. Part of me wondered if I was losing my mind — what else could explain such a thought?

I wanted to forget all about this embarrassing little incident ... but I couldn’t. Some strange feeling had risen up within me, that wouldn’t let me walk away from this subject. I figured that it must be simple curiosity. All I needed to do was read a bit more about Christianity, then when I was overwhelmed with the obvious flaws in its theology, I could move on.

### Plunging Into the Deep End of the Pool

I bought another Christian book, this one called *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis. Unfortunately, this was not going to help me extricate myself from this religion.

Lewis was reasonable and obviously intelligent. His book was one of the most clear, well-written things I’d read in a long time. I was particularly captivated by his case for the Natural Law, in which he proposed that God is the source of all that we call “good,” which is why people in all times and places have had the same basic ideas about what is good and what is bad. My curiosity piqued, I then read excerpts online from the great Christian thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas. I began to think that this religion was not opposed to reason at all — in fact, some of the most intelligent, reasonable people in history were Christians.

I finally caved in and bought a Bible, the first I’d ever owned. Not knowing how else to approach it, I started reading at page one. I was alternately baffled and horrified by what I read in the first few hundred pages. Joe encouraged me to read the second part of the book, called the New Testament, since that is where Jesus comes into the picture. That didn’t help. There was no clear call to action, like, “If you like what you’ve read here and would like to become a Christian, here’s what you do.” I had no idea how to interpret most of the passages, and it seemed like no one else did either. When I would search online for whether or not the Bible said abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, etc. were right or wrong, I encountered as many different answers as there were people, with each person citing Bible verses to back up his or her personal view. Similarly, I had no idea which church to go to if I wanted to ask someone questions in person: In my community there was everything from Church of Christ to Jehovah’s Witnesses to conservative Baptist to liberal Anglican churches, each one claiming to be based on the Bible, yet they all taught drastically different things about what constitutes sin.

This was a huge problem. If God is all that is good, then to define what is bad — in other words, sin — is to define the very boundaries of God Himself. It was nonsensical to suggest that His religion would be confused on that issue.

I’d found what I was looking for: the flaw that showed that Christianity didn’t make sense. It was time to move on.

### What’s This with the Catholic Intellectuals?

Shortly after I came to this realization, someone I’d encountered online made a crazy suggestion: he said that I’d been approaching the whole thing from a very modern and distinctly American perspective, that the traditional understanding of Christianity is totally different. He suggested that Jesus founded just one Church before He left the earth, and that He instilled it with supernatural power so that it would accurately articulate the truth about what is good — and therefore about what is God — for all times and places. As if that weren’t crazy enough, he was talking about the Catholic Church!

Joe and I both balked. Joe said that Catholicism wasn’t real Christianity, and I knew that the Church was an archaic, oppressive, sexist institution. Besides, this idea of supernaturally-empowered people was just silly.

However, I did notice something: almost all the people who had impressed me with their ability to defend their faith through reason alone, both famous authors and people online, were Catholic. In fact, the more I paid attention, the more I saw that the Catholic

## ...Journeys Home Continued...

intellectual tradition was one of the greatest in the world. I began reading books by Catholic authors; not that I was really interested in Catholicism, I told myself — I was just looking for something good to read. But I couldn't help but admit that these people seemed to possess an understanding of the world and the human experience that I'd never encountered before. They had the same solid grasp on science and the material world as the atheists, but also possessed a knowledge of the movements of the human soul that resonated as true down to the core of my being.

I wasn't sure what to make of all this Catholic stuff, and still vehemently disagreed with the Church on some of its crazier ideas, like its opposition to abortion and contraception. But I had to admit that the more I read about Catholic theology, the more sane it seemed.

I also began to think that it was more likely than not that God does exist, and that if the Christians weren't entirely right, they were at least close with their understanding of Him. But why, then, had I had no experience of Him? Not that this was a requirement for me to believe, but it just seemed like if there were a God out there and He cared about me, I would sense His presence in some way.

I'd been under a lot of stress between having a new baby and some money problems we were experiencing, plus I'd developed a severe pain in my leg that was almost debilitating. All along I'd prided myself on saying that I would never convert based on emotional experience, that I only needed facts, not feelings. But now it was getting old. It was hurtful to think that God might be out there but just withholding comfort from me. I was tired of pressing forward in this pursuit with no sense of His presence. I could be miserable and feel alone in the universe as an agnostic — why bother with this religion business if that didn't change anything?

### Will It Work? An Experiment

My feelings of frustration and resentment toward God reached a head. And then, just at the right time, I happened to come across a quote from C.S. Lewis in which he pointed out:

[God] shows much more of Himself to some people than to others — not because He has favourites, but because it is impossible for Him to show Himself to a man whose whole mind and character are in the wrong condition. Just as sunlight, though it has no favourites, cannot be reflected in a dusty mirror as clearly as in a clean one.

Of course. I'd been walking around talking trash, watching TV shows that portrayed all types of nastiness, indulging in selfish behavior ... and yet wondering why I couldn't feel the presence of the source of all goodness. I realized that, if I were serious about figuring out if God exists or not, it could not be an entirely intellectual exercise. I had to be willing to change.

I wasn't sure if I was ready to sign up for that for the long haul, but I decided to give it a shot: I committed to go a month living according to the Catholic moral code. I bought a copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a summary of the Church's teachings, and studied it carefully, living my life according to what it taught, even in the cases where I wasn't sure the Church was right.

My goal with the experiment had been to discover the presence of God; instead, I discovered myself — the real me. I had thought that cynicism, judgmentalness, and irritability were just parts of who I was, but I realized that there was a purer, better version of me buried underneath all that filth — what the Church would call sins — that I had never before encountered.

I found that the rules of the Church, that I had once perceived to be a set of confining laws, were rules of love; they defined the boundaries between what is love and what is not. It had changed me, my life, and my marriage for the better. I may not have experienced God, but by following the teachings of the Church that was supposedly founded by Him, I had experienced real love.

Following the teachings about contraception had been moot since I was pregnant with our second child, but I did read up on it during my experiment of following the Church's teachings. And, to my great surprise, I discovered that the Church had incredibly reasonable defenses of its points. I asked Joe to take a look at this stuff in case I was missing something, and, to his own amazement, he also found the Church's arguments to be airtight. He had been doing his own investigation into Catholicism, and this was the final issue that had been troubling him too. We looked at each other, and for the first time dared to ask: *Are we going to become Catholic?!*

### Medical and Moral Complications

Only two weeks after we had that thought, that pain in my leg got so bad that I ended up in the ER. I was seven months pregnant with our second child, and it turned out that I had a deep vein thrombosis, a life-threatening blood clot in a major vein. If the clot had broken free, I likely would have died.

After some testing, the doctors delivered worse news: I have a genetic clotting disorder that means that my blood clots easily — and I inherited it from both parents, which makes it worse. On top

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## ...Journeys Home Continued...

of that, it is exacerbated by pregnancy, which makes pregnancy dangerous for me.

I had a lot of time to mull over this turn of events: the clot couldn't be treated during pregnancy, and the pain was so severe that I could no longer walk on my own. So I spent most of my days lying in bed, wondering what to do now.

To treat the clot postpartum, the doctors wanted to prescribe an FDA Category X drug to treat the clot — it's so dangerous for pregnancy that women often choose to be sterilized before they take it. They told me that my clotting disorder means I should not have any more children, because of the risk that pregnancy poses to my health. I didn't want them to think I was religious for fear of what they'd think of me, but when I hinted at the question of using Natural Family Planning (a method for spacing children that the Church deems morally acceptable), they laughed. Someone with my condition had to use contraception, they said. There was no choice.

Fatigued by the constant pain, overwhelmed by medical bills that were piling up by the thousands, I began to slide back away from this religion, tumbling down a slope that ended back in atheism. I hadn't minded changing in the sense of not using the F-word so much, but this was a whole different ball game. To stick with the Church now would be to lose my life as I knew it, and to set out down an unfamiliar, frightening path.

Not knowing what else to do, I went back to the basics of the way I'd been taught to work through problems since childhood. My dad, my parent from whom I got my religious views (or lack thereof), had not raised me to be an atheist as much as he'd raised me to seek truth fearlessly. "Never believe something because it's convenient or it makes you feel good," he'd always say. "Ask yourself: 'Is this true?'"

And so I set everything else aside, and clung to the simple question: *What is true?*

I quickly realized then that this was not in question, and hadn't been for a while. For weeks now, I had known on an intellectual level that I believed what the Church taught. What stalled me had not been a hesitation of whether or not it was true; it had been a hesitation of not wanting to sacrifice too much.

I had no idea how things would work out. I thought there was a fair chance that this step would lead us to financial ruin, and may even take a serious toll on my health. But I decided, for the first time in a long time, to choose what was true instead of what was comfortable. Joe and I signed up to begin the formation process at our parish church. And, in the first statement of faith I'd ever made, I told my doctors that I would not use contraception, because I was Catholic.

### God Helps Us Home

After that moment, a bunch of fortuitous events occurred that smoothed the way for us to become Catholic. A series of windfalls gave us the money we needed to manage our medical bills. After they got over their initial shock at encountering someone who wouldn't contracept, my doctors came up with creative solutions to keep me healthy. Even after a surprise positive pregnancy test came at the worst possible time, just a few weeks after I'd healed

from the blood clot, a bunch of startling coincidences played out to help us stay afloat during that difficult time.

The next spring, three days before Joe and I would be received into the Church, it was time for my first confession. As I approached the confessional, I had no hesitation. I had an intellectual understanding that God is the source of goodness, and that therefore it's important that we take great care to repent when we have done something bad. But I'd already privately confessed all these sins in my head, so I figured that telling them to the priest, who was simply standing in for Jesus, would be redundant — after all, Jesus had already heard all this stuff.

But as soon as I heard the words coming from my mouth, everything changed. To hear all of these selfish, cowardly, hateful acts articulated with real words, for another human being to hear, was more powerful than I could have ever imagined. Tears began to flow, and, as I continued recounting every unloving thing I'd ever done, I shook and sobbed. Never could I have imagined the impact it would have on me to hear of my own sins, spoken out loud; but never could I have imagined how much it would impact me to hear the words, spoken by the priest on behalf of God, that I was forgiven. I walked away from the confessional in a daze, and slid into a pew in the silent church. I knew that my life had just changed, never to be the same again.

Later that night, around midnight, I stepped out on the back porch. When I was younger I used to avoid going outside at night when it was quiet and still, because it would trigger memories of all those ominous thoughts about meaninglessness that I was trying to forget. The darkness outside was too familiar, as if it had all spilled out from somewhere within me. But as I stood there that night after my first confession, I realized that all that was gone. The darkness within me was simply not there anymore. In its place was peace, and an unmistakable feeling of love. For the first time, I felt the presence of God. ■



JENNIFER FULWILER is a writer, a speaker, and the host of *The Jennifer Fulwiler Show* on the Catholic Channel on SiriusXM. Her bestselling memoir, *Something Other than God*, chronicles the story of her conversion from atheism to Catholicism. It was a finalist in the "Best Memoir and Biography" category in the Goodreads Choice Awards and was a top 100 seller on Amazon. She lives with her husband and six young children in Austin, Texas. You can connect with her at [JenniferFulwiler.com](http://JenniferFulwiler.com). Jennifer has been a guest twice on *The Journey Home* and the programs can be viewed at [chnetwork.org](http://chnetwork.org).

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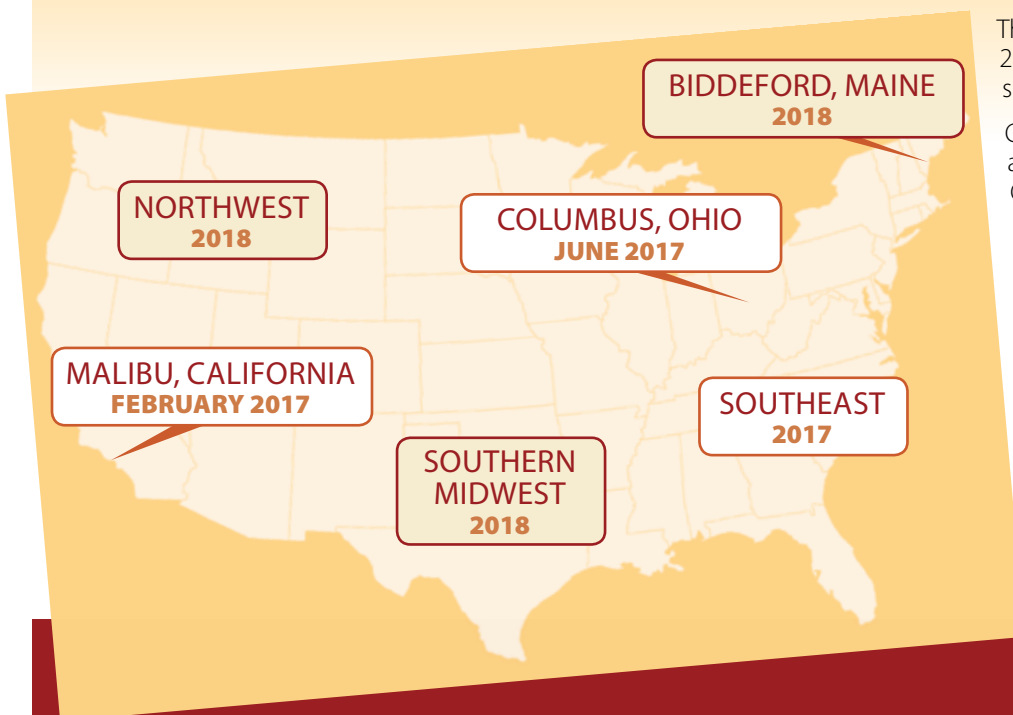
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# 2017/2018 CHNETWORK **RETREATS!**



The CHNetwork is hosting three retreats in 2017 and three in 2018 covering a total of six regional areas of the United States.

Currently scheduled are Malibu, California at the end of February and one in Columbus, Ohio in June. Later in 2017 we'll hold a retreat in the southeast and in 2018 we'll have retreats in the northwest, southern midwest, and a New England retreat at the Marie Joseph Center in Biddeford, Maine.

All members of the CHNetwork who are converts or who are currently on the journey to the Catholic Church, are invited and encouraged to attend.

**Space is limited! RSVP early!**

Visit [CHNetwork.org/retreats](http://CHNetwork.org/retreats) for more information and to apply for a spot.