



February 2021 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



From Muslim to Catholic

By Zubair Simonson

Childhood I was born in Massachusetts on September 18, 1982. My mother was a Muslim from Pakistan. Her mother was pious and her father nominal. In 1975, she emigrated to the United States for graduate studies. My father was from Michigan. His mother was Catholic, his father Lutheran. He converted to Islam shortly before he married my mother. At the time I was born, he worked for a company that was contracted by the Department of Defense.

My family moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, when I was six. From a very young age I had a sense that God — Allah as I was taught to call Him — was very powerful.

My childhood was, for the most part, typically American. Demographics assured that the majority of my friends were Christians, at least nominally. Pepperoni pizza, which in Islam was a forbidden food (pork), did occasionally remind me that I was also a little different from my friends.

I began attending Muslim Sunday school at our local mosque in Raleigh when I was six. It was there that I began to learn the details of how to pray (in a language I didn't understand), perform *wudu* (ablution), etc. Over the years, I went on to learn that Islamic instruction includes a great many details. For instance, I learned that two angels hovered over each of my shoulders, one recording my good deeds, the other recording my sins. My spiritual goal was to make sure that the record of my good behavior outweighed the bad.

The life of Muhammad, a story of piety followed by triumph, taught me that obedience to Allah, by imitating the Prophet, would bring me happiness and prosperity in this life as well as in the hereafter. And

if any of us kids had questions, such as, "If a Muslim man is allowed four wives, why did Muhammad have more than four when he died?" there were ready answers.

My mother was very proud of her faith. When I struggled to read Arabic in Sunday school, she took it upon herself to teach me. With her by my side, I began to read the *Quran* in Arabic at the age of ten, finally finishing the holy book at age seventeen. It was important to her that I be a good Muslim, and I often saw her as overly strict when she cared enough to yell "change the channel!" She was willing to stand up for our faith. When I was in the fourth grade, a couple of my classmates told me I would be going to hell since Jesus wasn't my Savior. My mother spoke about this to my teacher, who agreed to let my mother make a presentation to my class about Islam. She did all this without knowing that my faith, which she had encouraged so much throughout my youth, would eventually collapse. To this day, she blames herself for having failed me.

At age ten, I began fasting during the month of *Ramadan*. Prior to then, my mother wasn't fasting on weekdays during the holy month. Her young son's resolve inspired her to fast on

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Journeys Home

...Journeys Home Continued...

all of the days as well, and it made her very proud of me. To this day, I miss the family bonding and sense of community that comes with *Ramadan*.

At about age fifteen, I began to pray the five daily prayers. I was considered old enough, according to Islam, to distinguish right from wrong, and going to hell was something I preferred to avoid.

My exposure to Christianity was more than average for a Muslim. My family celebrated Christmas with my father's side; we just believed that Jesus was a great prophet rather than the Son of God. Both of my parents worked. Preferring that the house not burn down while they were away, they would drop my brother and me off at day camp at a Methodist church on weekdays during the summer, where all us kids got to sing along to "Yes, Jesus loves me..."

I was proud to be a Muslim and an American. The world headlines occasionally reminded me that my faith and certain policies of my country could be at odds with it. Chief among the "wrongs" in American policy was support for Israel. It was common for the *khutba* (sermon) during *Jum'ah* (Friday, the Muslim Sabbath) prayers to be politically focused. Fellow Muslims frequently blamed the failures of the Muslim world on "conspiracies" spearheaded by the Jews or the CIA.

Some of my fellow Muslims were also proud to be Americans, having no qualms with befriending non-Muslims. Others deemed those in the larger non-Muslim community to be *kafirs*, spiritually

unclean people. Why such Muslims had immigrated into a country which they so loathed was beyond my comprehension.

Collapse

The collapse of my faith was the result of many events and much thought.

In 1993, during spring break, I went on a camping trip for the Muslim boys of our mosque in the mountains of North Carolina. Several of the men took it upon themselves to mold us boys in a very rigid fashion. When we hiked, our instructors made us repeat military-like cadences. They shouted at us constantly. We would be awakened before dawn for shifts to "guard" the campgrounds from any phantom enemies. On one of those nights, I watched as a friend of mine was struck in the face by one of my Sunday school teachers. When the camping trip was ending, our instructors acknowledged to us that yes, they had been strict, but that was how men are treated in the army. I wondered whom they were teaching us to fight.

In January 1994, my best friend from Sunday school died. He was eleven. He had had a rare allergic reaction to a common medicine after going to a hospital for high fever. His parents were cousins. Cousin-marriage is common in the Muslim world, and my friend's death made me resent this.

During Ramadan, at a boys' sleepover at our local mosque, our Sunday school instructors walked up and down between the rows of sleeping bags with flashlights

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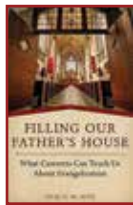
Through your donation to the CHNetwork, you become a partner in our ministry of assisting non-Catholic clergy and laity on the journey to the Catholic Church. As a thank you, we are delighted to offer the following resources to help enrich your faith.



Preaching the Gospel

CD — By Jeff Cavins

Marcus Grodi is joined by Jeff Cavins, founder of the Great Adventure Bible Timeline. They look at the Great Commission, as well as St. Paul's exploration of how God reveals Himself through creation, and discuss what those two passages tell us about how we are supposed to share our Catholic Faith. They delve into natural law, faith, and reason in this discussion about preaching the Gospel.



Filling Our Father's House: What Converts Can Teach Us About Evangelization

— By Shaun McAfee

Converts often bring to the Catholic Church an evangelical zeal that can renew and energize even the most tired and battle weary among us. The Church is hurting for enthusiastic voices to proclaim her teachings on truth and morals. In these pages, Shaun McAfee, a convert from Evangelical Protestantism shows how we can take the best tools of evangelization and use them to reach countless souls with the fullness of the Christian Faith. With Shaun's help, you'll learn simple ways you can make the visitor in your parish more at home, how to speak compellingly about the Faith, simple ways to integrate daily Scripture reading into your life, why small groups are important for spiritual enrichment, and how to communicate with souls who have never considered joining the Catholic Church. The simple steps Shaun outlines in these pages will also show priests and lay leaders how to more effectively engage modern society with our Catholic Faith.

\$35

Receive *Preaching the Gospel* CD for a donation of \$35.

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ON THE JOURNEY

Is *Sola Scriptura* Scriptural? Part I: Authority Under the Apostles

By Ken Hensley

When I was evangelical, did I even think of *sola Scriptura* as a doctrine that, like any other doctrine, needed to be *demonstrated* from the New Testament?

No. Never. My entire Christian life I had assumed the truth of *sola Scriptura*: at the home Bible study where I came to faith; in Bible College; in seminary. Throughout my years as a pastor — well, every believer I knew presupposed that the Bible functions as our “sole and sufficient infallible rule” for deciding what we are to believe and how we are to live as Christians. As an evangelical Protestant, *sola Scriptura* was a given. In fact, it seemed self-evident! After all, Scripture was inspired and nothing else was — no pastor, no teacher, no denominational creed.

Because of this, when I was led for the first time to “examine” the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, the most important question in my mind was, “Does the Bible teach *sola Scriptura*?” Protestant scholars Geisler and MacKenzie summarize *sola Scriptura* as the belief that “the Bible — nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else — is all that is necessary for faith and practice.” Is this something the NT actually *teaches*?

Here’s how I began to think it through.

New Testament Practice

First I asked the question: What was the actual *practice* of those living during the time of the Apostles? Was *sola Scriptura* the rule for the earliest Christians living then? What functioned as binding authority for them?

Well, there was the authority of the inspired writings.

This is something both Protestants and Catholics believe. Jesus always treated the writings of Moses and the Prophets as though they were binding and authoritative. Three times He responds to the devil’s temptations by quoting the book of Deuteronomy: “it is written.” He speaks of how “not one jot or tittle will pass from the Law until everything is fulfilled” (Matt 5).

The Apostles also quote from the Old Testament writings, allude to them constantly, and regard them as authoritative and binding such as when Paul writes in 2 Tim 3:16-17:

All Scripture is inspired by God (“God-breathed”) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good.

There is no question here. For those living during the time of the Apostles, the inspired writings were authoritative.

But so was the oral teaching of the Apostles.

Of course, the Apostles weren’t “inspired” in the sense that anything and everything they said was “special revelation” from God. At the same time, when Jesus sent the Apostles out, He gave them His Spirit and His divine authority, He said to them, “The one who listens to you listens to me” (Lk 10:16), and it’s clear that the Apostles taught with an awareness that the substance of their teaching was just as binding when spoken as it was when written down.

In 1 Thess 2:13, the Apostle Paul gives thanks to God that when he came to the Thessalonians to preach to them, the people had accepted his message, “not as the word of men but as it really is, the word of God” (1 Thess 2:13).

In his second letter, he commands them to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, *whether by word of mouth or by letter from us*” (2 Thess 2:15, emphasis added).

As a Protestant, I was so used to thinking of “tradition” as something bad (after all, Jesus was always rebuking the Pharisees for putting their “traditions” ahead of the Word of God) that I remember being thrown off balance when I saw this passage and for the first time understood its implications. But the Greek word used here (*paradosis*) simply means something that is “handed on.” Tradition is simply something handed on.

It can be bad and it can be good! And when Paul uses the word here, he simply means that the Christians in Thessalonica should receive and treat as “authoritative Christian teaching” whatever Paul had given them — whether it was something he had written in a

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letter to them or something he had taught them when he was with them!

And I could see that this made *perfect sense*.

After all, wouldn't it be kind of absurd to think that when Paul wrote something to the Church in Thessalonica, it was binding and authoritative, but when he taught them the same thing face-to-face, it wasn't? A common response to this is to refer to the Bereans in Acts 17:

Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scripture daily to see if these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

Here's what was clear to me: for Christians living during the time of the Apostles, both inspired Scripture and the oral teaching of Jesus and the Apostles were conceived as authoritative and binding.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood and addressed the crowds in Jerusalem, "Men of Israel, listen to these words." He went on to announce to them *authoritatively* things that had never yet been written down in the pages of inspired Scripture. He interpreted texts from the Old Testament in ways that no Jew had ever interpreted them. And what he *said* that day was to be received as God's word.

Finally, authority for those earliest Christians included the decisions of the Church's leadership as they met in council.

I'm referring to that key chapter in the New Testament, Acts 15.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2).

Here we read about the first serious theological dispute to arise in the early Church. The question was: must Gentile believers receive circumcision and keep the customs of Moses — essentially become Jews — in order to be saved? Some said yes. Others said no.

To settle the question, the Apostles and elders met in Jerusalem at what has since been referred to as the "Council of Jerusalem," the first council of Christian history. In a nutshell, here's what happened: The Apostles and elders discussed, debated, and decided the issue. A letter was drafted and sent out to all

the churches informing them of the council's ruling. And (this is important!) in this letter (this "decree" if you will) the decision of the council is described as the decision of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements (vs. 27-28).

So the letter went out and, finally, we read in verses 30 and 31 that it was received by the churches *with joy*.

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So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and when they had gathered the congregation together they delivered the letter. And when they read it *they rejoiced at the exhortation* (vs. 30-31).

In other words, the ruling of the council is accepted as authoritative and binding. It is the ruling of the Holy Spirit.

None of the Christians in Antioch think to respond, "Thank you very much for your guidance on this matter. We will examine the Scriptures to see if these things you tell us are so and let you know our position." Instead, the Christians "rejoice" that the matter has been settled and now they can focus on living out the truths of their faith.

Conclusion

Looking at the *practice* of those earliest believers living during the time of the Apostle, it was clear to me that they were *not* practicing *sola Scriptura*. For them (at least) Scripture was not the "sole infallible rule of faith and practice." For them it was not "the Bible — nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else — is all that is needed for faith and practice."

No. For those earliest believers authority resided (1) in the inspired Scripture, (2) in the oral teaching of the Apostles, and (3) in the decision of Church's leadership as it met in council to decide an issue of doctrine, to define the teaching of the Faith. This was clear.

It was also clear that in terms of this basic pattern (Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium) the earliest Church *looked an awful lot like what we see from the beginning and to this day in the Catholic Church*.

Now, while this gave this Protestant food for thought, it doesn't *prove* anything. After all, it's *possible* that the pattern of authority existing during the apostolic age changed when the Apostles died.

In fact, this is precisely what a thoughtful Protestant will say. The important question, Protestants will respond, is not "What was the practice of Christians living during the time when there were inspired Apostles?" The question that needs to be asked is, "What

should the practice of Christians be *now that there are no longer inspired Apostles? That's the key!*"

And the answer Protestants give to this question is: *Scripture alone! Sure, when the Apostles were alive and walking the earth...*

I could see that the next step needed would be for me to read through the New Testament again asking questions such as: "Do the Apostles *say* anything about what the practice of Christians will be after they have departed the scene? Do we see them preparing the Church for a future in which their oral teaching becomes no longer authoritative, in which councils are no longer authoritative, in which the Bible will function has their "sole infallible rule of faith and practice?"

This was the next step for me and this is where we will have to continue in our discussion next month. ■

SOLA SCRIPTURA

To read more about the topic of *sola Scriptura*, our exclusive CHResource *The Bible Alone?* presents a compelling look at the biblical roots, historical precedent, and logic behind using only the Bible as an infallible source of truth. This short book affirms the importance of Scripture as a divinely given foundation for our faith and also encourages the reader to consider the need for an authority established by Christ for its trustworthy interpretation. To obtain a copy of this book, please visit chresources.com or call 740-450-1175.



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TELEVISION

Mondays at 8 PM ET — Encores: Tuesdays 1 AM ET, Thursdays 2 PM ET

The Best of The Journey Home: Saturday 6 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-Friday 1 AM ET

February 1

James Anderson*
(former Episcopal priest)

February 8

Keith Albert Little*
(former non-denominational Evangelical)
(re-air from April 2018)

February 15

Deacon Charlie and Jess Echeverry*
(revert and former New Age)

February 22

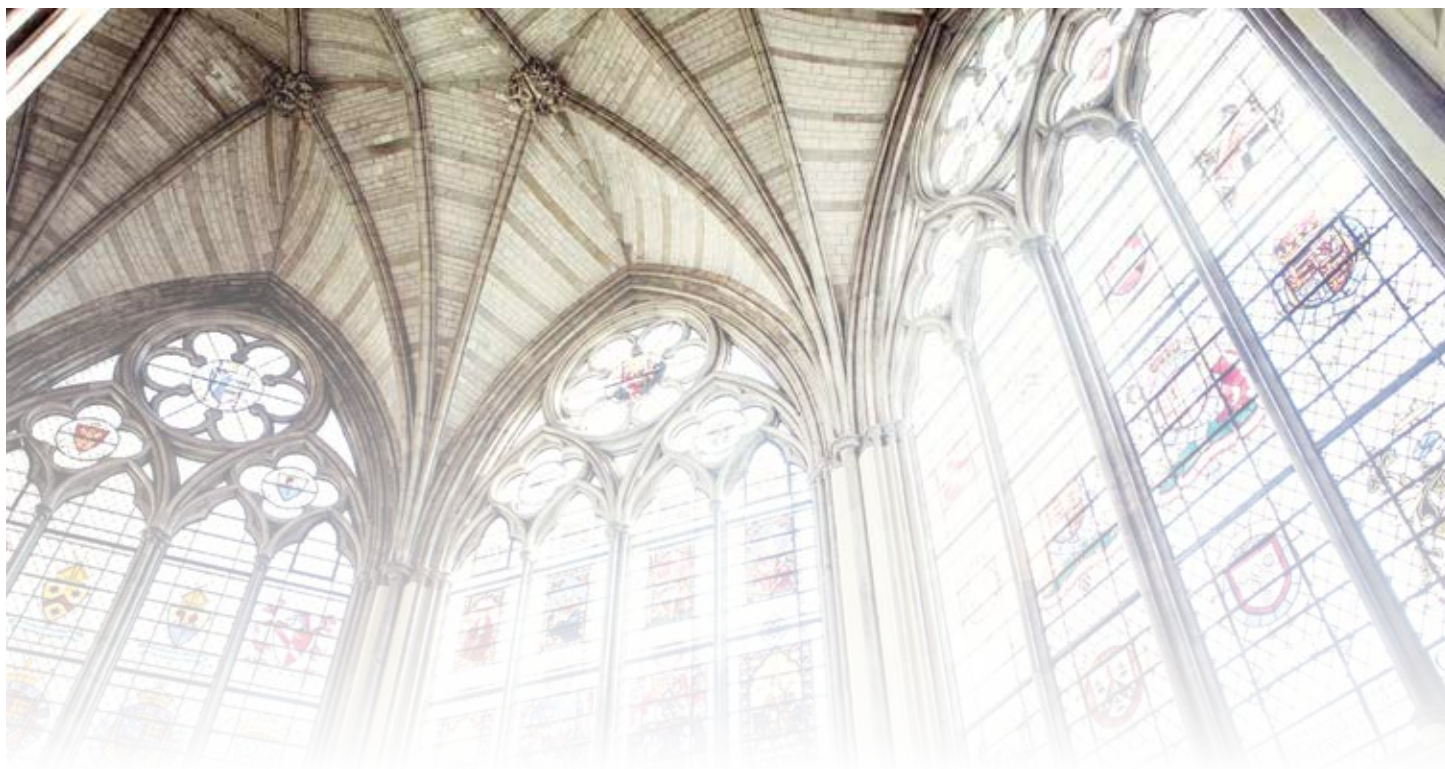
Dr. Leroy Huizenga* Former
Lutheran and Presbyterian
(re-air from 4/30/18)

March 1

Marcus Peter*
Former atheist and
Assemblies of God

*Schedule is subject to change.

To access the full archive of past *Journey Home* programs go to chnetwork.org/journey-home.



Joyful Journey Updates

From Rachel, a recent convert

"Wow, thanks for inquiring. Yes, I was formally brought into the Church at the beginning of this month. I've been in love with Christ for as long as I can remember but it was still by far the best day of my 25 years of life. Fullness of faith really is the best description of Catholicism . . . It's funny how you don't realize what you've been missing out on. Though I'm sure you've heard that many times before in your ministry! . . . I would love prayers in this time that God would direct me in the ways He wants to be using me now to carry our faith forward, particularly among my Protestant family and friends here. Thank you!! And thanks for providing such an incredibly rich number of resources on the CHNetwork."

From Nathaniel, a recent convert

"I just wanted to update you that yesterday I was received into the Roman Catholic Church, was confirmed, and received the Eucharist for the very first time. It was an incredible experience and I am so grateful to God for answering my prayers. I have also been clean for over a year and a half. I would never in a million years have expected the miracle that God has done in my life. I am profoundly moved and happy."

From Brett, a recent convert "It was absolutely wonderful! One of the best days of my life! They had a wonderful Mass for our RCIA class and my wife (who is revert to the Catholic Church) and my two grown sons who were raised Protestant were there to share it with me . . . After receiving

the Eucharist for the first time there was no flashing light "Damascus Road" moment but when I got back to the pew and knelt in silence I felt a closeness and a love for Jesus more intense than any I had felt before. It was the kind of love that you have for a child or a beloved family member and I believe it can only be explained by having experienced the Real Presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I have been on cloud nine ever since! Thank you so much for everything you and the Coming Home Network have done for me on my journey home. My journey took me a while but it is a marathon and not a sprint. I honestly believe that by taking so long and doing the research and watching your show, I erased all doubts. I know joining the Catholic Church is the right decision and thank you for getting me there!" ■

Prayer List

Clergy

■ **For Brian, a United Methodist minister**, that the Lord would guide him to a job where he can use his skills thus enabling him and his family to enter the Catholic Church.

■ **For Joshua, a former non-denominational missionary**, that the Holy Spirit would guide him as he witnesses to the truth of the Catholic Faith to his anti-Catholic friends and family.

■ **For a Bible Church pastor in Pennsylvania**, that he may become convinced of the truth of Catholic teachings and come rejoicing to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

■ **For Gary**, who has walked a long and winding road from Baptist to Orthodox and is now seeking to become Catholic, that the Lord will give him the firm conviction that he is on the right path.

■ **For Charles**, who has been a pastor for nearly 20 years, loves being a pastor, has never had another occupation, and is facing the fact that the Lord is leading him to become Catholic, that God will make the way straight.

■ **For Jeff**, who wants to become Catholic but is convinced that, at least for now, he needs to remain in pastoral ministry, that the Lord will show him when and how to make the move he sees as inevitable.

■ **For Derek, a Church of Christ pastor**, struggling with his conviction that Catholicism is true and having no idea how to follow that conviction given the facts of his life.

■ **For an Anglican priest**, who has become interested in the Catholic Church and is looking into it but is opposed by everyone around him, that Lord will give him the wisdom and courage he needs to continue listening and learning.

■ **For Michael**, who is involved in Protestant campus ministry but has been studying Catholicism and is firmly on the road toward the Church, that the Lord will help him to envision a new future for himself and his family should he become Catholic.

■ **For Jose**, a fallen-away Catholic who became a Protestant pastor, as he meets with a Catholic priest, reads through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and makes plans to leave the ministry and be reunited with the Church.

■ **For Gary**, who would love to explore the truth of the Church but cannot imagine leaving his ministry as a Protestant pastor at this time.

■ **For Daniel**, who was moving strongly toward the Church but has now put his journey on hold, that the Holy Spirit will continue to speak to him and help him to sort out the issues that are keeping him from moving forward.

■ **For Mitchell**, who is strongly attracted to the Church but sees no way to make a move at this time and has decided to remain where he is, that he will continue to learn and that the Lord will show him the way home.

■ **For an Episcopal priest** drawn toward the Church but struggling with remaining questions, that he will find the answers he needs.

■ **For Joshua, an evangelical missionary**, who, with his wife, has entered RCIA and is looking forward to becoming Catholic but concerned about how his family will respond.

Laity

■ **For John, an Anglican**, that the Holy Spirit may guide him to full communion with the Catholic Church through his prayers and devotions.

■ **For a Pentecostal in Georgia**, that his experience of RCIA may be positive and enlightening.

■ **For Heather** to be able to return to the sacraments and the fullness of the Catholic Faith.

■ **For Allen, a non-denominational Christian**, that our Lord Jesus would give him a hunger for the Holy Eucharist.

■ **For Dana**, that she will know when to move forward with her interest in Catholicism.

■ **For Joshua**, that the Lord would continue to deepen his faith and to open his wife's heart, who is an agnostic, to the reality of the truth and love of Jesus Christ.



■ **For a Baptist in Minnesota**, that she will be able to see through the false arguments about the Catholic Church that her pastor is giving.

■ **For Ken in Florida**, that he and his wife may grow ever more deeply in love with Jesus as they participate in RCIA.

■ **For a Methodist in the south** who feels abandoned and alone and is questioning God, that she will find solace in her time of trial.

■ **For Michael, an Evangelical**, that the Lord Jesus would continue to bless and guide him as he continues his journey home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For Lisa** who is learning more about Catholicism but struggles not knowing local Catholics who are in love with their faith.

■ **For Derek in Maryland**, that, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he may come home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For Charles, a Presbyterian**, that, as he learns what the Catholic Church actually teaches, he may embrace the fullness of the truth with a happy heart.

■ **For a Baptist in Texas**, that she will be able to return to her Catholic Faith as she has long desired.

■ **For Bruce, an Evangelical**, that the books of Dr. Thomas Howard would inspire him to enter deeply into the Catholic Faith.

■ **For Meagan** to find a good parish where she can begin RCIA.

■ **For Sean, an Inter-denominational Christian**, that God would open his heart to all the graces He wishes to grant to him.

■ **For a Bible Church Christian** who is lonely and discouraged and doesn't know how to move forward with her interest in the Catholic Faith without her husband's support.

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. We use only first names or general descriptions to preserve privacy.

...Journeys Home Continued...

► “Journeys Home” continued from page 2

in their hands, making sure that none of us boys were lying down on our stomachs. It is recorded that Muhammad always slept on his back; therefore, we were supposed to do so as well. One of our Sunday school teachers also taught us, among his lessons, that it was *haram* (forbidden by Allah) to yawn without covering one’s mouth; otherwise, *jinn* could jump into our mouths. I wondered what such stuff had to do with good and evil.

When I was in high school, a student at North Carolina State University had converted to Islam at our mosque. Over the course of a couple of years, he became increasingly radicalized. I learned from this that not all conversions to Islam were for the better.

The September 11 attacks happened a week after I began classes at the University of Michigan. It shook me greatly that my country could be so viciously attacked by men acting in the name of my faith.

During the summer of 2003, I lived in Washington DC. I’d found summer lodging at Georgetown with a formal program for Muslim interns. I quickly made friends with my fellow Muslims. The downside was that, weeknights, we had to listen to lectures or discuss topics centered on Islam. During one of those nights, the topic was whether apostates should be executed, as prescribed by Sharia Law. It disgusted me, as an American, that this was considered debatable. What disgusted me even more was seeing my peers, all of whom were well educated, seriously engage in the discussion.

In the spring of 2005, I went to *Jum’ah* prayers at the mosque in Raleigh. The man delivering the *khutba* complained, over the loud-speaker, that the government of the United States was preventing American Muslims from serving their jihad in Iraq. I never prayed at that mosque in Raleigh after that. Such sedition was crossing a line.

In December of that year, a family friend told me of how a Muslim man had approached the imam of a mosque in North Carolina, inquiring whether he should honor-kill his daughter. The imam advised him not to do that, because it was illegal in the United States.

In February 2006, I finally renounced Islam. I was living in New York City. I had, by then, become a stranger to mosques, but a rather familiar face in several bars.

It was while walking through Times Square one day that I caught the scrolling headline on a ticker that the Al-Askari shrine had been bombed by an opposing Muslim group. Was Islam a religion of peace or of violence? Reading that news was the final straw. I still believed in God, but I considered all religions to be poisonous.

A Gentle Tug

I had viewed the Christian Faith as a religion, which has much overlap with Islam, but also some errant and incoherent teachings — similar to how a Christian might view Islam. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity seemed like really bad math. It didn’t make sense that God would have a Son.

Though the majority of my friends were culturally Christian, I had a sound social strategy of avoiding persons whom I thought of as “too Christian.”

Despite any walls we build, the Spirit knows how to extend an invitation. There were moments in which I would watch a film, such as *The Miracle Maker*, or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (I watched

these, figuring they would discredit the Church), in which a certain scene would cause me pause. Similar moments occurred while I listened to Christmas music.

I was a comic book fan, and I stumbled upon *The Big Book of Martyrs*, a graphic novel, in my father’s library. It was my introduction to the story of St. Maximilian Kolbe.

I attended the University of Michigan when the landmark case of *Grutter v. Bollinger* (affirmative action) was heard before the Supreme Court. My college years were also the beginning of my affinity for *South Park*. Having a contrarian streak, I gained a distaste for political correctness. Between this distaste and a strong preference for beauty over blandness in art and architecture, I gained the conviction that much of western tradition was worth preserving, and I became a political conservative. I was still not ready, though, to acknowledge that a Judeo-Christian foundation was behind many of those things worth preserving.

In November 2004, I took my wheelchair-bound Catholic grandmother to Mass in Raleigh. The deacon joked about his own appearance during the homily. When my grandmother passed away in 2005, the priest joked during her funeral service that we grandchildren needed to be careful, because she can now see everything that we do. I found such humor, coming from religious persons, to be very refreshing.

Some months after I moved to New York, a former acquaintance of mine was arrested for stealing a credit card. His misfortune was the source of much laughter for some friends and me. About a month later, I bumped into him again. He introduced me to some new friends he had made, and those friends told me that our crossing paths was no coincidence. This old acquaintance struck me as strangely sincere in his determination to reform. After that chance meeting, it dawned on me that he had fallen in with a group of “Born Agains.” This again was the source of much laughter in my circle. Only in retrospect can I see that the Spirit was quietly doing His work there. I had never imagined that such moments would actually lead to anything positive.

Born Again

I began working for a marketing company in New York at the end of 2005. Our chief clients were New York-based film companies and Broadway shows. The job afforded me opportunities to travel and to also meet celebrities.

My boss seemed like a charming person when I first met him. He was, however, a pathological liar. I routinely caught him lying to clients, to my co-workers, to the man he called his “husband,” to me, and above all to himself. It wasn’t beneath him to manipulate data and reports. He frequently threw temper tantrums, and I was often the one on the receiving end of screaming and profanity-laden phone calls. Most awkward of all, he made sexual advances toward me on several occasions.

I had moved to New York wanting to conquer the world. Ambition called for me to endure the abuse and to do my best to act like the awkwardness was nothing, because my job seemed to have too much potential. I convinced myself that, by looking away and not directly engaging in any unethical behaviors, I was innocent.

...Journeys Home Continued...

I gradually became aware of how spineless I was. It turned out that by getting drunk at a bar on a given night, I would wake up with a headache, but still no spine. During the summer of 2006, I had the first of several prolonged depression episodes.

On a Saturday afternoon in January 2007, I was walking along the Hudson River, wondering whether it was a good idea to just hurl myself into the water. My boss had made a very aggressive pass at me the night before, later blaming me for leading him on after I had (again!) declined. “Is this what life is?” I asked myself.

A thought suddenly flashed in my mind: “Born again.” I immediately wondered where such a thought had come from. Born Again Christians were people I laughed at. But the thought of a fresh start, a chance to be someone else, had appeal. I went to the nearest bookstore and purchased a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*.

I soon began reading the Bible (it took about three months to finish) and attending Sunday Mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. The statues of saints in the cathedral discomfited me; Islam associated them with idolatry. About that time, a former roommate of mine introduced me to a weekly gathering of Christian artists called the Haven, which became my very first Christian community.

I also read C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* to familiarize myself with Christian basics. That book was where I encountered an outright declaration that Christians believed Jesus Christ was God. My conditioned reaction was to think, “Blasphemy!” But much of what I’d been reading in *Mere Christianity* also made tremendous sense, so I finished the book.

In April 2007, I was walking down the sidewalk when something odd occurred to me: I believed in the divinity of Christ. In fact, I had believed it for some weeks without noticing it. I began searching the internet for a church — any church — which would baptize me with little to no preparation. On the evening of June 26, 2007, I was baptized at Times Square Church.

Learning to Walk

In October 2007, I finally left the marketing company on hostile terms. It didn’t help that the economy was on the verge of the Great Recession. The next year and a half was a season of scarcity for me, of barely scraping by and worrying that God had abandoned me already. I lost weight, walking several miles to avoid paying subway fare. When I finally found stability, working at a restaurant (a job I had once considered “beneath me”), I felt something pulsing in my heart that I hadn’t felt in a long time: gratitude.

Worries that God had abandoned me, or that I’d displeased Him, or that He never wanted me in the first place, drove me to increase my activity as a Christian.

I began praying often. At first it felt clumsy to speak to God in my own words, in English, rather than following a specific formula. I often wondered whether I was “doing it right.” Though I’d left Islam, Islam hadn’t fully left me.

I carried on with readings about the Christian Faith. Most of the earliest topics I focused on tended to be simple, such as prayer. I read more books by C.S. Lewis, but G.K. Chesterton soon became my favorite author. I read the entire Bible a second time in 2008, a third time in 2009, and a fourth time (with Apocrypha) in 2010.

In December 2007, I began attending Redeemer Presbyterian Church, joining that church in early 2008. I thought I could never get enough of Tim Keller’s preaching. At Redeemer, I went on to volunteer at the information table, to become active in a Bible study, and to serve on the ministry team for the filmmakers’ group.

I kept attending the Haven and began serving in a leadership role in 2009. A good friend from the Haven also introduced me to *Jews for Jesus*, where I had made even more Christian friends. It wasn’t long before the majority of people whom I spent time with were practicing Christians.

During the early half of 2008 I was blessed with several graces.

At the Haven I cried during an open reading of John 15, “I am the vine, you are the branches....” having felt so honored by our Lord’s words that I was His friend. I felt in my heart that God wanted me as a son rather than a slave. It was the first time in almost a decade that I shed tears.

One afternoon, while praying to God, I suddenly realized that I was just as great a sinner as my former boss. I told God that, even if I was unable to forgive that man right away, I was at least willing to agree to forgive him. Later that evening, I joined some of my Haven friends at an outing. A couple of them asked me why my eyes looked brighter than before.

On another afternoon, while praying, I had a vision, something like a waking dream. Three hounds were trampling the globe. A dark overcast followed them. A woman, dressed in a white robe and holding a candle, stood at the eastern edge of the globe. The hounds charged at her, but they evaporated the moment their snouts touched her. The woman began walking. A procession of men and women, all in white robes and holding candles, appeared and began to follow her. Wherever they stepped, the dark clouds rolled back. “Who was that woman?” I wondered to myself. The answer, I think, would have been pretty obvious to a Catholic.

Questions

New York is a transient city. People constantly move in and move out, so that the set of friends surrounding a denizen in a given moment are often different from those surrounding him or her a year later. There’s a poetry in it.

The Haven disbanded in 2010. A few of my friends, having suffered trials, lost their faith. Many of my Redeemer friends had moved on to other churches or even to other cities, and I was going to church by myself.

I’d also fallen into the habit of falling asleep during the sermons at Redeemer. I became careful not to sit in the front pews, so that the pastor wouldn’t catch me napping. After a couple of years, it just seemed like I was hearing the same message over and over again.

The pastors who weren’t Tim Keller were being given more opportunities to hone their preaching skills, in hopes that Redeemer’s attendance wouldn’t plummet once Keller retired. Over the course of three years, I’d also met several pastors who had moved to New York with the intention of planting new churches. Frankly, some of them were highly unqualified to be giving anyone spiritual direction. I began to question the wisdom behind continually planting new churches, of always having to start afresh.

...Journeys Home Continued...

Between sermons and my independent reading, I became familiar with the basic teachings and history of the Christian Faith. The Christian-related topics which piqued my interest had become more detailed: exorcism, processes for investigating and confirming miracles, Marian apparitions, etc. G.K. Chesterton remained a favorite author of mine. The historical faith figures whom I admired the most included St. Francis of Assisi and St. Maximilian Kolbe. The Christian figure whom I most admired in living memory was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. I couldn't help noticing that much of what piqued my interest, and most of those I most admired, had something in common.

Many of my Christian friends had grown up with reservations concerning the Catholic Church, usually for it being "non-Biblical" for some reason or another. Some even believed that Catholics were not Christians — a claim which can sound very ridiculous to a Muslim. I, on the other hand, had grown up believing that all Christians were equally wrong.

Having read the Bible, having read several books by Catholic authors, and having had access to Google, I learned that much of what was deemed "non-Biblical" (confession to a priest, the intercession of Mary and the saints, etc.) was much misunderstood.

Independent study had likewise done much to inform me of differences between Catholic and Protestant teaching, particularly the Catholic view of the sacraments. When I was first told about transubstantiation, by a Protestant pastor in January 2008, I found it incredibly bizarre that Catholics believed such a thing and was glad I wasn't Catholic. But why was it that we were being encouraged to take miracles recorded throughout the Gospels as facts, yet not to take His words "This is My Body" and "This is My Blood" so literally as the Catholics do? Why were we drinking sparkling grape juice instead of wine during Communion at Redeemer? If we become what we consume, could it mean that the aim of the Eucharist was for a person to become much more than just "saved"? And wouldn't it be a tremendous relief to hear authoritatively that my sins were forgiven, as compared to wondering whether my "Sorry, God!" had been good enough?

I wondered about other things: Why were the interiors of Catholic churches, with such lovely statues of Mary and the saints, adorned so beautifully? Why was the interior of the Protestant church I went to so plain? Why was it that the Catholic Church, of all the churches, was the least prone to bending to the modern world, especially with issues such as abortion?

Redeemer was the perfect church for me as an infant Christian with a Muslim background. But was my time at Redeemer really a transition? Should I become Catholic instead? Doing so would disappoint some of my Christian friends, but I was already used to disappointing people through my conversion. But then, how could I know that I wouldn't just join yet another church a few years later?

The Answer

In September 2010, I was sitting in a pew in the Church of St. Paul the Apostle to have some quiet time with God before going to work. I'd been doing so for some weeks, because the beauty of the church had caught my eye from the sidewalk.

My quiet time with God was running into a snag: a woman was pacing at the back of the church, screaming in hysterics. The echoes of her screaming rang throughout the church.

"Will someone shut her up?" I wondered to myself.

A security guard at the church approached the crazed woman.

"Finally!" I thought to myself. I watched them out of the corner of my eye. The guard walked up and planted his feet in front of the crazed woman. "Let's see what happens next," I thought. And then he ... hugged her! The crazed woman went silent. I could finally have that quiet time with God. But by then, the question which I would have brought to God in that quiet time had already been answered: I was going to become Catholic.

Since That Day

RCIA was a more rewarding experience than I had anticipated, and I was received into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil in 2012, at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle.

I remained active in the Church of St. Paul while living in New York, serving on the ministry team for the Apostolists, the church's young adult group. The Lord has blessed me with many beautiful friends, who have done so much to help keep my faith warm that it has survived through many doubts and even the occasional episode of depression.

In November 2015, I was professed in the Secular Franciscan Order. I was active in the St. Benedict the Moor Fraternity while in New York and have been active in the Padre Pio Community since moving back to Raleigh.

I've been blessed with many opportunities to share my conversion and faith through writing, and I pray that whatever talents God has given me will be used for His purposes. ■



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