



December 2021 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



Damascus Road Traveler

By Ben Eicher

"Someday we'll all be Catholic." What!? I was eight years old when I heard my father say those words. It was the evening of Sunday, October 22, 1967. Dad was driving our family from our home in West Milford, NJ, where he was serving as pastor of Holy Faith Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, which he'd founded in 1960 straight out of Concordia Seminary. Our destination was about twenty miles down the highway, to Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church in Wayne, NJ, where my father and Father James Rugel were to jointly lead a post-Vatican II ecumenical service.

Dad had penned the "Welcome" message appearing that night in the Catholic parish's bulletin. He'd be serving as one of the nine participating clergymen: five Catholic priests and four Lutheran pastors. The Don Bosco College Choir and the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia Chorus would be singing the hymns.

I protested, "but we're Lutherans!" I felt like we were being traitors, or at least crossing enemy lines.

My protest wasn't because I was anti-Catholic. Practically all of my neighborhood buddies were Irish or Italian Catholics. They attended St. Joseph's Parochial School.

Why had Dad said such a confusing thing? I was aware that some grownups had angrily grumbled that my father's liturgical practices were "too Catholic" — not that I understood what they meant. I was aware that Dad had gotten into hot water with the officers of the Missouri Synod because he was offering weekly holy communion, rather than only having it once a month, and that he "communed himself."

My father's maternal familial lineage was German Lutheran. Before the Missouri Synod even existed, his maternal ancestors had founded a parish in northwest Ohio. Dad was the first home-grown member of that parish to be ordained. That took place in July 1960 at the hands of his seminary mentor, Dr. Arthur Carl Piepkorn. Piepkorn had been the head chaplain of World War II's European theater, serving with General Eisenhower.

I loved my father's demand for "high liturgy" worship, as well as his passionate and intelligent sermons. I also loved when Dad would ask guest pastors to help, mainly those from his seminary class of 1960. In February 1961, Richard John Neuhaus delivered the very first sermon at Dad's Holy Faith parish. Later, when we were going on vacation, Dad tabbed Robert Louis Wilken, another seminary classmate, to man the pulpit until we got back. I was proud to serve frequently as an acolyte (altar boy) at our services. In 1967, again at Holy Faith, I received my first communion.

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Journeys Home

...Journeys Home Continued...

Dad had hoped I'd grow up to follow in his footsteps and become a pastor, but that wasn't my dream. I wanted to play shortstop with the New York Yankees. (Ironically, three decades later, another boy from West Milford, Derek Jeter, would become the greatest-ever Yankees shortstop.)

"Someday we'll all be Catholic!" My mind ran through all the reasons we Lutherans *weren't* Catholics: didn't Catholics worship the Virgin Mary? Weren't Catholics told not to read the Bible? Didn't Catholics constantly take the Lord's name in vain? Didn't Catholics believe Jesus died again at every Mass? Didn't Catholics care more about a "haze of saints" than Jesus? Didn't the Catholic Church burn heretics at the stake and sell indulgences to get to heaven?

Was Luther wrong? I grew up thinking I'd forever be a Missouri Synod Lutheran. "Here I stand, I can do no other." What were we doing going to a Catholic church?

I'd never been inside a Catholic church. My Aunt Betty (my father's older sister) had scandalized the clan by wedding a Catholic man and had converted in order to get married in his parish. Then she became the parish's organist.

The only thing I knew about the inside of a Catholic church was it had racks of votive candles and weird statues. The women wore doilies on their heads, no one took off their coats, the priest spoke in Latin, and Catholics were taught a "works-righteousness" salvation.

Now, echoing in my head was this statement, "Someday we'll all be Catholic."

I learned later that Father Rugel and my father had led a parallel pastoral existence. Both had been ordained in July 1960; both had immediately been dispatched to the hinterlands of northern New Jersey as greenhorn missionaries, sent to build parishes from the ground up; and both had a devotion to the Eucharist as their respective faith traditions taught and practiced.

Despite my trepidation that night, the Catholic service wasn't bad. The church building wasn't eerie. The accoutrements inside weren't off-putting. I survived the evening.

However, not long after this ecumenical service, the storm clouds rolled in to rain fire and brimstone on my father. The semi-Fundamentalist wing of the Missouri Synod had surged to power. Their goals included

ridding seminary professorships and the pastorates of "Evangelical Catholics," and what they considered to be theological and/or political "liberals." Dad's bunch of Evangelical Catholics fell within their crosshairs.

In 1972, we moved from New Jersey to northwest Ohio. In 1973, Dr. Piepkorn, who had served on the panel of theologians making up the official Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue — where, by all accounts, he was *the* dominant force on it — was scheduled to face a heresy trial for allegedly teaching "false doctrine." The purge was on, as was the exodus. Eventually Pastor Neuhaus would swim the Tiber. So would Professor Wilken, who by then was serving as a Patristics professor at the University of Notre Dame.

By 1974, my father was trying to hold on within the Missouri Synod. He accepted a call to pastor the twin Missouri Synod parishes in far-off Crawford and Harrison, Nebraska. We became Cornhuskers.

Even though the administration of the Missouri Synod was in turmoil, I was completely happy being a Lutheran. Dad's high-liturgic style moved me; his preaching moved me; his Bible teaching moved me; Luther's *Small Catechism* moved me; receiving Lutheran holy communion moved me; the intelligence of the Lutheran pastors Dad was rubbing elbows with moved me. I remained loyal to Missouri Synod Lutheranism.

Dad's willingness to stay in the Missouri Synod continued even when the higher-ups were monitoring the content of his sermons.

In the fall of 1976, the hammer fell again. The "too-Catholic" accusations were heaped onto the allegation of an error I'd never heard of: "unionism." This meant worshiping or praying in a ceremony with non-Missouri Synod Lutherans. In Dad's case, his ultimate malfeasance had been saying the opening prayer at a high school baccalaureate.

The only thing I knew about the inside of a Catholic church was it had racks of votive candles and weird statues.

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Stand Firm

By Marcus Grodi

Many times over the past few decades, I've written or spoken about the "Verses I Never Saw." A number of the guests on *The Journey Home* program, as well as the converts who have shared their stories in our newsletters, have also affirmed that their hearts and minds were often opened to the Catholic Church through verses they had never noticed before. What many of us mean by this is that, though we were already quite familiar with Scripture, yet, all of a sudden, a verse jumps out and grabs us! Maybe we saw the verse in a whole new light, or maybe even wondered how we were so blind to what it was really saying about the Church.

I've presented a long list of these "Verses I Never Saw" (see chnetwork.org/2011/06/07/the-verses-i-never-saw-marcus-grodi) but one of the most important (at least for me) was 2 Thessalonians 2:15, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter."

What originally startled me in this verse was (1) the call to "hold to the traditions." We Presbyterians were Bible-alone folk, who denied the validity or authority of any "traditions." And then (2) St. Paul's emphasis that these authoritative traditions were passed on "either by word of mouth or by letter" — in other words, from the beginning there were the tandem authoritative traditions to help us know what was "the truth": written Scripture and oral apostolic tradition.

This, combined with a host of other eye-opening verses, plus the witness of many converts and lifelong Catholics, plus the history and teaching of the Church, plus the mercy of God's grace, eventually brought my wife and me into the Catholic Church.

Over these years as a Catholic, though, I've become aware of many other "verses I never saw," not so much about becoming a Catholic, but more on what it simply and truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. One of these "new verses" was actually a fuller appreciation of this very verse from 2 Thessalonians and its context:

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter (2 Thess 2:13-15).

First, I need to note that there are Christian groups, denominations, and individuals who are seemingly irreconcilably divided over the interpretation of many of the theological terms and topics in this short paragraph. Pause for a moment and consider, what does it mean, as a Christian, that (1) "God chose you"; (2) "from the beginning"; (3) "to be saved"; (4) "through sanctification by the Spirit"; (5) "and belief in the truth"; (6) that "he called you"; and (7) "that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Before I go on, I want to emphasize that when St. Paul here said "you," he meant *you*! What do these statements by St. Paul mean for *you* personally? What these statements meant for me over my life — first as a young Lutheran, then as a charismatic Congregationalist, and later as a Presbyterian pastor — were at least slightly different from what I have come to believe as a Catholic. In this short article, I can't review what I used to believe, but I'll try to explain how I've come to understand these theological ideas, very simply and practically, from a Catholic perspective.

What does it mean that "God chose" us? Does this mean He thinks we're more special than other people? That He likes us better than others? That He, for whatever reason, selected us for salvation, while leaving others — or predestining others — out of the Kingdom? In another place, St. Paul insists, on the other hand, that "God shows no partiality" (Rom 2:11).

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“So then,
brethren,
stand firm
and hold
to the
traditions
which
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by word of
mouth or
by letter.”

2 Thessalonians 2:15

“His divine power
has granted to
us all things that
pertain to life and
godliness, through
the knowledge of
him who *called us
to his own glory
and excellence*,
by which he has
granted to us his
precious and very
great promises,
that through
these you may
escape from the
corruption that
is in the world
because of passion,
and *become
partakers of the
divine nature*”

2 Peter 1:3-4

Here we get a glimmer of the mystery of God’s love and mercy, and we need to be careful of constraining God into the boxes of our limited human perspective. What we should be hearing here really doesn’t concern anyone else in the world — we need to hear Him speaking to you and to me. If you love Him, then know, as St. John said, that this is because He first loved you (1 Jn 4:19). We must not be tempted to wonder whether God’s choice for us implies He has not chosen our neighbor, or that we’re somehow more important in His eyes than our neighbor; rather it should drive us to our knees in gratitude and humility; to a full realization of how true it is when we say in Mass, “Lord, I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof ...”

In the context of both of St. Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians, “from the beginning” doesn’t mean from the beginning of time, but from the beginning of St. Paul’s proclamation of the Gospel in Thessaloniki. There was a long earlier portion of their lives before they heard the Gospel, when they were separated from God. Then, by their hearing of the Gospel and the opening of their hearts and minds by grace, they came to believe in Christ, and, as a result, were “saved” out of their pagan environment (cf. Eph 2:8-9). It wasn’t because they had been so “good,” doing “good works,” or regularly attending temple, so that God felt obligated to “choose them” and “save them,” but rather, in the mystery of God’s love, He opened their hearts and minds by grace, “while they were yet sinners” (cf. Rom 5:8) and they then responded to this gift of grace by faith.

Does “to be saved” mean that once this has happened we are saved for eternity? Not necessarily — for we were pulled out of our ignorance by grace through faith, so that we might be saved “through sanctification by the spirit and belief in the truth.” Here is that mysterious partnership between the work of the Spirit (of grace) in our hearts, and our faithful, willful response (again aided by grace) to believe — which when understood in the context of the rest of the New Testament means to adapt and surrender every aspect of our lives to Christ — heart, mind, soul, and strength — as a living sacrifice (cf. Rom 12:1-2). And, frankly, Scripture repeats many times that if we don’t do this, again aided by grace, we can lose that salvation.

The fact that “he called you” — *you* — refers to that mysterious beckoning, which from the beginning of your interest in Christ and His Church has touched your conscience, your heart, and opened your mind, calling you to Him, to worship, to prayer, to service, to repentance and forgiveness, to change, to humility, to imitate Him, with the end result that, again by grace, “you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

St. Paul does not only say that you may contemplate, understand, or see the glory of Christ, but that “you may obtain” it. What does this mean? Here is that mysterious transformation which Christians can undergo, again by the gradual purification that comes through the “sanctification of the Spirit” and the faithful “belief in the truth,” that St. Peter referred to in his second letter: “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who *called us to his own glory and excellence*, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and *become partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pet 1:3-4). It is as if either St. Paul was interpreting St. Peter, or St. Peter interpreting St. Paul, but either way, they were both saying that the upward call (cf. Phil 3:14) for Christians is a sharing in Christ’s glory, His divine life.

But this is no guarantee — no sure endpoint just because at some summer camp in the past we accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, or because we’ve obediently participated in as many sacraments as our particular vocational state allows. Which brings us to one other part of this “verse I never saw”, which may be the most important part — for it has never been more important that you and I take seriously our need to “escape from the corruption that is in the world.”

St. Paul emphasized that we must “stand firm!” Over and over in the New Testament, Our Lord, as well as the New Testament authors, emphasized our need to endure, to remain, to abide, to continue, to press on, even to conquer. This is why Christ gave us His Church, and the Holy Scriptures and Sacred Tradition, as well as her sacraments — not as ends in themselves, but as means of grace, to open our hearts and minds, to inform our consciences, to know what is true, to strengthen our wills, and to draw us always toward Him.

You and me. We’ve been called and chosen by grace. Let us humbly “give thanks to God always” for one another, lifting each other up, praying that by grace, together, we can “stand firm and hold to the traditions,” which we have received through our Mother, the Church. ■

Farewell

By Mary Clare Miller

Greetings readers! As 2021 comes to a close, so does my time with the CHNetwork. After a number of years being the editor for this newsletter, working in pastoral care, and other responsibilities, I am leaving the CHNetwork this month. I deeply appreciate the opportunity I have had to share in so many people's lives as they seek a deeper walk with Christ and His Church. My husband and I are expecting our first child in January and I am looking forward to dedicating my time to caring for our new little bundle of joy. We ask for your prayers in this new chapter of our lives.



SHARE THE NEWSLETTER!

The CHNetwork encourages members to make copies of the newsletter and distribute them to family and friends to encourage them to join our mailing list. They may also request to receive our mailings by using the response card included with this newsletter.

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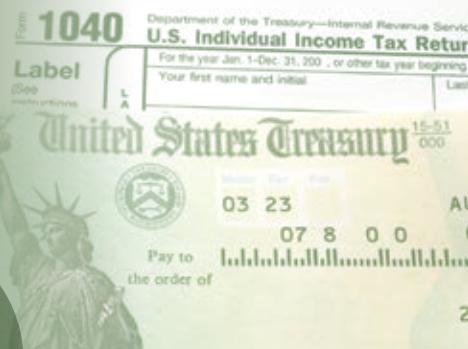
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TAX LETTERS

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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, 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

December 6

Craig Alexander*
(former Methodist)

December 13

Dr. David Russell Mosley*
(former Church of Christ)

December 20

Mother Seraphina Marie, FDM*
(revert)
(re-air from 3/11/19)

December 27

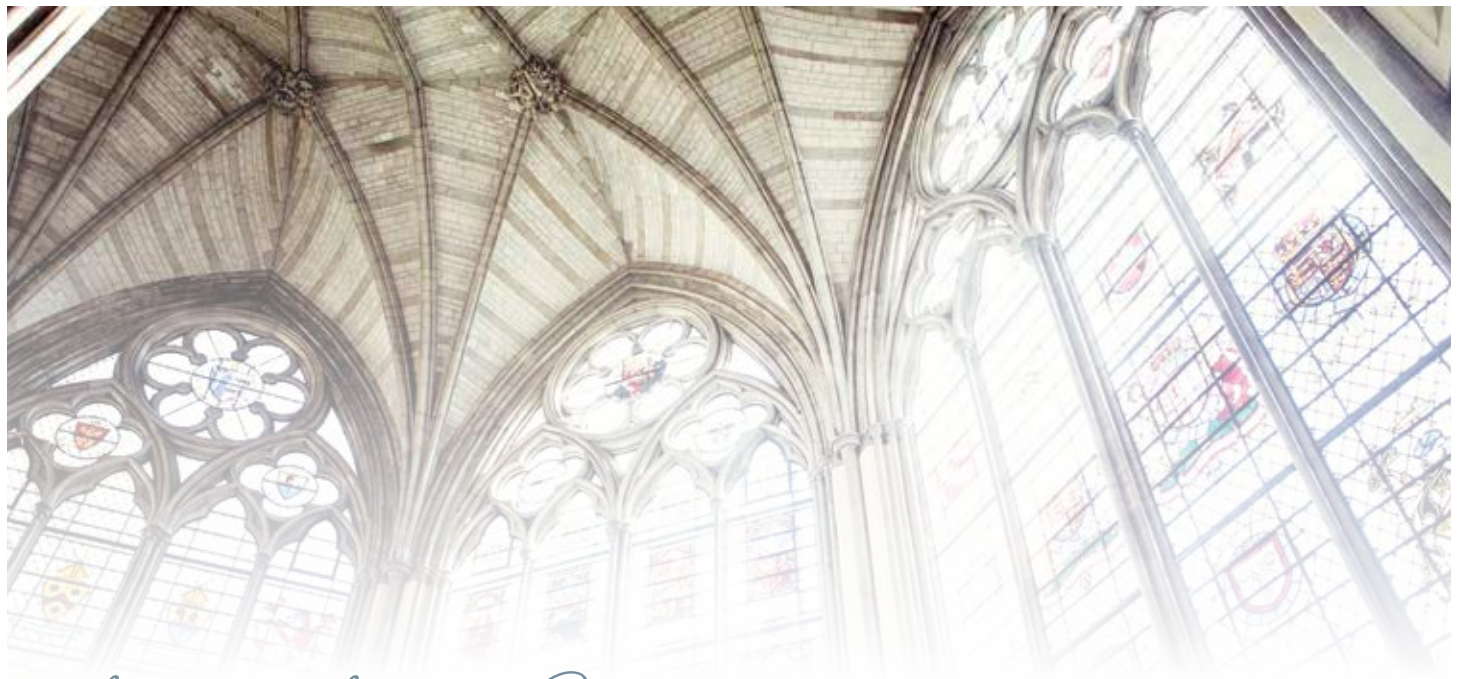
Don Smith*
(former non-denominational pastor)
(re-air from 2/11/19)

January 3

Matt Leonard*
(former Methodist)
(re-air from 3/18/19)

*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 Jerry, a convert "Thank you for showing kindness and compassion to me. I am enjoying my Catholic life. I am attending Mass 3 days a week, never miss the eucharistic Thursday worship and Sunday service. Still facing some difficulties with my Jehovah Witnesses family. Actually they shunned me because of my conversion, but that is the cross I have to carry for deciding to follow my Lord Jesus Christ. Can't wait for Christmas and all the celebration and the spiritual meaning of that."

From Rebecca, on the journey "Forgive me for not responding sooner. I did receive, and appreciate, your e-mail. I have been, slowly, reviewing the materials available from the Coming Home Network. Right now, my very Jewish husband is supporting me strongly, even in light of my decision. You see, I've found my spiritual home in the Catholic Church . . . I was watching our local church's livestream Mass when

the Lord said to me 'I am present in the Eucharist.' That made my decision very simple . . . I am now attending RCIA. Our Lord God works in wonderful and mysterious ways. Blessed be His name. I believe the testimonies I heard on *The Journey Home* made me more receptive to becoming Catholic. I know the many and varied programs I have watched on Catholic television in the past several years, as well as the prayers of the woman who is my sponsor, aided greatly in my conversion. As always, it was His will that made the difference."

From Danielle, on the journey "I have completed all but 4 RCIA classes already. I will be either entering the Church officially this next Easter or I may talk with Father to see if he will allow me to enter sooner. When I first started I was still discerning if I wanted to convert, however, I know for sure now. I am very thankful for EWTN and the Coming Home Network. My conversion has largely been

impacted from listening to the network radio stations and viewing segments on YouTube. I appreciate you reaching out to me and others. God bless all of you!"

Joshua, a recent convert "On April 3, 2021, at the Easter Vigil Mass, my wife and I received the sacraments at St. Catherine of Alexandria parish. It was one of the greatest days of our lives. This happened after a long and arduous journey from the Calvary Chapel/ Southern Baptist denominations to the Catholic Church, in the midst of personal and career upheavals due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, my wife and I find ourselves happily in the arms of Roman Catholicism, despite the objections from many friends and family. A few days ago, my wife and I were able to baptize our 2 young sons, both of them under the age of 2. Thank you so much CHN for the support you have given us during this equally joyous and difficult time." ■

Prayer List



Clergy

- **For Austin, a pastor** who has come to the conclusion that he is on the road to the Catholic Church, that the Holy Spirit will go before him to soften the hearts of his wife and family.
- **For an Anglican priest** trying to navigate his way into the Church, that the Lord will lead him as he attempts to work through all the practical and personal issues.
- **For a minister in the Salvation Army** who has been reading deeply into Catholic teaching and history and would like to do doctoral work in Catholic theology.
- **For Ben, a pastor** on the journey toward the Church but still struggling with some doctrinal issues, that the Holy Spirit will lead him to the answers he seeks.
- **For Gary, an Evangelical pastor** awakening to the truth of the Catholic Faith and happy that his wife is with him on this journey.
- **For a Wesleyan pastor** who has been reading the case for Catholicism, is strongly attracted, but has questions about the status of the Orthodox Church.
- **For a Salvation Army couple** who have been pastors for a number of years and are rethinking their future in the light of the claims of the Catholic Church, that the Spirit of God will lead them into all truth.
- **For Kent, a former Protestant seminary student** who entered the Church Easter of 2020 and is in the process of discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life in the Catholic Church.
- **For a Pentecostal pastor** who has been on the journey a long time and has gone in and out of RCIA, but has struggled with the scandals in the Church and has not yet been able to decide.
- **For Brian, a Methodist pastor** who is convinced he must become Catholic and is struggling with how he will support his family.
- **For Bret, a pastor** who has begun examining the teachings of the Catholic Church and attending Mass and is struggling to reconcile his Protestant background and understanding with what he's now learning.

- **For a Baptist pastor** who has become convinced of the truth of the Catholic Faith, that the Holy Spirit might soften his wife's heart and give him the wisdom to know how to lead her toward the Church.
- **For a Church of Christ preacher in Kentucky**, that the Holy Spirit would open the doors for him to a new experience of the fullness of Christ's truth in His Holy Church.
- **For Jordan, a non-denominational Charismatic minister**, that his experience of RCIA would be one of blessing and spiritual growth.

Laity

- **For a former Lutheran who became involved in Wicca**, that his RCIA journey culminating in the Easter sacraments would free him of the oppression under which he suffers.
- **For a convert in Virginia** who is no longer practicing her faith, that she will once again come to the table of the Lord.
- **For an atheist in Oregon**, that our Lord Jesus Christ would grant him the grace of faith in the reality of God and His love for him.
- **For Christina, a Baptist**, who is once again drawn towards learning about the Catholic Church, that she will continue pursuing truth.
- **For Chris in Florida**, that, as he investigates the Catholic faith of his ancestors, he may be granted a burning hunger for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.
- **For Aaron, an Episcopalian**, that he may discover the fulfillment for which he is seeking in the Catholic Church.
- **For Nancy, an Episcopalian**, who after many years, is finally able to move forward with her deep desire to be Catholic and is now in RCIA.
- **For Joe in Maryland**, that the Holy Spirit would guide him back to the Catholic Faith of his youth.
- **For an Anglican in England** who is committing to a prayer life and is considering whether to move forward with her interest in the Catholic Church but feels very unsure, that Jesus will give her clarity and peace.
- **For Maureen** who is learning more about the early Church and Catholic beliefs, that she will continue to grow in her faith and follow the Lord's leading.
- **For a Baptist in California**, that he would find a mentor to help him to better learn the fullness of the Catholic Faith.
- **For Michele, a convert** who is looking for ways to grow in her faith life, that Jesus will open the right doors for her.
- **For Jeffrey, a member of the United Church of Canada**, that our Lord Jesus Christ would lead him home to full communion with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.
- **For Bob, an Episcopalian**, that he may be granted the grace to pursue the will of God for him in Christ's one holy Church.
- **For Marilyn** and her questions about Church teaching, that the Holy Spirit will guide her heart and mind.
- **For Alessandro, a former Catholic**, that the love of Jesus would lead him back to a full participation in the sacraments of Christ.
- **For an Evangelical in Florida** who has been on the journey for many years and is finally moving to a point of making a decision whether or not to become Catholic.
- **For a non-denominational Christian in Montana**, that our Lord Jesus would soften the heart of his wife towards the Catholic Church.
- **For Melanie** who is in the process of becoming Catholic but is struggling with not knowing any Catholics in real life.
- **For Brian, a convert**, as he finds ways to serve the Church and grow in his new life as a Catholic.
- **For a non-denominational Christian** whose family is not supportive of him becoming Catholic and has trouble accepting some Catholic practices, that Jesus will show him the way forward.

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

Dad was shown the door. The Synod removed my father’s name from the “call” list, meaning they would no longer allow him to pastor a Missouri Synod church.

In the years that followed, my father wandered in the employment desert. He worked the night shift as a security guard; he taught high school; he obtained a Master’s degree in guidance and counseling. In 1993, the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) Synod offered him a parish in Edon, Ohio. He accepted, although he was honest with the parishioners that he’d give them Piepkornian Missouri Synod Lutheranism.

The “someday” that “we’ll all be Catholic” never arrived for my father. He died in 1995, on the Eve of the Feast of All Saints, as the popular pastor of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church.

As for me, it was with great heartache that I jumped ship in September 1982. During law school in Lincoln, Nebraska, I became a member of the AELC (a short-lived synod of purged Missouri Synodians that, in 1988, was absorbed into the newly-formed ELCA). I was a faithful attendee at All Saints Lutheran Church until my law school graduation.

In May 1985, I joined a law firm in Rapid City, South Dakota. In the Black Hills, there were no AELC parishes, and my father was back in Ohio, so I sat on the sidelines. I became rudderless. Although I never lost my faith in Christ, I descended into an unchurched, non-sacramental existence. On Sunday mornings, I lamented the loss of “going to church,” but not enough to join an ELCA parish. Those who are familiar with the Dakotas know that a large Scandinavian-heritage population lives there, and they tend to be Lutherans. This means there are many ELCA Lutheran parishes. On the other hand, there are also many Native Americans (Lakota Sioux) there, and they are Catholic. So there are also plenty of Catholic churches.

I ignored them all. I was determined not to dabble in non-Lutheran Protestantism. That was easy for me. As a Missouri Synod Lutheran, I shared much in common with Catholic doctrine, but little with Calvinist or Zwinglian doctrine. They didn’t believe in a true Real Presence, and they had a different set of the Ten Commandments.

In 1988, I married a divorced woman with two unbaptized children. I asked my father to trek the 1,100 miles from Ohio to go South Dakota to perform the nuptials and baptize the kids. My Catholic aunt was willing to play the organ for us. A local Congregational parish in the Nebraska town we used to live in rented me their church building for the festivities.

I worked hard to make the wedding ceremony perfect. I bought the communion hosts. I built a processional cross. I typed the bulletins. But that’s about as “religious” as I got. I never prayed about our situation. My fiancée and I didn’t go through pre-marital reli-

gious counseling. We didn’t scout for a suitable parish to join after we became man and wife.

The wedding ceremony Dad led us through was highly liturgical. It included the kids’ baptisms as well as holy communion. My bride and her family constantly joked about our religiosity. Afterward, Dad lamented that he shouldn’t have married us because

of the low state of our chronically non-religious life. He was right. My wife and I didn’t even make it through two years before we were divorced.

God wasn’t to blame. I knew I had to get God back into my life. But even then, I didn’t feel compelled to become “churched.” I thought I’d just read the Bible, plus books by or about Luther and Lutheranism.

In 1990, I met a lapsed Catholic woman with three baptized kids, and I began a serious relationship with her. The woman’s parents, as well as her brother Paul, were devout, but she was not.

During our three years together, we didn’t attend church. Not even Christmas or Easter. Also, I didn’t get to know Paul during that time. By early 1993, our relationship was failing.

The time had come for me to pray, “God, help us!” I hatched a plan to get my girlfriend to become Lutheran: “You’re Catholic and I’m Lutheran. Let’s alternate every Sunday.” I was being devious. I had no intention of becoming Catholic. I figured I was Catholic enough by virtue of my father’s “too-Catholic” habits. My girlfriend agreed to my plan. I suggested we start at a Lutheran church.

We picked an ELCA parish, and one Sunday we headed there. The parish was holding a “modern” liturgy service, without holy communion. As the “contemporary service” unfolded, I thought to myself, “I don’t recognize this. Where is any semblance of the Lutheran liturgy?”

The next Sunday it was my girlfriend’s turn. During the week, my benign anti-Catholicism (which I hadn’t realized I had) reared its head. Much of it ran through my thoughts: Tetzels and the sale of indulgences (“Into the coffer a penny rings; out of purgatory a soul springs.”); worldly cardinals and popes, some of whose rich overly-secular families had purchased ecclesiastical stature for their boys when they were under five years old; priests who couldn’t read and who’d fathered illegitimate children while wagging fingers at the parishioners not to commit fornication; the papacy is the anti-Christ; Church councils had erred; burning heretics at the stake; they’d chained Bibles to tables; forbade Catholics from reading the Scriptures; then there was the Inquisition and Galileo. I dug out my tattered copy of the *Book of Concord*, the official set of Lutheran doctrinal writings, and read.

Regarding Mary, yes, she is rightly called Mother of God; yes, she was perpetually virgin; yes, in heaven she prays for us. But in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, there is criticism of Mari-

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...Journeys Home Continued...

ology as being the desire to employ “magic.” A specific example is cited: at a monastery, a statue of Mary was manipulated by puppet strings to nod Yes or No to parishioner’s prayers to her. The Catholic Church, I was convinced, had rejected Luther when all he wanted to do was preach the gospel and bring education to the masses.

“Protestantism” meant “Protest-antism,” and it was the Catholic Church that was being protested. “Reformation” meant “reformation” to us Lutherans, but to other non-Catholic faiths it meant “re-form-ation.” It was, of course, the Catholic Church that was being “reformed” or “re-formed.” Despite having little in common with other non-Catholic faiths, I was sure that, since 1517, in spite of the Council of Trent, the Catholic Church hadn’t been reformed. It still taught a works-righteousness salvation, and it was filled with the traditions of men.

With these thoughts spinning inside my brain, my girlfriend and I headed to Rapid City’s Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. As we drove there, I was filled with trepidation, and I tried to calm myself: “whatever happens, don’t run out in mid-service.”

With shaky knees, I started walking up the entrance steps. Suddenly a voice inside me announced: “once you go in, you’ll never come out.” The locution literally stopped me in my tracks. My girlfriend looked at me like I was bailing on her before we even went inside. I was stunned! Were the words a warning or a prophecy?

We walked in. I nearly hyperventilated. There were holy water fonts that people were dipping their fingers in. Everyone had their coats on, maybe because there was nowhere to hang up their coats. We walked into the nave. The biggest thing in the sanctuary wasn’t a hanging cross or crucifix, but an icon of Mary holding the infant Jesus. It looked enormous — especially Mary. I worried: “during the service, will there be worship of Mary?”

My girlfriend and I sat in a pew far in the back. I nervously scanned the other pews and made mental notes of where the exits were. “There are more people here than I expected,” I gulped as the liturgy began. The processional hymn was familiar. I’d grown up singing it. The priest and altar servers solemnly processed behind a crucifix, just like we used to do.

I began to calm down. I suddenly had the odd feeling I was “home.” The parishioners were singing, even if not nearly as loudly as we Lutherans did. There was no worship of Mary. The liturgy was virtually identical to the Lutheran “high-liturgy” I’d been raised with. Some of the wording was different, or not in the same order, but at no point during the service did I feel I was in the wrong place.

When it came time to leave, I didn’t want to. “Let’s come here next week,” I said to my girlfriend. And we did.

But it didn’t save our relationship. It dissolved soon afterwards. Nevertheless, I kept going back to the cathedral. The next thing I knew, my girlfriend’s brother, Paul, was inviting me to stay between the Sunday morning Masses for coffee and donuts in the basement.

The locution I heard was right: I went in and never came out. I never went back to a Lutheran church. As I kept attending Mass at the cathedral, I became closer with my ex’s devout brother and his family. I still had no intention of becoming Catholic, though.

Enter Tim — now known a well-known Catholic professor and apologist. At that time, he was a high school religion teacher at the new St. Thomas More High School in Rapid City. Tim also taught a Bible study class. Paul invited me to attend with him. A *Catholic* Bible class? I didn’t know such a thing existed! I’d been through many boring Bible study classes, and I already knew the Bible well enough. When I was 11 years old, I came in second in a New York City radio station’s Bible Quiz show. I begrudgingly told Paul I’d give it a try.

Wow! I’d never heard the Bible opened the way Tim did it. My “Lutheran Bible-interpretation eyeglasses” flew away. Tim laboriously fed us hot meat instead of the lukewarm milk of the “What does this verse mean to you?” style of Bible studies I’d grown weary of. He

walked us through Covenant Theology and delved deeply into the linguistic nuances and what the early Church Fathers interpreted the verses to mean. I was putty in Tim’s hands.

But I wasn’t spineless about it. I became committed to immersing myself in reading more Lutheranism than I ever had. I pored through the Augsburg Confession and the other writings contained in the *Book of Concord*; I read parts of Martin Chemnitz’s four-volume set on the Council of Trent; I read this Lutheran book and that. I also had numerous long-distance phone chats with my father. I tried hard to remain Lutheran.

Despite my research, I was drifting in the undertow of Catholicism. I doubled down on my commitment to Lutheranism by firmly gripping onto the life raft of *sola Scriptura*. I reminded myself that one reason Luther was so Scripture-oriented was because of the lack of holiness and worldliness of the popes and cardinals of the early 1500s. Their scandals inspired in me no confidence that they spoke for God. Indeed, the gates of hell seemed to be prevailing. As to *sola fide* (i.e., “faith alone” — “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls”), I couldn’t see any way that doctrine could fall.

Tim’s comprehensive and kind Scripture teaching offered a better life raft. I learned that Tetzl was a rogue; the pope wasn’t the anti-Christ; the Church taught that “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ”; there weren’t any puppet strings manipulating statues of the Virgin Mary; and rightful Mariology carried out the prophecy (Luke 1:48) that all generations would call her blessed.

A Catholic Bible class? I didn’t know such a thing existed! ... I already knew the Bible well enough.

...Journeys Home Continued...

Sola Scriptura sank when I realized a bunch of leaks: we Lutherans had our own extra-biblical Magisterium; “lover of the Bible” Martin Luther wasn’t thrilled with a number of New Testament canonical books; the Catholics hadn’t added books to the Bible, but rather the Protestants had removed them; during the Catholic liturgy, the Gospels are so revered they are held aloft and often incensed prior to their reading; the Lutherans used the same Bible readings in their service that the Catholic Church did; we both held to the Three Creeds, those being the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

Sola fide foundered more quickly: I no longer had to believe a tortuous reading of James 2:24 (“not by faith alone”); in comparison, the words of St. Paul should be read in context with, and in comparison to, the words of Jesus, not vice versa (2 Peter 3:16 talks about those who misinterpret Paul’s words); even the Athanasian Creed ends on an anti-faith-alone declaration.

Gulp!

My “someday” had arrived. It came as a thief in the night the evening Tim taught on Matthew 16:18, where Jesus makes Peter the head of His Church. If it were true that Peter was the first pope — Jesus had made Simon His prime minister, and had given him the keys to the kingdom of heaven, promising that the gates of hades would never prevail against the Church founded upon him — I knew I had no choice. My conscience compelled me to come into full communion with the Catholic Church.

Double gulp! How will I break the news to my father? How do I join? How will I “get” things like Marian devotion?

I swallowed my pride and plunged into the turgid waters of the Tiber. In 1993, at age 34, I began RCIA. My ex-girlfriend’s brother Paul was my sponsor. The priest who ran the classes later became Wyoming Diocese’s Bishop Steven Biegler. Nine months later, I was confirmed by then Rapid City Diocese’s Bishop Charles Chaput.

During my confirmation, I had another religious experience. Within milliseconds of being anointed with the oil of the Sacrament of Confirmation, I was struck with an overpowering urge to teach Bible study. When Tim moved on from Rapid City, he asked me to take over his Bible study class. I met with Bishop Chaput about it, and he approved it. During our discussion, Bishop Chaput asked about my background. I told him about my father. Bishop Chaput said his favorite Scripture professor at the University of San Francisco had been a Lutheran, Dr. John Elliot. I said I’d ask my father if he knew him. I called Dad that night to inquire. His response was, “Jack? I graduated from seminary with him.” I taught Bible study in Rapid City from 1994 to 2014. I had to stop at age 55 because of a stroke.

Before my stroke, I had vigorously worked to return the favor to God and His Church for my newfound blessings. During the spring semesters of 2003 and 2004, I taught religion at St. Thomas More High School. From 2003 to 2005, I served as Religion Consultant for the Emmy Award-nominated CBS-TV drama series, “Joan of Arcadia.” (It was a 21st century version of a Joan of Arc style girl hearing God’s voice and trying to act on His messages.) In January 2005, I was a guest on *The Journey Home*. From 2001 to 2006, I served on the Board of Directors of the Center for Catholic

and Evangelical Theology. The chairman was former Lutheran Dr. Robert Louis Wilken.

Today, I love being Catholic. It saved my spiritual life. In a way, it also saved my physical life. When I had my stroke, in the ICU I “coded out” seven times. When I emerged from a coma, a priest was seated at my bedside giving me the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. When I opened my eyes, he nearly jumped off the chair. I remember hearing him say, “I’ve gotten this far, so I may as well continue.”

Ten weeks later, I was discharged. I was told I’d be in a wheelchair for life. Lots of prayers later, I advanced to a walker, then to a cane. Even though I stagger, I walk. I rarely use a cane. I drive. I work full time.

However, I didn’t get off scot-free. I’m permanently unable to swallow, and my right leg is semi-paralyzed. But four doctors have told me I’m a miracle. I thank God.

I still cherish my Lutheran upbringing. It helped lead me to the Church that Jesus Christ founded. Jesus has certainly been with me as I have stumbled along with fear and trembling.

“Someday we’ll all be Catholic.” I went in and never came out. Hallelujah! ■



BEN EICHER was a trial lawyer for 18 years before departing the practice in 2003. He moved on to be the religion consultant for the Emmy-nominated CBS-TV drama, “Joan of Arcadia.” He now writes a weekly column for a Nebraska newspaper, pens novels, and does legal research for Rensch Law Office in Rapid City, South Dakota. He is also a licensed attorney in the Rosebud Sioux Tribal court system.

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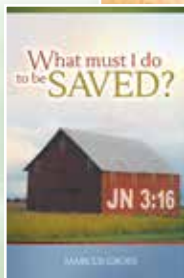
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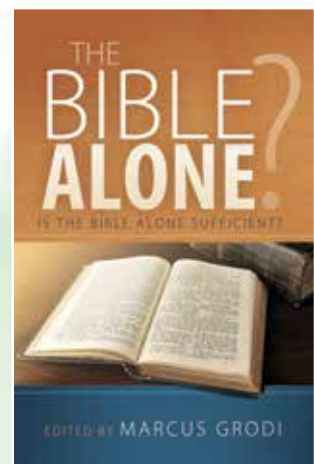
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