



January 2022 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



God Leads Us One Step at a Time

By Nick Alexander

God's grace guides us all. He doesn't push people to do anything, but rather uses elements in that person's own world and circumstance to open and close doors, providing guidance and wisdom.

I came to know Christ personally in 1984 when I was 14 years old. I had attended a summer youth retreat in New England, where I became convinced of the reality of the existence of a personal God. Afterwards, I returned home to an apartment in New York City with a new reality before me, a newfound zeal.

My parents didn't know how to relate to this. I was raised by an Episcopalian mother and an atheist father. Their son, who had previously been bullied and was overweight, was now a religious zealot, a "Jesus freak." My mother's faith had led her towards political activism and the liberal causes she espoused, particularly that of women's rights. My father's lack of faith brought our already fragile relationship to the breaking point as he resorted to mockery and demeaning slurs. My love of Christ disrupted our family dynamic.

High School Leadership

A couple of years passed while I adjusted to my new faith in Christ. For the most part, I kept my faith from other kids at school. But during the summer before my junior year, I was challenged to step out of my comfort zone, to live fully for Christ, no matter the consequences. I knew that I had to become more outward in living my faith and had committed myself to do a number of things to this end, including

immersing myself in Evangelical Christian culture, learning the musical genre of Christian Rock, and wearing clothing with creative evangelical messages. More importantly, I began to participate — to my parents' chagrin — in a number of Christian youth groups.

My high school had an extracurricular Bible study group that met daily, in the early mornings. The leader, Ian, was a member of a Black Gospel church. We studied the Gospels together. Over the course of the school year, we grew in friendship and knowledge of our faith to the point that, when he graduated, I inherited the position of high school Bible study president.

The following year, I went into full-throttle evangelical mode, leading the Bible study and providing additional helps, such as songbooks and a lending library. I expanded its hours and wallpapered the city-block-sized public school with fliers. Some of my secular friends were disdainful of my new direction, but there were others who commended me for my forthrightness and boldness, even if they disagreed with me.

Outside of school, I found myself committed even more to attending my Episcopal parish, which incidentally had become more charismatic in its worship style. I was a speaker in my Episcopal Youth Cursillo weekend and also

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Journeys Home

...Journeys Home Continued...

branched out to many different youth groups outside of my Episcopal parish. On Friday nights, I would travel by subway, ferry, and city bus to participate in an Evangelical youth group in Staten Island. As president, I wanted to ensure that my Bible studies were correct; I knew the responsibility teachers carried.

One of the side effects of living in this particular Christian bubble was that not one person I encountered had a positive experience of the Catholic Faith. There was a Catholic bookstore near me that I had occasionally browsed through, but for the most part I took for granted that, if someone claimed to be Catholic, with all its man-made rules and practices, he would be oblivious to the true Gospel, which freely offered a personal relationship with Christ. We disdainfully dubbed that approach “Churchianity.”

Some of our group even passed along comic books that promoted the claimed testimony of a former Jesuit priest, Alberto Rivera, whose testimony was woven with fantastic tales of Church corruption through the centuries. We counted our blessings to be free of such craziness.

Discovering the Charismatic Renewal

It was 1988, the year I graduated from high school. I was astounded at the growth in my faith walk in just four years’ time. What surprises did God have in store for me at Rutgers College in central New Jersey?

Since my senior year in high school was such a blessing, I sought to continue my trajectory, being active in my Christian pursuits in college as well. During the college’s Activity Fair, I signed up for all the groups with a Christian focus. At this large university, there were roughly a dozen such groups, some of which were from nationally-recognized ministries.

However, at this one table, I had a good conversation with Eric, a member of a group called University Christian Outreach. I dis-

covered that this group offered daily morning prayer. It took place off campus at a Christian fraternity house that was just one block from my dorm. *Sign me up!*

The next morning, members were surprised to see this stranger at the door at the scheduled time. I followed them into the basement, anticipating a worship experience similar to what I had in high school.

We stood in a well-lit, furnished basement room with a cross up front. I was handed a paperback book of the Psalms and a binder of worship songs. The group began by chanting two psalms from the paperback psalter, accompanied by the strums of an acoustic guitar. Then a student read a passage from the Gospels, after which he shared a brief encouragement for the day.

Following this, the group exploded into charismatic prayer. Songs at high decibel levels flowed into other songs. Hands were raised. What sounded like gibberish (praying in tongues) abounded and lasted another twenty minutes.

I was blown away. I had rarely experienced this level of enthusiastic worship, even with all the groups I had attended the prior year. My home Episcopal parish had been experimenting with charismatic expression in its liturgies, but not like this. I was curious, drawn to this group, knowing the importance of keeping my faith vibrant in a college atmosphere, where temptations to sin abounded.

This group offered a series of off-campus classes to introduce students to charismatic prayer. I swiftly embraced it. I had picked up the guitar and learned to lead worship in such settings. I also attended a men’s group, a dedicated group of students that met weekly to grow in faith. Church-hopping, checking out the many different denominations (and non-denominations!), I was drawn into ever more contemporary and free-flowing expressions of worship.

About six months into my involvement, I stumbled across a reality that utterly floored me. The majority of the students, including the residents in the Christian household that held morning prayer, were — to my utter disbelief — *Catholics!* How could this be?

They were the children of devout Catholic parents involved with a charismatic covenant community located about forty-five minutes away. Many Catholics introduced to charismatic prayer had opted to band together, pool their resources, purchase real estate, and move into houses adjacent to each other. By doing so, they could continue their respective faith walks with a level of support they weren’t finding in their original parishes.

This gave me hope for our Christian faith. No longer would I speak negatively about Catholics. I attended a reunion with my old high school Christian friends and let them know of my discovery that even Catholics — yes, *Catholics* — can be saved! They were incredulous.

Mary — for Protestants!

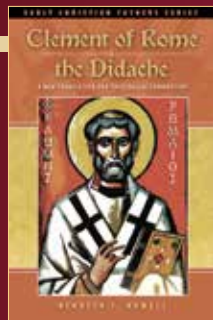
It was Christmas 1989, and one of the presents I received was a book about Mary, her apparitions, and the Rosary ... written

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CLEMENT OF ROME & THE DIDACHE BY DR. KENNETH HOWELL

Clement’s *Letter to the Corinthians* and the *Didache* reveal how early Christians were implementing and living out the Faith taught by Jesus and passed on by the twelve Apostles. The constant threat of schism and doctrinal deviation prompted these earliest writers to pen some of the most enduring wisdom known to the Church. In a time when Christians everywhere are seeking a greater visible unity of faith and order, these documents provide rich food for thought.

Call 740-450-1175 or go to chresources.org to order this book and other resources about the Catholic Faith!





The Prayer of the Righteous

By Matt Swaim

"The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" James 5:16b.

I entered the Catholic Church during the Easter Vigil in 2005, but for the 25 years of my life prior to that, I bounced around a handful of different Christian congregations, mostly of the kind that people would consider "Evangelical." They varied from one another on some finer points of doctrine and worship style, but there is one particular principle that I experienced in every single one of them: if you found yourself in need of prayer, it was a consoling thought to bring it up to your Sunday school class, or maybe to the family that sat in the pew behind you every week, or to Bob the worship leader, or to Dave the youth pastor.

But if you *really* wanted your concern to get properly prayed for, you knew whom to seek out: the little old lady in the front pew who'd been there longer than anyone and who everyone knew started and ended her day in prayer, sustaining it with prayer all through the intervening period. Because, as the Epistle of St. James tells us, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Now, Martin Luther was known to have a distaste for the Epistle of St. James because it didn't square with his view of justification by faith alone. However, the forms of Protestant Christianity my family participated in weren't from Luther's branch; they had descended from John Wesley through the Holiness movement, and

they *loved* James. That meant that I heard James preached from the pulpit with some frequency. I heard all the time about how faith without works was dead (Jas 2:26), that Christians had a moral duty to tame the tongue (Jas 3:3-12), and that, ultimately, as James reminds us, "religion that God our Father accepts as pure

and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (Jas 1:26).

There were other passages from James that I would only understand later as a Catholic, such as his references to Confession and the Anointing of the Sick at the end of his letter. Yet the verse from James that I recall hearing invoked *most* frequently was the one about the power of a righteous person's prayer. I had James 5:16 underlined in my well-worn 1984 edition of the New International Version, but because of the way I heard it preached and related to me by the "prayer warriors" in my congregation, I tend to remember it in the King James Version:

"the effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much."

Whether preached from the pulpit, or shared at VBS or Sunday school, or printed on a box in the foyer where you could drop your prayer requests, the invocation of this biblical principle by those of us in the Holiness movement had two key implications; first, if

“Heaven is full of men and women who preferred Christ above all things and, for their reward, obtained union with the One whom they sought. These are the righteous, whose prayers were effective during their sojourn here on earth and whose prayers now reach across space and time. They are closer by far to Christ in their present state than they ever could have been then, and their prayers are even more powerful and effective now.”

you want power behind your prayers, find a righteous person to pray for you. Second, and more importantly, if you want power behind your prayers, go *be* a righteous person yourself.

One of the most beautiful discoveries that was a part of my journey toward entering the Catholic Church was the revelation of the mind-blowing reality of the Communion of Saints. Heaven is full of men and women who preferred Christ above all things and, for their reward, obtained union with the One whom they sought. These are the righteous, whose prayers were effective during their sojourn here on earth and whose prayers now reach across space and time. They are closer by far to Christ in their present state than they ever could have been then, and their prayers are even more powerful and effective now. Why *wouldn't* we ask for them to pray for us, just as I would have asked that little old lady in the front pew in my days in the Holiness movement?

And just as I used to hear from Evangelical pulpits growing up, that twofold understanding of James 5:16 holds true for us as Catholics: you ask for the prayers of the saints because you know they are righteous and have influence, but you also ask for their prayers because you know their holiness and want to emulate it in your own life.

In my daily work at the Coming Home Network, I spend a lot of time trying to explain this concept of the Communion of Saints to Christians from non-Catholic backgrounds who are often overwhelmed with trying to digest 2000 years of Catholicism one concept at a time. A lot of ink has been spilled by Catholic apologists over the years, citing various passages from the Bible that indicate that devotion to the saints is deeply Christian and not crassly pagan, as so many outside the Catholic Church perceive it to be.

Yet for me, it always comes back to that one verse from St. James: "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Every Christian, Catholic or not, knows this principle is true because we have seen the power of prayer in action, through the holy people in our lives who we know treasure God above all else. We have seen prayers answered in desperate situations, and when a loved one falls ill, or a national tragedy strikes, or a pandemic paralyzes the world, our first recourse is to find our most faithful friends and ask them to join us in prayer. How much more should we know the truth of this biblical principle in the witness of the saints, who now experience perfect union with Christ and who pray more perfectly in their beatific state than any of us who remain on this side of the veil? ■

PLAN TO **JOIN US** FOR THESE UPCOMING CHNETWORK **2022 EVENTS!**



Our Lady of the Pines Retreat Center

RETREAT

May 23-26, 2022

Our Lady of the Pines Retreat Center
Fremont, OH



PILGRIMAGE

September 12-21, 2022

Germany



Marie Joseph Spiritual Center

RETREAT

October 27-20, 2022

Marie Joseph Spiritual Center
Biddeford, ME

**For more information or to register, please contact
Ken Hensley at kenh@chnetwork.org or go to chnetwork.org/events.**

SHARE SHARE YOUR STORY!

The CHNetwork **always welcomes** those of our members who are converts or reverts to share their **written conversion stories** of how they were drawn (or drawn back) to the Catholic Church. If you feel called to share your story, please feel free to go to chnetwork.org/converts to review our writer's guidelines, see sample stories, and upload your testimony.

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.

We do ask that copies of the newsletter not be sold. Unless otherwise indicated, the contents of this newsletter are copyright © 2022 by the Coming Home Network International. All rights reserved.

NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE

Our online newsletter archive is new and improved! Visit chnetwork.org/newsletter-archive to view past newsletters. We do ask for a \$35 yearly donation to help cover the production costs of the newsletter.



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SUPPORT THE CHNETWORK!

Could you give \$25 a month or more to help support the CHNetwork as we help men and women come home to the Catholic Church?

The 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 if you have any questions or concerns.

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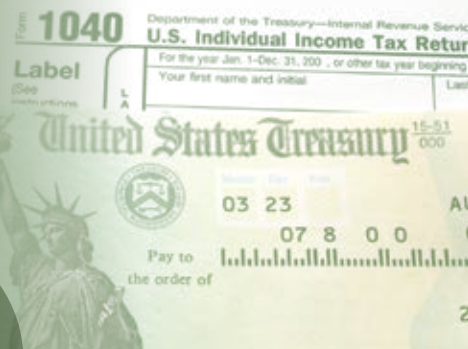


THE
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*Thank you for your generous
support of our apostolate!*



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

January 3

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

January 10

Fr. Andrew Jones*
(former Baptist)

January 17

Melissa Slagle*
(former Baptist)

January 24

Steve Faulkner*
(former non-denominational)
(re-air from 3/25/19)

January 31

Fr. James Bradley*
(former Anglican priest)

February 7

Fr. Gaurav Shroff*
(former Hindu)

*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 Sandra, on the journey “Hi, and thank you for writing! I'm doing great! I may not have said this before, but I keep what I call 'My Catholic Journal,' and I write updates quite a lot due to all that continues to lead me home. I study constantly because I just can't get enough. I've done so many Good Catholic Series, almost daily; have read about 23 books this past year (yes, Catholic); led an Ascension Press study in my home this past winter; am now substitute teaching at two different Catholic schools . . . volunteer with the Children's Liturgy of the Word in my church; watch *Catholics Come Home* most Sunday evenings with my husband and *The Journey Home* on Monday evenings . . . and on and on and on. I've got it BAD! Haha! Although I

haven't been confirmed yet, my husband says I'm Catholic. I think he's right . . . My journey is amazing, and I've documented it all.”

From Justin, a pastor on the journey “This journey in exploring Catholicism has been wonderful. Around Easter time I decided that I wanted to enter into full communion into the Catholic Church. I have currently been writing a document about my decision — the deconstruction I went through with Evangelical Christianity, the aspects that drew me to Catholicism, and some of the particular doctrines I had to wrestle with. I grew up in some pretty anti-Catholic circles, and, of course, being a pastor for 11 years, I imagine this will come as a surprise to many. Your podcast

has been a tremendous help for me. I've listened to every episode. Please pray for me as I move to this next step of sharing my decision with family and friends.”

From Janet, on the journey “I was just entering cataract surgery . . . and here I am, responding 4 months later! — I am sorry for the delay, especially after you have diligently offered prayers on my behalf for so long. Your perseverance and faithfulness have made all the difference in my life. I will be starting RCIA . . . I'm really excited, as I know this is the appointed time for me. I will keep you updated. THANK YOU for your kindness and caring and your gentle encouragement these past years.” ■

Prayer List



Clergy

- **For Jeffrey, an Anglican minister** who has been attracted to the Catholic Church for a number of years but has personal issues that make it very difficult for him to become Catholic, that the Lord would make a way for him and his wife.
- **For Justin, an evangelical pastor** who has been watching shows on CHN every week and is on the road to the Church, that the Lord will give him answers to the questions he still has.
- **For Julie, a Reformed pastor** in training who appears to be on a slow path toward the Catholic Church, for the Spirit's leading in her life.
- **For Gary who is an ordained Protestant pastor** and has been drawn toward the Catholic Church for some time, that the Lord will lead him home.
- **For Donald, a Presbyterian pastor** who is looking to return to the Church but dealing with a number of hurdles, both theological and practical.
- **For Michael, an Episcopal priest** seeking full communion with the Catholic Church and looking into possible ordination as a Catholic priest.
- **For Ben, a pastor** firmly on the path toward the Church, that the Holy Spirit will give him courage to make the hard decisions he sees on the horizon.
- **For Matthew and Rachel**, pastors who are reading and praying and discerning their future, that the Holy Spirit will lead them home.
- **For an Evangelical in Poland** who, with his wife, is drawn to the Church but, after 30 years as Protestants, struggle with a number of questions, that they will find the answers they need.
- **For Jay, a non-denominational Protestant pastor** who was baptized and raised Catholic and now finds himself drawn back toward the Church, that the Lord will lead him and give him courage.
- **For Will, a Lutheran pastor** who has made the decision to resign his ministry later this year and enter the Church and is actively looking for some way to earn a living once he does this.

- **For an Anglican priest** drawn to the Catholic Church and struggling very much with a family who is strongly opposed.
- **For a Baptist pastor** firmly on the road toward the Church and wrestling with how to teach his wife all that he has learned.
- **For Bryan, a Baptist pastor** looking to come back to the Church, that the Lord would show him the way.
- **For a pastor's wife** in the south who is discerning how she might enter the Church without causing undue disruption with her husband's ministry.

Laity

- **For a revert in Michigan** who is struggling with her husband being anti-Catholic and is raising their sons in his church.
- **For Deb** who is planning to begin RCIA and is asking that Jesus make it clear to her if she is called to become Catholic at this time.
- **For Linda and her husband** as they navigate difficult personal issues and for their interest in the Catholic Church.
- **For Amelia, a convert**, that she will be able to connect well with a faithful community to help her enrich her faith life.
- **For Jennifer** who is on the journey and is going through a painful personal struggle, that Jesus will be close to her during this difficult time and give her comfort.
- **For a Pentecostal in California** who hasn't been able to connect with a priest at her local parish about her desire to become Catholic, that Jesus will smooth the way for her.
- **For Alice** who is considering going to Mass for the first time, that our eucharistic Lord will make known His presence to her.
- **For a woman in Europe** who feels like she can never again embrace her deep desire to become Catholic on account of a complicated past and local priests who are antagonistic toward her, that she will find comfort and peace.
- **For Terry** who is reading and praying and is considering joining RCIA, that the Holy Spirit will guide her and her husband's steps.
- **For Linda** who is continuing to learn more about the Catholic teaching on Mary, that she will be receptive to the loving hand of Our Lady in her journey.
- **For a former Catholic in North Carolina** who has tried multiple times to connect with her local parish about returning to the Church and has not had success with getting answers, that she won't be discouraged or give up.
- **For Cathy, a recent convert** who is struggling with health issues but is continuing to learn more about her faith and go deeper in her love for Jesus.
- **For Teresa** whose husband does not support her desire to become Catholic, and she doesn't know how best to proceed with her journey aside from participating in prayers and devotions.
- **For LeAnn who is beginning RCIA** and has questions about learning more about the saints.
- **For a Baptist in Indiana** who reads Catholic material and does Catholic devotions but feels he can't move forward with his journey without his wife's support.
- **For Keith in Oregon**, that the Holy Spirit would bless and guide his RCIA journey.
- **For Allen, a non-denominational Christian**, that the Holy Spirit would bless and guide his journey.
- **For David, a Southern Baptist**, that he may find acceptance from his family as he embarks upon this journey to the Catholic Church.
- **For Frank**, that our Lord Jesus would manifest His reality, presence, and love to him.
- **For a Baptist in California**, that he may find a mentor in his area to help him with his journey to the fullness of the Faith.
- **For Michael, an Evangelical in British Columbia**, that, through the example of the conversion stories that he reads, he may find an open door that enables him to return to the 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. We use only first names or general descriptions to preserve privacy.

► “Journeys Home” continued from page 2

by a Protestant! This author had been touring different mainline churches to share his experiences and his beliefs that Marian apparitions were a real phenomenon and that Protestants could very well benefit from the Rosary. My mother had purchased this nearly-blasphemous item on a whim, evidently thinking that her religious zealot son could benefit from such a notion.

I was taken aback at her apparently thoughtless gesture. Didn't she know that there were Catholics who *worshipped* Mary? Didn't she understand the powder keg of idolatry and blasphemy that lay within these pages? That, thankfully, some Catholics (like those in UCO) were breaking free from the shackles of Mariology and embracing true freedom in Christ? I forced a smile and thanked her, having no desire to delve into its pages.

One day, however, I picked it up and read it in one sitting. I found myself pulled into the author's story. He was making the point that Mary was a gift to the entire Church, first by being faithful to her calling in bringing Christ into the world, who in turn brought salvation to humanity. Later, when Jesus' sacrifice on the cross united Christians as brothers and sisters, she was given to John as his mother (see John 19:26-27). In this case, John represents all Christians; she is our mother, too.

Again, if she desired to share the Gospel with the world, pointing to Jesus, centuries after her walk on earth, would Jesus disallow this? This same Jesus who obeyed Mary's request at the wedding feast of Cana (see John 2:1-10), who is bound to love her because of His obedience to the Ten Commandments?

Perhaps He would, perhaps not. We are, I maintained, not privy to knowing the relationship between the two. It was at this logical standoff that I realized there was a way to know with certainty if these Marian doctrines held up logically: I could actually “test the spirits” (see 1 John 4:1-3) and pray the Rosary!

I found myself again at that Catholic bookstore, approaching the cashier with a cheap set of rosary beads in one hand and a booklet, “Praying the Rosary for Non-Catholics,” in the other. “They're ... for a friend,” I found myself saying.

I devoured the booklet immediately. I knew the moment of testing was about to begin. Terrified, I knew that I would never know for certain without trying it for myself. “Lord,” I prayed on a park bench, “I am only trying this because Scripture recommends testing the spirits. Please don't take offense. Please protect me no matter what, and if it is false, please make it evident to me, and I will never do it again.” Then I picked up the beads and prayed, as

directed by the booklet, starting with the mystery of the Annunciation.

I fell in love. I found that, instead of placing Mary in the place of God (a grave sin), I was actually invited to love Jesus even more intimately by getting to know His earthly family, witnessing His story from *her* vantage point. She had been with Jesus ten times longer than the disciples. Jesus situated her in a place of great honor because she acquiesced to God the Father's will for her life, leading to the salvation of humankind. Yet the honor given to Mary is in an entirely different category compared to the worship owed to God.

The presence of Mary was uniquely strong for me. I suddenly remembered that she was prophesied to have her own cross to bear, that proverbial sword piercing her heart (see Luke 2:35). She was not immune to the sufferings of His Passion, dealing with the emotional agony of witnessing her adult child suffer. Such sorrows have now been transformed into glorious victory.

Later, I shared my experiences with some friends. Word spread quickly. A

few other Protestant friends were curious, so I shared with them, too. Soon afterwards, even these others began praying the Rosary, too. That summer, several dozen of us were vacationing at the outer banks of North Carolina, and beachside Rosary walks were led by four of us who happened to be Protestants.

A Non-Catholic Catholic Apologist

Even though I had a newfound respect for the Catholic Faith, I had resolved that I wouldn't join it. Nevertheless, the following school year, I attended a month of RCIA classes before deciding that it wasn't for me. My Episcopal faith, which had become dormant, was revitalized due to my love of the Rosary (Episcopal Rosary groups do exist) and my recognition that liturgy was powerful. I was content.

I discovered a parish that was warm and had excellent sermons. Then I discovered that the testimony about Alberto Rivera, the subject of those anti-Catholic comic books that I had devoured just three years earlier, was actually a fraud, according to a series of articles in decades-old issues of *Christianity Today*. I was furious that such falsehood was being sold in Christian bookstores.

For the next several years, I was a defender of Catholic teaching without actually being a Catholic. I was a bridge between the two factions, a peacemaker. I had the notion that Catholic doctrine could be explained to my non-Catholic friends with Scripture and



Didn't she know that there were Catholics who *worshipped* Mary? Didn't she understand the powder keg of idolatry and blasphemy that lay within these pages? That, thankfully, some Catholics ... were breaking free from the shackles of Mariology and embracing true freedom in Christ?



logic, and even if we could not come to a new consensus, healing would result.

The hardest issue, the one I really wrestled with, was the Eucharist. On the one hand, I was convinced that there was nothing wrong with taking the Bread of Life discourse (John 6:26-58) as a metaphor for “accepting Jesus Christ into your life as personal Lord and Savior.” The notion that Jesus could be actually present in the sacrament was bizarre to me, a return to medieval thinking. As I later had to acknowledge, this was a knee-jerk response, not really based on Scripture.

Jesus had every opportunity to not scandalize His flock, to clarify that He was speaking metaphorically, to increase His numbers, but He did not. Every time He could have clarified that He was speaking of “accepting Him into your heart as personal Lord and Savior,” He chose to add more confusion, using non-metaphorical terms (i.e. Greek *trago* = “munch”; see John 6:53-56) and saying that He who “munches” His Body will have eternal life. So scandalized were the crowds, that many left Him — and Jesus let them leave. His disciples would have left as well, but they didn’t have anybody else to follow (see John 6:67-69).

I didn’t want to pursue further about how to interpret this passage. I was adamant that, even with harsh language, it had to reflect the importance of a personal relationship with Christ and nothing further. The concept of taking the “Bread of Life” to mean transubstantiation was, for me, a bridge too far. But my interpretation of the passage was about to be put to the test.

Eucharistic Adoration

In my senior year of college, 1992, UCO helped organize a local conference focused on Catholic evangelization. A celebrity priest was the emcee, as well as two popular speakers in the Catholic charismatic scene. I was intrigued by the final offering on the agenda: Eucharistic Benediction. I had never heard that term before, but a traditional form of worship mixed with charismatic prayer appealed to me.

The talks were well received. It was in a moderate-sized arena with hundreds of Catholic faithful in attendance. The Catholics were inspired to learn and share their faith, and I, as a good-will ecumenist, was encouraging them to do so.

Eucharistic Benediction was scheduled last. To say I was unprepared for it was an understatement.

The priest came out, leading a solemn procession, with some golden circular thing with a communion wafer inside. The entire arena, in nearly domino-fashion, kneeled, following the progress of the procession.

I didn’t kneel, however. I was scrunched on the floor, taking in all the reverence around me. I wasn’t prepared. I had never seen Eucharistic reverence on this level. Just as I was getting comfortable with the notion that Catholics can be Christians despite the silly notion that Jesus was fully present in the Eucharist, I was confronted with hundreds of devout Catholics expressing their fervent worship, acknowledging that Jesus truly is present among us.

I was torn. Either Jesus was truly present in this little wafer within this golden container, or the thousands of rank-and-file parishioners, with whom I had spent the entire weekend truly supporting in an ecumenical manner, were all bizarrely crazy. There was no third option. My desire to find out had reignited. I knew I had to put my research into overdrive.

That day I had purchased *Spiritual Journeys*, a book detailing

the stories of many notable Catholic conversions. I devoured the book in days. Over and over came a singular theme: that the Catholic Church, for all its failings, all its historical missteps, for all its liturgies filled with lukewarm parishioners ... this was *home*, with Jesus as the central Resident.

The interdenominational churches I had attended in the past were fun, and I was learning about God. It was

almost like they were a Beatles convention. There would be lots of *fun* music and entertaining lectures. But wouldn’t a devoted Beatles fan prefer being a guest at Sir Paul McCartney’s *house*? Such an environment would be much different. Music would not be playing 24/7. His family members would not be impressed by his own celebrity. But there would also be an unparalleled level of intimacy. I saw how this would be preferable to me.

Women’s Ordination

All of this was enticing, but I still could not commit. I had one final issue: I believed that women could and should be ordained in the clergy. Because of my upbringing, I believed that a prohibition of women clergy was, at root, misogynistic. I understood that the early Church had such a prohibition, but I attributed it (see 1 Timothy 2:11-14) to an outdated cultural climate that we no longer share. The Episcopal rector at my college parish was, in my opinion, a great homilist. I couldn’t in good conscience join a denomination that would have prevented her from completing what I presumed was her calling.

Then I graduated. I had felt a mix of both accomplishment and overwhelm. Suddenly, I had these life-altering choices before me. I was about to enter the workforce, and even with Christ in my life, I felt aimless. With such pressure, I found even more avenues for prayer.

The Catholic Church, for all its failings, all its historical missteps, for all its liturgies filled with lukewarm parishioners ... this was home, with Jesus as the central Resident.

...Journeys Home Continued...

One time, while before the Blessed Sacrament, I sensed God asking me what my greatest concerns were. There were three: first, I wasn't certain what occupation I was to pursue because my major had a lot of options, and we had just entered a recession. Second, I didn't know if I was called to marriage, and if so, I had no idea how to find a wife. Third, I was still on the fence about the Catholic Faith. Although my experiences with Eucharistic Adoration were growing increasingly profound, I was unable to shake my personal disdain for the Church's prohibition against women in the priesthood.

Later that day, I sensed God speaking to my heart: these issues were *secondary*. There was an overarching concern that was the root of these three: I did not know what it meant to be a father. Such a revelation caused my mind to race.

My relationship with my earthly father had always been mixed. When I committed myself to Christ at fourteen, I had caused a great division between us. Much of my insecurity about my future was rooted in his harsh words. No wonder I was anxious about my future occupation and had apprehensions about marriage. If I were to be called to that vocation, I would likely become a father, and since my own relationship with my Dad was so negative, I was afraid that I would instill those same abuses on my own children.

But the final issue, that of my entering the Catholic Faith, was where I couldn't connect the dots. I had scars from the faulty relationship with my father, yet God had used those experiences to move me closer to His loving embrace. While I was grateful to find Him in these diverse Christian churches and youth and young adult groups, could I stay right where I was and truly serve God? In that moment, I was seeing myself hindered from receiving the Catholic Eucharist — something that I was growing more convinced was uniquely Jesus Himself. There was still, however, my own ignorance and trepidation as to what it meant to be a father. I just could not see the connection.

"Lord, I just don't see how my not knowing what it means to be a father has anything to do with this prohibition against women-in-the-priesthood!"

Wait! Did I just say that?

There it was — the connection was obvious, and I was shaken to my core. I needed to look beyond personal talents, towards the deeper designs of God and His creation. We are all created male and female, and this points to the reality of how God relates to us. In the life-giving act, fathers provide the seed, and the mothers nurture it to life, just as God (while beyond gender, is identified as Father, by Jesus Himself) creates life, while Mother Church nurtures us and prepares us for maturity.

I also began to see that the priesthood was more than homiletics, counsel, and administration. A good speech could be made most anywhere, and some of the great faith writings were given by women who are now doctors of the Church. Good counsel could be done in professions that open themselves to do so. Administration is used in every business. Women are not prevented from these professions, and if they are so inclined, they can pursue them without restriction.

I had a vision of all of the liturgies that have ever been celebrated as being part of a great stage play, where even those of us in the congregation have a role to play; no part is too small. Priests are there in the role of Christ — "*in persona Christi*" as they say — even up to the crucifixion. The role of priest is limited to men, not because women were not worthy, but because Jesus was a man and needed a representative in this role that could demonstrate His role in the salvation of humankind, without distracting by way of novelty.

This is substantively different from being a mere minister. The key to understanding the importance of women in the priesthood had everything to do with this distinction. And at that moment, I *knew*. That last domino had dropped; I would be Catholic.

Conclusion

And so it happened. At the Easter Vigil 1993, I was officially, beautifully, and reverently welcomed into the Catholic Faith. My family reluctantly attended. Of course, my mother couldn't help but try to persuade me otherwise, even after the ceremony, but that's who she is. Over the years, my relationship with my parents has ebbed and flowed, but God remains good.

Shortly after my conversion, circumstances conspired to move me away from my supportive community. I was forced to grow in faith where there were few young adults with the zeal with which I had been blessed. I lent my guitar skills to a couple of local interdenominational youth groups while holding firm my Catholic position. I eventually met a Catholic woman who would become my wife. Today we have two wonderful children. I even learned to craft parody songs from my personal experiences, pleasing many. All in all, I have found that God truly is a faithful Father, whose love is beyond compare, whose faithfulness truly knows no bounds. My life did not end with the decision to entrust my life to Him; rather, it was the beginning of an amazing adventure, a ride I am still experiencing. May God be praised, hallelujah! ■



NICHOLAS A. KLESZCZEWSKI (*aka Nick Alexander*) is a Catholic speaker, worship leader, and comedian. He is best known for a series of Catholic parody efforts, taking secular songs and putting a Catholic comedic spin upon them. His video for Lent, "This Time of Forty Days" (a parody of The Police's "King of Pain"), has reached over 88,000 views. He has performed at World Youth Day, NCYC, and Catholic TV. He is a devoted husband and father of two, living in Stratford, Connecticut. His website is nickalexander.com.

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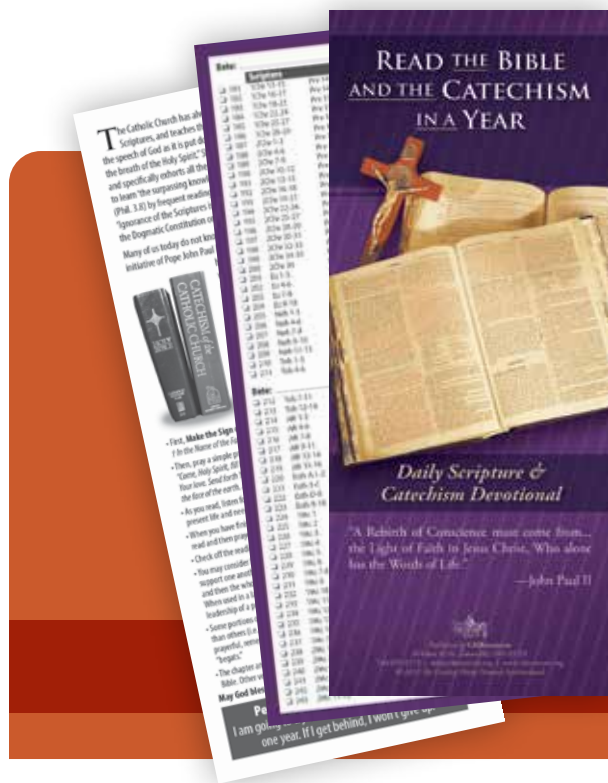
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