



February 2022 CHNewsletter

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THE COMING HOME NETWORK INTERNATIONAL



Thankful to Be Able to Be Thankful

By Jeff Miller

One of the things that I learned later in my life was that I was born the day after Pope Pius XII died. So I was born during an interregnum¹, and I feel that is an apt metaphor for my life. I lived most of my life as if God did not exist. I was like a *semi-sedevacantist*, as I believed that there was no God on a throne in heaven...but also that neither God nor heaven existed at all.

Most of my formative years were spent in Portland, Oregon, where the majority of my relatives lived. As a child, there was no point during which I thought there was a God — never a time when I had some belief in a transcendent being or took this idea seriously. Discussions about faith or talking about God never occurred in my household. I knew that there were different religious belief systems among my school friends, my neighbors, and the world. Nevertheless, this was a subject that did not come up in discussions.

I pretty much idolized my dad while growing up. He was a polymath interested in many things, from science to the arts. He described himself as a retired Christian and just never talked about religion at all. Neither did he lambast people of faith or inveigh against religion. He worked in the theater, performing multiple jobs from acting and writing to set designing and building. I spent a lot of time with him in his work environment among the actors. I loved these people; they were talented and creative, and they shared my same materialistic worldview.

My mom was a bit of a cipher to me. When my mother started going to Mass, as far as I knew at that time, she had always been Catholic. It was only much later in life that I found out that my mother, her sister, and their mother had become Catholic while I was in high school. I surmised later that there was severe disagreement concerning the topic of religion between her and my father. So, faith was just not talked about, and this was the atmosphere during my formative years. I did spend about a year going to Mass to please my mother — but mainly because I loved to sing. Hymn selection was pulled right from the radio. I thought it hilarious that, as an atheist, they asked me to sing in their ensemble.

When I was in high school, my mother asked me to meet with the priests there to learn about the Catholic Faith. It was the first time I consciously heard the word Catholicism. It struck me at the time as seeming both odd and ominous — something from times past. From what I remember, they were trying to appeal to me by discounting miracles in favor of natural causes. *Continued on page 2* ➡

¹ The time between the death of one pope and the election of another, when the seat (*sede*) of Peter is empty (*vacante*)

...Journeys Home Continued...

(These two priests later left the priesthood.) Significantly, I thought this rather odd since I was already ignoring miracles due to my worldview. During this period, I learned pretty much zero about what the Church taught, but I was very rocky soil.

The space program and the moon landing were a significant influence on me; these shaped my life in those days. I became a great fan of science fiction, especially author Isaac Asimov. This genre inspired my imagination and shaped my worldview. As C.S. Lewis advised in *Surprised by Joy*, “A young man who wishes to remain a sound atheist cannot be too careful of his reading” (Lewis 1955, 191). Apparently, I was careful in my reading because I encountered nothing to challenge my materialistic worldview. My base assumption fell into the category of scientism: that all actual knowledge must be empirical. It was not worthwhile to look into philosophy or religious thought. These ideas were myths that the human race would outgrow. I was curious about many things and would often grab books from the library to explore them. It just never occurred to me that the question of God’s existence should be delved into at all. Modernity had already settled that question.

I was also attracted to a form of arrogance that purported this truth about the universe: that when we die, we are annihilated. This, I concluded, was a brute fact that people denied by believing in an afterlife. My heroes were Sherlock Holmes and Mr. Spock. Both were advocates of using pure reason to solve problems scientifically. Their stoicism was also attractive to me. I wanted to live a life without strong emotions, with all my decisions being

rational. However, my attempts at imitating them did not work out for me, and it never dawned on me that my guides were fictional characters.

I was the rocky soil described in Jesus’ “Parable of the Sower.” I delighted in science and in the fast pace of discoveries. The beauty of the universe was palpable to me — the wonders in what we were learning! Being a man who could be captivated by a painting and its intricacies, if invited to meet the artist, I would have stumbled at the idea that an artist created it. The universe was just there to be admired.

Looking back, I can discern some of the events in my life that God used to bring me closer to Him. There is an old joke about making God laugh by telling Him your plans. The opposite is also true — that God can make us laugh if He reveals His plans for us. I would have scoffed at the idea that I could move from being a convinced atheist to a convinced Catholic.

When I finished high school, I joined the Navy. My motive was to get the education in electronics that I desired and then quit. I worked in avionics, where I troubleshooted and repaired “black boxes” at the component level. I excelled at this and enjoyed the whole process of troubleshooting and repair. I was also attracted to working on board aircraft carriers, which was the closest I would get to being on a spaceship. Consequently, I ended up making a career of the Navy, learning many lessons in the military which would later be helpful for my conversion.

While in the Navy, I met my wife, Socorro, in the Philippines. She was Catholic and devoted to prayer, to the Rosary in particular. I saw this as a character flaw. I disdained this superstitious belief system and, following in my father’s footsteps, would never discuss the topic. Arrogantly, I just put up with her behavior. I appeased her by allowing our two children to be baptized Catholic, but all I could think of during the ceremony was how ignorant this all was.

My nihilistic worldview tended towards “what can I get away with” instead of “what ought I to do.” As you can imagine, this caused a lot of conflicts. While an atheist can be a good person, I wasn’t. My father, as an atheist, was a very good person in many regards, but as I later discovered, he would have been a better person if he had responded to God’s grace. I was holding his hand as he died and will always be praying for him.

I will not go into the details of my many sins; they would rival a Russian novel in length. Still, arrogance was my besetting sin, toxically brewed with self-absorption. I was looking at opportunities and people as a means to an end.

My wife was my St. Monica, though I did not realize this at the time. Her daily prayers for me for two decades were an instrument that God used in my conversion. Her perseverance in prayer still stuns me, despite how much of a selfish jerk I was. Sadly, she died four years ago of cancer. I will always be indebted to her for showing me an example of unselfish love. I still vividly remember her at hospice within days of her death. Her concern was asking if we had eaten yet when she herself could barely eat.

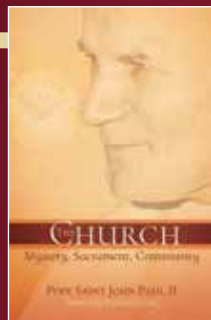
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THE CHURCH: MYSTERY, SACRAMENT, COMMUNITY

BY POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II

For ten years, Pope Saint John Paul II dedicated his Wednesday papal audiences to a thorough discussion of the Creed. Newly brought back to the English language, *The Church – Mystery, Sacrament, Community* presents the selection of those audiences that address the Church and her place in salvation history. Pope Saint John Paul II gives remarkable insights into a wide range of topics such as the unity of the Church, the role of the papacy and ordained clergy, how the laity build up and spread the Kingdom, and the Church’s dedication to ecumenism and unity among Christians. The scope and depth of Pope Saint John Paul II’s discussion on the Church is a treasure for its readers.

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



New CHNetwork Staff Member

MEET KENNY BURCHARD, DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT FOR THE COMING HOME NETWORK

In November of 2021, the Coming Home Network welcomed our newest staff member, Kenny Burchard, to our team as the Director of Development. We asked him to share more about his journey into the Church, his work in philanthropy after two decades of pastoral work, and his new role on our team.



How did you become familiar with the Coming Home Network?

In 2018, my family and I began to seriously investigate the Catholic Church. I had been a Protestant Christian for 33 years and a full-time vocational pastor for twenty years, so the season of discernment was pretty lonely.

During this time not many people in our social circle were safe outlets with whom we could process. When a friend sent me a link to the CHNetwork website, I was amazed to discover that I was not alone; so many former seminary-trained Protestant pastors were also seriously and actively considering the tenets of the Catholic Church. I made initial contact, and Ken Hensley reached out to me. Ken became an important voice for me as I made the journey home. This journey culminated on the Easter Vigil of 2019 when my wife, my son, and I became Catholics.

What were you doing for work when you first reached out to us?

I left vocational pastoring in 2013, six years before consciously beginning my journey into the Catholic Church. My first job after leaving the ministry was as an international fundraiser for Operation Smile, headquartered in Virginia Beach. Operation Smile provides free craniofacial surgeries to children in underserved nations. Our son, Victor, had received numerous craniofacial surgeries after his adoption from Ukraine in 2005, so I jumped at the opportunity to raise money for children who would otherwise never get the care they needed. That job was my entry point into a fundraising career. Since working at Operation Smile, I have worked in domestic hunger relief and corporate philanthropy for a global Christian charity, served as VP of Development for a regional charity, and eventually served as Executive Director of Development for a community hospital foundation in Norfolk, VA. I was serving in that capacity when I met Ken Hensley and became familiar with the CHNetwork (CHN).

How did you come to join the team at CHNetwork?

Even after I became Catholic I still needed to sort through issues surrounding that decision. I asked Ken Hensley in October of 2020 if we could catch up and talk, and he invited me to a Zoom call. While on the call, Ken noticed that I was wearing a tie and sitting in a big leather chair in an executive office. When he asked where I was, I told him that I was the Executive Director and Fundraiser for a community hospital foundation. Toward the end of our call, Ken invited me to connect with JonMarc and others on the team to discuss how CHN raises funds for the important work they do. I became a volunteer sounding board

for CHN, informally offering ideas and collaborating in any way that I could. In July of 2021, Marcus invited my wife, MaryJo, and me to appear on *The Journey Home*. While in Ohio for the filming, MaryJo and I got to know other members of the staff and learned more about the important contributions each member makes to support people on their faith journeys. I was inspired! In September JonMarc invited me to consider joining the team as the Director of Development. After a series of conversations, prayer, and discernment, I felt that this was God's direction for me. I joined the team officially on November 1, 2021.

What exactly is a Director of Development?

In the world of charities and nonprofits, the term *development* is synonymous with fundraising. That's my focus in this position. The Coming Home Network has a solid and growing base of supporters who generously respond to our newsletters, appeal letters from Marcus, and invitations for support through emails and website pages. All of those mechanisms for raising funds have served CHN well over the years. My focus is to build on that foundation, initially, by focusing on what fundraisers call "major gifts." A major gift is different for every charity. CHN considers a baseline gift of \$1,000 or more a "major gift," whether it is given in a single sum once a year or in smaller pledge payments over the course of one year. We do receive gifts well above this amount, but at this time, this is our baseline threshold for a major gift. I always stress that every single gift, no matter the size, is essential to our apostolate, as every donation allows us to help inquiring clergy and laity come home to the Catholic Church. Additionally, major gifts of \$1,000, \$5,000, or even \$10,000 or more enable us to make strong headway as we seek to strategically expand the impact of our work. So, I'm spending the majority of my time working directly with the people who are, or who want to be, part of our growing family of major-gift donors.

What funding projects are you working on right now?

We are working on three projects right now. First, we've created a scholarship fund called "The Shepherd's Fund" aimed at assisting Protestant pastors and their wives who are discerning God's call into full communion with the Church. The fund will be specifically devoted to providing full or partial scholarships for these pastors and their wives to attend a CHN retreat or pilgrimage if they can't afford it. Our first-year goal for this fund is \$100,000. In the first three weeks of sharing this goal one-on-one with a few major-gift donors, we've raised pledges of \$43,000! Second, I'm reaching out to donors who may wish to partner with us to raise \$80,000 for the equipment and resources necessary

Continued on page 4 ➡

to expand our growing media outreach. Third, we'd like to raise \$20,000 to purchase a reliable minivan for remote video projects, as well as for transportation for *Journey Home* guests when they arrive in Ohio to appear on the program. My initial sense is that we probably have a couple of donors who could help us reach this third goal fairly quickly. These three expansion projects for 2022 (amounting to \$200,000 total) are my chief focus right now.

What should a person do to help provide funding for these initiatives or become a major-gift donor to CHNetwork?

The easiest way to reach me is by email: kenny@chnetwork.org or to call me at 740-450-1175 ext. 105. We can then have a

candid conversation to ensure each person's gift accomplishes exactly what he or she intends. I love interacting personally with our donors, and I would be honored to partner with anyone who wants to join us. There's a lot more work to do, and we can't do it without all our donors! ■

Kenny, his wife, MaryJo, and their adult son, Victor, live in Virginia Beach, VA and attend St. John the Apostle Catholic Church in Virginia Beach. His Journey Home program can be viewed at chnetwork.org.

GREAT WAYS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CATHOLIC FAITH!

Be sure to listen & subscribe to these informative resources brought to you by the Coming Home Network!

Deep in Scripture

Marcus Grodi has recorded hundreds of episodes of *Deep in Scripture*, featuring conversations with *Journey Home* guests and CHNetwork staff about passages from the Bible that have particular meaning to them.



On the Journey with Matt & Ken

Former Baptist pastor Ken Hensley and former Wesleyan Matt Swaim came from two very different theological backgrounds, but they both ended up finding a home in the Catholic Church. Each week they examine a major issue or question they faced along the way and share the series of events and discoveries that led them to embrace the Catholic Faith.



Deep in History

Marcus Grodi and Msgr. Jeffrey Steenson join together in this series to explain how the study of early Christianity and the Fathers of the Church helped guide each of them to the Catholic Faith.



Deep in Christ

Deep in Christ, hosted by JonMarc Grodi, is a conversation about the daily task of growing deeper in imitation of and in relationship with Our Lord, Jesus Christ. JonMarc and guests discuss topics such as prayer, devotion, spiritual study, and growth in virtue, all with an eye towards practical implementation, whatever vocation or state of life in which we find ourselves.



FIND THEM ALL AT CHNETWORK.ORG

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 visit 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 to view past newsletters. We do ask for a \$35 yearly donation to help cover the production costs of the newsletter.



SUPPORT THE CHNETWORK!

SUPPORT THE CHNETWORK!

Could you give \$25 a month or more to 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.

Your information

Name _____

Signature _____

Address line 1 _____

Address line 2 _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone number _____

Email address _____

☐ Yes! I wish to make a monthly donation of \$25.00 on auto-payment to help support the CHNetwork's ministry.

☐ Yes! I wish to make a monthly donation of \$_____ on auto-payment to help support the CHNetwork's ministry.

☐ **Checking account** or ☐ **Savings account**

Bank routing number (9-digit number) _____

Account number _____

☐ **Credit card**

Card number _____

Expiration date / CVV Code _____

☐ Visa

☐ MasterCard

☐ Discover

☐ AmericanExpress

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The Coming Home
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www.chnetwork.org



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TAX LETTERS

Tax letters for 2021 contributions will be e-mailed to donors who have e-mail addresses on file. If you would like your tax letter sent by postal mail, please contact **Janna Pitcock**:

janna@chnetwork.org
740.450.1175 x102

*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

February 7
Fr. Gaurav Shroff*
(former Hindu)

February 14
Dr. Lawrence Feingold*
(former agnostic)
(re-air from 4/8/19)

February 21
Dr. Jennifer Frey*
(former atheist)

February 28
Dr. Karin Öberg*
(former Swedish Lutheran & Anglican)

March 7
Denise Bossert*
(former Presbyterian)
(re-air from 4/15/19)

*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 Kayla, on the journey “My faith journey is coming along beautifully!! I am in RCIA and will have my First Holy Communion and Confirmation this coming Easter!! I am learning so much and have deeply grown, and I know I will continue to grow in ways I never thought imaginable. My prayer life has deepened, and I give more time for prayer now — I want to continue to be a prayer warrior! My love for the Rosary and our holy Mother is growing more and more. I feel more guilt for my past feelings and lack of knowing her, but God has forgiven me, and Mary herself, I pray. My family is growing closer to God every day, and the peace of our home is more noticeable by the day! Thank you for taking the time to reach out to me. Your network was the first place I went to when God spoke to me and told me what He wanted me to do (and I fought before my breakdown), and then I researched. God was the final say and is the final say. Thank you!!”

From Cecile, a recent convert “Today we celebrated my first year as a confirmed Catholic! What an ocean of graces I have received since then. So many things happened in but a year! Yesterday was the Feast of St. Lazarus. We believe St. Lazarus crossed the sea with Martha and Magdalena after the persecutions in Jerusalem and began preaching the Gospel here in Marseille. I give thanks to God not only for His unfathomable plan of love and salvation, but also for the manner in which the Gospel did reach me, tracing back from Lazarus!!! I am in awe when I think about all this. May God be praised forever and always! I was thinking about how rich I am as a Catholic — not only the fullness of truth and grace available to me, but it’s also at reach. I’ve got beautiful Masses near our flat, and I can visit some Sisters in the monastery whenever I want. I was thinking how much I am a spiritual billionaire!! Praise God!!”

From Collette, a revert “Thank you for your kind email and your continued prayers. Many good things have happened in my life, and I give thanks to our Heavenly Father. Last year I wrote to you that I was a divorced Catholic who had drifted away from the Church to attend an Anglican church. However, I found, worshipping there, that something was ‘missing’ from my relationship with God. Then, I saw the banner outside my family [Catholic] church that read, ‘Catholics, Come Home.’ This called to me, and I started attending Mass again. I was blessed by the Holy Spirit with the courage to petition for an annulment of my marriage (after 23 years of divorce). My marriage was convalidated in May, and so, joy fills my heart each day that I receive the Body of Our Lord in the Eucharist. I have taken up service as a catechist, and I help out regularly with stewarding. I am also studying for the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies that I hope will lead to my undertaking a Master’s Degree in Religious Studies. God fills my days, and He gives me His peace. Thank you for your simple, but life-changing, mission statement that hangs outside my church, and I pray that the message will reach others, too.” ■



Crypt, Abbey of St. Victor, Marseilles, France — site of St. Lazarus’ refuge during Christian persecutions under Emperor Nero

Prayer List

Clergy

■ **For Christopher, a Protestant pastor** preparing to resign his ministry and enter the Catholic Church, that the Holy Spirit will pave the way for him and his wife.

■ **For James, a former Lutheran pastor** who left his ministry and entered the Catholic Church this past Easter Vigil and is struggling with how to support his family, that he will find something that fits his skills and meets their needs.

■ **For Gary, an Evangelical pastor** who is awakening to the truth of the Catholic Faith and is thanking God that his wife is with him on this journey. Praise be to the Lord!

■ **For Jonathan, a Wesleyan pastor** who has been reading the case for Catholicism and is strongly attracted but has questions about the status of the Orthodox Church.

■ **For Kent, a former Protestant seminary student** who became Catholic and is in the process of discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life in the Catholic Church.

■ **For an Evangelical pastor** who has been removed from all public ministry (preaching and praying) since confessing that he is considering becoming Catholic, that the Lord will show him how to move forward from here.

■ **For Chris, a Reformed Baptist pastor** who finds himself strongly drawn back to the Church in which he was baptized and raised: the Catholic Church.

■ **For a Baptist pastor** who has come to the conclusion that he is on the road toward the Catholic Church, that the Holy Spirit will go before him to soften the hearts of his wife and family.

■ **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 Presbyterian pastor** who is on the journey toward the Church but is still struggling with some doctrinal issues, that the Holy Spirit will lead him to the answers he seeks.

■ **For Chris, an Anglican priest** trying to navigate his way into the Church, that the Lord will lead him as he attempts to work through all his practical and personal issues.

■ **For Scott, a Pentecostal pastor** who has been on the journey for a long time, going into and out of RCIA, but has struggled with Church scandals and has not yet been able to decide.

Laity

■ **For an Episcopalian in Tennessee**, that she will find a way forward with her faith journey and longtime interest in the Catholic Church.

■ **For an Anglican in Virginia** who has been attracted towards the Church for many years but has personal struggles that prevent him from coming into full communion with the Catholic Faith.

■ **For Susan** who is taking classes at her parish, that the Holy Spirit will guide her heart and mind as she learns more about Catholic teaching.

■ **For Becky** who is excited to begin RCIA and see where the Lord leads her, that she will draw ever closer to His truth.

■ **For a Lutheran married couple** who are inching closer to the Church, that they continue to pursue truth and know how best to proceed with their journey.

■ **For Kendra** who is on the journey and has connected with a local parish and is finding ways to grow in her faith life.

■ **For an Anglican in England** who is drawn toward the reverence in the Catholic Church and is looking for a place she can grow in her faith.

■ **For Helen** as she delves into more about the Catholic Church's teachings in her search for a closer relationship with Our Lord Jesus.

■ **For Cindy and her husband who are recent converts**, as they share their new-found love for the Faith as recent converts with their parish in an effort to build up their local community.

■ **For a Presbyterian in New England** as she watches EWTN and considers the direction of her faith journey, that she will know how best to move forward.

■ **For Jonathan, a non-denominational Christian**, that the Holy Spirit would successfully guide him and his family back to the Catholic Church.



■ **For Pamela**, that she will continue seeking the Lord's direction in her faith journey and continue to draw closer to His Church.

■ **For Frank, an agnostic**, that God may grant him the grace to accept the teaching authority of the Church founded by Jesus.

■ **For Tim in Zimbabwe**, that he may come to realize that the true Bible church is the holy Catholic Church.

■ **For John in Tennessee**, that he may find a solid, dynamically-orthodox Catholic parish.

■ **For Derek, an agnostic**, that, through the grace of Our Lord Jesus, he may be able to overcome all obstacles to his entry into the Catholic Faith.

■ **For Allen, a non-denominational Christian**, that he would find the fellowship he is seeking in a Catholic parish.

■ **For Ken, a member of the Assembly of God**, that, as he accompanies his wife on her RCIA journey, he would develop a deep hunger for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

■ **For a Lutheran in Maryland**, that he may soon experience the joy of coming home to the Catholic Church.

■ **For Clinton in Scotland**, that he may find good answers to his concerns about the Blessed Virgin Mary.

■ **For Patrick in New York**, that he may find his path that will lead him home to the Catholic Faith of his youth.

■ **For Joshua, an agnostic**, that the Holy Spirit would reveal the reality of God's love to him.

■ **For a Pentecostal in Georgia**, that Our Lord Jesus would guide his RCIA experience.

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

The first intellectual waypoint in my conversion that I can identify was, oddly, listening to talk radio. At the time, in the early 1990s, I was stationed at NAS Patuxent River in Maryland. I was driving on the Beltway in Washington, D.C. when I heard G. Gordon Liddy give an atheist caller a summary of St. Thomas Aquinas’ five ways of knowing God. I remember being somewhat stunned that there could be intellectual arguments for God’s existence. I packed this information away but had no desire to investigate it further.

In 1993, after we were transferred to NAS Norfolk in Virginia, I felt that I might be losing my atheistic beliefs. I found that, generally, I did not admire the behavior of some atheists. At the same time, I saw the merit in how some religious believers led their lives. That these atheists had the same materialist philosophy as myself was not a point on which I wanted to dwell. Still, at that time, leaving my atheism behind was a step too far for me. Instead, I purposely started reading atheistic philosophers. It is a bit embarrassing now to think about my Ayn Rand phase, that radical selfishness really enticed me.

One day, while riding my bike to work, I was struck by a car in a hit-and-run. My life did not flash before my eyes as I saw the impending collision. My first thought was that I was about to be annihilated. It is not a spoiler to write that I survived this incident after being catapulted into traffic. I was pretty banged up but only required stitches. After this, for whatever reason, I no longer believed that at death we become non-existent. God had to get my attention, and apparently, this was the available two-by-four.

Still, this was not enough to get me to seriously examine the issue of God’s existence. While Christmas was always theologically opaque to me, I always loved traditional Christmas carols. However, I was ignorant about the Incarnation and really could not tell you what Christians believed. I just loved the beauty of these songs, and I loved singing them. I started to find it harder to locate traditional carols on the radio. They were mixed in with more secular songs about the holidays and snow, and I found myself skipping around the dial to find a station that still played them.

I ended up on Protestant radio stations. I would skip to another station when they started talking. Yet, over time, I started to tolerate their messages between carols and found myself interested in the questions about God and, specifically, Jesus. As a life-long book lover, I thought perhaps I should investigate these claims

with an open mind. This started what I call my “200” period. In the Dewey Decimal System, class 200 is the Religion section. I was reading random books on Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. I learned from Protestant radio that the host in one hour might have a different view from the host in another hour. I found the same to be true in the books I was reading. There was much greater consistency in the Catholic books. These had a consistent theological worldview that seemed to fit together better; there was a much deeper intellectual cohesiveness to them, despite my beginner’s grasp of them. More and more, I was seeking out Catholic titles. One aspect of this that surprised me was that, whenever I read Catholic titles from dissenting authors, I realized theirs was bad theology. At the time, I knew nothing about dis-

senting authors; it was just the growth of my spidey theological sense.

During this time, I had also started reading heroic fantasy. Before, I had disdained fantasy for not being scientific. I became attracted to the hero quests, especially the virtues of the characters involved: the importance of only doing what was good and not falling into relativism. One day, a serious revelation hit me regarding these characters. Why was I so attracted to these virtues when I didn’t practice them myself? This disparity bothered me.

At this time, I was retiring from the Navy as a Chief, and we were moving to Jacksonville, Florida. Within days of arriving there and driving around downtown, I saw the magical words, “Catholic Bookstore.” I don’t think I had ever seen a Catholic bookstore in my life — just Protestant ones. This bookstore was part of a parish, and we walked inside. I was stunned by the beauty of this parish aesthetically. It called to me in ways I did not understand. As an atheist, I tried to deny aesthetic beauty — the relativism of the “eye of the beholder.” These were the contortions my previous mindset went through to pretend beauty was just “attributes of matter.” However, this parish would end up being where I attended RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) and entered the Catholic Church.

It was the summer of 1997 when we moved to Jacksonville. It turns out that the city had one of the three Catholic radio stations in existence at the time. I was indebted to Catholic radio, listening to thousands of hours of it. I delighted in discovering that the intellectual consistency of the Faith was not just something I had imagined. While the shows on EWTN were vital to me, it was the new broadcast, *Catholic Answers*, that fed me. CA’s suggestions also directed me to be much more discerning regard-

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ing what titles to read. In particular, I must give a shout-out to Jimmy Akin since I continue to learn so much from him. It was not just the knowledge that he imparted, but he also served as a primer on *how* to think ... his intellectual curiosity and how he treated people. I also remember the first time I saw EWTN's web page with a picture of Mother Angelica. It sparked no interest in me, as it invoked none of her personality. When I saw her on *Mother Angelica Live*, however, I was instantly won over. I owe such a debt to her in all that she did, providing the platform for Catholic radio that helped me so much. In addition, I have watched the majority of *The Journey Home* programs from day one since I still delight in the uniqueness of individual conversion stories.

There is one advantage of coming into the Catholic Church from atheism. Once you get over the "There is a God, and He loves me" thing, it is all downhill from there. I didn't have the theological objections that I would have had if I had come from a different faith tradition. The Navy had prepared me in understanding the nature of and need for authority. Thus, I came to understand the authority of the Church before I started to accept her teachings. As St. Augustine wrote, "I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church" (*Against the Fundamental Epistle of Manichaeus*, 5). I had a lot to both learn and unlearn. My attitude became, "If this is authentically what the Church teaches, then I must try to understand it." It was the intellectual cohesiveness of the Faith that helped me to trust and assent. When I say "understand," I mean, first, to grasp something at some surface level and then, second, to spend the rest of my life hoping for further understanding. I also realize that I don't need to understand everything fully at a deeper level. My wife had minimal schooling, yet she lived the Faith at a level I aspire to reach.

Reading Scripture for the first time, I was surprised by all the literary references I recognized; previously I had not known that they originated in the Bible. I kept wondering if my ignorance knew any bounds. I held myself so high above religious believers, but I did not know even basic things. Furthermore, reading Scripture on my own, I am sure I reinvented many her-

esies. This turned out to be good training for me to learn that I needed an interpreter, as did the Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Acts, who said, "How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31).

I also started reading Church history, and there was so much in it that surprised me. All I knew about Church history was a slant on the Galileo affair from my biology teacher and the Inquisition parodies by Mel Brooks and Monty Python. As I learned more, I realized that so much of what I had been taught about history reminded me of Sherlock Holmes using the clue about "the dog that didn't bark" to solve a mystery. The Church's

almost 2,000-year history did not bark and had been "sanitized" in a way, thereby mentioning only the negative parts. One of my newly-realized, positive discoveries, the one that astonished me the most, was that the Church birthed western civilization and, subsequently, the scientific revolution. All that I had assumed about faith versus science was not just mistaken — it was the exact opposite of the truth! Later I would read the works of Fr. Stanley Jaki and discover exactly why the scientific method was "stillborn" in other civilizations. Tracing the development of everything from hospitals to the university system added to this surprise. Thomas E. Woods, Jr.'s *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* was eye-open-

ing. I had taken so much for granted in the modern world. There are episodes in Church history that make one grimace, but there are also many glorious achievements. I prefer my history to be unsanitized, and Church history is even more amazing, considering it is made up of fellow sinners.

Another aspect of reading history reminds me of the oft-cited quote on *The Journey Home* by former Protestants: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant," a line from St. John Henry Newman. I was ceasing to be secular and growing in appreciation of the Church's role. The role of the saints in history was another surprise. The pivotal roles they played! Even the hermits were essentially living in community with the Mystical Body of Christ, praying for the good of her members. There were so many saints to fall in love with and to help me fall

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...Journeys Home Continued...

in love with Jesus! Reading the lives and works of some of these saints helped me get over what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery.” The saints came from all walks of life, and they were saints because they walked with Jesus. They are a rebuke to my arrogance and a constant challenge to me to imitate Christ in my own life. It is easy to complain about the times in which we live instead of conforming our own life to Christ. I am reminded of G.K. Chesterton’s assertion in his biography of St. Thomas Aquinas, “The Saint is a medicine because he is an antidote” (Chesterton, 1933, 5).

Moreover, in *St. Francis of Assisi*, another of Chesterton’s comments struck me during the process of my own conversion: “The worst moment for an atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank” (Chesterton, 1923, 88). In fact, this rather rattled me. It put into words a feeling I had developed over time. I had previously reflected that, as an atheist, for me, giving thanks was to pat my own shoulder. My previous materialism denied any existential thankfulness. My fundamental existence was a “flake of the universe,” to quote National Lampoon’s parody song “Deteriorata.” Blind chance invites no thankfulness. I grew amazed at how thankful I had become to be able to be thankful to God. Gratitude opened up new vistas for me. My world became bigger as my ego was slowly getting smaller.

At the 1999 Easter Vigil, when I came into the Church, I reflected on how I had spent 40 years in the desert of atheism. I was so joyous in leaving that behind me! In my arrogance, I thought that I had read myself into the Church. I was telling God, “Fine, you met my intellectual parameters.” Yet, really, it was God’s sheer grace that moved me towards conversion, as well as the prayers of my wife, my mother, and, no doubt, others. This initial grace led me to some of my now-favorite authors who helped diminish the roadblocks I had. It was my reading of Peter Kreeft that helped to reassure me that my movement towards Jesus was not wishful thinking. I had been worried that I was fooling myself. It was reading Chesterton that got me to stand on my head to see the world and develop thankfulness and gratitude to God. The treasury of the writings of the Catholic saints was also an invaluable resource. I fell in love with the works of the Carmelite saints, especially St. Teresa of Avila, the founder of the Discalced Carmelites. As someone who had never previously prayed in my entire life, I realized, from them, that I continue to have much to learn. Finally, I learned about myself, that my primary motive for conversion was a recognition of my sinfulness. When asked why he became Catholic,

Chesterton quipped, “to get rid of my sins.” My stoic tendencies kept failing me because I could not do this on my own. I needed a Savior who, indeed, could save me from my sins.

I describe myself as a Vampire Introvert. I must be invited in, in order to not feel socially awkward. After my initial conversion, I was bursting at the seams wanting to talk about the Church; however, my introverted tendencies pretty much prevented this until I started blogging in 2002. My blog, *The Curt Jester*, is an outlet to express myself and exercise my Catholic faith. As just some random Catholic convert, I was a bit surprised that it got any attention or that it led to my appearances on Catholic radio and other places. I was even more surprised to meet or hear from people who thanked me for something I had written or even a parody I had created. If God could use Balaam’s ass in salvation history, He can use me also.

I find the most annoying thing about a conversion story is that it is really, “Here is where I am currently in the *life-long* process of conversion.” I am so thankful for my faith and cannot now imagine life without it. Sometimes I reflect on the fact that, if I had still been an atheist when my wife died, I would not have handled that at all well. Yet God, in His mercy, has helped me. Jesus wasn’t kidding about that “pick up the cross daily” thing. I also find Jesus’ statement in the Gospel of Luke daunting: “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven — for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47). I have been forgiven so much, and I know my love of Jesus is not commensurate with that. I just pray to make that less lopsided. ■



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1515-1582

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- Her Jewish grandfather & father converted during the Spanish Inquisition
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